



Educating the STRATEGIC CORPORAL

A PARADIGM SHIFT

Kevin D. Stringer, Ph.D.

IN AN INCREASINGLY complex interagency, joint, and multinational world that oscillates between conventional and nonconventional military missions, transforming noncommissioned officer (NCO) education and leadership development is of paramount importance. The U.S. military assumes that commissioned officers, based upon their level of education and hierarchical roles, will bear the main weight of interagency and intercultural interactions in current and future stability and counterinsurgency operations. That hypothesis is wrong because the era of the “strategic corporal” is upon us. This operative term comes from the article, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War,” by U.S. Marine Corps General Charles C. Krulak.¹ In it he refers to the inescapable lessons of Somalia and other more recent humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping, and traditional operations, where outcomes hinged on decisions made by small-unit leaders. In these situations the individual NCO was the most conspicuous symbol of American foreign policy and influenced not only the immediate tactical situation but also the operational and strategic levels as well. His actions directly affected the outcome of the larger operation. Today’s NCOs fulfill front-line, nonstandard roles by serving as town mayors in Iraq, negotiating with tribal leaders in Afghanistan, and training indigenous forces worldwide. They are strategic assets.

To address these advanced leadership requirements, U.S. Army educational development should expand to include language training, cultural education, and interagency exchange opportunities at the appropriate levels of the noncommissioned officer education system (NCOES). This expansion will prepare strategic corporals for the complex operations confronting the U.S. Army now and in the future. With existing NCO schooling shifting from training to education as NCOs move up the hierarchical ladder in both rank and position, the first steps of change are taking place.² This shifting paradigm provides a window of opportunity to add essential language training, cultural education, and interagency exchange opportunities to the NCO educational portfolio. These three areas provide focus for prescriptive recommendations using best practices from other U.S. services for adapting the noncommissioned officer education system.

Dr. Kevin D. Stringer has served in leadership and staff positions in the 8th Infantry Division, the Southern European Task Force, and European Command as an active and reserve-component Army officer. A 1987 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, he holds an M.A. from Boston University, and a Ph.D. from the University of Zurich. A former Department of State Foreign Service officer, he is the author of the book Military Organizations for Homeland Defense and Smaller-Scale Contingencies (Praeger Security International, 2006). He teaches international affairs at institutions in Switzerland, Estonia, and the Ukraine.

PHOTO: U.S. Army SGT Stephen Olson observes Afghan National Policemen searching for enemy weapons caches near Shah Wali Zarat, Khowst province, Afghanistan, on 24 July 2009. (U.S. Army, SSG Andrew Smith)

The Need for Military Expertise

A recent U.S. Joint Forces Command study on the future of warfare suggests high potential for instability around the globe due to demographic, energy, and climate trends. This *Joint Operating Environment 2008* report stated:

The next quarter century will challenge U.S. joint forces with threats and opportunities ranging from regular and irregular wars in remote lands, to relief and reconstruction in crisis zones, to sustained engagement in the global commons.³

The analysis implies that U.S. military forces will be engaged in persistent conflict over the next quarter century. This environment will be one where the Army faces adversaries that may be nonstate actors, insurgents, criminals, or dispersed networks of ideological extremists. Distinguishing between combatants and noncombatants will become more and more complex and chaotic since they will be culturally and socially foreign.

Critically, the U.S. Army rarely possesses the language skills or cultural expertise for operating in these regions—the Horn of Africa, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Afghanistan. Language, cultural understanding, and regional knowledge all mesh in different yet complementary ways to produce better intelligence, more credible civil-military operations, and greater insight into the enemy. As noted in the U.S. Joint Forces Command study, “The conduct of war demands a deep understanding of the enemy—his culture, history, geography, religious and ideological motivations, and particularly the huge differences in his perceptions of the external world.”⁴ This understanding can only occur with organic language, cultural, and regional competencies starting at the small unit level—the NCO foundation. As one prominent French expert on complex operations said, “Effective leaders of small combat units must think like human intelligence collectors, counterpropaganda operators, nongovernmental organization workers, and negotiators.”⁵

Doctrinally, the Army’s landmark manual on counterinsurgency, Field Manual 3-24, provides valuable insights into what skills and competencies are required for success in the described environment:

It requires Soldiers and Marines to employ a mix of familiar combat tasks and skills more often associated with nonmilitary

agencies...It requires leaders at all levels to adjust their approach constantly...Soldiers and Marines are expected to be nation builders as well as warriors. They must be prepared to help re-establish institutions and local security forces and assist in rebuilding infrastructure and basic services...The list of such tasks is long; performing them involves extensive coordination and cooperation with many intergovernmental, host nation, and international agencies.⁶

Post-Cold War military operations are highly decentralized, requiring men and women at all levels throughout the force to exercise complex leadership and management tasks. In the new world disorder, everybody—NCO, officer, and Soldier—not just the best and the brightest destined for generalship—requires a crucial degree of professional military competence.⁷ These trends require the Army to foster a military culture that is aimed at preparing noncommissioned officers to become strategic corporals. As aforementioned, this term refers to the devolution of command responsibility to individuals at lower rank levels in an era of instant communications and pervasive media images.⁸ Developing the strategic corporal includes supplementing his traditional military proficiency with cultural and foreign language knowledge and opportunities to work with civilian government and nongovernmental organizations.⁹

Education Redesign

The first steps of change are taking place with the redesign of the Army’s noncommissioned officer education system to meet the needs of the global war on terror. The noncommissioned officer education system is the keystone for NCO development. It provides leader and military occupational skill

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training in an integrated system of resident education at four levels—primary, basic, advanced, and senior. The updated courses will better prepare Soldiers for the greater decision-making and leadership responsibilities required in the global war on terror. In the words of Command Sergeant Major Ray Chandler at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, “We’ve got a better-educated NCO corps than ever before, so we’ve had to update the curriculum to take advantage of that higher education level, to support the full spectrum of operations in this era of persistent conflict.” He said the new curriculum will focus more on the kind of critical thinking and problem-solving skills formerly reserved for officer-level instruction.¹⁰ Colonel Don Gentry, commandant of the academy, stated:

They [NCOs] have to be educated . . . they have to understand how to solve complex problems. They have to be critical and creative thinkers, because the situations they are presented with in combat are much more complex than they have been in the past. We are talking evaluation and synthesis, versus just understanding and knowledge.¹¹

This educational approach would mirror one view of education for NCOs defined as those activities that aim at developing the knowledge, skills, moral values, and understanding required in all aspects of life, rather than isolated skills and knowledge relating to only a limited field of activity. The essential function of academic education, whether civilian or military, is to develop an individual’s intellectual capacity.¹²

Concurrently, this redesign will align the system’s content with the curriculum at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The goal is to unify the material to create a more seamless team that speaks the same language and solidifies the relationship between officers and NCOs: “one is the planner, [and] one is the executor at the most fundamental level.”¹³ According to CGSC deputy director Marvin L. Nickels, “CGSC has made its entire curriculum available to [the] United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, which is in the process of adapting our curriculum to meet their needs.” The goal is to have Army field-grade leaders and senior noncommissioned officers share a common frame of reference, so that the single skill

set acquired by both types of leaders better supports the commander.¹⁴

This redesign and curriculum alignment is an ideal opportunity to add relevant “soft skills” education to the Army NCO educational portfolio. Soft skills are those abilities that fall into the range of human dynamics, interpersonal communications and personal relations categories rather than combat skills associated with engaging the adversary by fire and maneuver or other kinetic means. Soft skills facilitate direct engagement of the population through social interaction. The soft skill of foreign language proficiency has a tremendous impact on success in counterinsurgency. Another skill is cross-cultural awareness, and a third is the ability to operate and cooperate within an interagency context.¹⁵

While there is no doubt that foreign language skills and cultural expertise are critical capabilities needed by today’s military to face current challenges, only a small portion of today’s Soldiers and leaders possess language skills. Until just recently there was no comprehensive, systematic approach to developing cultural expertise.¹⁶ Today’s military should be trained and ready to engage the world with an appreciation of diverse cultures and communicate directly with local citizens. These skills save lives. Whether performing traditional combat missions, or irregular warfare missions, they are critical skills.¹⁷ Verbal communications skills, such as social interaction, negotiation, and critical and creative thinking, are essential tools for leaders at all levels—from NCOs in the squad to colonels at the multi-national force.¹⁸ Furthermore, since non-conventional operations are essentially a holistic mix of capabilities drawn from the Army and a host of other federal agencies, interagency exposure and experience is essential, especially for senior NCOs. Thus, language training, cultural education, and interagency exchange opportunities for the NCO represent essential requirements.

Language Education

As one field grade officer stated:

If all our soldiers spoke Arabic we could have resolved Iraq in two years . . . [The] point is that language is obviously an obstacle to our success, much more so than [culture]. Even a fundamental understanding

of the language would have had a significant impact on our ability to operate.¹⁹

Clifford F. Porter, Command Historian for the Defense Language Institute, noted that—

Truly knowing our enemy requires understanding the culture, politics, and religion of the terrorists, which in turn requires experts in their language. Two early lessons learned from Afghanistan are that foreign language skills were absolutely critical for overthrowing the Taliban regime so quickly and that the military does not have enough foreign language capability...Furthermore, foreign language capability is not only important for intelligence gathering and special operations, it is essential for understanding how the enemy thinks from the strategic to the tactical level of war.²⁰

Language affects the intelligence war too. As evidenced by the Russian experience in Chechnya fighting clan and tribal based terrorists, intelligence is a critical factor in counterinsurgencies. Not surprisingly, intelligence success in such a war remains the province of determined human beings, not machines.²¹ Given that America's global interests and responsibilities still far exceed its human intelligence capabilities, this lack of language capability has led to a predictable gap in intelligence capability.²² Limited foreign language capability in intelligence and special operations—as well as other sectors of the government—has already cost lives. Two lessons learned from previous conflicts are that the United States never has enough foreign language capability, and it pays for this deficit in blood.²³

For the past two years, the Department of Defense has received quarterly foreign language requirements reports from the combatant commands, services, and defense agencies. The reports have shown a marked increase in requirements from 80,000 to 141,000.²⁴ Interestingly, more than half of the requirements are for basic, low-level skills, reflecting demand for them in the general purpose force.²⁵ Practical language education should be integrated early in the NCO curriculum to ameliorate effects of the shortage. The goal at this level is basic understanding and communication of the language, not fluency and mastery. Required “tactical” languages like Arabic, Dari, Farsi, Turkish, and Pashto should be the focus. The de facto goal is

language basic training, with the further expectation that students are motivated to continue learning the language on their own volition.²⁶

For example, upon returning from the initial invasion of Iraq as the commanding general of the 1st Marine Division, General John Mattis prepared for the division's next rotation with predeployment language training. He provided four weeks of basic Arabic language and cultural instruction for 200 Marines, about one per platoon.²⁷ Mattis recognized that language and cultural ability are force multipliers.²⁸ His view was that “having someone who can speak Arabic is like having another infantry battalion.”²⁹ The U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services questioned why these lessons had not been institutionalized, providing models for the future.

Integrating such language education into the four levels of Army NCO education (Warrior Leader Course, Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course, Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Course, U.S. Army Sergeants Major Course) would address this deficiency. Career tracking of Soldiers' language proficiency (and commensurate levels of instruction according to their ability and progression) is one way to achieve this end state while providing the Army NCO with an essential tool for managing complex operational situations.

Cultural Knowledge

While language is important, one should not underestimate how critical cultural understanding is.³⁰ As the highly respected British strategist Colin S. Gray noted, the American way of war has 12 specific characteristics—one of which is cultural ignorance. He wrote that Americans are not inclined “to be respectful of the belief, habits, and behaviors of other cultures . . . The American way of war has suffered from the self-inflicted damage caused by a failure to understand the enemy of the day.”³¹ Retired Israeli General Arie Amit

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reinforced this view when he told a Washington audience in March 2002 that the United States would not prevail against terrorists unless we understand “their language, their literature, and their poetry,” in short—their culture.³²

Interaction with the Iraqi people demonstrates the problem. For example, during routine peace-keeping patrols, Iraqi citizens who were upset and angry confronted U.S. forces. The Soldiers’ had no means to communicate in Arabic—a helpless, volatile, and extremely dangerous position. They were unable to explain their nonhostile intent or understand the Iraqis’ reasons for their angst. An explosive situation for U.S. forces ensued. Fortunately, the commanding officer resorted to communicating through sign language by rendering a passive act of kindness and demonstrating no intent of aggression; the Iraqis responded in kind. This situation was extremely dangerous, escalated quickly, and could have gone terribly wrong. The officer was resourceful and made a good judgment call, but he admitted, “Nobody had prepared him for an angry crowd in an Arab country.”³³ This statement also holds true for all NCOs at the small-unit level in these circumstances. The local population is the center of gravity at the sergeant level. Adequate knowledge about the local culture is paramount for Soldiers’ personal safety.³⁴

The U.S. Marine Corps provides a best practice educational approach with its clear definition of the “culture learning end state” it wants to achieve. Simply stated:

[It] is not cultural education for the sake of culture, but a reasonable amount of operationally focused training and education to ensure Marines and leaders make informed decisions and understand the cultural impacts of tactical and operational decisions.³⁵

To do this, the Marines established the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning to infuse cultural awareness throughout the Corps’ training and educational continuum.³⁶



U.S. Air Force, SSG Shawn Weismiller

U.S. Army SGM Matthew Mullins, assigned to the Nangarhar Agri-Business Development Team at Forward Operating Base Finley-Sheilds, Afghanistan, inspects wheat seed, 28 May 2009.

For instance, a team of deploying NCOs and enlisted Marines trained for three days at the center. During the first day, there were classes on the history of Afghanistan. Other courses taught the basics of Afghanistan:

- Ethnic groups.
- Languages.
- Geography.
- Climate.
- Tactical considerations of training the Afghanistan National Army.

On the second training day, the instructors gave classes on techniques for communicating with indigenous personnel. They taught how to pass information to the Afghans through cultural barriers and what mistakes to avoid when speaking to them. The teams were also taught the culture of the Taliban and Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin, Hekmatyar’s fighters—a terrorist group operating in Afghanistan.

When Marine units engage with tribal leaders, the intent is for Marines to use the culture of the enemy to advantage. The purpose is to work effectively with the Afghanistan National Army and civilians and to understand the mind-set of the enemy. On each day of training, the Marines receive instruction on Dari and Pashto, the two languages that they

will use.³⁷ Language training is an essential and complementary component to cultural education. Such a three-day course on language and culture can serve as one model for a “starter” module in the four-week Army Warrior Leader Course.

When thinking about the fields of cultural awareness and language proficiency, some speculate that future junior Army NCOs may need to possess attributes that traditionally have been the province of the Special Forces. However, an enhanced educational regime designed to produce a strategic corporal does not necessarily require wholesale Special Forces training. A systematic program to master a range of additional proficiencies would suffice. Most skills are currently being taught within the Army, but on an ad hoc basis.³⁸ The institutionalization of enhanced cultural awareness education for Army NCOs would have an immense payoff.

Working with Agencies

According to one analyst, the U.S. armed forces largely eschew integrated joint, interagency, and coalition operations, as well as ignore the role of nongovernmental agencies (NGOs). Most operations lack cohesion, flexibility, and responsiveness.³⁹ To remedy this deficit, educational and experiential cross-fertilization between the military and other government agencies would enhance effective interagency command and unity of effort. The military has invested substantial amounts of educational resources to develop a “joint” culture. A true interagency culture that links the U.S. military to its civilian agency counterparts will require a similar effort.⁴⁰

Such an endeavor to link agency counterparts together is especially pertinent for Army NCOs since many civilian government agencies do not have an equivalent leadership function to the NCO ranks; thus, this role is not well understood by most civil servants. This becomes more important as

senior NCOs begin to work on equal terms with members of the Department of State, members of foreign governments, and nongovernmental organizations.⁴¹ As the commandant of the Sergeants Major Academy said:

Training for NCOs is not what we need. Education is what we need so the Army can build their intellectual capacity for full spectrum ops . . . NCOs already are talking with the State Department [and] NGOs. They are mayors of towns.⁴²

For instance, Soldiers and NCOs of the 3d Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, were assigned a comprehensive assessment mission on revitalizing Iraq’s aquaculture industry—an interagency task well beyond the boundaries of classical NCO responsibilities.⁴³

Given these situations, military leaders need to encourage coordination at the operational and tactical levels. Educating military and civilian agency leaders to work together would be a key step, but no one has put a substantial teaching program into place.⁴⁴ Affording senior NCOs a 6 to 12 month fellowship with another agency will increase the cross-governmental ties necessary to accomplish the missions that confront the force.

NCOs do not require deep academic education in military history, diplomacy, or international relations. They do require a basic applied knowledge of these subjects; a “lessons learned” approach that assists Soldiers with their decision making and judgment.⁴⁵ Career-tracking adjustments need to ensure that the added interagency education or experience provides benefits in future assignments and promotions.⁴⁶

Equally important for counterinsurgencies or stability operations is the ability to deal with NGOs.⁴⁷ There are several thousand NGOs of many different types whose organizing charters govern their activities and members’ motivation.⁴⁸ NGOs often play an important role at the local level in operations. Thus, NCOs must be prepared to deal with these sometimes prickly establishments.

Many such agencies resist being overtly involved with military forces because they need to preserve their perceived neutrality; however, establishing some kind of liaison is necessary. Cooperation involves a shared analysis of the problem and building a consensus that allows for the synchronization

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of military and interagency efforts. The military's role is to—

- Provide protection.
 - Identify needs.
 - Facilitate civil-military operations.
 - Use improvements in social conditions as leverage to build networks and mobilize the populace.⁴⁹
- These connections ensure that, as much as possible, the military forces and civilian agencies share objectives and synchronize actions and messages. Achieving this synergy is essential.⁵⁰

There is also a “Catch-22” with the military-NGO interface that affects the security equation. NGOs need a secure environment within which to conduct their job. Without it, they cannot do their work. If NGOs cannot do their work, the U.S. military has to tackle more civic action projects to win hearts and minds. Less troops for security makes it even harder to get NGOs in the field.⁵¹

Given the position of the NCO at this important nexus, a 6 to 12 month internship with an NGO may be useful after the Advanced NCO Course. The experience would expose the rising Army sergeant first class to humanitarian organizations and their work culture and world outlook. His presence could build a bridge between the military and NGO worlds. It could also assuage or correct preconceived notions about the military in the humanitarian world. The NGO, in turn, would gain an individual with strong leadership, administrative, organizational, and logistical abilities.

Recommendations and Cross-Service Best-Practices

To prepare NCOs to carry out nonconventional missions effectively, they need to receive standardized, relevant instruction throughout the professional military education system. Given the ongoing changes from training to education, now is the time to add language instruction, cultural education, and interagency exchange programs

to the portfolio. The primary issue will be implementing language and cultural programs in NCO schools whose course length is too short to permit adding instruction to an already full curriculum. One solution for the NCO force would entail offering increased opportunities for language learning through the Defense Language Institute or other organizations.⁵²

The following outline is one proposal on how to implement these changes within the existing educational structure. An important prerequisite would be for the U.S. Army to designate the top five or six languages of strategic importance for the force.

- *Warrior Leader Course.* Add a three-day introductory language and cultural education block to identify future NCOs with language capabilities, begin basic language orientation of needed languages, and expose the students to operational cultural constructs. This module includes taking the Defense Language Aptitude Battery Test and also, vetting and earmarking NCOs who are both willing and able to become career-long language learners in one of the strategically important languages.⁵³

- *Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course.* Provide both refresher and basic language and cultural education to an extended common core (currently one week), which supplements the leadership training received at the Warrior Leader Course.

- *Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Course.* Offer both refresher and basic language and cultural education within the current eight-week, two-day course. Add a short and practical block of education on interagency and joint relationships to the curriculum taught at this level.

- *Interagency Fellowship or NGO Internship.* Offer a 6 to 12 month assignment for selected NCOs in the rank of sergeant first class and above.

- *U.S. Army Sergeants Major Course.* Develop enhanced cultural knowledge, refresh acquired language skills, and provide further exposure to the interagency environment through additional curriculum offerings.

Instructional supplements could complement cultural-awareness education via distance learning for the periods between formal courses. Also, NCOs could be assigned a specific language while in the Warrior Leadership Course; a foreign language that they will maintain throughout their careers.

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Again, the goal is to develop an adequate level of basic language and cultural capability among leaders in the general-purpose force. While not considered language professionals, special operations personnel must attain at least some level of foreign language proficiency. Special Forces—whose members do not include junior enlisted personnel—focus their language training by attaining at least rudimentary conversational speaking skills that enable them to interact with local populations.⁵⁴

The Army can seek other organizations who are developing these types of educational offerings for NCO leadership development, and adapt for Army-specific requirements. In language, for example, the Marine Corps is reserving 40 seats annually at the Defense Language Institute as part of a critical language reenlistment incentive program. The program is open for enlisted Marines of any specialty, including those who would not normally require language proficiency as part of their duties.⁵⁵ The Corps' Center for Advanced Operational Cultural Learning has a tuition assistance program for all non-first-term Marines to acquire training in language, culture, and the economic aspects of an assigned region.⁵⁶

For culture, the U.S. Air Force Air University is growing its cultural awareness initiatives for Airmen by incorporating culture and language education into the Air Force NCO Academy curriculum.⁵⁷ In December 2007, the Air Force created the Air Force Culture and Language Center at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. This Air Force-level organization now has the responsibility for defining, coordinating, and implementing cultural, regional,

and foreign language education and training programs to satisfy the U.S. Air Force requirements.⁵⁸ Even earlier in February 2006, Air University began language instruction at the Senior NCO Academy in four “strategic” languages: Spanish, French, Mandarin Chinese, and Arabic.⁵⁹

Lastly, foreign armies are also looking at developing their noncommissioned officer corps through enhanced education. The Australian Army provides language training for NCOs prior to deployment for service in East Timor.⁶⁰ The French Army even integrates operational and anthropological cultural education at the battalion, platoon, and squad level.⁶¹

21st-Century Ideals

NCOs will have to engage in the struggle against terrorism and other ideologies that may emerge in the 21st century.⁶² They will be called upon to deal with local populations, other government agencies, and humanitarian organizations. Counterinsurgency and policing operations demand foreign language skills, cross cultural understanding, and historical knowledge.⁶³

To meet these challenges the Army should invest in the education of its junior and senior NCOs by adapting the current educational framework to incorporate language instruction, cultural education, and interagency exchange opportunities at the appropriate levels of the NCO educational system. Concurrently, this investment establishes the institutional commitment to lifelong NCO professional leadership development, thus building the strategic corporals needed for current and future complex operations. **MR**

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47. See JP 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: GPO, 12 April 2001, amended through 17 October 2008), <www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/n/9466.html> (2 July 2009). Joint doctrine defines a nongovernmental organization as: A private, self-governing, not-for-profit organization dedicated to alleviating human suffering; and/or promoting education, health care, economic development, environmental protection, human rights, and conflict resolution; and/or encouraging the establishment of democratic institutions and civil society.
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49. Ibid., A-7.
50. Ibid., 1-22.
51. Anonymous officer quoted in Bruce Hoffmann, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, June 2004), 16, footnote 98.
52. Warwick, (4 March 2009).
53. Ibid.
54. "Building Language Skills and Cultural Competencies," 24.
55. Ibid., 50.
56. See Jeffrey R. Granger. Expanding Cultural Awareness Education: Language and Fact-Oriented Information Are Not Enough, unpublished master's thesis, Air Command and Staff College, Air University (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL, April 2006).
57. Ibid.
58. Headquarters USAF/A1 and Headquarters AU, Air Force Culture and Language Center Charter, 26 December 2007.
59. Warwick (4 March 2009).
60. Liddy, 143.
61. Boré, 65-71.
62. Adapted from Carafano, "On Teaching War: The Future of Professional Military Education," The Heritage Foundation, (31 July 2008), <www.heritage.org/press/commentary/ed080108d.cfm> (18 February 2009).
63. See Jeffrey Record, "The American Way of War: Cultural Barriers to Successful Counterinsurgency," *Policy Analysis Series, No. 577* (1 September 2006), 17.

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