

Running Head: The Importance of Cultural Understanding in Military Operations

The Importance of Cultural Understanding in Military Operations

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Well written. Does not address the problem of what the Union Army might accomplish in the South. The paper doesn't discuss the political direction given the Army.

Abstract

This essay explores the importance of military forces achieving cultural understanding in order to attain strategic goals in their area of operations. The study compares the United States Army's failures in the post-Civil War south during reconstruction and their success in pacifying the Moros during the Philippine insurrection. The reasons for failure were an inability to understand the cultural environment in which they were operating and a lack of preparedness in dealing with the monumental task of rebuilding a country. The successful operations against the Moros were directly linked to an understanding of the cultural view of the use of force and its proper application in the area of operations. The study concludes that the success of military operations in the contemporary operating environment is dependent upon achieving cultural understanding in the area of operations.

The Importance of Cultural Understanding in Military Operations

Throughout its history, the United States Army has spent the majority of its time in the performance of either post-combat military operations or operations other than war. The success or failure of these operations is dependent upon Soldiers and leaders achieving a cultural understanding of their operating environment. The majority of doctrine and organization literature focuses on conventional battlefield tactics and strategy and often overlooks this vital area. Cultural understanding aids in attaining military goals by providing a frame of reference for the dynamics of the operating environment. Understanding local customs, demographics, hierarchy, and social norms are key to effective post-conflict rebuilding and reconstruction efforts. Failure to achieve cultural understanding will derail operations and feed dissent among the populace, creating a breeding ground for insurgent activities. Soldiers, as the point of the spear and those most able to gauge the pulse of the people, must achieve cultural understanding to achieve success.

Many years of these types of operations have provided lessons learned for Soldiers and leaders to draw upon. An examination of failures in the post-Civil War south and the success of pacifying the Moros in the Philippines demonstrate the impact of cultural understanding on post-conflict operations and operations other than war. In the first, the failure of Soldiers and leaders to fully understand the culture of the south, aided by a lack of training and a volatile political atmosphere, derailed reconstruction efforts and had national strategic implications for almost 100 years. The second demonstrates how Soldiers understood the Moro culture and used a policy of chastisement to successfully pacify them. While these two studies differ, most notably because the former was a police action against Americans, they illustrate how success or failure depends on cultural understanding at the tactical level.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, an occupation force of 200,000 federal troops took up station as the main source of law and order in the defeated south. (McPherson, 2001, p. 533)

The army placed the south under martial law and established military courts to deal with lawlessness and set about providing humanitarian aid and rebuilding and restoring the region. Military commanders took on additional roles as administrators at the local and state level, with Soldiers providing critical functions in law enforcement and civil support operations. The Soldiers also found themselves as the lead in enforcing the abolition of slavery and monitoring ^{integration} the inculcation of former slaves into the southern society. This task proved difficult for the force, due to the lack of training and the explosive political atmosphere, but mostly because of a lack of cultural understanding of both the southern people and of the former slaves. The south saw in the federal Soldiers a constant reminder of the humiliation they had endured by defeat. The Soldiers failed to grasp the deepness of this resentment, as well as the long held view of the black race, but more importantly failed to understand that the freed slaves became “surrogate victims of attacks by southerners who did not dare assault the real symbols of their humiliation, Yankee Soldiers.” (McPherson, 2001, p. 534-535)

The Soldiers were unable to deal with the challenges facing them in the south during reconstruction. The abolition of slavery had irrevocably alienated southern public support, and the sudden introduction of over 4,000,000 former slaves into a social structure that did not want them increased the burden on the occupation force. The political overtones of this environment were not important to the Soldiers, but a basic understanding of these divisions and their impact in establishing a self reliant post-war society by their leaders would have aided them in the accomplishment of their mission. In reality, the majority of Soldiers made little effort to understand the social and cultural norms of the south, resigning themselves to stay neutral and

merely survive the ordeal of their assignment. The failure to act, except in extreme circumstances and under orders, created an environment where the freed slaves felt betrayed and the defiant southerners felt emboldened, further making the task of reconciliation and reconstruction difficult. (Foner, 1988, p. 432-433) A darker aspect of occupation duties was the enticement of Soldiers to forage and loot without authorization as well as other acts of petty criminality that further alienated the southern population. (Birtle, 2004, p. 27) Further, Soldiers detested this type of assignment because it was difficult, unrewarding, and highly political. (Birtle, 2004, p. 48) The Soldiers' inability to deal with these challenges was a result of a failure to prepare and an overall dislike of occupation duties that led to actions that further complicated their mission.

The failure to grasp cultural understanding had strategic implications. Most notable are the impact that the Soldiers' actions had on southern public opinion, but the failure to embrace the needs and goals of the freed slaves aided in creating a sense of hopelessness in blacks. It also helped create a social structure that effectively kept blacks relegated to a lower class destitute of civil rights in the majority of the south through the 1950s and 60s. Army officials and the Soldiers in charge of helping the freed slaves in achieving economic independence, land ownership, and social mobility did not view them much more favorably than the southern population. In fact, "most army officials in charge of wartime labor relations assumed that the emancipated slaves should remain as plantation laborers." (Foner, 1988, p. 58) When the former slaves refused to embrace plantation labor as a viable economic option, it created a sense of failure among the military leaders, who incorrectly attributed it to laziness on the part of the black race. Southerners capitalized on this, using it as justification to enact harsh vagrancy laws to force labor onto plantations. The end result was a series of legislative measures throughout

the south that made it almost impossible for blacks to rise above menial farm labor and led to the oppression of black civil rights in the south for almost 100 years. Military leaders had intended plantation labor as a means for freed slaves to enter into the labor market, but they failed to understand the deeply held aversion to this form of labor that was the byproduct of a culture enslaved under similar conditions for over 400 years. The failure of leaders and Soldiers to embrace the cultural impact of their efforts, coupled with the incorrect assumptions based on racial stereotypes led to an oppressive environment that had long lasting implications in the white and black society.

Lessons from the U.S. Army's failures to grasp cultural understanding in the post-war south proved important to later operations. In the early part of the twentieth century, American forces found themselves attempting to instill a democratic government in the Philippines, a country composed of many different tribes and that had suffered oppressive rule at the hands of the Spanish. Initial experimentation with benevolent acts and conciliatory measures resulted in increased insurgent activities and attacks on Soldiers. The Moros, an extremely violent warrior tribe, were responsible for the most serious activity and became the focus of the American effort. Astute leaders realized that understanding the Moro culture would provide the means to pacify and stabilize the country.

The American Soldier quickly learned that a policy of attraction would not solve the problems facing them in the growing insurgency. Leaders realized that the Moro people "regarded American leniency as weakness and were overawed by the guerrilla's ability to strike down their foes." (Birtle, 2004, p. 127) In light of this realization, American forces adopted a policy aimed at burning crops and villages, concentrating the indigenous population, destroying the enemy's logistical bases, and punishing the hostile population. Soldiers and leaders

understood that their enemy viewed violence and the application of force as strengths to be respected and admired, and used this understanding to form a doctrine that the Soldiers ruthlessly enforced. The new policy proved effective in crushing the Moro insurgents, and within a little more than a year had resulted in the surrender of one major guerrilla commander after another and the installation of a civilian government in the Philippines. (Birtle, 2004, p. 132) The American's ability to understand the Moro culture enabled the successful application of force to meet the desired goal.

While the unrestrained use of force against enemy supply bases and civilian supporters proved crucial, it was not solely responsible for American success in the Philippines. Force broke the back of the resistance, but positive measures [?]undermined it and helped reconcile the insurgents to their defeat. (American Military History, Vol. 1, 2004, p. 359) Soldiers and leaders realized that a single policy of coercion or benevolence would not be completely successful in pacifying the region. Successful operations relied on a mix of force and good works derived from an understanding of the culture in which the force was operating. Looking back, it is clear that benevolence only became a viable option once American forces made "war distressing and hopeless on the one hand and by making peace attractive." (Birtle, 2004, p. 135) American Soldiers transitioned back to building infrastructure and other peaceful nation building operations to demonstrate that once the insurgents submitted they would have a stable society in which to re-enter.

Cultural understanding is vital to post-conflict military operations. The U.S. Army's failure to grasp the cultural intricacies of the post-war south resulted in actions that did much to derail reconstruction efforts. Soldiers and leaders did not understand the deep-seated resentment that the southern population harbored, nor were they trained and prepared for the multitude of

administrative functions that reconstruction required. Occupation duty in the south was less than ideal and ^athankless duty in a highly political atmosphere where the defeated white population despised them and the black population thought they could solve every problem. This no-win situation created a sense of apathy among the Soldiers that reinvigorated southern defiance and stifled reconstruction efforts. In contrast, American forces, through trial and error, used cultural understanding to their advantage in the Philippine insurrection. They learned that the application of force and coercion would make war unbearable and smother support for the insurgency. This understanding also enabled Soldiers to use the one thing that in the Moro culture invoked respect and admiration. Soldiers transitioned to benevolence after the application of force to make the pill of defeat easier to swallow, and this combination resulted in a swifter transition to a civilian government and mission accomplishment.

Conclusion

Cultural understanding dictates the relationship between the populace, the government, and the military force. History shows that rarely does a strict policy of chastisement or attraction work on its own merit. The most successful operations are the result of a mixture of these approaches based on an understanding of the culture and society of a specific area of operations.

Soldiers must understand cultural dynamics and their impacts. Knowing the culture enables the *Army* ^{to} proper ^{ly} application ~~of~~ measures that will build confidence among the population, instill security, deprive insurgents of safe havens, and ultimately achieve strategic goals. A small miscue at the tactical level can have devastating and far-reaching effects on strategic operations. Most importantly, understanding the cultural domain is vital to success and is not solely the realm of the strategic leader. Cultural understanding by Soldiers is a force multiplier that is the key to successful post-conflict operations.

References

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