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Cultural Sensitivity in a Military Occupation

The U.S. Military in Iraq

.... ROCHELLE DAVIS, with DAHLIA EL ZEIN and DENA TAKRUR ......

At the time of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, there was no cultural training policy or unified training plan in either the U.S. Army or Marine Corps to prepare troops to serve in the Middle East. The planning, conception, and implementation of the invasion of Iraq and subsequent occupation have revealed, among other things, the absence of a long-term vision by the U.S. government for the role of the U.S. military and government in the country. Similarly, criticisms of the U.S. military show how the leadership envisioned toppling the Saddam Hussein government and did not prepare for the long-term military occupation and rebuilding of the country. This longer term role, of course, has required the U.S. military and governmental forces to interact much more with Iraqis, in particular as they train Iraqi troops and rebuild the country's infrastructure. The logical considerations in such a plan would encompass an understanding by U.S. troops of the communities, societies, cultures, and people of the country they are occupying, administrating, restructuring, and rebuilding. Rather than an overall U.S. governmental policy, individuals and unit commanders have found ways to brief their troops about Iraqis from the outset, and varying written and aural material has been developed to hand out to troops on their way to Iraq.

As a cultural anthropologist of the Arab world working in the United States, I became aware of and concerned by the types of
knowledge about Muslims and Iraqis that were being produced and disseminated among U.S. servicemen and women and to the American population following the 2003 invasion. This chapter grows out of a subsequent research project about the U.S. military in Iraq that was conceived out of the desire to understand the U.S. war in Iraq generally and specifically the experiences of U.S. military personnel with Iraqis and their views about Iraqi culture and society and the future of Iraq. The interviews for this research were conducted in 2007 with active- and reserve-duty U.S. military servicemen and women as well as veterans, from a wide range of ages, ranks, locations in the United States, and backgrounds. The project consisted of forty in-depth interviews ranging in length from forty-five minutes to two hours covering fifteen demographic questions and seventeen open-ended questions. We interviewed twenty-one army, seventeen marine, one navy, and one air force personnel. Interviewees ranged in rank from E-3 (private first class [army] or lance corporal [marines]) up to O-6 (colonel) who had served in Iraq between 2003 and 2007 and ranged in age at time of service from twenty-one to fifty-eight. Participants came from a wide variety of military occupation specialties, duty positions, and branch specialties, including intelligence, infantry, military police, logistics, civil affairs, and medical personnel. The interviewees were recruited via word of mouth, referrals of friends and relatives, on-base requests, and lisservs from all over the United States, and the interviews were conducted face-to-face and over the telephone. The limitations of a sample size consisting of just forty interviews, when there have been at least three quarters of a million U.S. troops serving in Iraq, are obvious. At best, we hope, in the tradition of in-depth qualitative work, to illuminate some of the issues that emerged from these conversations about how these soldiers and marines were trained to think about Iraqi culture and society and the ways they independently developed to understand and interact with Iraqis and also to gain from their experience an understanding of some of the larger issues about military culture and the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

We must emphasize that the material we collected from these interviews is what the soldiers and marines recall and not necessarily what actually took place in terms of training they received or knowledge they developed in Iraq; rather, it is what they remembered and then reported to us. Thus, the issues discussed here suggest more about the military personnel’s experiences and how successful the cultural training programs were (or were not) than about the actual content of the cultural training programs. We argue in this paper, based on the interviews, that the knowledge about Iraq and Iraqis passed on by the U.S. military establishment to its troops is largely seen as insufficient and not useful; thus military personnel on the ground turn to other sources—other troops and translators—to gain what they define as “useful information.” Thus, instead of the U.S. military being the source for understanding the country and people of Iraq, most of our interviewees reported that they gained the most useful knowledge about Iraqis—both for what they define as “mission effectiveness” and for interacting with Iraqis—once in Iraq from other military personnel, from civilian Iraqis and translators, and from knowledge they gained prior to going to Iraq.

Cultural Sensitivity and the Military Occupation of Iraq

As an example of U.S. military policy regarding cultural sensitivity, the practice of separating the males and females during house raids was cited by many of the interviewees as part of cultural consideration. A twenty-two-year-old infantry captain remarks, “The fact that we . . . didn’t take females, that was conscious early on. Nor did we search them. We did have women military police that were with us who would do searches of the females. So that was taken into consideration.” A twenty-six-year-old infantry sergeant mentions similar experiences: “Well I mean, of course men would never deal with women as far as searching them and stuff like that.”

These considerations of “local culture” were referred to by the project’s participants as components of Iraqi culture without the acknowledgement that such practices would be common even in the United States. From our own experiences, we know that when going through any type of security either in an airport or elsewhere, female searchers are always provided to search women. However, in the context of house raids and military occupation, these service men and women view this practice as part of Iraqi cultural sensitivities. In part this has to do with all Iraqis being seen as enemies, and thus the women are not civilians to be searched as if at an airport but are all instead seen as potential insurgents or aiding insurgents (which, of course, some of them are and do). Thus because of the military occupation of Iraq, U.S. soldiers and marines are in situations in which, owing to military reasons, no Iraqi is to be trusted until proven trustworthy or harmless; thus, even when dealing with civilians this exception (men do not search women) to a military principle (secure the area) is justified as a “cultural consideration.”

The concept of “cultural training” as expressed by the military suggests that culture can be taught to others. However, in teaching culture, someone must determine what constitutes the teachable components of a specific culture. Thus by choosing what subjects and information it wants soldiers and marines to know about Iraqi culture, the U.S. military is taking on both an authoritative and determining role of what Iraqi culture is and which of its
features are most important and can be taught to American servicemen and women. For the U.S. military as a whole, cultural training is administered to its servicemen and women with the intention of increasing operational effectiveness, which it believes can also be achieved by not offending Iraqis (see, e.g., Baker 2003). However, for many of the servicemen and women, cultural training and the emphasis on cultural considerations help them, as individuals, to reconcile the morality of their interactions by providing them with certain ways of performing their actions that are seen to be culturally sensitive. The fact that these participants took note of the “culturally considerate” nature of these raids speaks to this larger contradiction of a culturally sensitive occupation. Hence, cultural consideration becomes a way for these individuals to view their actions, such as a house raid, which some acknowledge to be very difficult for Iraqis to accept, in ways that in their minds soften the violence and invasiveness of them. One soldier recalled that “if the raids went peacefully and nothing happened and nobody was hurt and we had no reason to feel anything suspicious was going on, the women would make us tea, which was delicious, which was cool. I guess I can relate to that. Tea brings everyone together...” Framing what is by its very nature a violent and invasive house raid, for example, in terms of short-term accomplishment of objectives (finding the bad guys, not upsetting the family), disconnects the raids from their role in the larger military invasion and occupation. In his telling, the hospitality offered by the family to those who have violently entered their home can only be accepted if there is nothing suspicious going on. Once the soldiers feel the situation is secure, a cultural interaction can happen between Iraqis and Americans, one that this soldier reports enjoying. Cultural training also leads soldiers and marines to think that culture in general and cultural sensitivity in particular can be part of achieving the goal of “winning the hearts and minds” of the Iraqi people—part of the liberation discourse of the Iraq War.

However, not all of our participants agreed with these cultural considerations toward women, and one participant expressed dismay at this practice by pointing out that not being able to search women was militarily inefficient. An infantry first lieutenant, aged thirty-one, remarked that “…the U.S. army does some cultural things that aren’t very military. Like you don’t search them. And so, are they wearing a bomb, are they hiding stuff? Could easily be! But I’m not allowed to do anything.” This response is representative of a group of respondents who found cultural consideration in operations militarily inefficient and, as this interviewee emphasizes, simply in conflict with the military’s mission. How then do soldiers and marines evaluate the cultural training they receive, the role it plays in how they do their jobs and how they think of Iraqis?

Cultural Training Knowledge in the U.S. Military

According to the interviewees, U.S. military personnel gain information about Iraqi culture and society through different sources: formal military cultural training; advice and stories from other U.S. military personnel; and advice from Iraqi, Arab, and/or other interpreters. Of the forty interviewees in our study, thirty-three reported that they received some sort of formal cultural training prior to deployment to the Middle East, which in their recollections ranged from a half-hour lecture by the chaplain of the unit to periodic lectures as part of predeployment training to a three-day intensive course on the history and religions of Iraq in manuals and CDs on the country and language. Of the seven who did not receive any sort of cultural training, they reported that they were “expected to figure it out themselves when they got there.” One air force captain in the medical corps reported that

I was told there is too much to do for the mission. So you show up at your job and do it. … The group commander said, “Hit the ground running, just go do what you need to do,” because most people at our installation were not going to interact with Iraqis at all. Even any of the work being done on the installation was done by third country nationals but not Iraqis, a lot of Indians, a lot of Pakistanis.

The majority of military personnel who were interviewed felt that the information they received in the formal training situations offered in the military was oftentimes extremely basic. One infantry army soldier who served throughout all of 2005 described the training as “minimal.”

You certainly sort of receive the cultural dos and don’ts, you know—don’t do anything with your left hand, don’t show anybody the soles of your feet, […] that things go slow there. […] I think that the training was absolutely aimed at […] Arab culture for dummies. You know, here are three or four things that you can do to not offend people.

The interviewees described their formal training as largely consisting of this type of knowledge: a list of dos and don’ts, which embody behaviors that can be obeyed like orders. In this sense, the military training portrays culture as a basic skill with which to interact with Iraqis and something that both the military and its personnel can define as knowable and tangible.

The interviewees, however, found the formal training and the type of cultural information they received in it to be of little to value to them. Of those
who received formal cultural training by either the army or marines, only five of the thirty-three reported it to be useful. A thirty-five-year-old infantry company commander described his cultural training as "... really useful, I mean the things that they said were important. However, there was a lot of stuff you had to discover. But the things that we were told were in their own way, very useful. I mean it's important to show your feet to an Iraqi, not to show the soles of your feet to an Iraqi, it can really make them uncomfortable." This captain thought that one of the advantages of such cultural training was that it helped the U.S. military do things that wouldn't offend the Iraqis they had contact with. Of the remaining twenty-eight interviewees, fifteen described it as "somewhat useful," eleven said it was not useful at all, and two were ambivalent. One U.S. Marine Corps intelligence officer described the training as not exactly what they needed: "Yes, it was like, what things to do and what not to do, and most of it didn't even apply, like the 'don't shake with the left hand' kind of stuff, that doesn't really apply. I didn't find that any of the cultural training prepared me in any way." The generally negative assessment by our interviewees of this cultural training reflects on both the content of the training material as well as its pedagogical conception.

In examining the U.S. military definitions of culture and cultural training as recalled by the interviewees, "culture" was defined as and confined to a list of dos and don'ts that the soldiers and marines widely considered insufficient and not particularly useful. And yet at the same time, this list of dos and don'ts is what they held to be real truths about Iraqis and constitutes the basic and essential information that they know about Iraqi culture and society. The seeming contradiction reveals a fundamental element in the perspectives of the U.S. servicemen and women: what they learned may be how Iraqis "are," but that information was not seen as useful for the U.S. soldiers' and marines' needs in their roles as military occupiers. Thus, their criticisms of the cultural training they received are not about whether it is accurate or not, because they may believe the information they receive. Rather, their criticisms tend to reflect that they think the information they are provided formally is not useful for them in the jobs they do in the military in their interactions with Iraqis.

Given these reactions to the cultural training that the military provided, soldiers and marines sought knowledge about Iraqi culture through interactions with other military personnel who had previously served in Iraq or had begun their tours prior to their colleagues. One navy corporal equipment operator said, "We didn't learn until we got there and we either learned from the guys who had been there longer than us or from our superiors who had gotten word from their superiors." The interviewees' assessment of the technique of "swapping stories," as they called it, in their telling is a more useful method of learning about Iraqi culture than the formal training. This may be due in large part to the perceived credibility of a fellow military colleague who is both trusted and respected for already having served in Iraq and who witnessed and learned about Iraqis and the situation there firsthand.

But what kinds of knowledge did this story swapping consist of? In some cases, the interviewees learned basic information about Iraqi society and power structures. A twenty-two-year-old army captain recalled that trading information was crucial for learning the differences in local social and power structures in the rural and urban areas.

The intelligence guys, we met a couple times a week and then we met with the operations guys. So, yeah, you pass stories. The one thing was in the cities, in Baghdad, shaykhs were early on, were not really considered that important. I know they are important in the countryside and we learned that although they were shaykhs in the city, they didn't have the authority that you would think in most communities. I remember that we traded stories about, you know, a shaykh who would show up and say, "I am the shaykh of this area," and you would think this guy is the man and then you would talk to people and they would be like, "No, we don't deal with him." So that was one of the things we learned about shaykhs.

In this case, the Baghdadi shaykh himself tried to gain power by playing on the stereotypes about the dominant role of shaykhs in all of Iraqi society that the U.S. military and government has incorrectly absorbed (that is, "tribal society is dominated by shaykhs"). The officer himself says, "They didn't have the authority that you would think in most communities" indicating that what they learned about shaykhs, what one would think, could be generalized across an entire country. Of course, no one country is homogenous, and such a view of culture and society erases all differences among class, education, religion, and geographical location, among many other things. Ultimately, the officer learned about some of the most basic differences between urban and rural society in Iraq and simple lessons about how people attempt to gain power for themselves.

In addition to the general information about Iraqi society and dos and don'ts, these tips often related to how to do the jobs they were trained for in the context of Iraqi insurgents, military, and civilians. Thus, the advice focused around how the insurgents fight, what to do about women and children during raids, and how best to get information from Iraqis. This they defined as the type of cultural information that was useful to them—knowledge and techniques that helped them do their jobs as military personnel in Iraq.
Other knowledge they gained came in the form of relatively nuanced information and insight into multiple facets of Iraqi culture, society, and politics, including religious differences in Iraq, the brutality of Saddam’s regime, Iraqis’ love for soccer, and how to speak persuasively with Iraqis. What some of the interviewees suggested was knowing something about Iraqis and Iraq—such as the ancient history of Iraq, how they had suffered under Saddam, or the names of famous Iraqi soccer players—was important not necessarily for specific mission success but for creating some sort of connection or relationship with Iraqis that allowed the U.S. servicemen and women to understand the situations they were in, allay Iraqi suspicions, and show respect for Iraqis, all of which, in theory, would allow them to better do their jobs. The reactions of Iraqis when Americans had this kind of knowledge were described by a thirty-eight-year-old army first lieutenant:

I think the theme that stuck out throughout a lot of training was that this is kind of the foundation of modern civilization and that we were shown slide after slide regarding the technologies, the knowledge, the resources that have been developed in Mesopotamia and that general area. I think our jaws dropped. We brought that up with the Iraqis who we advised and they were very proud of it, and they were, I think, very impressed that we knew that this was where modern civilization really came from.

The third way in which the interviewees learned about Iraqi culture was through the military personnel’s interactions with translators, who were either in-country Iraqis or Iraqi or Arab expatriates or, in a very few cases, Americans who spoke Arabic. Like the jobs of the military personnel whom our interviewees learned information from, for the most part the translators’ job also included imparting credible information to the servicemen and women. Moreover, the idea of using translators as cultural brokers or sources of knowledge also hinged on them being seen as trustworthy. Many servicemen and women expressed their inability to trust Iraqis as they said Iraqis lied constantly or were looking to gain from every interaction. These qualms about trust were circumvented by the close relationships that developed between military personnel and their interpreters, who in most cases after 2003 lived on the same base. A fifty-eight-year-old Mustang sergeant in the army expressed his admiration of his Iraqi interpreter whom he also attributes to saving his life more than once:

Probably the smartest interpreter I had had worked for the Indian embassy. She was in the diplomatic service, probably for I think it was fifteen years. She knew the history of Iraq printed in six books, she knew those books cover to cover, and over probably a three- to four-month period, she really gave me a great understanding of what Iraq was all about, which that was a real plus for us. [Because of that we developed] respect for her, and we were willing to listen. But she really educated us in the society norms, the dos and don’ts, and she became a very integral part of our mission planning, so she was very important. All three of the interpreters that we dealt with, the F2 section dealt with, were very educated; they at least had a two-year college education, and the lady that I spoke about had a four-year college degree. So they were a huge asset to us.

The soldiers’ and marines’ interactions and closeness to Iraqi and/or Arab translators afforded them useful native knowledge that transcended, in most cases, their fears of untrustworthy Iraqis. One army infantry lieutenant, when asked about the cultural training he received, replied that they relied on their interpreters for that kind of information:

And we truly believed that our interpreters should be the ones teaching this course in the future. Mostly after events would happen we would kind of run through them with the interpreters and say, you know, “What did this mean? How could we do this better? He said this, did it really mean this?” Most of our interpreters would bring up with us if we did something that either struck a good note or bad note. For us, that was our bread-and-butter cultural interaction.

The translators provided the U.S. soldiers and marines an opportunity to not just learn behaviors but to ask questions such as “What did this mean” and to understand the contextual meaning of actions and the results of certain behaviors. In contrast, the formal cultural training about dos and don’ts was given without much understanding of the larger social context and environment in which these behaviors were embedded. One serviceman described the cultural training he received as what “… you would tell a tourist, which was not really, I don’t think, at the depth of what we needed.” He continued with an assessment of its weaknesses:

There wasn’t a whole lot of “let’s understand how Arabs or Iraqi culture works” or how to understand or plan for, really train for, the kind of interactions you are going to have with them. It was much more at a surface level of; you know, like I said, here’s the four things you can do to avoid offense, but not so much how to pursue it …
That the military issues commands in the forms of do’s and don’ts, what David Price (this volume) calls “disarticulated culture factoids,” on how to act properly without elaborating or substantiating why points to the larger motives behind cultural training. The U.S. military’s priority, of course, is to complete missions and enhance mission effectiveness, which means for them that cultural issues should help advance military priorities and objectives. The soldiers and marines, however, found that formal cultural training did not provide them with this nor did it provide them a more comprehensive explanation of Iraqi culture. “Culture” is taught to them as a fixed behavior, the right reaction to a certain situation, enumerated as are so many other military responses to situations (rules of engagement), when to fire a weapon, who to salute and how, etc.). Thus, Iraqi culture as defined by the military, like military culture as taught to initiate, becomes a knowable thing. Unlike how culture is lived by people and defined by anthropologists, culture for the U.S. military is not thought of as a process or as flexible systems and behaviors that are constantly changing and adapting. Thus, the ways the soldiers and marines are taught about culture formally by the U.S. military fails to provide them with the ability to understand or behave according to how Iraqis themselves live and understand their culture. So U.S. soldiers and marines end up turning to other sources—translators, other troops, and even Iraqis themselves—to understand behaviors and meanings. The interviewees found that knowledge of Iraqi history, culture, society, and subjects of interest to Iraqis aids U.S. military personnel in building relationships with Iraqis and engendering among them a sense of respect by the occupying forces toward the country they occupy and its people. Ultimately, the interviewees expressed that even the simplest cultural considerations and basic formal behavior seem to be appreciated by Iraqis.

Defining Culture

The responses to the kinds of cultural training the U.S. military provided reveal the difficulties of offering a blanket introduction about the large and varied country that is Iraq to such a diverse group of military personnel. It seems that in trying to make such cultural information accessible to all, the information becomes diluted and overly practical. In essence, when culture is reduced to a list of do’s and don’ts, all diversity, subtlety, and variation are erased so that broad generalizations are made to represent the entire populace, with out regard to economic level, educational level, rural and urban differences, geographic location, gender, travel experience, and so on. Even among the interviewees, depending on the level of their interaction with Iraqis and time spent in Iraq, we found a range of diversified responses. A fifty-one-year-old marine colonel with three tours of duty in Iraq points out, “Don’t show them the bottom of your feet, don’t eat with your left hand, and I’m left-handed, don’t talk about women, sex, religion, politics . . . and that’s all they wanted to talk about once they got to know you! They are more like us than they are different.”

However, with increased contact with Iraqis, particularly when the U.S. military personnel lived closely with Iraqi soldiers and police, some of the U.S. military personnel came to realize the specificity of certain behaviors and how they were not so much about “Iraqi” culture as they were about formal and informal behavior, generational issues, respect, rural and urban differences, and so on. One U.S. Army National Guard captain battalion intelligence officer in Baghdad recalled that the cultural training he received was the same as everyone else’s but that “once you get there you learn—everybody was all freaked out about touching with the left hand and, you know, when you sit down, don’t show the bottom of your foot. That’s all true, but it’s all in context. If it’s a friend or someone you’ve known for a while, they are not going to give a shit.”

The U.S. military’s list of do’s and don’ts also suggests that there is one static culture spread all across Iraq and that it does not change. As we have shown, some servicemen and women knew better: one marine first lieutenant reported that it did not really matter if he learned the culturally appropriate hand gestures, because after four years of the U.S. military presence in Iraq, the Iraqis had gotten used to them. He concluded that “the whole thing about not showing them the palm of your hand or your feet is not necessarily considered a sign of disrespect.” Cultures, of course, change, adapt, and rework global in-fluences. It should not be surprising that Iraqis, as people do everywhere, adapt to and adopt other cultures. As an army captain explained, “They [the Iraqis] understand that, at least the guys that I interacted with, that Americans have a whole different set of customs and don’t understand their customs. However, just doing stuff as simple as pulling your feet back or whatever, makes them feel a lot better.”

Given the military occupation of Iraq, the overwhelming military force and power shown by the U.S. armed forces, and the rebuilding and security role taken on by the U.S. military, Iraqis are adapting to the dominant powers, learning about American culture and how to deal with the U.S. soldiers and marines as a military power, an occupying army, potential employers, providers of security, and people with power to help and hurt them. The power dynamics suggest that cultural awareness and the drive to adapt or accept are often left to those whose very life and death, life ways, and incomes depend on learning the cultural mores and practices of the powerful.
Finally, what we found consistently throughout these interviews is the struggle of our subjects in understanding the role of cultural considerations in the context of a military occupation. The individual interviewees had varied emphases on the need for cultural consideration in executing military operations that dealt regularly with civilians—some saw it as an unnecessary burden on them as they tried to achieve their military objectives, while others saw it as playing a major role in their ability to achieve their military objectives. This contextualized and commonsense application of cultural information is, of course, how Americans (and everyone else) learn to apply our own cultural knowledge. It is true that sitting with one's foot on one's knee so that the bottom of the shoe is turned to face the person on one's left or right is rude and disrespectful in Arab society. However, the importance placed on this offensive but forgivable behavior, this oft-repeated "don't," and the singularity with which the U.S. military personnel whom we interviewed recalled it, when asked what they learned about Iraqi culture, seems misplaced. In the context of a military invasion by the most powerful country in the world, the deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqis, the destruction of Iraqi civil institutions, the continued nonfunctioning of the government, the economy, the water and electricity systems, and so many other elements of the Iraqi state, the emphasis by the interviewees about avoiding showing others the soles of their shoes as an important Iraqi cultural practice seems to be something that they themselves can control in a situation that has become uncontrollable. The ironies of cultural training and culturally sensitive practices in the context of the military operation do not deny or belittle individual efforts to recognize humanity through cultural differences and thereby define a more humanistic role for themselves within the destruction of the U.S. military invasion and occupation. However, the ways in which the U.S. military defines culture and the types of information that U.S. soldiers and marines define as useful fundamentally reinforces the dominance of the U.S. military power in Iraq to control and circumscribe all aspects of Iraq's lives.

The study was led by Dr. Rochelle Davis, and research was also conducted by Georgetown MA students Rola Aboumouched, Dahlia Elzein, Elizabeth Graasieder, R. Brian Seibeking, Dena Takruri, and BA student Jonathan S. Oullette. Funding was provided by grants from Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, the Oman Faculty Grant from the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, and the Georgetown Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (GUROP). The survey was conducted anonymously and any names mentioned in the interviews, American and Iraqi, have been changed. Our appreciation and thanks is extended to the U.S. servicemen and women who agreed to be interviewed and took the time to help us understand their views and experiences.

1. The United States established major military bases in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and later Kuwait) following August 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait and the United States invaded during the first Gulf War in 1991 and thus had had a presence in the Middle East for more than twelve years at the time of the invasion of Iraq. Veterans of this war recall that certain units had developed informational and training materials at this time concerning Arab and Muslim societies for their own specific uses, including a small pamphlet or "smart card" (e.g., Gusterson, this volume). In addition, an Army War College paper prepared in February 2003 provides a prescient discussion of post-invasion Iraq and the various local Iraqi issues that the U.S. invasion force would have to take into consideration, which it clearly did not. See Crane and Terrill (2003).


3. In addition to the extensive accounts in Woodward and Ricks, a Human Rights Watch report (2005) confirms the absence of on-the-ground planning and the resulting complications: U.S. combat troops in Baghdad like the 82nd Airborne and 1st Armored Division are being asked to perform law enforcement and policing tasks for which they are not prepared. According to soldiers and commanders, there was inadequate training and equipment for what the military calls SASO (Stability and Support Operations) and an inadequate supply of Arabic interpreters. The problem was articulately presented by an unnamed U.S infantry commander in a letter he wrote in April 2003 and since declassified [1]. "After less than 48 hours after the first battle: engagement," the commander said "members of this company team were tasked to conduct checkpoint operations southwest of al Najaf. With no training, soldiers were expected to search vehicles, interact with civilians with no CA [Civil Affairs] or PSYOPS [Psychological Operations] support, detain EFW's [Enemy Prisoners of War], and confiscate weapons. Less than 48 hours after this, the unit was again heavily engaged in combat operations. The radical and swift change from combat operations to SASO and back to combat operations over and over again causes many points of friction for the soldiers and their leaders. With the exception of a class given to the platoon leaders, there were no formal classes or training conducted by CA prior to the operation. No training on checkpoint operations or dealing with civilians was received."

4. This has resulted in mixed reviews as to the accuracy of the content or the appropriateness. One interviewee deployed in the initial invasion reported that his chaplain gave a briefing on Islam in which, inaccurately, the Muslim god was portrayed as being different from the Christian god. Soldiers are now given "smart cards," which are pocket-sized sixteen-page informational cards with cultural information and Arabic sayings on them (Iraq Cultural Smart Card: Guide for Cultural Awareness, http://www.fao.org/iryp/dod/smartcard/iraqsmart-0506.pdf), in addition to CDs and online training material. See the University of Military Intelligence (http://www.universityofmilitaryintelligence.us/main.asp), the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Culture Center, the U.S. Army Battle Command Knowledge System (https://bck.s.army.mil), and a variety of secure U.S. military training Web sites (see in particular http://www.au.af.mil/au/aul/abilis/culture.htm).

5. A number of other scholars are working on the subject of U.S. military cultural training programs, including Georgetown University M.A. student Rudy Gharabeb. Military personnel have
also been writing articles advocating for the importance of cultural training. See Elder (2007) and Elkhanniti (2007).

6. These responses were to the question, “In your opinion, was local culture taken into consideration when you or your unit planned/executed its operations?”

7. Only fourteen of the forty reported that they received some training in the Arabic language.

8. For example, the 2004 and May 2006 Iraq Culture Smart Card states, “Admitting ‘I don’t know’ is shameful for an Iraqi,” and in a section called “Islamic Flag Meanings,” it states that “Muslims often fly colored flags to observe various holidays or dates of personal significance. Each color carries a specific meaning.” The first of these is so generalizing as to cast everything Iraqis say with suspicion, and the second provides no information other than to say that they fly flags for nonmilitary reasons.

9. Early in the invasion and occupation, the translators came from areas close to the bases and went home at night. U.S. military thought many of these people to be corrupt and untrustworthy. It was when the local translators were brought to the bases to live, because they and their families had become targets of the growing Iraqi insurgency, that different kinds of relationships developed in which the American soldiers became more trusting of the local translators.

10. At the same time they are considered untrustworthy by American troops, they are also suspected and targeted for assassination by Iraqi insurgents. See Associated Press (2005).

11. This issue is explored more fully in Davis and Grassemer (n.d.).

12. The variation among our interviewees in terms of how we contacted them, rank, political leanings, and so on rule out that our interview sample is overly biased toward “culturally sensitive” people. In terms of political leanings, our sample included thirteen moderates, eight conservatives, five liberals, one libertarian, one progressive, and fourteen unreported.

13. My students and I have had long discussions about our own conceptions of the value of cultural training in the course of a military occupation. By suggesting that U.S. soldiers and marines individually try to make sense of their missions and be culturally sensitive is not to be soft on the U.S. military’s role in the occupation of Iraq. Instead, what we are trying to do is to be fair and honest to our informants, the forty or so men and women that we interviewed for this project, and to reflect on the sense of how many of them understood Iraqi culture and reported their own behavior.

The “Bad” Kill
A Short Case Study in American Counterinsurgency

JEFFREY BENNETT

We had been losing a lot of people without doing anything. . . . My sergeant Major told me he wanted to produce more kills, and I was the guy to make it happen.

Staff Sergeant Michael Hensley, 1/501st (A) scout/sniper platoon

He [Hensley] asked me if I was ready. I had the pistol out, I heard the word shoot. I don’t remember pulling the trigger. It took me a second to realize that the shot came from the pistol in my hand.

Sergeant Evan Veia, 1/501st (A) scout/sniper platoon

It’s a terrible war out there and you have to make tough decisions. This war doesn’t provide you that luxury to be perfect.

Sergeant Anthony Murphy, 1/501st (A) scout/sniper platoon

If you’ve never been outside the wire, . . . you don’t have a basis to judge what I do or what I don’t do.

Sergeant Richard Hand, 1/501st (A) scout/sniper platoon

Introduction

“Small wars” or insurgencies have plagued conquering states since the days of the Roman Empire. To end these wars, states have adopted strategies ranging from national annihilation, at one end