

Statement of  
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*before the*

Committee on Armed Services  
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation

United States House of Representatives

July 9, 2008

*on the topic of*

Department of Defense Language and Cultural Awareness Transformation

Chairman Snyder, Congressman Akin and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the future direction of language and cultural awareness in the United States' military. It is a privilege to be able to contribute. This statement reflects my own assessment and independently conducted research, and not that of my employer.

**The Current Challenge**

The U.S. military confronts particular challenges with respect to cross-cultural awareness. The majority of deployed forces rotate from one distinct linguistic and cultural arena to another with relative frequency. It would be implausible for all regular forces to become area or linguistic experts in one region, let alone several.

Second, warfighters lack the luxury of time to reflect on, or learn organically from, their surroundings. They may find themselves thrust into situations in which they must make decisions rapidly, with life-and-death impact.

To make matters more complex, members of the 21<sup>st</sup> century military are likely to find themselves in situations other than war, and engaged with civilians. Humanitarian assistance, counterterrorism or counterinsurgency support, peacekeeping and other operations will be successfully achieved by way of negotiation, suasion and collaboration more than they will sheer force.

These conditions suggest a paradox. The military at all levels has a vital need for cultural awareness. Yet these same conditions constrain the practical ability of many military members to acquire it.

Moreover, the current turn of events arguably has distorted the path the DoD may take to forge a long-term cultural awareness strategy. I would suggest that a preoccupation with the September 11, 2001 attacks as a point of historic departure and the subsequent focus on Islamic societies has led to a habit of confusing *knowledge of particular cultures* (e.g. Afghan and Iraqi) with *cultural awareness* in a more comprehensive sense. This habit can be found within and beyond the military.

The 2001 Al Qaeda attacks did not compel the need for a culturally aware military. Rather, they reflected trends in evidence since the end of the Cold War, including globalization and the revolution in communications technology.

The Soviet collapse permitted deferred ethnic-nationalist agendas and regional conflicts to emerge. The globalization of markets and media promoted new, hybrid forms of culture and community, both transnational and local. And a communications revolution ensured rapid, dynamic shifts within cultures. Transcultural networked communities with fluid boundaries emerged. These are the conditions that in combination have created the need for a more culturally aware military. In such circumstances, the warfighter armed solely with demographic facts or customary behaviors is at best minimally prepared to evaluate his surroundings.

It is worth briefly emphasizing that globalization impacts every society. This is so even if to the American eye a community appears to be barely on the brink of modernity, and even if its own inhabitants proclaim their pure traditionalism.

The U.S. expectation that the globe's inhabitants live in two separate worlds dominates the military mindset, and affects its approach to cultural awareness. In the 'two worlds' mindset, Western democracies are modern, high-tech, secularized, and rational. Adversaries in the Middle East, as well as friends, come from and have access to a more slowly modernizing, religious, traditional and potentially less rational world. We use bank transfers; they use *hawalas*, for example. To accommodate this worldview, the military has often approached cultural awareness as consisting of knowledge about that second world, or of traditional societies

This 'two worlds' model has led to substantial cultural miscalculation, however. By way of example, consider the extended confusion over how Usama bin Laden could appropriate both modern and anachronistic symbols and strategies to suit his purposes. Substantial time and energy could have been saved by understanding at the outset that these appropriations do not present bin Laden, nor his adherents, nor the societies they function in, with much of a paradox.

For the purposes of cultural awareness, it would be more effective to understand that we all live in the same world. At the strategic level, we will grasp that our predisposition to divide the world into two reflects our own cultural habit of mind.

At the ground level, these mindsets matter. A soldier seeking to make sense of an unfamiliar situation will rely on her own cultural habits. A soldier looking over a village landscape, whose inhabitants wear what she views as old-fashioned or traditional clothing, may make many other assumptions about what these inhabitants know and don't know, and how they function. The same can be said of a soldier looking out over a London street.

The military has tended to define "cultural awareness" as 'facts about other cultures, especially those that appear on their face to be least familiar.' However, because regular forces cannot be expected to accumulate nor process nearly enough information to make this definition useful, another framework is required.

### **Resolving the Challenge: Cultural Awareness an Element of Force Transformation**

This Subcommittee has already revised the dominant paradigm by incorporating cultural and linguistic awareness into the broader concept of Force Transformation. The Transformation framework offers a productive conceptual vehicle for the defense community to elaborate what it means to have a culturally aware military. This strategic elaboration may then flow into practical steps in the education and training of the military.

The absence of cultural and linguistic awareness from even recent statements on transformation indicates that there is work to be done. The 2003 document, *Military Transformation*, calls for "processes to enable innovation and adaptability," arguing that, "if we do not transform, our enemies will surely find new ways to attack us." Despite the claim that "no aspect of defense should be left untouched if we are to maintain a competitive advantage in the information age," the cultural aspect of defense is left untouched.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, existing cultural training processes and products, whatever their specific uses, reflect an increasingly obsolete understanding of the nature and role of the military. The use of wireless technology, voice recognition software, gaming technology, or other information age technologies does not indicate a transformed notion of cultural awareness. They simply transport information about specific cultures to their audiences more speedily and potentially more effectively. Recruiting native speakers from heritage communities, while it also has uses, also does not indicate a military moving toward what the Army calls Cultural Proficiency.<sup>2</sup> (Multilingual military members do not come with

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<sup>1</sup> United States Department of Defense, *Military Transformation: A Strategic Approach* (Washington DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense), Fall 2003.

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of the Army, *2008 Army Posture Statement Information Papers: Cultural and Foreign Language Capabilities*. Available online at:

fewer biases, or with less need to be trained in cultural awareness, than English speaking members).

Transformation's key concepts align well with those of cultural awareness. The DoD's definition of transformation as "a process that shapes the changing nature of military competition and cooperation through new combinations of concepts, capabilities, people and organizations . . ." <sup>3</sup> will easily incorporate a parallel process to situate the changing role of cultural interaction in military endeavors, and to prepare for it through new combinations of concepts, capabilities, people and organizations.

The directive to "enable innovation and adaptability" is perfectly attuned with a 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural awareness paradigm. In this case, however, it is people—members of the military, from regular forces to their top leadership—who must be enabled to innovate and adapt. To that end, a new paradigm will correspond to the operational landscape, where human communities—cultures—are also innovating and adapting to new technological, social, material and other realities of this millennium. Culture, in a new paradigm, will be seen as an element of human interaction, and less so as only inert terrain to be observed from afar.

Finally, transformation will also offer a framework for strategizing relevant changes in the organizational culture within the U.S. military. Indeed, cultural awareness cannot be conceived without engaging its key ingredient, human individuals and communities. The military community is the starting point for cultural awareness.

In the transformation paradigm, although a Marine may be called on to deploy in three different arenas in as many years, he will recognize in all three that he must be watchful for his own and his interlocutors' habits of interaction. He will have enough elementary knowledge and language to enter into interactions, and he will have had training that gives him the cognitive tools to innovate, adapt and learn more as his interactions deepen. He will not be allowed by a responsible leadership to deploy culturally unarmed.

### **Action Items en Route to a Culturally and Linguistically Aware Military**

Circumstances do not permit the luxury of working out a cultural and linguistic transformation strategy, and then implementing it. However, it is likely to be counterproductive and costly in terms of opportunity to begin to plan next steps without any governing framework. A well-constructed roadmap for next steps could condense and combine strategy and implementation to good effect.

Very loosely, here are some of the practical steps toward cultural and linguistic transformation. Although I have primarily folded foreign language learning into the broader cultural awareness rubric today, it is probable that there are supporting activities related only to the special activity of language acquisition that should be undertaken.

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[http://www.army.mil/aps/08/information\\_papers/transform/Cultural\\_and\\_Foreign\\_Language\\_Capabilities.html](http://www.army.mil/aps/08/information_papers/transform/Cultural_and_Foreign_Language_Capabilities.html).

<sup>3</sup> *Military Transformation: A Strategic Approach*, 2.

- **Develop a cultural and linguistic awareness transformation strategy.** This document will elaborate what is meant by cultural awareness, develop the relationship between cultural awareness and force transformation, and develop a high level strategy for its achievement, in a coordinated way, across the defense community.
- **Conduct a Cultural Awareness Training and Education Audit for Congress.** Resource planning requires a clear picture of the current state of cultural awareness. Cultural and language training and education take place in a variety of settings, through a variety of means. The programs at TRADOC, the USMC Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL), in the military academies, and elsewhere; the products such as games and informational material produced by or on behalf of the military; and the processes in and outside of the United States should be catalogued and evaluated in order to get a clear picture of the state of cultural awareness training. Courses, products and materials may be scored against the goals of a cultural awareness transformation paradigm; they may also be evaluated on their own terms.
- **Find a home base for cultural awareness and linguistic transformation planning, or create room for one within existing organizational structures.** If an existing organization is selected to house and direct next steps, it should be open to the idea of cultural awareness as an element of Force Transformation. It may be useful to develop a network or academic partnership to contribute to planning and programs. A team from a range of disciplines may be useful to consult. At the minimum, the social sciences and the humanities, various disciplines engaging pedagogy, including psychology, and cross-cultural management and organizational behavior will prove useful.
- **Design and test a requisite first "layer" of cultural awareness learning that will be required of all military members in the future.** In the near future, all military members should be trained in cultural awareness as a portable skill as a prerequisite for learning about any particular culture. It will be useful to plan when and where in the larger cycle of education and training this layer will be inserted, and whether and how it will differ for different career tracks within the military. It may also be useful to contemplate a similar course for civilians who will be working alongside the military.

Finally, it may be kept in mind that the creation of a culturally aware military is a function of a broader strategic communication strategy for the U.S. government as a whole. Culturally aware forces will both reflect and model the kind of engagement, in speech and action, that the U.S. intends to have with the rest of the world through its diplomatic, economic and cultural engagements. Thank you again for this opportunity.