Anthropology and Counterinsurgency:
The Strange Story of their Curious Relationship

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SOMETHING MYSTERIOUS is going on inside the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD). Over the past 2 years, senior leaders have been calling for something unusual and unexpected—cultural knowledge of the adversary. In July 2004, retired Major General Robert H. Scales, Jr., wrote an article for the Naval War College's *Proceedings* magazine that opposed the commonly held view within the U.S. military that success in war is best achieved by overwhelming technological advantage. Scales argues that the type of conflict we are now witnessing in Iraq requires "an exceptional ability to understand people, their culture, and their motivation."[1] In October 2004, Arthur Cebrowski, Director of the Office of Force Transformation, concluded that "knowledge of one's enemy and his culture and society may be more important than knowledge of his order of battle."[2] In November 2004, the Office of Naval Research and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) sponsored the Adversary Cultural Knowledge and National Security Conference, the first major DOD conference on the social sciences since 1962.

Why has cultural knowledge suddenly become such an imperative? Primarily because traditional methods of warfighting have proven inadequate in Iraq and Afghanistan. U.S. technology, training, and doctrine designed to counter the Soviet threat are not designed for low-intensity counterinsurgency operations where civilians mingle freely with combatants in complex urban terrain.

The major combat operations that toppled Saddam Hussein's regime were relatively simple because they required the U.S. military to do what it does best—conduct maneuver warfare in flat terrain using overwhelming firepower with air support. However, since the end of the "hot" phase of the war, coalition forces have been fighting a complex war against an enemy they do not understand. The insurgents' organizational structure is not military, but tribal. Their tactics are not conventional, but asymmetrical. Their weapons are not tanks and fighter planes, but improvised explosive devices (IEDs). They do not abide by the Geneva Conventions, nor do they appear to have any informal rules of engagement.

Countering the insurgency in Iraq requires cultural and social knowledge of the adversary. Yet, none of the elements of U.S. national power—diplomatic, military, intelligence, or economic—explicitly take adversary culture into account in the formation or execution of policy. This cultural knowledge gap has a simple cause—the almost total absence of anthropology within the national-security establishment.

Once called "the handmaiden of colonialism," anthropology has had a long, fruitful relationship with various elements of national power, which ended suddenly following the Vietnam War. The strange story of anthropology's birth as a warfighting discipline, and its sudden plunge into the abyss of postmodernism, is intertwined with the U.S. failure in Vietnam. The curious and conspicuous lack of anthropology in the national-security arena since the Vietnam War has had grave consequences for countering the insurgency in Iraq, particularly because political policy and military operations based on partial and incomplete cultural knowledge are often worse than none at all.

A Lack of Cultural Awareness

In a conflict between symmetric adversaries, where both are evenly matched and using similar technology, understanding the adversary's culture is largely irrelevant. The Cold War, for all its complexity, pitted two powers of European heritage against each other. In a counterinsurgency operation against a non-Western adversary, however, culture matters. U.S. Department of the Army Field Manual (FM)

A civil affairs officer speaks with Iraqi tribal leaders at the Civil-Military Coordination Center in Baghdad, 12 May 2003.

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(interim) 3-07.22, *Counterinsurgency Operations,* defines insurgency as an "organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through use of subversion and armed conflict. It is a protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken government control and legitimacy while increasing insurgent control. *Political power is the central issue in an insurgency* [emphasis added]." Political considerations must therefore circumscribe military action as a fundamental matter of strategy. As British Field Marshall Gerald Templar explained in 1953, "The answer lies not in pouring more troops into the jungle, but rests in the hearts and minds of the . . . people." Winning hearts and minds requires understanding the local culture.[3]

Aside from Special Forces, most U.S. soldiers are not trained to understand or operate in foreign cultures and societies. One U.S. Army captain in Iraq said, "I was never given classes on how to sit down with a sheik. . . . He is giving me the traditional dishdasha and the entire outfit of a sheik because he claims that I am a new sheik in town so I must be dressed as one. I don't know if he is trying to gain favor with me because he wants something [or if it is] something good or something bad." In fact, as soon as coalition forces toppled Saddam Hussein, they became *de facto* players in the Iraqi social system. The young captain had indeed become the new

sheik in town and was being properly honored by his Iraqi host.[4]

As this example indicates, U.S. forces frequently do not know who their friends are, and just as often they do not know who their enemies are. A returning commander from the 3d Infantry Division observed: "I had perfect situational awareness. What I lacked was cultural awareness. I knew where every enemy tank was dug in on the outskirts of Tallil. Only problem was, my soldiers had to fight fanatics charging on foot or in pickups and firing AK-47s and RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades]. Great technical intelligence. Wrong enemy."[5]

While the consequences of a lack of cultural knowledge might be most apparent (or perhaps most deadly) in a counterinsurgency, a failure to understand foreign cultures has been a major contributing factor in multiple national-security and intelligence failures. In her 1962 study, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, Roberta Wohlstetter demonstrated that although the U.S. Government picked up Japanese signals (including conversations, decoded cables, and ship movements), it failed to distinguish signals from noise—to understand which signals were meaningful—because it was unimaginable that the Japanese might do something as "irrational" as attacking the headquarters of the U.S. Pacific fleet.[6]

A 101st Airborne Division trooper examines a captured RPG and makeshift bamboo launcher, 1969.

two primary, interrelated reasons. First, anthropology is largely and conspicuously absent as a discipline within our national-security enterprise, especially within the intelligence community and DOD. Anthropology is a social science discipline whose primary object of study has traditionally been non-Western, tribal societies. The methodologies of anthropology include participant observation, fieldwork, and historical research. One of the central epistemological tenets of anthropology is cultural relativism—understanding other societies from within their own framework.

The primary task of anthropology has historically been translating knowledge gained in the "field" back to the West. While it might seem self-evident that such a perspective would be beneficial to the national-security establishment, only one of the national defense universities (which provide master's degree-level education to military personnel) currently has an anthropologist on its faculty. At West Point, which traditionally places a heavy emphasis on engineering, anthropology is disparagingly referred to by cadets as "nuts and huts." And, although political science is well represented as a discipline in senior policymaking circles, there has never been an anthropologist on the National Security Council.

The second and related reason for the current lack of cultural knowledge is the failure of the U.S. military to achieve anything resembling victory in Vietnam. Following the Vietnam War, the Joint Chiefs of Staff collectively put their heads in the sand and determined they would never fight an unconventional war again. From a purely military perspective, it was easier for them to focus on the threat of Soviet tanks rolling through the Fulda Gap, prompting a major European land war—a war they could easily fight using existing doctrine and technology and that would have a clear, unequivocal winner.[8]

The preference for the use of overwhelming force and clear campaign objectives was formalized in what has become known as the Weinberger doctrine. In a 1984 speech, Secretary of Defense

Such ethnocentrism (the inability to put aside one's own cultural attitudes and imagine the world from the perspective of a different group) is especially dangerous in a national-security context because it can distort strategic thinking and result in assumptions that the adversary will behave exactly as one might behave. India's nuclear tests on 11 and 13 May 1998 came as a complete surprise because of this type of "mirror-imaging" among CIA analysts. According to the internal investigation conducted by former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff David Jeremiah, the real problem was an assumption by intelligence analysts and policymakers that the Indians would not test their nuclear weapons because Americans would not test nuclear weapons in similar circumstances. According to Jeremiah, "The intelligence and the policy communities had an underlying mind-set going into these tests that the B.J.P. [Bharatiya Janata Party] would behave as we [would] behave."[7]

The United States suffers from a lack of cultural knowledge in its national-security establishment for

Caspar Weinberger articulated six principles designed to ensure the Nation would never become involved in another Vietnam. By the mid-1980s, there was cause for concern: deployment of troops to El Salvador seemed likely and the involvement in Lebanon had proved disastrous following the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. Responding to these events, Weinberger believed troops should be committed only if U.S. national interests were at stake; only in support of clearly defined political and military objectives; and only "with the clear intention of winning."[9]

In 1994, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell (formerly a military assistant to Weinberger) rearticulated the Weinberger doctrine's fundamental elements, placing a strong emphasis on the idea that force, when used, should be overwhelming and disproportionate to the force used by the enemy. The Powell-Weinberger doctrine institutionalized a preference for "major combat operations"— big wars—as a matter of national preference. Although the Powell-Weinberger doctrine was eroded during the Clinton years; during operations other than war in Haiti, Somali, and Bosnia; and during the second Bush Administration's pre-emptive strikes in Afghanistan and Iraq, no alternative doctrine has emerged to take its place.[10]

We have no doctrine for "nationbuilding," which the military eschews as a responsibility because it is not covered by Title 10 of the *U.S. Code*, which outlines the responsibilities of the military as an element of national power. Field Manual 3-07, *Stability Operations and Support Operations*, was not finalized until February 2003, despite the fact the U.S. military was already deeply engaged in such operations in Iraq. Field Manual 3-07.22—meant to be a temporary document—is still primarily geared toward fighting an enemy engaged in Maoist revolutionary warfare, a type of insurgency that has little application to the situation in Iraq where multiple organizations are competing for multiple, confusing objectives.[11]

Since 1923, the core tenet of U.S. warfighting strategy has been that overwhelming force deployed against an equally powerful state will result in military victory. Yet in a counterinsurgency situation such as the one the United States currently faces in Iraq, "winning" through overwhelming force is often inapplicable as a concept, if not problematic as a goal. While negotiating in Hanoi a few days before Saigon fell, U.S. Army Colonel Harry Summers, Jr., said to a North Vietnamese colonel, "You know, you never defeated us on the battlefield." The Vietnamese

colonel replied, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant."[12] The same could be said of the conflict in Iraq.

Winning on the battlefield is irrelevant against an insurgent adversary because the struggle for power and legitimacy among competing factions has no purely military solution. Often, the application of overwhelming force has the negative, unintended effect of strengthening the insurgency by creating martyrs, increasing recruitment, and demonstrating the "brutality" of state forces.

The alternative approach to fighting insurgency, such as the British eventually adopted through trial and error in Northern Ireland, involves the following: A comprehensive plan to alleviate the political conditions behind the insurgency; civil-military cooperation; the application of minimum force; deep intelligence; and an acceptance of the protracted nature of the conflict. Deep cultural knowledge of the adversary is inherent to the British approach.[13]

Although cultural knowledge of the adversary matters in counterinsurgency, it has little importance in major combat operations. Because the Powell-Weinberger doctrine meant conventional, large-scale war was the only acceptable type of conflict, no discernable present or future need existed to develop doctrine and expertise in unconventional war, including counterinsurgency. Thus, there was no need to incorporate cultural knowledge into doctrine, training, or warfighting. Until now, that is.

On 21 October 2003, the House Armed Services Committee held a hearing to examine lessons learned from Operation Iraqi Freedom. Scales' testimony at the hearing prompted U.S. Representative "Ike" Skelton to write a letter to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in which he said: "In simple terms, if we had better understood the Iraqi culture and mindset, our war plans would have been even better than they were, the plan for the postwar period and all of its challenges would have been far better, and we [would have been] better prepared for the 'long slog' . . . to win the peace in Iraq."[14]

Even such DOD luminaries as Andrew Marshall, the mysterious director of the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment, are now calling for "anthropology-level knowledge of a wide range of cultures" because such knowledge will prove essential to conducting future operations. Although senior U.S. Government officials such as Skelton are calling for "personnel in our civilian ranks who have cultural knowledge and understanding to inform the policy process," there are few anthropologists either available or willing to play in the same sandbox with the military.[15]

The Current State of the Discipline

Although anthropology is the only academic discipline that explicitly seeks to understand foreign cultures and societies, it is a marginal contributor to U.S. national-security policy at best and a punch line at worst. Over the past 30 years, as a result of anthropologists' individual career choices and the tendency toward reflexive self-criticism contained within the discipline itself, the discipline has become hermetically sealed within its Ivory Tower.

Unlike political science or economics, anthropology is primarily an academic discipline. The majority of newly minted anthropologists brutally compete for a limited number of underpaid university faculty appointments, and although there is an increasing demand from industry for applied anthropologists to advise on product design, marketing, and organizational culture, anthropologists still prefer to study the "exotic and useless," in the words of A.L. Kroeber.[16]

The retreat to the Ivory Tower is also a product of the deep isolationist tendencies within the discipline. Following the Vietnam War, it was fashionable among anthropologists to reject the discipline's historic ties to colonialism. Anthropologists began to reinvent their discipline, as demonstrated by Kathleen Gough's 1968 article, *Anthropology: Child of Imperialism*, followed by Dell Hymes' 1972 anthology, *Reinventing Anthropology*, and culminating in editor Talal Asad's *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*.[17]

Rejecting anthropology's status as the handmaiden of colonialism, anthropologists refused to "collaborate" with the powerful, instead vying to represent the interests of indigenous peoples engaged in neocolonial struggles. In the words of Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak, anthropologists would now speak for the "subaltern." Thus began a systematic interrogation of the contemporary state of the discipline as well as of the colonial circumstances from which it emerged. Armed with critical hermeneutics, frequently backed up by self-reflexive neo-Marxism, anthropology began a brutal process of self-flagellation, to a degree almost unimaginable to anyone outside the discipline.[18]

The turn toward postmodernism within anthropology exacerbated the tendency toward self-flagellation, with the central goal being "the deconstruction of the centralized, logocentric master narratives of European culture." This movement away from descriptive ethnography has produced some of the worst writing imaginable. For example, *Cultural Anthropology*, one of the most respected anthropology journals in the United States, commonly publishes such incomprehensible articles as "Recovering True Selves in the Electro-Spiritual Field of Universal Love" and "Material Consumers, Fabricating Subjects: Perplexity, Global Connectivity Discourses, and Transnational Feminist Research."[19]

Anthropologist Stephen Tyler recently took fourth place in the Bad Writing Contest with this selection from *Writing Culture*, a remarkable passage describing postmodern ethnography: "It thus relativizes discourse not just to form—that familiar perversion of the modernist; nor to authorial intention—that conceit of the romantics; nor to a foundational world beyond discourse—that desperate grasping for a separate reality of the mystic and scientist alike; nor even to history and ideology—those refuges of the hermeneuticist; nor even less to language—that hypostasized abstraction of the linguist; nor, ultimately, even to discourse—that Nietzschean playground of world-lost signifiers of the structuralist and grammatologist, but to all or none of these, for it is anarchic, though not for the sake of anarchy, but because it refuses to become a fetishized object among objects—to be dismantled, compared, classified, and neutered in that parody of scientific scrutiny known as criticism."[20]

The Colonial Era

From the foregoing discussion, it might be tempting to conclude that anthropology is absent from the policy arena because it really is "exotic and useless." However, this was not always the case. Anthropology actually evolved as an intellectual tool to consolidate imperial power at the margins of empire.

In Britain the development and growth of anthropology was deeply connected to colonial administration. As early as 1908, anthropologists began training administrators of the Sudanese civil service. This relationship was quickly institutionalized: in 1921, the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures was established with financing from various colonial governments, and Lord Lugard, the former governor of Nigeria, became head of its executive council. The organization's mission was based on Bronislaw Malinowski's article, "Practical Anthropology," which argued that anthropological knowledge should be applied to solve the problems faced by colonial administrators, including those posed by "savage law, economics, customs, and institutions."[21] Anthropological knowledge was frequently useful, especially in understanding the power dynamics in traditional societies. In 1937, for example, the Royal Anthropological Institute's Standing Committee on Applied Anthropology noted that anthropological research would "indicate the persons who hold key positions in the community and whose influence it would be important to enlist on the side of projected reforms." In the words of Lord Hailey, anthropologists were indeed "of great assistance in

providing Government with knowledge which must be the basis of administrative policy."[22]
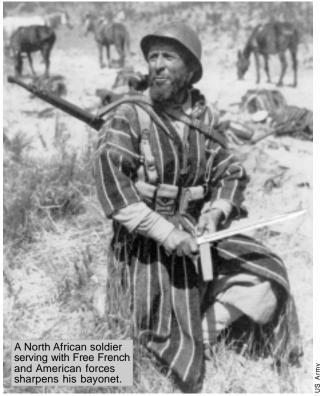
Anthropology as a tool of empire was, however, not without its detractors. In 1951, Sir Philip E. Mitchell wrote: "Anthropologists busied themselves [with] all the minutiae of obscure trial and personal practices, especially if they were agreeably associated with sex or flavoured with obscenity. There resulted a large number of painstaking and often accurate records of interesting habits and practices, of such length that no one had time to read them and [which were] often, in any case, irrelevant. . . ."[23]

The World War I Era

After the classic age of empire came to a close, anthropologists and archeologists became key players in the new game in town—espionage. Their habits of wandering in remote areas and skill at observation proved to be quite useful to the government. Although a number of anthropologists worked as spies during World War I (including Arthur Carpenter, Thomas Gann, John Held, Samuel Lothrop, and Herbert Spinden), the most famous was Harvard-trained archaeologist Sylvanus Morley, who had discovered the ancient city of Naachtun and had directed the reconstruction of Chichén Itzá while serving as head of the Carnegie Archaeological Program from 1914 to 1929. Morley, who was one of the most respected archeologists of the early 20th century, was also the "best secret agent the United States produced during World War I."[24]

In 1916, when German agents were allegedly attempting to establish a Central American base for submarine warfare, the Office of Naval Intelligence recruited Morley, who used archeological fieldwork as cover to traverse 2,000 miles of remote Central American coastline, enduring "ticks, mosquitoes, fleas, sand flies, saddle-sores, seasickness, barrunning, indifferent grub, and sometimes no grub at all, rock-hard beds, infamous hostelries, and even earthquakes." While Morley and company found no German submarine bases, he did produce nearly 10,000 pages of intelligence reports documenting everything from navigable shoreline features to the economic impact of sisal production.[25]

Morley's activities were not well regarded by many anthropologists. On 20 December 1919, Franz Boas, the most well-known anthropologist in America, published a letter in *The Nation*, to the effect that Morley and others (although they were not named directly) "have prostituted science by using it as a cover for their activities as spies. A soldier whose business is murder as a fine art . . . accept[s] the code of morality to which modern society still conforms. Not so the scientist. The very essence

A North African soldier serving with Free French and American forces sharpens his bayonet.

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of his life is the service of truth."[26]

A German Jew by birth, Boas was an adamant pacifist and an outspoken critic of the war, writing multiple editorials and newspaper articles expressing his opinion that World War I was a war of imperialist aggression. (Ironically, many of Boas' students, including Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict went on to work for the military in roles Boas would have, no doubt, questioned.)

For his public allegations against the unnamed anthropologists, the American Anthropological Association censured Boas in 1919. The criticism of Morley by his peers for his espionage activities and the resulting scuffle within the American Anthropological Association (AAA) foreshadowed the reemergence of the issue of covert anthropological support to the U.S. Government during the 1960s.

The World War II Era

During World War II, the role of anthropologists within the national-security arena was greatly expanded. Many anthropologists served in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the institutional predecessor to both the CIA and Special Forces. Anthropologists served in a research capacity and as operatives. Carleton Coon, a professor of anthropology at Harvard, trained Moroccan resistance groups in sabotage, fought in the battle of Kasserine Pass, and smuggled arms to French resistance groups in

Stretcher bearers prepare to evacuate American wounded near Buna, New Guinea, 1942.

German-occupied Morocco. His book about life in the OSS, *A North Africa Story: The Anthropologist as OSS Agent*, contains a highly amusing account of developing an IED in the shape of a donkey dropping.[27]

Other anthropologists also saw direct action: British ethnologist Tom Harrisson parachuted into Borneo to train indigenous guerrillas to fight the Japanese. Cora Du Bois, who served as Chief of the Indonesia section in the OSS Research and Analysis Branch, became the head of the Southeast Asia Command in Ceylon, where she ran resistance movements in Southeast Asian countries under Japanese occupation. Du Bois received the Exceptional Civilian Service Award in 1945 for her work with the Free Thai underground movement.[28]

Perhaps the most famous anthropologist who served in the OSS was Gregory Bateson. Bateson, a British citizen, spent many years conducting ethnographic research in New Guinea, the results of which were published in 1936 as *Naven*. At the beginning of World War II, having failed to find a position with the British War Office, Bateson returned to the United States and was recruited by the OSS, where he served as a civilian member of a forward intelligence unit in the Arakan Mountains of Burma.[29]

In addition to intelligence analysis, Bateson designed and produced "black propaganda" radio broadcasts intended to undermine Japanese propaganda in the Pacific Theater. He found the work distasteful, however, because he believed that truth, especially the unpleasant truth, was healthy. Despite his misgivings about deceitful propaganda, Bateson was a willing and competent operative. In 1945, he volunteered to penetrate deep into enemy territory to attempt the rescue of three OSS agents who had escaped from their Japanese captors. For this service, Bateson was awarded the Pacific Campaign Service Ribbon.[30]

Bateson had remarkable strategic foresight concerning the effect of new technology on warfare. While in the Pacific Theater, he wrote to the legendary director of the OSS, "Wild Bill" Donovan, that the existence of the nuclear bomb would change the nature of conflict, forcing nations to engage in indirect methods of warfare. Bateson recommended to Donovan that the United States not rely on conventional forces for defense but to establish a third agency to employ clandestine operations, economic

A Kachine child watches as a U.S. soldier serving with the Chinese 38th Division receives a haircut, 1945.

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controls, and psychological pressures in the new warfare.[31] This organization is, of course, now known as the Central Intelligence Agency.

Later in his career, Bateson was allegedly involved with a number of experimental psychological warfare initiatives, including the CIA's Operation MK-Ultra, which conducted mind-control research. It is generally accepted that Bateson "turned on" the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg to LSD at the Mental Research Institute, where Bateson was working on the causes of schizophrenia.[32]

Among anthropologists, Bateson is generally remembered not for his activities in the OSS, but as Mead's husband. In 1932, he met Mead in the remote Sepik River area of New Guinea. After conducting fieldwork together in New Guinea, Bateson and Mead coproduced ethnographic films and photodocumentation of Balinese kinesics.[33]

Like her husband, Mead was also involved in the war effort. In addition to producing pamphlets for the Office of War Information, she produced a study for the National Research Council on the cultural food habits of people from different national backgrounds in the United States. She also investigated food distribution as a method of maintaining morale

during wartime in the United States. Along with Bateson and Geoffrey Gorer, Mead helped the OSS establish a psychological warfare training unit for the Far East.[34]

Like Bateson, Mead had reservations about the use of deceitful propaganda, believing that such methods have "terrible possibilities of backfiring." Mead's larger concern, however, was the "tremendous amount of resentment" against using anthropological insights during the war. In particular, she noted that using anthropologists to advise advisers is ineffective; to be useful, anthropologists must work directly with policymakers.[35]

In 1942, Mead published *And Keep Your Powder Dry*, a book on U.S. military culture. According to Mead, Americans see aggression as a response rather than a primary behavior; believe in the use of violence for altruistic, never for selfish purposes; and view organized conflict as a finite task to be completed. Once finished, Americans walk away and move on to the next task. William O. Beeman points out that Mead's observations of U.S. national strategic character seem to be borne out by the current administration's characterization of the conflict in Iraq as a defensive war, prompted by the

imminent threat of weapons of mass destruction ready for imminent use and undertaken for altruistic reasons, such as "bringing Democracy to Iraq," that would be short and limited in scope.[36]

In 1943, Benedict, Mead's long-time friend and collaborator, became the head (and initially the sole member) of the Basic Analysis Section of the Bureau of Overseas Intelligence of the Office of War Information (OWI), a position Benedict sought to use "to get policy makers to take into account different habits and customs of other parts of the world." While at OWI, Benedict coauthored *The Races of Mankind*, a government pamphlet which refuted the Nazi pseudo-theories of Aryan racial superiority. Conservative congressmen attacked the pamphlet as communist propaganda, and the publicity surrounding it led to the sale of 750,000 copies, its translation into seven languages, and the production of a musical version in New York City.[37]

Benedict also undertook research on Japanese personality and culture, the effect of which cannot be overstated. Near the end of the war, senior military leaders and U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt were convinced the Japanese were "culturally incapable of surrender" and would fight to the last man. Benedict and other OWI anthropologists were asked to study the view of the emperor in Japanese society. The ensuing OWI position papers convinced Roosevelt to leave the emperor out of the conditions of surrender (rather than demanding unconditional surrender as he did of dictators Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini). Much of Benedict's research for OWI was published in 1946 as *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword,* considered by many as a classic ethnography of Japanese military culture, despite Benedict never having visited the country.[38]

Since fieldwork in the traditional sense was impossible during wartime, culture had to be studied remotely. The theoretical contribution of World War II anthropologists to the discipline is commonly known as "culture at a distance." Following the war, from 1947 to 1952, Mead, Benedict, and others established a research program at Columbia University. Working under contract to the U.S. Office of Naval Research, anthropologists developed techniques for evaluating cultural artifacts, such as immigrant and refugee testimonies, art, and travelers' accounts, to build up a picture of a particular culture.[39]

Most of the culture-at-a-distance studies were rooted in the premises of developmental psychology, such as that the so-called national character of any group of people could be traced to commonalities in psychological-development processes. While some of their conclusions now seem ridiculous (for example, Gorer's "swaddling hypothesis" to explain the bipolar swings in Russian culture from emotional repression to aggressive drinking), other research results were not only accurate but useful in a military context.[40]

Small Wars

In January 1961, U.S. President John F. Kennedy met with national security adviser Walt Whitman Rostow to discuss various national-security threats. Kennedy and Rostow turned their attention to the subject of Vietnam, and Kennedy said: "This is the worst one we've got. You know, Eisenhower never mentioned it. He talked at length about Laos, but never uttered the word Vietnam."[41]

Kennedy and Rostow's discussion (and Kennedy's approval of the "Counterinsurgency Plan" for Vietnam 10 days after taking office) was inspired by Major General Edward G. Lansdale's report on the situation in Vietnam. Lansdale, who was widely believed to have been the model for Alden Pyle in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, was a former advertising executive who almost single-handedly prevented a communist takeover of the Philippines. Lansdale helped install Ngo Dinh Diem as president of the American-backed government of South Vietnam and, later, ran Operation Mongoose, the covert plot to overthrow by any means necessary Fidel Castro's government in Cuba.[42]

Much of Lansdale's counterinsurgency operations in the Philippines can best be described as applied military anthropology. For example, in the 1950s, as part of his counterinsurgency campaign against the Huk rebels of the Philippines, he conducted research into local superstitions, which he exploited in "psywar": "One psywar operation played upon the popular dread of an *asuang,* or vampire. . . . When a Huk patrol came along the trail, the ambushers silently snatched the last man of the patrol. . . . They punctured his neck with two holes, vampire-fashion, held the body up by the heels, drained it of blood, and put the corpse back on the trail. When the Huks returned to look for the missing man and found their bloodless comrade, every member of the patrol believed that the *asuang* had got him and that one of them would be next. . . ." Lansdale noted that such tactics were remarkably effective.[43]

During the Huk Rebellion, the real guerrilla-warfare expert was Captain Charles Bohannan, who

Latin American soldiers receiving heliborne training from U.S. Special Forces, 1969.

later coauthored one of the best studies of practical counterinsurgency, *Counter-Guerrilla Operations: The Philippine Experience*. Bohannan, who fought as an anti-Japanese guerrilla in New Guinea and the Philippines during World War II, remained in the Philippines as an Army counterintelligence officer. He was a natural pick for the team when Lansdale returned to the Philippines in 1950. Bohannan continued to work with Lansdale in Vietnam (and apparently Laos) throughout the 1950s and 1960s, serving as deputy commander of the covert "Saigon Military Mission" that Lansdale headed. Quite likely, Bohannan was also the military planner for the Bay of Pigs.[44]

Bohannan had completed advanced graduate work in anthropology and was a strong advocate of local cultural knowledge and "total immersion" during training and operations.[45] He was particularly interested in "operations intended to influence the thinking of people." In 1959, for example, he was a member of the secret U.S. "survey team" sent to Colombia to evaluate the insurgency and provide a plan for U.S.-Colombian action. Much like anthropologists conducting fieldwork, the team traveled more than 23,000 kilometers and interviewed more than 2,000 officials, civilians, and guerrilla leaders. Their three-volume report reviewed the history of the violence, the underlying socioeconomic conditions, and issued recommendations for social, civil, and military reform to the Colombian and U.S. governments.[46]

Bohannan was a believer in the use of minimum force in counterinsurgency. In an unpublished 1964 paper from a Vietnam posting, he objects to totalitarian methods of counterinsurgency as being potentially counterproductive: "Mass arrests, wholesale searches, and other seemingly easy methods of "population control" can only strengthen opposition to the government." And, according to Lansdale, overwhelming force was simply not effective for fighting an insurgency: "Only unabashedly totalitarian governments, Communist or colonialist, with relatively unlimited resources, can seriously think of, or attempt, killing or capturing most of the insurgents and their supports."[47]

Bohannan's mentor, Rufus Phillips (a former CIA operative who later headed the Rural Affairs Section of the U.S Agency for the International Development Mission in Vietnam) observed in a 1964 memorandum that the U.S. military was bound by "conventional military thinking." The American command was guided by neither a British-style dedication to a political objective—however abusive the measures used to achieve it—nor any particular

interest in the nonmilitary side of U.S. counterinsurgency: "Everybody talks about civic action and psychological warfare, but little command emphasis is placed on it and it is not understood. The major emphasis remains on 'killing Viet Cong'."[48]

The Vietnam War

Despite the authority of men like Lansdale and Bohannan within high-level military and policy circles during the Vietnam War, the military preference for overwhelming force frequently trumped the hearts and minds aspect of counterinsurgency. Anthropologists such as Gerald Hickey, who went to Vietnam as a University of Chicago graduate student and remained throughout the war as a researcher for the RAND Corporation, found that their deep knowledge of Vietnam (valuable for counterinsurgency) was frequently ignored by U.S. military leaders who increasingly adopted a conventional-war approach as the conflict progressed. Hickey's career raises a number of issues that even now plague anthropological research in a military context, such as the politics of research inside the beltway, the inability to change counterproductive policies, and backbiting by other anthropologists hostile to the military enterprise.

Hickey, who wrote *Village in Vietnam*, a classic ethnography of a southern Vietnamese lowland village, was recruited by RAND in 1961 to produce a study funded by DARPA. The study followed the newly established Strategic Hamlet Program that sought to consolidate governmental authority in pacified areas through a defense system and administrative reorganization at the village level. Central to the study was the question of how highland tribes could be encouraged to support the South Vietnamese Government.

Hickey's research indicated that the strategic hamlets might be successful if farmers saw evidence their communal labor and contribution of time, land, and building materials actually resulted in physical and economic security. Although Hickey's observations were probably correct, his views were often dismissed as too pacifistic.[49] When Hickey debriefed Marine General Victor Krulak, the general pounded his fist on his desk and said, "We are going to make the peasants do what's necessary for strategic hamlets to succeed!"[50] As Hickey noted, peasants have many methods of passive and active resistance, and force is often counterproductive as a motivator. Disliking the results of the study, the Pentagon pressured RAND to change the findings and, in the interest of impartial research, RAND refused. In the end,

none of Hickey's findings were implemented, and the Strategic Hamlet Program was a failure.

In 1964, a major uprising of Montagnard highland tribal groups occurred under the banner of FULRO (The United Front for the Struggle of Oppressed Races). Although the Montagnards sided with the United States against the communist north and were supplied by (and fought alongside) U.S. troops, they violently opposed the South Vietnamese Government's efforts to control their region and assimilate the population.

Dealing with the revolt was a major imperative for the military and the South Vietnamese Government because the central highlands were of strategic importance and included the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was the main North Vietnamese infiltration and supply route. Hickey, who had worked closely with the Montagnards for years, advised the senior commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, on the reasons for the rise of ethno-nationalism among the tribes and how to cope with the revolt. Hickey also successfully acted as an intermediary between highland leaders and the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments.[51]

As the war dragged on, Hickey became increasingly frustrated with the military-strategy viewpoint held by officers such as U.S. Army General William E. Depuy, who believed a war of attrition would defeat the communists. Hickey's view was that the war in Vietnam was a political struggle that could only be resolved in political terms, not through pure military force. As an anthropologist, he recognized that elements of Vietnam's own culture could be used to promote peace between the existing nationalist political parties, religious groups, and minorities—none of whom welcomed communist rule.

In a remarkable paper titled "Accommodation in South Vietnam: the Key to Sociopolitical Solidarity," Hickey explored the indigenous Vietnamese cultural concept of accommodation. While Taoist roots of the Vietnamese value system stressed individualism, in the Vietnamese worldview, accommodation was also necessary to restore harmony with the universe. In Washington, D.C., Hickey's views on accommodation were treated as heresy. In 1967, at the conclusion of Hickey's brief to a Pentagon audience, Richard Holbrooke said, "What you're saying, Gerry, is that we're not going to win a military victory in Vietnam." Because it did not conform to the prevailing view of the conflict, Hickey's message was promptly dismissed. Regardless of the improbability of a military victory, to U.S. leaders, "accommodation" meant "giving in," and that was not an accept-

able alternative. In the end, the American solution to the conflict was the use of overwhelming force in the form of strategic bombing and the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, neither of which resulted in victory.[52]
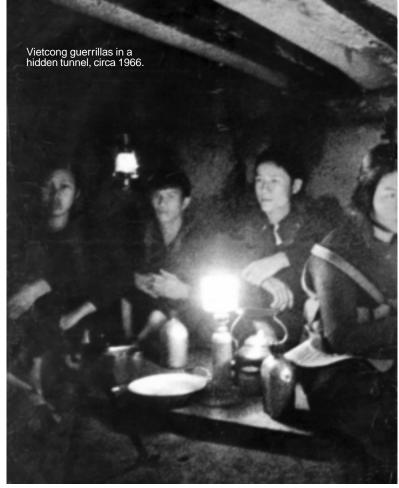
For his "ethnographic studies," "contributions to the enhancement of U.S. Advisor/Vietnamese Counterpart relationship," and "presence and counsel during periods of attack by Viet Cong Forces and Montagnard uprisings," Hickey was awarded the medal for Distinguished Public Service by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Despite his medal (or perhaps because of it), Hickey was not able to get an academic job when he returned to the United States. He was refused a position at the University of Chicago by fellow anthropologists who objected to his association with RAND. Ironically, Hickey was also forced out of RAND because it was no longer interested in counterinsurgency. Following the lead of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, RAND was no longer going to undertake research on unconventional warfare, but turn its attention to "longer-range problems of tactical, limited war and deterrence under the Nixon Doctrine."[53]

Vietcong guerrillas in a hidden tunnel, circa 1966.

Eyewitness Vietnam

Project Camelot

Testifying before the U.S. Congress in 1965, R.L. Sproul, director of DARPA said: "It is [our] primary thesis that remote area warfare is controlled in a major way by the environment in which the warfare occurs, by the sociological and anthropological characteristics of the people involved in the war, and by the nature of the conflict itself."[54]

The recognition within DOD that research and development efforts to support counterinsurgency operations must be oriented toward the local human terrain led to the establishment of the Special Operations Research Office (SORO) at the American University in Washington, D.C. With anthropologists and other social scientists on staff, SORO functioned as a research center into the human dimension of counterinsurgency. Many SORO reports took a

unique approach. In 1964, the Army commissioned an unusual paper titled "Witchcraft, Sorcery, Magic, and Other Psychological Phenomena, and Their Implications on Military and Paramilitary Operations in the Congo." Authored by James R. Price and Paul Jureidini, the report is a treatise on paranormal combat, discussing "counter-magic" tactics to suppress rebels who are backed by witch doctors, charms, and magic potions.[55]

In 1964, SORO also designed the infamous Project Camelot. According to a letter from the Office of the Director of the Special Operations Research Office, Project Camelot was "a study whose objective [was] to determine the feasibility of developing a general social systems model which would make it possible to predict and influence politically significant aspects of social change in the developing nations of the world." The project's objectives were "to devise procedures for assessing the potential for internal war within national societies; to identify with increased degrees of confidence those actions which a government might take to relieve

An American Huey pilot talks with Thai villagers, 1962.

US Army

conditions which are assessed as giving rise to a potential for internal war; [and] to assess the feasibility of prescribing the characteristics of a system for obtaining and using the essential information needed for doing the above two things."[56]

Project Camelot, which was initiated during a time when the military took counterinsurgency seriously as an area of competency, recognized the need for social science insights. According to the director's letter: "Within the Army there is especially ready acceptance of the need to improve the general understanding of the processes of social change if the Army is to discharge its responsibilities in the overall counterinsurgency program of the U.S. Government."[57]

Chile was to be the first case study for Project Camelot. Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung was invited to design a seminar for Project Camelot. Although he refused, he shared information about the project with colleagues. Meanwhile, Hugo Nuttini, who taught anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh, accepted an assignment for Project Camelot in Chile. While there, he concealed Camelot's military origin, but word leaked out. Protests arose from Chile's newspapers and legislature and the Chilean

Government lodged a diplomatic protest with the U.S. Ambassador. In Washington, D.C., following congressional hearings on the subject, McNamara canceled Project Camelot in 1965.

The Thai Scandal

Shortly after the Project Camelot scandal, the issue of clandestine research surfaced again in Thailand. In March 1970, documents that appeared to implicate social scientists in U.S. counterinsurgency programs in Thailand were stolen from a university professor's file cabinet. The documents were given to the Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam and were subsequently published in *The Student Mobilizer*. A number of anthropologists and other social scientists were allegedly gathering data for DOD and the Royal Thai Government to support a counterinsurgency program that would use development aid to encourage tribal villages to remain loyal to the Thai Government rather than joining the insurgents. Although anthropologists claimed to have been using their expertise to prevent Thai villages from being harmed, heated debates took place within the AAA's Committee on Ethics.[58]

As a result of Project Camelot and the Thai scan-

dal, government funding and use of social science research became suspect. Anthropologists feared that, were such research to continue, the indigenous people they studied would assume they were all spies, closing off future field opportunities abroad. Many anthropologists also believed the information would be used to control, enslave, and even annihilate many of the communities studied. The result of these debates is the determination that for anthropologists to give secret briefings is ethically unacceptable. The AAA's current "Statement of Professional Responsibility" says: "Anthropologists should undertake no secret research or any research whose results cannot be freely derived and publicly reported. . . . No secret research, no secret reports or debriefings of any kind should be agreed to or given." These guidelines reflect a widespread view among anthropologists that any research undertaken for the military is de facto evil and ethically unacceptable.[59]

The Perils of Incomplete Knowledge

DOD yearns for cultural knowledge, but anthropologists en masse, bound by their own ethical code and sunk in a mire of postmodernism, are unlikely to contribute much of value to reshaping national-security policy or practice. Yet, if anthropologists remain disengaged, who will provide the relevant subject matter expertise? As Anna Simons, an anthropologist who teaches at the Naval Postgraduate School, points out: "If anthropologists want to put their heads in the sand and not assist, then who will the military, the CIA, and other agencies turn to for information? They'll turn to people who will give them the kind of information that should make anthropologists want to rip their hair out because the information won't be nearly as directly connected to what's going on on the local landscape."[60]

Regardless of whether anthropologists decide to enter the national-security arena, cultural information will inevitably be used as the basis of military operations and public policy. And, if anthropologists refuse to contribute, how reliable will that information be? The result of using incomplete "bad" anthropology is, invariably, failed operations and failed policy. In a May 2004 *New Yorker* article, "The Gray Zone: How a Secret Pentagon Program Came to Abu Ghraib," Seymour Hersh notes that Raphael Patai's 1973 study of Arab culture and psychology, *The Arab Mind*, was the basis of the military's understanding of the psychological vulnerabilities of Arabs, particularly to sexual shame and humiliation.[61]

Patai says: "The segregation of the sexes, the veiling of the women . . . , and all the other minute rules that govern and restrict contact between men and women, have the effect of making sex a prime mental preoccupation in the Arab world." Apparently, the goal of photographing the sexual humiliation was to blackmail Iraqi victims into becoming informants against the insurgency. To prevent the dissemination of photos to family and friends, it was believed Iraqi men would do almost anything.[62]

As Bernard Brodie said of the French Army in 1914, "This was neither the first nor the last time that bad anthropology contributed to bad strategy." Using sexual humiliation to blackmail Iraqi men into becoming informants could never have worked as a strategy since it only destroys honor, and for Iraqis, lost honor requires its restoration through the appeasement of blood. This concept is well developed in Iraqi culture, and there is even a specific Arabic word for it: al-sharaf, upholding one's manly honor. The alleged use of Patai's book as the basis of the psychological torment at Abu Ghraib, devoid of any understanding of the broader context of Iraqi culture, demonstrates the folly of using decontextualized culture as the basis of policy.[63]

Successful counterinsurgency depends on attaining a holistic, total understanding of local culture. This cultural understanding must be thorough and deep if it is to have any practical benefit at all. This fact is not lost on the Army. In the language of interim FM 3-07.22: "The center of gravity in counterinsurgency operations is the population. Therefore, understanding the local society and gaining its support is critical to success. For U.S. forces to operate effectively among a local population and gain and maintain their support, it is important to develop a thorough understanding of the society and its culture, including its history, tribal/family/social structure, values, religions, customs, and needs."[64]

To defeat the insurgency in Iraq, U.S. and coalition forces must recognize and exploit the underlying tribal structure of the country; the power wielded by traditional authority figures; the use of Islam as a political ideology; the competing interests of the Shia, the Sunni, and the Kurds; the psychological effects of totalitarianism; and the divide between urban and rural, among other things.

Interim FM 3-07.22 continues: "Understanding and working within the social fabric of a local area is initially the most influential factor in the conduct of counterinsurgency operations. Unfortunately, this is often the factor most neglected by U.S. forces."[65]

And, unfortunately, anthropologists, whose assistance is urgently needed in time of war, entirely neglect U.S. forces. Despite the fact that military applications of cultural knowledge might be distasteful to ethically inclined anthropologists, their assistance is necessary. ***MR***

NOTES

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