US AND UK MILITARY CULTURAL RELEVANCE FOR FUTURE WARFARE

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US and UK Military Cultural Relevance for Future Warfare

The shape of warfare is evolving and there are significant challenges for western militaries adapting to the more diffuse battle space and shifting from large scale maneuver to a counter insurgency style of warfare. This project examines the organizational cultures of the two militaries at the forefront of the Global War on Terror. It seeks to identify whether they are relevant in organizational cultural terms for the challenges that they are facing now and will face in the future. The research reveals some inadequacies in both organizations that will require some bold cultural corrections if success on the battlefield is going to be found without an exorbitant cost. A broad suggestion for implementing cultural change drawn from personal experience is offered by way of conclusion.
USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

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The innovator has for enemies all those who prospered under the old regime’

—Niccholo Machiavelli
The Prince

Machiavelli’s observation has as much relevance today as when it was first penned. It is a perfectly natural part of the human condition that most people are resistant to change. When confronted with a changed environment those who fail to adapt will soon be left behind; it is a simple Darwinian fact. When transposed from the individual to a collective group or organization the ease with which change can be conducted becomes increasingly difficult as other interwoven vested interests are at stake, not least of all the underlying culture of the organization.

The underlying question that this paper seeks to address is a problem that is vexing most military organizations, how do we adapt to the challenges of 21st Century warfare? If one accepts the premise that the very nature of warfare has changed then so has its cultural context. How ready are the military cultures of the USA and UK for the challenges these changes provide?

In this paper I will briefly give a definition of 4th and 5th generation warfare before examining a broad military culture in both the US and UK armies, in order to identify some of the cultural problems in dealing with 21st Century warfare. I will use the GLOBE methodology as outlined by Gerras, Wong and Allen in their paper Organizational Culture: Applying A Hybrid Model to the US Army. I will examine both the US and British Armies against key parts of the GLOBE model. I will not seek to offer solutions but merely identify areas that may require further work and I will conclude by offering
some techniques that might be used to effect cultural change drawn from personal experience. I will not attempt to examine national cultures although it would be a sound starting point for a more detailed examination of the subject.

**Future Warfare**

There is a growing body of writers who believe that the character of war has changed out of all recognition and that the 3rd Generation of Warfare, i.e. manoeuvre warfare, has already come and gone and that we have now moved in to 4th Generation Warfare and even that is evolving to a possible 5th Generation. Key amongst these are Thomas X Hammes with his work The Sling and the Stone who asserts that ‘The Fourth generation has arrived. It uses all available networks – political, economic, social and military...’

Another writer, General Sir Rupert Smith argues persuasively in his book The Utility of Force that how force is used must be governed by the phenomenon of ‘wars amongst the people’

Hammes and other strategists are however advancing their theories in to the 5th generation of warfare which for the purpose of clarity in this paper will be defined as the use of ‘all means whatsoever – means that involve the force of arms and means that do not involve military power, means that entail casualties, and means that do not entail casualties – to force the enemy to serve one’s own interest’

In short it is not quite that ‘war no longer exists’ just that it has changed in to a variety of very intangible forms alongside its more traditional and familiar, to us at least, 3rd and, to an extent, the 4th generational forms as seen in Iraq and Afghanistan. There are critics of the generational arguments most notably Frank Hoffman who prefers to
describe the changing face of warfare as hybrid warfare. Whichever view one accepts it seems that we are in a period where we must adapt to a mode of warfare that is different to what we have conditioned ourselves for many years.

To counter these assertions there are strong claims that war fundamentally has not changed and the addition of adjectival descriptors means little. But if the addition of adjectives is what is required to provoke a shift in thinking from ‘heavy metal’, armour oriented manoeuvre warfare thinking to more agile and intellectual military actions then those adjectives serve their purpose well. For the purposes of this paper I have assumed that we are in a shift in the conduct of war. I have also accepted the premise of 4th generation warfare and that this will require a corresponding change in organisational culture to cope with it.

Background and Context

Looking in particular at the US Army there is much to be respected; the sheer size and ability to conduct 3rd Generation warfare is unmatched on the planet and although it has taken the best part of 4 years the US Army has adapted to the challenges at a tactical level of waging dual COIN operations in the distinct and separate theatres of Iraq and Afghanistan.

But what of the culture that underpins that success, I will examine this in a more formal fashion shortly but first some anecdotal observations of the US Army as an outside observer. What seems to be the spectre at the feast of recent success is the shadowy figure of ‘the Vietnam experience’. Certainly through the dark days of the Iraqi insurgency through 2004 to 2006 it was wheeled out all too often and glibly by commentators. But if there is a sub-conscious cultural bogeyman that rests on the
collective shoulders of the US Army, it would appear to be that Vietnam must not and
cannot be repeated. Perhaps of greater significance is the Vietnam Influence in 2 areas;
first, there was a reluctance to confront the challenges of Counter Insurgency warfare
and its associated techniques. The SOF community and to a lesser extent the Light
Infantry divisions were the exception. Secondly and most significantly was the creation
of a world beating manoeuvre warfare army. More recently the introduction of COIN
Doctrine and the bitter and hard learned lessons of the last 6 years have done much to
rectify this.

This latter underpinning ethos that pulled the US Army back to self-respect after
Vietnam was the move to Air Land Battle combined with a determination not to do COIN
again. In more recent years that has been extended. It is marked by the warrior ethos
and a belief that ‘might is right’ which appears to underpin much of American military
thinking. When coupled with a lack of deep corporate COIN experience particularly at
the junior level where success depends on the judgement calls of very junior NCOs
there is a potential recipe for failure and for institutional heavy handedness that could
act as a catalyst for failure. The desire for black and white, win or lose outcomes also
cLOUDS judgement and thinking. That said the US Army prides itself on being a learning
organisation and the bitter experience of the last 5 years has forged a level of COIN
experience but at a high cost.

From the end of the Second World War to the present day the British Army has
either been extracting from its colonial legacy and thus engaged in low level ‘police
actions’ or it has been involved in counter insurgencies from Palestine through Malaya,
Kenya, Cyprus and the very alive legacy of the 38 year Northern Ireland campaign. By
the very nature of the requirements placed upon it and, relative to the US, its small size the British Army had by the start of the 21st Century established a world class reputation for COIN. As the Northern Ireland campaign reduced in intensity from 1994 onwards and the role of the Army became more focussed towards Public Order support to the Police so the genuine skill base of COIN/Counter Terrorism became eroded. When this was coupled with the expansion of operational commitments to the Balkans, complacency began to emerge in the British Army. By the summer of 2003 and the start of serious unrest in Southern Iraq, the British Army was in an arguably dangerous position of believing its own press about its COIN capabilities. It was taking unnecessary casualties as a result of poor low level techniques and tactics which ten years earlier would have been deemed unacceptable and dangerous on the streets of Belfast but appeared to have been forgotten on the streets of Basra. The criticisms of US tactics elsewhere in Iraq gave strength to the myth or lie that Southern Iraq was more under control not just because of the Shia population but because of some perceived superiority in British ability and suitability for the modern battlefield. The illusion of a relatively benign Southern Iraq was shattered as the Shia revolt of early 2004 proved all too vividly.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s there are many similarities in what both Army’s were seeking to do, on the one hand support a range of peace support operations in varied locations whilst at the same time maintain an all arms capability to conduct manoeuvre warfare of the typical 3rd generational type. For the US this did not include any emphasis or concern with COIN. For the British it meant continuing to conduct a COIN campaign in Northern Ireland, contribute to a number of peace support operations
whilst striving to stay up to the pace with the US army for manoeuvre warfare. The lessons of the 1991 Gulf War vindicated those who advocated the need to maintain the 3rd generational capability at the forefront of British military thinking and the UK 1st Armoured Division took its place alongside its US counterparts in the coalition advance in to Iraq and Kuwait.

The GLOBE Methodology

Now I will turn to Geert Hofstede and the GLOBE study as used by Gerras, Wong and Allen for it provides a useful framework on which to distil a simplified view of not just US but other western military cultures many of which are still struggling to define their direction post Cold War despite the passage of some 19 years since the Fall of The Berlin Wall. The 4 GLOBE dimensions I will examine are Institutional Collectivism, Power Distance, High Performance Orientation and Assertiveness.

Institutional Collectivism. Institutional Collectivism is defined as ‘the degree to which organizational and societal institutional practices encourage and reward collective distribution of resources and collective action’⁷. One of the major factors in both American society generally and in the US Army is the strong sense of egalitarianism which whilst noble is arguably flawed. The corresponding reward culture it breeds does not necessarily provide the organisation with the best available people. The process of young officer selection conducted by ‘the egalitarian notion that with enough training anyone can become a leader keeps standards for admission to the profession of arms too low’⁸ is a deeply worrying aspect of US Army culture. If the US Army is to contend with the challenges of a disaggregated battlefield in 4th and 5th generation warfare its junior commanders must be of the highest quality possible and rigorously selected for
their leadership qualities. In an ambush halfway up a defile in the Korengal Valley it is no time to discover that the Platoon Commanders Bachelors degree qualifies him for very little that is relevant to the current situation.

It is worthwhile examining this fundamental difference in officer selection criteria. Firstly there are basic differences largely driven by the different size of the 2 armies. The US Army has various commissioning processes, the US Military Academy at West Point, Reserve Officer Training Corps and Officer Candidate School whereas all British Officers are trained on a one year course at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. The British Commissioning Course is an intensive military skills and leadership development course with some academic pursuits. The majority, somewhere around 95% of British Officers, are graduates but a first degree is not a requirement to lead men – a basic level of leadership potential is however. All British Officers are selected in the three and a half day Army Officer Selection Board process at Westbury from which about 30% of attendees will be selected for Officer Training. The battery of tests examines everything from academic ability, through planning skills, team and group interaction, physical tests and fitness. The purpose of this is simple, to establish whether the potential officer has the requisite level of leadership potential that with a year at Sandhurst he would be fit to lead British soldiers. This is a time tested process and whilst it is not unknown it is rare to find young officers who have failed to meet the leadership challenge laid before them. It is not as egalitarian as the American system perhaps but it is entirely a meritocracy.

In the British Army the holiest of sacred cows is the Regimental system that in various forms has served the Army well for over 350 years. It continues to flourish albeit in a rather more diffuse design than many would like but it has evolved to meet the
challenges of soldiering. These changes have been forced upon it more often than not by political desires and necessity rather than any home grown desire to change itself whether through the Caldwell and Haldane reforms of the 19th Century or through the more recent changes of the Post Cold War Options for Change and the more recent Future Army Strategy\(^9\) and Future Infantry Structures\(^10\). It is within this construct that the British Army’s institutional collectivism has reposed and arguably from where much of the army’s success has derived. But at times the structure and the arguments about its form have been to the detriment of the wider Army. The vested interest of Regimental Officers in the future of their regiments has led to decisions that have called into question the impartiality of senior officers in matters of restructuring or even of allocation of operational roles. Loyalty to the Regiment has been perceived by some to be more important than loyalty to the wider Army or perhaps even to rationality. The chorus of senior officers denying such nepotism can be heard now baying their denials from afar. The US Army’s sense of cultural identity reposes more in Branch and in turn with the Divisional structure – it will be interesting to see how the combination of operational tempo and the BCT structure impacts on this as Divisional assets are split to the four winds to serve operational necessity, as an example the 10th Mountain Division with 2 Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) in Iraq and 2 in Afghanistan.

*Power Distance.* *Power Distance* is defined as ‘the degree to which members of an organisation expect power to be distributed equally. If Power distance is high, those in a position of authority expect and receive, obedience – the organization is based on hierarchical decision-making processes with limited one-way participation and communication’\(^11\). The near religious deference paid to senior officers in US Army
culture is quite a sight to behold to a British Officer. Its sits at odds with the ‘hail fellow well met’ illusion that many senior US officers seek to portray, the cigar chomping ‘man of the people’ act that is so much at odds with the highly intelligent commanders that the vast majority are. I have yet to fathom this need to be two people but I have no doubt it serves to discombobulate the staff and render them off balance and therefore potentially as inconsistent as their leaderships mood swings. It is my experience that there is very little devolution of power or decision making downward in the US Army below Colonel level and control and command is generally exercised at too high a level with little scope for mission command and a tendency to defer decisions upwards. Arguably this is a factor of size and yet conversely certainly in the Combat Arms responsibility for Company Command and its equivalent is given to Captains when in the British Army that responsibility remains at the Field Rank of Major. In addition Brigade Command is given to Colonels and in the British Army it resides at the Brigadier level. There is a definite inconsistency between giving responsibility to a more junior rank, the US approach, but then not allowing much freedom to manoeuvre or to exercise free decision making. The British approach of retaining the posts at a higher rank permits greater freedom to the individual. Yet conversely the approximate ages and, perhaps more significantly, length of time served before reaching equivalent positions at Company Command and Brigade command is broadly the same. There are strong arguments for the benefits of both approaches and I do not intend to rehearse those here but my point is that on the one hand leadership in battle is devolved to a very junior level relative to the numbers commanded and yet responsibility for decision making in headquarters appears to be held much further up. This is certainly the case
with the US Army whereas with the British Army commanders are marginally older and left with more mission command to execute their tasks. Again in the fluidity of the 4th and 5th generation failure to exercise mission command will stifle success not least on the battlefield. This control sits at direct odds with the generally relaxed nature of American society but is perhaps a reflection of a lack of confidence to let go the reins and allow individuals to have a chance of success by taking the risk that they may get it wrong. This alone requires a cultural shift that will need to start at the very top of the organisation. As General Mattis noted in his recent Commanders Guidance for Effects-based Operations ‘Decentralized decision making, with emphasis on empowering subordinates’ initiative in accordance with intent, clearly defined objectives, and executable tasks, is the best approach to achieve our goals.’

Common to both armies is what in the US military would be described as the Officers Appraisal Report (OAR) factor or in the British Army the MS (Military Secretary) factor which often precludes officers from taking the bold decision in training for fear of seeing their careers take a nose dive. Certainly in the British Army this has become less of an issue given the realities of life and the tempo of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. But in career terms we are still some way short of ‘fortune favouring the brave’ certainly if that bravery involves making some bold decisions in training.

**High Performance Orientation.** High performance orientation in the context of the military can be explained ‘as having a “Can Do” attitude, an emphasis on results as opposed to people, and valuing a sense of urgency’. In my mind this is linked almost inextricably in the military to the 4th of the GLOBE dimensions that I am using, that of **Assertiveness.** Why should this be so? A problem for both the US and British Armies is
the ‘can do’ mindset that whilst admirable also becomes a potential point of failure as the professional ethic is so strong that despite unreasonable demands and institutional ‘over stretch’ both organizations continue to function admirably and pay the price in both blood and treasure. There have been well documented accounts in both armies of accusations of a failure of Generalship in allowing the organizations to be taken to war unprepared and then subsequently overstretched as a result of Generals failing to assert themselves in their professional advice to political masters.

One of the problems of the modern army lies in the need to empirically measure everything. In peacetime this may be primarily related to the harsh reality of an ever shrinking Defence budget where the scrutiny of auditors means attempting to quantify to ensure justification. This ethos of measurement finds itself transferred to the operational environment and numerous measures of effectiveness that fast become the bane of every Commander’s life. The high performance aspect of professional western armies is perhaps best exemplified by the desire in a quasi-bureaucratic way to be assessed empirically in training against a scientific metric and all too often this has been against a well developed manoeuvre warfare metric. This latter metric tried and tested and embedded in the training organization and enshrined for the US Army in the NTC and for the British Army in the British Army Training Unit Suffield (BATUS) serves to confirm a mode of operation that becomes less relevant with each passing day. Those who dare to criticize such metrics are swiftly reminded of the great post Cold War myth that manoeuvre and the all arms battle in that context are the holy grail and all else are but pale imitations of the one true path despite repeated evidence to the contrary on operations.
That is not to say that warfighting and all arms coordination are over rated or should be of secondary importance, they should not. Warfighting must be the gold standard but it should be relevant and encompass the complexity of the modern and future battle space not seek to replicate some outmoded notion of manoeuvre warfare on the German Plain or the Arabian desert. The British concept of the Adaptive Foundation i.e. train for ‘a war not the war’ is entirely justified and the US Army must be careful not to dismiss the expertise born of Air Land Battle too quickly in pursuit of the short term success that current operations demand. Warfighting experience is plentiful in both Armies but the fixation with high performance orientation and its supporting empirical data from outmoded measurement systems will quickly serve to disillusion the young blades. Training must be realistic and relevant but also not so narrow in focus that the challenges for the future are put off indefinitely in the search for a quick fix in the current fight.

Assertiveness. Linked inextricably to high performance orientation is the aspect of assertiveness where on the one hand there is a failure to assert coupled with too much assertiveness. What do I mean here? For the individual the fear of appearing disloyal means there is a reluctance to assert upwards and to speak out against poor decisions or even to offer sage advice to superiors. Arguably this a natural curse of the hierarchical system which is the military way. The blend of the need for robust assertiveness to get things done when lives are at risk balanced in turn with a need for feedback to ensure that the best possible solutions that reduce the risk of casualties are taken is difficult.
Always at the forefront of people’s minds is the need to achieve success collectively without descent in to some utopian chat shop where no decision is taken and leadership flounders in a sea of consensus building. The combined effects of the OAR/MS panic mentioned earlier in the paper can tend to stymie the frank exchange of views required to articulate the best solution to a problem. The ingrained and understandably hierarchical nature of the military militates against a lessening of this assertiveness. Arguably however in the fluid 360 degree battle space of the 4th or 5th generation then greater flexibility not just of mind but of manner is what will bring about success.

There is less deference to the trappings of authority in the Israeli Army and repeatedly they have demonstrated a versatility and ability to respond quickly and effectively and alter course likewise that puts both the British and American Armies to shame. Arguably the unique nature of the Israeli operating environment, the relative small size of the nation and structure of their Army means that there is an inevitability that they operate in a far more fluid and less hierarchical way.

The surfeit of assertiveness downwards serves to increase power distance which in turn reduces the opportunity for people to speak out lower down the chain as identified earlier. The need for Commanders who have the charisma and confidence to listen to subordinates and encourage debate without losing authority is a very real challenge but argues strongly in need of selection of high quality material at the beginning for both soldiers and officers. Thereafter the education system must be broad and questioning and not confined to mechanistic problem solving and therefore mechanistic and predictable solutions. The open and frank exchanges based on mature
and intelligent debate that mark much of the Special Forces world’s planning process need to be replicated in the mainstream. The diffuse battle space and the requirement to function with little direction and oversight in isolated environments means that Commanders cannot be aloof. The sheer scale of feed in to headquarters requires staffs that are in tune with commanders as the ability of the commander to function with a staff cowering before him is going to degrade very rapidly. Some will function well out of fear the majority will function better out of respect. Many commanders will fail to recognize the criticisms that are leveled here and will profess to being ‘approachable’ and would be genuinely surprised that their subordinates may cower from them. Others however will revel in the aura of power they exert and will justify it as their means of ensuring a loyal, hardworking and dynamic staff or arguably a cowed staff. As an anecdotal example, the Divisional Chief of Staff in the British Army who insisted on the Headquarters conducting its weekly collective physical training after lunch on a Friday as a means of stamping a good ‘protestant work ethic’ when the rest of the Army was heading home for the weekend succeeded in doing nothing more than creating a Staff who whilst they did not doubt his professional competence, had some serious reservations about his human qualities. He pursued the same ethos as a Brigade Commander. It is unlikely that this slightly unhinged attitude to people did anything to reduce the power distance and this style of assertiveness did more to isolate subordinates than draw them in.

Effecting Change

As Gerras, Wong and Allen observe in their paper ‘culture change in a mature organization is extremely hard’ they use the Schein model for systematically
embedding and transmitting a culture\textsuperscript{15}. Their paper puts forward some very sound ideas as to how to effect cultural change in the US Army but it is debatable whether either the US Army or the nation as a whole is ready for some of the detailed changes proposed to US Army culture. The method of effecting change is as applicable to the British Army and I do not intend to regurgitate their proposed solutions but merely offer a few thoughts on leading change from the medium of leading change as a Battalion commander and as a Change Committee member as a 320 year old regiment merged in to a new identity. I will not dwell on specific examples as the paper is too short to permit that but the underlying principles remain the same at the strategic level and can be applied to the cultural change needed to cope with 21\textsuperscript{st} Century warfare.

First and underpinning cultural change there must be a collective belief that there is a need for change which in turn will probably have been driven by a changed environment. Implicit in the need for change is criticism of the status quo and those responsible for it. The danger with this is that it requires some very grown up thinking and acceptance by individuals that the way they have been doing things were not as good as they might have been. Implicit in the Gerras, Wong and Allen paper’s description of Officer selection for the US Army is that the quality of officers generally is flawed, this is not so but an even higher quality line could be reached with a shift away from egalitarianism. The British Army’s Officer Selection has evolved from a wartime model from the Second World War and has proven to be highly effective yet the process of selection for Regiment or corps still has something of the nepotistic air about it yet it seems to work effectively.
Once that change is accepted as being inevitable there is a need to communicate it and the reason for it. For this to be successful the adoption of a ‘one size fits all’ strategy will not work. The strategic leader seeking to effect the cultural change faces a wide number of constituencies the most difficult of which is likely to be ‘the dinosaur vote’ i.e. those that have gone before and none will be more critical or dangerous than those who have filled his own shoes. A consensus will need to be built behind the scenes to ensure that there are no ‘slings and arrows’ from the flanks. A reduction of power distance in the US Army would be for many perceived as the tip of a dangerous iceberg that could erode the whole discipline and focus of the force. Yet for the force to really flourish the power distance and excess testosterone needs to be reduced. A similar problem of Power Distance exists in the British Army but is perhaps less visible which is perhaps more a societal reflection than a purely military one. The need to balance the requirements of the hierarchical structure against openness will remain a challenge but if the caliber of commanders is correct and their personal confidence high enough then the need to create power distance to compensate for any insecurities will be less

Once the change has been decided upon then bold action is required to ensure it is effected promptly and cleanly to ensure that it becomes embedded in the culture quickly. Thereafter there is no time for complacency because there must be perceptible quick wins to ensure that the organization sees the benefit of the change in a tangible sense. If those quick wins come about there will be a very quick growth in stature and success and this becomes self-feeding. What must be avoided at all costs is for the advances to stagnate in self-satisfaction and the strategic leader must have the
requisite drive and energy to continue to push the changes forward. Here assertiveness comes to the fore but in turn there is a requirement to balance that with regulating power distance to ensure the change is powered through but also that constituency voices are heard and not repressed.

The single biggest factor once the need for change is identified is the strategic leader’s personal example – that alone can decide whether the enterprise succeeds or fails. It will be a canny balancing act of the GLOBE dimensions of Institutional Collectivism, Power Distance, High Performance Orientation and Assertiveness whilst using embedding and transmitting techniques to ensure the cultural change is driven through, takes hold and replaces that which existed formerly.

But perhaps the final thought on how best to confront future challenges lies not purely in organisational culture but in something altogether simpler.

‘Preparation for war is an expensive, burdensome business, yet there is one important part of it that costs little – study. However changed and strange the new conditions of war may be, not only generals but politicians and ordinary citizens, may find there is much to be learned from the past that can be applied to the future.’

Endnotes

3 Donald J Reed, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, Beyond the War on Terror: Into the Fifth Generation of War and Conflict, 2008
4 Smith, The Utility of Force, 17
The Future Army Strategy (FAS) began its implementation in 2003 and was designed to address the needs of the Army as the commitment to Northern Ireland reduced. Primarily it saw a reduction in the size of the Infantry and an increase in the enablers of the Combat Service Support Arms.

Future Infantry Structures was born out of the FAS work and addressed how best the Infantry could be structured to meet its future challenges. 2 main elements comprised the Paper. Firstly, the removal of Arms Plotting whereby Infantry Battalions moved geographic location and role at a rate of between 2 to 8 years depending on role. Secondly the creation of ‘large’ regiments whereby soldiers could be ‘trickle’ posted between Battalions of the same Regiment to provide variety and broad skill sets. The main underpinning of the FIS work was for Battalions to gain geographic and role stability as a far better means of delivering combat effectiveness whilst supporting the needs of families and dependents. Despite its logic and common sense, FIS was seen by some as a direct assault on the Regimental System. Despite the assertions at the time the sky has yet to fall in and indeed some Regiments are thriving as a result of the changes.