Female Marine searching Iraqi woman at control point outside Fallujah

And when people are entering upon a war they do things the wrong way around. Action comes first, and it is only when they have already suffered that they begin to think.

—Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*

The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture

By M O N T G O M E R Y   M c F A T E

Cultural knowledge and warfare are inextricably bound. Knowledge of one's adversary as a means to improve military prowess has been sought since Herodotus studied his opponents' conduct during the Persian Wars (490–479 BC). T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) embarked on a similar quest after the 1916 Arab rebellion against the Ottoman Empire, immersing himself deeply in local culture: "Geography, tribal structure, religion, social customs, language, appetites, standards were at my finger-ends. The enemy I knew almost like my own side. I risked myself among them many times, to learn."[1] Since then, countless soldiers have memorized Sun Tzu's dictum: "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles."

Although "know thy enemy" is one of the first principles of warfare, our military operations and national security decisionmaking have consistently suffered due to lack of knowledge of foreign cultures. As former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara noted, "I had never visited Indochina, nor did I understand or appreciate its history, language, culture, or values. When it came to Vietnam, we found ourselves setting policy for a region that was terra incognita."[2] Our ethnocentrism, biased assumptions, and mirror-imaging have had negative outcomes

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during the North Vietnamese offensives of 1968 and 1975, the Soviet-Afghan war (1979–1989), India's nuclear tests (1998), the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990), and the Shi'ite transformation of Iran (1979).

Despite the fact that cultural knowledge has not traditionally been a priority within the Department of Defense (DOD), the ongoing insurgency in Iraq has served as a wake-up call to the military that adversary culture matters. Soldiers and Marines on the ground thoroughly understand that. As a returning commander from

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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."[3] As this commander's observation indicates, understanding one's enemy requires more than a satellite photo of an arms dump. Rather, it requires an understanding of their interests, habits, intentions, beliefs, social organizations, and political symbols—in other words, their culture.[4]

This article argues that new adversaries and operational environments necessitate a sharper focus on cultural knowledge of the enemy. A lack of this knowledge can have grave consequences. Conversely, understanding adversary culture can make a positive difference strategically, operationally, and tactically. Although success in future operations will depend on cultural knowledge, the Department of Defense currently lacks the programs, systems, models, personnel, and organizations to deal with either the existing threat or the changing environment. A Federal initiative is urgently needed to incorporate cultural and social knowledge of adversaries into training, education, planning, intelligence, and operations. Across the board, the national security structure needs to be infused with anthropology, a discipline invented to support warfighting in the tribal zone.

Changing Adversaries and Operational Environments

Cultural knowledge of adversaries should be considered a national security priority. An immediate transformation in the military conceptual paradigm is necessary for two reasons: first, the nature of the enemy has changed since the end of the Cold War, and second, the current operational environment has evolved fundamentally within the past 20 years as a result of globalization, failed states, and the proliferation of both complex and light weapons.

Although the United States armed and trained for 50 years to defeat a Cold War adversary, Soviet tanks will never roll through the Fulda Gap. The foe the United States faces today—and is likely to face for years to come—is non-Western in orientation, transnational in scope, non-hierarchical in structure, and clandestine in approach; and it operates outside of the context of the nation-state. Neither al Qaeda nor insurgents in Iraq are fighting a Clausewitzian war, where armed conflict is a rational extension of politics by other means. These adversaries neither think nor act like nation-states. Rather, their form of warfare, organizational structure, and motivations are determined by the society and the culture from which they come.

Attacks on coalition troops in the Sunni triangle, for example, follow predictable patterns of tribal warfare: avenging the blood of a relative (*al tha'r*); demonstrating manly courage in battle (*al-muruwwah*); and upholding manly honor (*al-sharaf*).[5] Similarly, al Qaeda and its affiliated groups are replicating the Prophet Mohammed's 7th-century process of political consolidation through jihad, including opportunistic use of territories lacking political rulers as a base, formation of a corps of believers as a precursor to mass recruiting, and an evolution in targeting from specific, local targets (such as pagan caravans) to distant powerful adversaries (for instance, the Byzantine Empire). To confront an enemy so deeply moored in history and theology, the U.S. Armed Forces must adopt an ethnographer's view of the world: it is not nation-states but cultures that provide the underlying structures of political life.

Not only our adversaries have changed. The 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review* predicted that smaller-scale contingencies—military operations of smaller scale and intensity than major theater or regional wars, such as humanitarian, peacekeeping, peace enforcement, noncombatant evacuation operations, and combating terrorism—will characterize the future operational environment. The use of the military for humanitarian disaster relief, peacekeeping, and counterterrorism operations means that the military will be increasingly forward-deployed in hostile, non-Western environments "disconnected from the global economy."[6] According to Andy Hoehn, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, "The unprecedented destructive power of terrorists—and the recognition that you will have to deal with them before they deal with you—means that we will have to be out acting in the world in places that are very unfamiliar to us. We will have to make them familiar."[7]

Culture Matters Operationally and Strategically

Culture has become something of a DOD buzzword, but does it really matter? The examples below demonstrate three points: misunderstanding culture at a strategic level can produce policies that exacerbate an insurgency; a lack of cultural knowledge at an operational

Navy admiral discussing school construction in Najaf, Iraq, with tribal Sheik

U.S. Marine Corps (Robert K. Blankenship)

level can lead to negative public opinion; and ignorance of the culture at a tactical level endangers both civilians and troops. There is no doubt that the lack of adversary cultural knowledge can have grave consequences strategically, operationally, and tactically.

At a strategic level, certain policymakers within the Bush administration apparently misunderstood the tribal nature of Iraqi culture and society. They assumed that the civilian apparatus of the government would remain intact after the regime was decapitated by an aerial strike, an in-

when the United States cut off the hydra's Ba'thist head, power reverted to its most basic and stable form—the tribe

ternal coup, or a military defeat. In fact, when the United States cut off the hydra's Ba'thist head, power reverted to its most basic and stable form—the tribe. As a tribal leader observed, "We follow the central government. . . . But of course if communications are cut between us and the center, all authority will revert to our sheik."[8] Tribes are the basic organizing social fact of life in

Iraq, and the inner circle of the Ba'th Party itself was the purview of one tribe, the Al Bu Nasir. Once the Sunni Ba'thists lost their prestigious jobs, were humiliated in the conflict, and got frozen out through de-Ba'thification, the tribal network became the backbone of the insurgency.[9] The tribal insurgency is a direct result of our misunderstanding the Iraqi culture.

At the operational level, the military misunderstood the system of information transmission in Iraqi society and consequently lost opportunities to influence public opinion. One Marine back from Iraq noted, "We were focused on broadcast media and metrics. But this had no impact because Iraqis spread information through rumor. Instead of tapping into their networks, we should have visited their coffee shops." Unfortunately, the emphasis on force protection prevented Soldiers from visiting coffee shops and buying items on the economy. Soldiers and Marines were unable to establish one-to-one relationships with Iraqis, which are key to both intelligence collection and winning

hearts and minds. A related issue is our squelching of Iraqi freedom of speech. Many members of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and Combined Joint Task Force 7 felt that anticoalition and anti-American rhetoric was a threat to security and sought to stop its spread.[10] Closing Muqtada al Sadr's *Al Hawza* newspaper contributed to an Iraqi perception that Americans do not really support freedom of speech despite their claims to the contrary, reinforcing their view of Americans as hypocrites.

Failure to understand adversary culture can endanger both troops and civilians at a tactical level. Although it may not seem like a priority when bullets are flying, cultural ignorance can kill. Earlier this year, the Office of Naval Research conducted a number of focus groups with Marines returning from Iraq. The Marines were quick to acknowledge their misunderstanding of Iraqi culture, particularly pertaining to physical culture and local symbols, and to point out the consequences of inadequate training. Most alarming were the Iraqis' use of vehement hand gestures, their tendency to move in one's peripheral vision, and their tolerance for physical closeness. One Marine noted, "We had to train ourselves that this was not threatening. But we had our fingers on the trigger all the time because they were yelling." A lack of familiarity with local cultural symbols also created problems. For example, in the Western European tradition, a white flag means surrender. Many Marines assumed a black flag was the opposite of surrender—"a big sign that said shoot here!" as one officer pointed out. As a result, many Shia who traditionally fly black flags from their homes as a religious symbol were identified as the enemy and shot at unnecessarily. There were also problems at roadblocks. The American gesture for *stop* (arm straight, palm out) means *welcome* in Iraq, while the gesture for *go* means *stop* to Iraqis (arm straight, palm down). This and similar misunderstandings have had deadly consequences.

On the other hand, understanding adversary culture can make a positive difference strategically, operationally, and tactically. The examples below illuminate three key points: using preexisting indigenous systems creates legitimacy for the actions of the occupying power, indigenous social organization

postconflict reconstruction is most effective when the rebuilt institutions do not impose external concepts of social organization

(including tribal and kinship relationships) determines the structure of the insurgency, and avoiding the imposition of foreign norms will generate public cooperation.
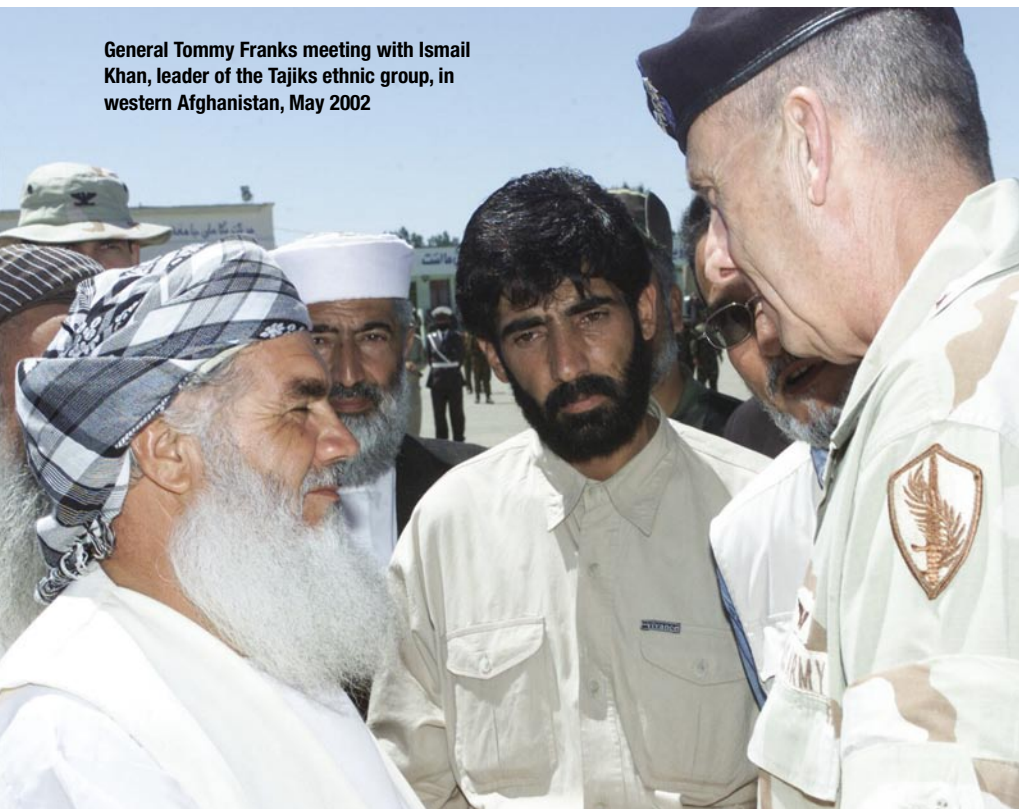
Recognizing and utilizing preexisting social structures are the key to political stabilization in Iraq. While U.S. policymakers often seemed perplexed by the sub rosa tribal structure in Iraq, the British understood the indigenous system and used it to their advantage. Brigadier Andrew Kennett, commander of the British battlegroup

based in Basra, identified a core lesson learned during their history of empire: the importance of adjusting to local cultures and of not imposing alien solutions.[11] In Iraq, the most important element of local culture is the tribe and the associated patronage system. The majority of the population belong to one of the 150 major tribes, the largest containing more than a million members and the smallest a few thousand.[12] Tribes are invariably patronage systems in which powerful sheiks dispense riches and rewards to sub-sheiks, who in turn distribute resources to the tribal community. Sheiks always need money to generate loyalty from sub-sheiks. There is a saying in Iraq: you cannot buy a tribe, but you can certainly hire one.[13] In Amara, the British did just that. They appointed tribal leaders to local councils and gave the councils large sums to distribute, reinforcing the sheiks' political standing. As one officer noted, "We deal with

what exists. In the five months we've been here, we're not going to change the culture of Iraq. We have to work with what there is."[14]

The structure of any insurgency will reflect the indigenous social organization of the geographical region. Thus, charting the Iraqi tribal and kinship system allowed 4th Infantry Division to capture Saddam Hussein. Although most U.S. forces were preoccupied with locating the 55 high-value targets on the Bush administration's list, Major General Raymond Odierno, USA, understood that relationships of blood and tribe were the key to finding Saddam Hussein.[15] Two total novices, Lieutenant Angela Santana and Corporal Harold Engstrom of 104th Military Intelligence Battalion, were assigned to build a chart to help 4th Infantry Division figure out who was hiding Saddam. According to Santana, a former executive secretary, their first thought was "Is he joking? This is impossible. We can't even pronounce these names." Despite the challenges, they created a huge chart called "Mongo Link" depicting key figures with their interrelationships, social status, and last-known locations. Eventually, patterns emerged showing the extensive tribal and family ties to the six main tribes of the Sunni triangle: the Husseins, al-Douris, Hadouthis, Masliyats, Hassans, and Harimyths, which led directly to Saddam Hussein.[16]

Postconflict reconstruction is most effective when the rebuilt institutions reflect local interests and do not impose external concepts of social organization. For example, Iraqis tend to think of the central government as the enemy. The longstanding disconnect between the center and the periphery meant that Baghdad did not communicate down and city councils could not communicate up. The CPA misunderstood the relationship between Baghdad and the rest of the country and imposed a U.S. model based on central government control. Yet many Marine Corps units intuitively had the right approach and began po-

General Tommy Franks meeting with Ismail Khan, leader of the Tajiks ethnic group, in western Afghanistan, May 2002

U.S. Air Force (Joe Springfield)

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litical development at the local level. A Marine captain was assigned to build a judicial system from the ground up. He refurbished the courthouse, appointed judges, and found the 1950 Iraqi constitution on the Internet. Because he used their system and their law, the Iraqis perceived the court as legitimate. Unfortunately, he was instructed to stop employing Ba'thists. It appears that we are often our own worst enemy.

An Inadequate System

Countering insurgency and combating terrorism in the current operational environment demand timely cultural and social knowledge of the adversary. As Andy Marshall, Director of the Office of Net Assessment, has noted, future operations will require an "anthropology-level knowledge of a wide range of cultures." Currently, however, DOD lacks the right programs, systems, models, personnel, and organizations to deal with either the existing threat or the changing environment.

Socio-cultural analysis shops, such as the Strategic Studies Detachment of 4th Psychological Operations Group and the Behavioral Influences Analysis Division of the National Air and Space Intelligence Center, are underfunded, marginalized, and dispersed. Because they lack resources, their information base is often out of date. Task Force 121, for example, was using 19th-century British anthropology to prepare for Afghanistan. With no central resource for cultural analysis, military and policy players who need the information most are left to their own devices. According to a Special Forces colonel assigned to the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, "We literally don't know where to go for information on what makes other societies tick, so we use Google to make policy."

Although the Army Intelligence Center at Fort Huachuca, 82d Airborne Division, Joint Readiness Training Center, Naval Postgraduate School, and John F. Kennedy Special Warfare School

Religious leaders talk to military chaplain regarding male soldiers searching Iraqi women at checkpoint

55th Signal Company (Olga Steilert)

all offer some form of predeployment cultural training, their programs are generally rushed, oversimplified, or unavailable to all Soldiers and Marines who need them. Much so-called cultural awareness training focuses on do's and don'ts and language basics and tends to be geared toward Baghdad. As one Army colonel noted, "In Western Iraq, it's like it was six centuries ago with the Bedouins in their goat hair tents. It's useless to get cultural briefings on Baghdad." Troops rely on personal reading to make up for the lack of formal training. Inadequate training leads to misperceptions that can complicate operations. For example, Marines who were instructed that Muslims were highly pious and prayed five times a day lost respect for Iraqis when they found a brewery in Baghdad and men with mistresses. In actuality, Iraq has been a secular society for six

decades, and there were relatively few pious Muslims.

Even though all services now have a foreign area officer (FAO) program, the military still lacks advisers who can provide local knowledge to commanders on the ground. The FAO program is intended to develop officers with a combination of regional expertise, political-military awareness, and language qualification to act as a cross-cultural linkage among foreign and U.S. political and military organizations. Because few FAOs are ever subjected to deep cultural immersion totally outside the military structure, most do not develop real cultural and social expertise. Furthermore, most do not work as cultural advisers to commanders on the ground but serve as military attachés, security assistance officers, or instructors. The result is that commanders must fend for themselves. One Marine general

explained that his unit had no local experts when it deployed to Afghanistan. The Pastoo-speaking cook on the ship, who happened to be born in Afghanistan, became the "most valuable player" of the mission.

The current intelligence system is also not up to the task of providing the required level of cultural intelligence. Retired Admiral Arthur Cebrowski, USN,

during the Vietnam era, anthropologists excelled at bridging the gap between the military and tribes

Director of the Office of Force Transformation, noted that "the value of military intelligence is exceeded by that of social and cultural intelligence. We need the ability to look, understand, and operate deeply into the fault lines of societies where, increasingly, we find the frontiers of national security."[17] Rather than a geopolitical perspective, threat analysis must be much more concrete and specific. According to Lieutenant General James Clapper, Jr., USAF, the former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, "Of course we still provide in-depth orders of battle, targeting data, and traditional military capabilities analysis. But we must also provide the commanders on the ground with detailed information regarding local customs, ethnicity, biographic data, military geography, and infectious diseases." Producing intelligence on these factors can be challenging. As Clapper noted, "We provided detailed analysis on more than 40 clans and subclans operating in Somalia—far more difficult than counting tanks and planes."[18]

Back to the Future

A Federal effort is needed to infuse the national security structure with anthropology across the board. While this idea may seem novel, anthropology was developed largely to support the military enterprise.

Frequently called "the hand-maiden of colonialism," anthropological knowledge contributed to the expansion and consolidation of British power during the era of empire. In the United States, the Department of Defense and its predecessors first recognized culture as a factor in warfare during the Indian Wars of 1865–1885, resulting in the formation of the Bureau of American Ethnology under Major John Wesley Powell. During World War II, anthropologists such as Gregory Bateson served the war effort directly, first conducting intelligence operations in Burma for the Office of Strategic Services, and later advising on how to generate political instability in target countries through a process known as *schizmogenesis*. American anthropologists produced ethnographies on the Axis powers that facilitated behavioral prediction based on national character. While Ruth Benedict's 1946 study of Japanese national character, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, is the best known, studies such as Ladislas Farago's *German Psychological Warfare* (1942) collect dust on library shelves. Their predictions were often highly accurate: following recommendations from anthropologists at the Office of War Information, President Franklin Roosevelt left the Japanese emperor out of conditions of surrender.[19]

The legacy of World War II anthropology survives in the form of the Human Relation Area Files at Yale University. Established by the Carnegie Foundation, the Office of Naval Research, and the Rockefeller Foundation, this database provided information on Japanese-occupied former German territories of Micronesia. Although the database was maintained for decades after the war with Army, Navy, Air Force, and Central Intelligence Agency funds, U.S. Government agencies seeking "an anthropological-level of knowledge" have sadly now forgotten its existence.

During the Vietnam era, the defense community recognized that familiarity with indigenous, non-Western cultures was vital for counter-insurgency operations. The Director of the Defense Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency, R.L. Sproul, testified before Congress in 1965 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." To win hearts and minds, counterinsurgency forces must understand and employ local culture as part of a larger political solution. As General Sir Gerald Templer explained during the Malayan Emergency, "The answer lies not with putting more boots into the jungle, but in winning the hearts and minds of the Malayan people." Thus, the U.S. defense community determined that it must recruit cultural and social experts. Seymour Deitchman, DOD Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency, explained to a congressional subcommittee in 1965:

The Defense Department has . . . recognized that part of its research and development efforts to support counterinsurgency operations must be oriented toward the people . . . involved in this type of war; and the DOD has called on the types of scientists—anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, economists—whose professional orientation to human behavior would enable them to make useful contributions in this area.[20]

During the Vietnam era, the special warfare community understood that success in unconventional warfare depended on understanding indigenous, non-Western societies, and they turned to anthropologists. U.S. Special Operations Command's *Special Operations in Peace and War* defines *unconventional warfare* as "military and paramilitary operations conducted by indigenous or surrogate forces who are organized, trained, equipped, and directed by an external source." To conduct operations "by, with, and through," Special Forces units must have the support of the local population, which can be decidedly difficult to secure. While he was acting as an

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adviser to U.S. troops in Vietnam in 1965, British expert Sir Robert Thompson suggested that anthropologists be used to recruit aboriginal tribesmen as partisans. Indeed, anthropologists excelled at bridging the gap between the military and tribes. Special Forces in Vietnam, for example, were assisted by Gerald Hickey in working with the Montagnards.

So where are the anthropologists now that the Government needs them? Although the discipline's roots are deeply entwined with the military, few anthropologists are interested in national security. Their suspicion of military activity stems from a question of ethics: if professional anthropologists are morally obliged to protect those they study, does their cooperation with military and intelligence operations violate the prime directive? They believe it does. This conclusion was based on a number of defense projects that sought to use anthropological tools in potentially harmful ways. In 1964, the Army launched Project *Camelot*, a multinational social science research project, to predict and influence politically significant aspects of social change that would either stabilize or destabilize developing countries. The effort was canceled in July 1965 after international protests erupted in target countries. Critics called *Camelot* an egregious case of "sociological snooping."[21]

While anthropological knowledge is now necessary to national security, the ethics of anthropologists must be taken into account. In addition to direct discussion and debate on using ethnographic information, policymakers and military personnel must be trained to apply anthropological and social knowledge effectively, appropriately, and ethically.

The changing nature of warfare requires a deeper understanding of adversary culture. The more unconventional the adversary, and the further from Western cultural norms, the more we need to understand the society and underlying cultural dynamics. To defeat non-Western opponents who are transnational in scope, nonhierarchical in structure, clandestine in approach, and who operate outside the context of nation-states, we need to improve our capacity to understand foreign cultures.

The danger is that we assume that technical solutions are sufficient and that we therefore fail to delve deeply enough into the complexity of other societies. As Robert Tilman pointed out in a seminal article in *Military Review* in 1966, British counterinsurgency in Malaya succeeded because it took account of tribal and ethnic distinctions, while similar U.S. efforts in Vietnam were bound to fail because they lacked anthropological finesse.[22]   **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] T.E. Lawrence, quoted in B.H. Liddell Hart, *Lawrence of Arabia* (New York: DeCapo, 1989), 399.

[2] Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect* (New York: Random House, 1995), 32.

[3] Steve Israel and Robert Scales, "Iraq Proves It: Military Needs Better Intel," *New York Daily News*, January 7, 2004.

[4] *Culture* is "those norms, values, institutions and modes of thinking in a given society that survive change and remain meaningful to successive generations." Adda Bozeman, *Strategic Intelligence and Statecraft* (New York: Brassey's, 1992), 57.

[5] Amatzia Baram, "Victory in Iraq, One Tribe at a Time," *The New York Times*, October 28, 2003.

[6] Greg Jaffe, "Pentagon Prepares to Scatter Soldiers in Remote Corners," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 27, 2003, 1.

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[13] Baram.

[14] Charles Clover, "Amid Tribal Feuds, Fear of Ambush and the Traces of the Colonial Past, UK Troops Face up to Basra's Frustrations," *Financial Times* (UK), September 6, 2004, 11.

[15] Vernon Loeb, "Clan, Family Ties Called Key to Army's Capture of Hussein," *The Washington Post*, December 16, 2003.

[16] Farnaz Fassihi, "Charting the Capture of Saddam," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 23, 2003.

[17] Arthur K. Cebrowski, Director of Force Transformation, Office of the Secretary of Defense, statement before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Treats, and Capabilities, Armed Services Committee, United States House of Representatives, February 26, 2004.

[18] Lieutenant General James R. Clapper, Jr., "The Worldwide Threat to the United States and Its Interests Abroad," statement to the Senate Committee on Armed Services, January 17, 1995: <http://www.totse.com/en/politics/terrorists_and_freedom_fighters/wrldthrt.html>.

[19] David Price, "Lessons from Second World War Anthropology," *Anthropology Today* 18, no. 3 (June 2002), 19.

[20] Irving Louis Horowitz, ed., *The Rise and Fall of Project* Camelot: *Studies in the Relationship Between Social Science and Practical Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967).

[21] Ibid., 47–49, 232–236.

[22] Robert O. Tilman, "The Nonlessons of the Malayan Emergency," *Military Review* 46 (December 1966), 62.