1   Culture Warriors

'To the colonial mind it was always of the utmost importance to be able to say: "I know my natives", a claim which implied two things at once. Firstly that the native was really quite simple and secondly that understanding him and controlling him went hand in hand – understanding being a precondition for control and control constituting adequate proof of understanding.'[1]

In 2006 a novel and highly publicised evolution in military affairs emerged at the hands of US military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Functioning under the moniker of the Human Terrain System (HTS), it promised a fundamentally different way of approaching the perennial problem of countering violent insurgency and so establishing the conditions required for security, stability and the sorts of political change ultimately envisaged by the United States and its coalition partners. Operating as part of a radically redesigned population-centric COIN doctrine, the HTS sought to present US forces (and those of its allies) with a highly informed understanding of the structures, sentiments, loyalties and designs of the local population among whom coalition forces operated. This, it was believed, comprised perhaps the most decisive audience when seeking to win the COIN battle. Anthropologists, ethnographers and other social scientists operating in the field would provide military commanders with the necessary insights to more surgically tailor their efforts to understanding the local population, thereby enabling that vital constituency to be more accurately factored into tactical actions and operational designs. The emphasis behind this evolution was clear. Understanding the environment one operates in and in particular its socio-political structures and its 'human terrain' is a fundamental ingredient of success in any COIN campaign, stabilisation operation or expeditionary intervention. As the celebrated COIN expert David Kilcullen stated, there could be no substitute for analysis provided by 'extremely deep local area and cultural knowledge'.[2] Other analysts agree, stating that in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, 'it became obvious that

1

understanding the cultural landscape, including ethnic and tribal affili-
ations, was foundational to any kind of military success'.[3] Without such
understanding, the argument goes, our militaries are destined to operate
blind, uncomprehending of the insights necessary to leverage influence
within that population from whom the insurgents will draw support and
upon those who hold the keys to power. In the words of both General
David Petraeus and the HTS's then chief advocate Montgomery McFate,
if the indigenous population is the so-called 'centre of gravity' in COIN
and complex stabilisation operations then this form of socio-cultural
knowledge is an absolutely critical component in achieving success.[4]
The Human Terrain Team (HTT) handbook spelled out precisely what
was at stake:

> The human dimension is the very essence of irregular warfare environments.
> Understanding local cultural, political, social, economic, and religious factors is
> crucial to successful counter-insurgency and stability operations … The human
> aspect of the environment becomes central to mission success.[5]

Such sentiments are logical and plausible. They are also highly mislead-
ing. The benefits of understanding the fine detail of the human and
political terrain of a particular operating environment would seem self-
explanatory, but such understanding must be understood for what it is:
not an end in itself but a *means to an end*. In both Iraq and Afghanistan
the ultimate intent of conjoining social science and COIN was to create a
more effective route to the establishment of military and political control.
This new-found understanding was designed not simply to distinguish
between friend and foe but to function as an aid to forms of social
engineering; an instrumental capability whereby societies could be
understood, attitudes changed, allegiances formed or manipulated,
enemies turned, power brokers created and sustained, and new systems
of political rule implemented. It was, in other words, about informing
actionable outcomes. Herein lies the point of this study. There remains a
powerful strain of thought within modern military doctrine that views
'cultural competency' as being a fundamental requirement for effective
war-fighting in environments characterised by unfamiliar social, political
and religious forms of organisation. The rationale being that by more
accurately understanding such things one is better placed to understand
the effects of one's actions in relation to them and better placed in
general to tailor one's methods. In that sense, 'understanding' not only
provides a window onto the intricacies of local societies and the sinews of
influence within but also provides the kind of purchase upon them
necessary to guide intervening forces more surely toward their ultimate
strategic objectives.

However, such a vision rests upon a number of important assumptions. Is the necessary understanding achievable in the ways envisaged? Can unfamiliar social, cultural and political systems be deciphered with the degree of accuracy required to provide external military actors with a genuine basis for action? Do the capabilities designed to achieve and digest this information automatically lead to their employment in a fashion designed to most likely aid campaign success? And how exactly does this knowledge aid the emergence of favourable new realities according to the interests of those that wield them? These basic questions are important in themselves but lead us onward to further considerations about some of the fundamental assumptions underpinning the use of military power in these circumstances. Ultimately they query whether ambitious, transformational interventions of the sort witnessed in Iraq and Afghanistan for example can *ever* really work in the way that they are intended.

The Cultural 'Turn' in War

The forms of understanding required to aid not only in the conquest of new territories and peoples but also the establishment of political control over them are not a new thing. They were certainly a preoccupation of the European imperial powers from the late nineteenth century onwards, as well as Cold War counterinsurgents, as will be shown. But such preoccupations lay largely in abeyance in the post-Vietnam era until the emergence of Al Qaeda and the rise of Islamic insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq began to encourage observers to prioritise an understanding of their new adversaries. From Christopher Coker's identification of a distinctly 'Islamic' way in war or Robert Johnson's nuanced identification of a distinctly 'Afghan' variant of the same, commentators such as Jonathan Kaplan and Victor Davis Hanson extended the argument further, articulating the ways in which ethnicity and heritage shape propensities toward (and success within) conflict, leading toward a promotion of the belief that understanding the culture of one's enemies was now the 'soul' of modern insurgency/counterinsurgency.[6] Consequently, after the initial armed interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, there (re-) emerged into modern military thought a firmly held belief in the importance of 'cultural understanding' and the ways that this could materially benefit military actors undertaking COIN operations in these challenging new environments. Overall there appeared a powerful tendency to subscribe to the notion that 'culture' and other forms of local knowledge mattered hugely in respect to these forms of conflict.[7] As a consequence, a highly receptive climate greeted the emergence of a new breed of

military anthropologists to whom the matter of cultural expertise and associated forms of knowledge was a fundamental ingredient in their conceptualisation of how to fight modern irregular conflicts.[8]

A manifestation of this would be the Human Terrain System (HTS) which, in the words of its progenitors, was designed to improve operational decisions and chances for mission success not only by way of an increased understanding of local cultural, ideological, religious and tribal allegiances but also by helping avoid unintended second-order effects resulting from a lack of understanding of the local 'human terrain'. The HTS attracted much favourable attention. Reports of anthropologists navigating the dangerous confines of these increasingly testing insurgencies played well with a media hungry for evidence of a new approach to failing campaigns.[9] In association with the sudden emergence in late 2006 of a brand-new COIN doctrine in the form of Field Manual (FM) 3-24, itself heavily influenced by social science, the HTS appeared to be evidence of a paradigm shift in COIN; from a seeming reliance upon brutal kinetic measures to a far more intelligent, informed application of knowledge and insight that sought to apply military action in a discerning and constructive fashion, one that incorporated local knowledge and sentiment in its designs. As Kilcullen, one of the influential authors of FM 3-24, observed, 'the key is to first diagnose the environment, then design a tailor-made approach to counter the insurgency, and – most critically – have a system for generating continuous, real-time feedback from the environment that allows you to know what effect you are having, and adapt as needed'.[10] To its supporters, the HTS offered a critical capability in that respect.[11]

Yet amidst this broad consensus as to the central importance of the socio-cultural aspect of the War on Terror, there emerged a thoughtful and critical response that challenged the notion of such matters as fixed and deterministic. The historian-cum-International-Relations scholar Patrick Porter in particular pushed back against the so-called cultural turn in war, arguing against the apparently instinctive and powerfully held belief on the part of academics and strategists who viewed the global war on terrorism as '[a] clash of profoundly different cultures, between American-led forces on one side, and jihadist warriors or tribal warlords on the other'. He proposed that this encouraged an overly determinist view of the tangled relationship between war and culture. In its aim to encourage greater sensitivity to the nuances that differentiate cultures it actually encouraged a crude view of ancient and fixed ways of war. As Porter stated, it risked replacing strategy with stereotypes.[12] The significance of his argument was its willingness to apply rigour to a debate populated by such slippery concepts as 'culture' or 'understanding'. By

revealing the flawed assumptions inherent to the way in which we char-
acterise such concepts in the broadest terms, Porter and others opened
the door to a far more thoughtful mode of enquiry in general when it
came to this debate.[13] What should we be trying to understand, exactly?
Why should we understand it? To what extent, and to what ends? What
or whom should we use to help us understand it? How will we know
when we have succeeded in understanding it? And perhaps most import-
ant of all: what are those 'unknown knowns' that cause us to understand
things in the way that we do?[14]

The requirement to adopt a more questioning mindset in this respect
was emphasised by examination of certain of the publications that
emerged during the period of engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan and
since, and which are typical of an overwhelming confidence in the ability
of militaries to gather, interpret and then instrumentalise 'local' know-
ledge in order to better do stabilisation, COIN and pacification oper-
ations. Broadly speaking, these themes have been promoted with varying
degrees of emphasis by three groups: those academics, often drawn from
the fields of social science and entwined within Professional Military
Education (PME) who firmly extol the advantages of such knowledge
in improving the performance of militaries engaged in such activities;
those doctrine writers (often heavily influenced by the aforementioned
academic cohort) who have absorbed such recommendations and used
them to form the basis of tactical and operational manuals of war; and
most recently those political scientists who have advocated the use of 'big
data' to more properly understand the myriad complex factors affecting
the course of violence in indigenous societies subject to armed interven-
tion, with the intention of better informing the techniques of military
actors in particular.

Culture Warriors

The first cohort are represented by any number of publications that
emerged courtesy of initial missteps in Iraq and Afghanistan. One
example is *Solving the People Puzzle: Cultural Intelligence and Special
Operations Forces.*[15] This was designed to promote the notion of cultural
intelligence (or Cultural Quotient: CQ) as a fundamental ingredient of
success in the COIN and stabilisation operations then being undertaken
by the Canadian army in Afghanistan. But the intellectual justification for
such an approach simply raises more questions than it answers. Like
many works on the subject, it adheres firmly to the notion that 'culture'
in all its myriad respects comprises the centre of gravity when it comes
to expeditionary interventions, insofar as an understanding of the

indigenous culture leads toward favourable outcomes for the counter-insurgent. Alternative perspectives, i.e. that culture is inherently mutable or plays a relatively subordinate role in conditioning protagonists' actions, are entirely absent from the debate. From there we are led to the highly questionable presumption that the requisite 'CQ' can be acquired quickly and with relatively little difficulty even by military actors largely unfamiliar with the concepts at play. And ultimately we are subject to the recommendation that once acquired, it can then be conceptualised as an instrument of power and influence with a clearly definable relationship between its employment on the one hand, and the outcomes that one seeks to engineer on the other. As the author states in an additional study, '[T]he whole idea of cultural intelligence refers to the capacity to understand and effectively respond to the beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviours of individuals and groups under complex and changing circumstances *in order to effect a desired change*' (author's italics).[16] A similar and even more ambitious argument comes courtesy of Dr Paula Holmes-Eber, former professor of operational culture at the Marine Corps University, Quantico. The focus of Holmes-Eber's enquiries is less the significance of culture in war per se than the intellectual evolutions undertaken by the US Marine Corps (USMC) which allow it to accommodate the notion of culture as a variable within its own planning processes. The results are instructive, as an extract from her work *Culture in Conflict: Irregular Warfare, Culture Policy, and the Marine Corps* reveals:

The "culture concept" has been reshaped and reworked to fit into Marine Corps organizational processes, identity, and ways of seeing the world … a standardized "one size fits all" culture and language training framework … which can easily be adapted to any culture or country to which Marines may suddenly deploy … Culture becomes, then, "a tool in the kitbox" – a skill like shooting a rifle or flying an airplane – that Marines can use to achieve the mission wherever they may be sent.[17]

The notion that forms of socio-cultural understanding can be seized upon, shaped and 'Marinized' in order to create a uniform approach to operations anywhere on the planet is perhaps understandable from the perspective of the military planning mind but is still scarcely believable, raising as it does a multitude of questions as to how such conformity should even begin to function in practice.[18] Similarly problematic assumptions are evident in the 2014 edited collection *Culture, Conflict and Counterinsurgency*, a work that sought to draw together a range of intellectual approaches in discussing the thorny matter of cultural understanding and its relevance to the campaign in Afghanistan. The

belief that such understanding was nothing less than fundamental to the success of the military effort there can be judged by the proposition that embracing the cultural dimension of the conflict would allow the possibility of a 'meaningful and enduring victory' in that country.[19] Seen from this perspective, some of the chapter titles are instructive. 'Incorporating Cultural Intelligence into Joint Intelligence: Cultural Intelligence and Ethnographic Intelligence Theory'; 'Employing Data Fusion in Cultural Analysis and COIN in Tribal Social Systems'; and lastly 'The Use of Evolutionary Theory in Modelling Culture and Cultural Conflict'. Aimed firmly at the military establishment, these titles promised three distinct things: firstly, that culture is a defining element of conflict; secondly, that it can be understood in technical terms and then be incorporated into military planning; and lastly that such understanding promises to those that possess it the ability not simply to comprehend, but to influence and control. The latter point is certainly emphasised by Andrew MacKay and Steve Tatham's *Behavioural Conflict: Why Understanding People and Their Motivations Will Prove Decisive in Future Conflict*. Former British military officers with decades of service between them in Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Iraq and Afghanistan, the authors promote the notion that military actors engaged in COIN and stabilisation operations can achieve transformative political and psychological effects upon target societies and their populations through the application of behavioural economics theory. Dismissing the traditional vision of the population as comprising simple rational choice actors, the authors proposed instead the adoption of advanced psychological theories that recognise human decision-making as a flawed, irrational and confusing process, and which can by extension allow more informed 'messaging' and 'framing' of choices to achieve operational and strategic effect. As the book states, 'influence is all about learning what the right levers are, and how to apply them'.[20]

Perhaps the most forthright advocate of the 'social science' approach during the era of Iraq and Afghanistan was the anthropologist Montgomery McFate. It should be emphasised that there is much food for thought in McFate's more recent and hugely interesting work on anthropology in the age of empire.[21] But between 2003 and 2011 and over the course of a number of publications and as one of the original progenitors of the HTS, McFate was at the forefront of social science's 'march' onto the battlefield, a trajectory reflected in 2011's *Social Science Goes to War: The Human Terrain System in Iraq and Afghanistan*.[22] Within, McFate would claim that by improving commanders' situational awareness and thus improving resultant courses of action HTS's so-called combat ethnographers had materially enhanced the operational

effectiveness of military units in both conflicts.[23] HTS and its subordinate HTTs enabled units to '[r]educe kinetic operations, develop more effective courses of action, improve situational awareness, improve consequence management, increase support for host nation government, improve humanitarian assistance efforts, improve village assessments and decrease attacks by enemy forces'.[24]

McFate's powerful advocacy of the importance of socio-cultural knowledge to the conflicts then underway in Iraq and Afghanistan has, directly or indirectly, informed a wealth of recent doctrinal development in the field of COIN and stabilisation.[25] But there appear to be some fundamental problems inherent to this intertwining of COIN and culture, as reflected in the work of Johnson, Zelen *et al.*, where contributors casually trot out terms such as 'fusion', 'analysis', 'systems' and 'models', contributing to the notion that social control of the human landscape can be achieved by visualising, recording and manipulating key variables within that environment.[26] Aside from these dubious assumptions, such theories fail to take account of similar 'systems' approaches adopted by the colonial powers over a century ago and which sought to apply scientific methodologies to the business of understanding and influencing indigenous societies, but which found these to be of marginal use in delivering peace and stability. Secondly, all of the aforementioned studies, and indeed the cultural 'turn' in general, tend to advocate a ground-up approach to understanding the ways in which COIN campaigns are won or at least resolved, and thereby ignore the fundamental importance of the way that policy sets objectives and thus dictates the context within which military power is exercised. Thirdly, they skirt serious moral and ethical issues related to the phenomenon of expeditionary COIN and stabilisation operations. As the authors of *Culture, Conflict and Counterinsurgency* state in their introduction, '[S]uccessful militaries must be culturally informed if they are to be successful in invasion, occupation and counterinsurgency.'[27] But as the anthropologist David H. Price observes, the mere mention of terms such as invasion and occupation raises immediate ethical objections: the social science technocrat is essentially advocating the cultivation of 'full spectrum' dominance over those that they seek to control.[28] Not only is this a largely indefensible objective in the minds of the academic rank and file who may then avoid assisting the military effort, but the emergence of private sector 'applied anthropologists' to fill the void only diminishes the effectiveness of the social-science aspect. And last but not least, all of these works neglect to acknowledge the highly problematic way in which war delivers results. The acquisition of 'understanding', the employment of that understanding at the tactical and operational levels via various military and

non-military forms of action, and the subsequent emergence (or other-wise) of effects at the strategic and political level form so complex and non-linear a process in terms of the relationships at play as to cast doubt on whether any such positive causal relationship can be established.[29] Without acknowledging the way in which war actually 'works', advocates of the social science approach deprive themselves of a hugely important set of considerations in proving the validity of their claims.

Advocates of the culture approach are not blind to such objections, of course. In *Social Science Goes to War*, Mc Fate provided a robust defence of the concept that was in many respects not only perfectly justifiable but sorely needed after the publication in 2013 of a highly critical report that savaged numerous aspects of the HTS programme.[30] But even taking to heart its positives, that defence still failed to provide a satisfactory analysis of the utility of cultural understanding in support of complex exped-itionary COIN and stabilisation campaigns. It provided no empirical evidence to support claims that cultural knowledge makes any difference to military outcomes, acknowledging instead that its utility was essen-tially subjective and anecdotal.[31] Claimed successes looked impressive but were unable to prove that HTTs provided US forces with a decisive advantage.[32] It also portrayed the HTS's use of ethnographic understanding in support of COIN and stabilisation operations as a stand-alone initiative almost unparalleled in history. It did not therefore place the HTS into any form of intellectual trajectory in this respect and thus masked the inconvenient fact that the instrumentalisation of socio-cultural knowledge by military actors has, historically, been plagued by repetitive problems. And ultimately, with an eye on events taking place in 2007–10, at the height of its activities, the claimed successes of the HTS appear far more questionable with the passing of time.[33]

The Doctrine Writers

The second type of publication that reveals a host of assumptions regarding the importance of local understanding in war, and the require-ment for military actors to engage with and understand such matters, is doctrine, particularly the celebrated FM 3-24 (Counterinsurgency), pub-lished in late 2006 at the height of the campaign in Iraq. Updated in 2018, it remains largely unchanged.[34] Like nearly all military doctrines on this subject, it describes how the population constitutes the strategic 'centre of gravity'; an article of faith that still underpins mainstream teaching on the subject of COIN. It goes on to promote the importance of what it terms a population-centric approach to combating insurgency,

the significance of understanding that population, and from that a
number of educational, technical and operational initiatives designed to
increase that understanding: cultural training, smart cards, biometrics,
partnering with host nation forces and so forth. Knowledge and under-
standing became central to this process as far as FM 3-24 was concerned:
in the sense not only of enabling its readers and adherents to grasp the
method and purpose of COIN per se, but of preparing them for the task
of wielding military power in the midst of unfamiliar social and cultural
realms which, in the words of the doctrine, requires a sophisticated
understanding of socio-cultural factors in the local context.[35] The ori-
ginal FM 3-24's influence upon thinking of counterinsurgency in those
terms has been widespread and lasting. In 2009 the US Joint Chiefs of
Staff issued guidance that newly commissioned officers have a thorough
working understanding of the concept of 'culture' and its importance to
the contemporary operating environment.[36] In 2010 General Michael
Flynn, the chief International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) intelli-
gence officer in Afghanistan, determined that the intelligence services
devote themselves to answering fundamental questions 'about the envir-
onment we operate in and the people we are trying to protect and
persuade'.[37] Western COIN and stabilisation doctrine maintains an
explicit emphasis upon the value of socio-cultural understanding to
tactical and operational commanders. In its 2012 analysis of the enduring
'lessons' from a decade of COIN at that point, the US Joint Chiefs
proposed that the primary requirement was the need for a '[g]reater
understanding of the environment', particularly ethnic and tribal iden-
tities, religion, culture and politics.[38] Australian army COIN doctrine
promotes the notion of a 'complex human terrain', of 'cultural compe-
tence and capability' and the requirement for a deep understanding of
the target population including political, social and cultural organisation
and structures.[39] Its French counterpart meanwhile advocates the need
for 'a sense of where we operate … an understanding of the human
environment and what the expectations of local leaders and populations
are'.[40] The British military pushed forward even further. The emergence
in 2010 of an *entire* doctrine relating to the question of 'understanding'
(subsequently updated in 2016) was significant insofar as it represented
the first commissioning of a manual of war specifically devoted to this
subject in and of itself.[41] The trend was further bolstered by a raft of
overarching doctrines such as the 'Integrated Approach', which now
emphasise the primary importance of 'understanding' in enabling the
more informed and effective employment of Britain's armed forces in
irregular conflict scenarios in particular, and which stipulate such under-
standing as being *fundamentally* instrumental in nature.[42] As for FM