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2022

## The Importance of Cultural Knowledge in Counterinsurgency

Allee Norvell

*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*

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The Importance of Cultural Knowledge in Counterinsurgency

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis  
Submitted in Partial fulfillment of University Honors Program  
Requirements University of Nebraska-Lincoln

by  
Allee Norvell, BA  
Political Science  
College of Arts and Sciences

March 14, 2022

Faculty Mentors:  
Tyler White, PhD, Political Science

## Abstract

This thesis discusses the importance and usefulness of cultural knowledge in counterinsurgency. When combatting insurgent groups, it can be difficult to identify insurgents and utilize conventional warfare. Insurgents use various tactics and strategies to promote their goals while living among the local population. These aspects require intervening countries and counterinsurgency to take the varying strategies into consideration when making their military decisions. The most important aspect needed for these counterinsurgency operations is cultural knowledge. Having an understanding of the intervening population and its dynamics with the insurgent group can be proven to be very beneficial. Specifically, in the cases of the US, their counterinsurgency tactics have varied across cases. This thesis will observe three cases of US intervention: Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. These cases show the need for cultural knowledge. The cases of Vietnam and Afghanistan have little utilization of cultural knowledge, and this can be a main explanation to why these wars ended with shortcomings and loss. It can be argued that cultural knowledge could have improved the US's position in these interventions. Iraq shows that a switch to a population based military strategy that incorporated cultural knowledge can be successful. This paper argues the importance of cultural knowledge in the cases of counterinsurgency and intervention and how it could have influenced and changed the outcome of three US interventions. This thesis will present the significance of cultural knowledge in these specific three cases as well as counterinsurgency as a whole.

**Key Words:** Counterinsurgency, Culture, Knowledge, Military, Population

The US is known for its military might. They have utilized advancements in technology and weaponry to expand their beliefs and democratic ideals. This military superiority and aggressive tactics have proven to be effective in past world wars and other international conflicts. However, the rise of terrorist and insurgent groups has begun to undermine traditional methods to fighting the enemy. The change in fighting tactics between insurgent groups and America's conventional military methods allow for other factors to gain importance (Johnson and Zellen 2020). Military can be effective in defeating insurgents, but past US intervention into foreign areas have shown that military is not the sole solution to ending this conflict, particularly in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Cultural knowledge and awareness are critical to victory in the fight against terrorism and insurgency. Increasing the focus of culture in a region will allow the external aids, like the US, to achieve more success than military tactics could not. Cultural knowledge will create a better understanding of the local population and the various conflicts, religions, and other aspects of the society that is important to know when intervening in their environment.

The increase of cultural knowledge has many advantages in counterinsurgency. Knowledge about the local culture and dynamics in the society allows for troops to be on the ground and in the community. This will allow the troops to be within the population to keep out or identify the insurgents, earn the local population's trust, and help stabilize the population and government post-intervention (Lister 2011). Cultural knowledge of the intervening countries, including political and military leaders and troops, will create more efficiency and success in the areas experiencing insurgency and violence. In past conflicts, we have seen the understanding of the foreign population and culture can be much more important and successful. Iraq showed us that the change to a population-based strategy utilizing cultural knowledge can be much more

beneficial and effective (Lister 2011). In cases where the US has failed in intervening against counterinsurgency, it can be argued that they would have been successful if the US came into the situation with more cultural knowledge. This can be seen in the cases of Vietnam and Afghanistan. Vietnam and Afghanistan showed the flaws of solely military-based strategy with little involvement and interaction with the population. In this paper, I will be focusing on the US intervention into Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. I will explain the cases of Vietnam and Afghanistan and how a different outcome could have occurred with a cultural understanding about the area. In the case of Iraq, I will explain how the change of tactics, including cultural knowledge, was effective in combating insurgent groups. These are just a few examples of how foreign intervention, in these cases the US, can utilize cultural knowledge and lead to a better outcome and success against insurgency. The increase of cultural information of the intervening countries, particularly the US, will lessen the influence and combat the power of insurgents.

### Literature Review

Past literature regarding the importance of cultural knowledge focusses on how it can improve counterinsurgency and can identify where military strategies fell short in achieving victory. In the Vietnam War, the military strength of the US should have been more than enough to defeat the Viet Cong (Rosen 1982). However, their lack of cultural knowledge led to the US underestimating the resolve and will of the Viet Cong (“Vietnam War”). Cultural knowledge of the Vietnamese population along with the various dynamics in the region could have influenced the US’s decisions regarding military tactics and strategy for the war (Johnson and Zellen 2020). The failure in Vietnam can be explained by various factors, but the lack of cultural knowledge in their counterinsurgency efforts is a main reason for their loss. Iraq and Afghanistan are the latest examples of how much success intervention has without knowledge relating to the culture and

dynamics of the foreign population (Johnson and Zellen 2020). There was little to no success in only utilizing military strategies when combating insurgency. Military intervention lacked the effectiveness in situations that could have succeeded if they had the cultural knowledge prior to entering the foreign area. Cultural knowledge can be seen to have advantages and effectiveness in counterinsurgency.

The US, in past instances, have been military focused when intervening in a country, but, lately, it has shown to have shortcomings in successful interventions. The US focuses on short-term actions that don't always consider what the region will look like post-war (Jager 2007). The US's only focus in Vietnam was to end the spread of communism, but they took little time considering the future and population of Vietnam ("Vietnam War"). Looking at Iraq, the US wanted to get in and out quickly with little plans about the formation and enforcement of the government (Kilcullen 2017). These are some example showing that aggressive methods don't always achieve the ideal result. Military and physical force is a necessary part of counterinsurgency in situations like providing security, enforcing a ceasefire, and maintaining stability ("Tactics of Counterinsurgency" 2009). However, the type of military intervention can create more backlash from the insurgents and civilians (Piazza and Choi 2018). Violent methods, like drone strikes that have the potential to kill innocent civilians, can generate more resentment towards foreign aid (Morris 2019). The targeting civilians in counterinsurgency can increase the resistance against intervening countries and lead to the victimization of civilians (Kocher 2011). The bombings performed by the US were counterproductive and allowed the Viet Cong to have more control over the population (Kocher 2011). These negative sentiments can result in civilians feeling more secure and supporting the insurgents. This will further increase the insurgents' influence and power in those communities because of the rise of support among the

population. Focusing on enemy-based and aggressive tactics detaches the foreign country with the local population. This separation and lack of knowledge leads to the use of stereotypes and assumptions (Johansson 2017). External forces come into the foreign area with the misconceptions that the primary beliefs of the insurgents are surrounding the idea of resentment for Western ideas and America (Thrall and Goepner 2021). With more cultural knowledge about the insurgent groups, the external aid would better understand their goals and why they are carrying out this violence (Jager 2007). Counterinsurgency has been developed as a political and military based program, but new framework to add cultural knowledge would be beneficial to fighting insurgency (Jager 2007).

The absence of cultural understanding offers insurgents, among other groups, an opportunity to obtain the support of the local population and further their goals and influence. Insurgents derive their power and influence from the support of the locals (Worby 2010). Without this control over the population, the insurgents are powerless and can't further their message through violent acts and fear. Insurgents are still given this influence over the people because of the "us vs them" mentality of the intervening countries (Jager 2007). This is because they don't have the proper knowledge about the people and their culture (Jager 2007). External forces coming into a region filled with violence and insurgency see everyone as potential threats and can't distinguish the insurgents from the civilians (Kilcullen 2017). Because the military sees the civilians as threats, there is no trust on either side, and that gives the insurgents the opportunity to come in. The insurgent group is from the same region, and they look like the civilians. It is easier for civilians to trust the a group that appears to represent their interests and values rather than foreign troops with weapons (Worby 2010). Local insurgent groups are more likely to understand the civilians' interests and to be understood by them as well (Johansson

2017). The US doesn't have this luxury when intervening in a country, so understanding and learning about their culture is the only way to become competitive with the insurgent group in gaining local support. The US, like other external forces, have difficulty appealing to civilians' emotions and gaining their trust (Worby 2010). In order to achieve this appeal, the US must increase their cultural knowledge in the areas they are intervening in. However, the US has an inability, or challenge, to see the world from other societies because of their lack of cultural understanding (Jager 2007).

The use of the military as the singular strategy to combat insurgency leaves a disconnect between the intervening country and the local civilians. "Cultural distance" between these two groups can lead to ethnocentrism and misconceptions about the different religious or ethnic groups in that region (Johansson 2017). Misunderstandings of foreign cultures and the different relationships among the groups in the region will lead to a negative outcome for both sides with the insurgents gaining more power and influence (Johansson 2017). An incorrect assumption that the US makes when intervening in foreign countries is that the government and stability will remain intact post-war (Jager 2007). Particularly in Iraq, the US would have known that this would not occur after the removal of Saddam Hussein if they understood the power vacuum this country was (Kilcullen 2017). The US left this political and cultural vacuum open for any group to exert their influence and authority over the people (Powaski 2002). The lack of cultural knowledge about the countries that the US intervened in allowed for a rise of insurgent and other extremist groups. Cultural knowledge could have improved the stability of Iraq after Saddam Hussein, and it could have improved other situations where the US intervened.

There has been a primary focus on military strategy regarding counterinsurgency with little emphasis of cultural awareness (Lister 2011). Cultural knowledge brings numerous benefits

to the local population and the intervening country. Cultural understanding can build a relationship between the external country and the locals while also isolating the insurgents.

The use of cultural knowledge allows for the local population and the insurgent group to have a more trusting relationship. A rise in cultural knowledge has been promoted and seen to be effective in the fight against insurgency, especially under General Petraeus (Jager 2007). Making the intervention strategy become more population based, it proves to the civilians that the foreign country and troops care about them and their security as well as stopping the insurgents (Worby 2010). Being around the population more, military troops are able to get to know the civilians and understand the interests and values and vice-a-versa. When the civilians become more comfortable and familiar with the troops, they can become more cooperative in identifying insurgents and sharing other information. Cultural knowledge is important for military troops to have when they arrive to the foreign area. Having an understanding of the culture and local dynamics will prepare the intervening country when they get on the ground and begin forming relationships with civilians and local institutions.

In addition to the development of trust and security between the military and civilians, cultural knowledge isolates the insurgents by being in the local community and being able to better identify them. Having a close relationship with the local institutions also creates more trust and confidence. Foreign military forces working with the local security allows for insurgent threats inside and outside of the community to be controlled or prevented (“Tactics in Counterinsurgency” 2009). Having troops on the ground and within the community is a great deterrent to prevent future insurgencies (Kilcullen 108). The separation of insurgents and civilians is a critical step in counterinsurgency (Worby 2010). This step can be achieved more efficiently when the intervening country has cultural knowledge about the population and their

interests and values. It will allow the troops to be in the community and connect with the people without the fear of offending a certain culture or religion. The trust of civilians in the intervening country's motives and abilities isn't achieved through military strikes and violent tactics but with understanding of the people and the environment that they are in.

The importance of cultural knowledge has been stressed in past literature emphasizing the effect it has on counterinsurgency and the local population that military tactics don't have. Just because the US, or other intervening countries, has an understanding of the society's culture, it doesn't guarantee that the population will automatically trust them (Johnson and Zellen 2020). Cultural intelligence allows military and political leaders to make decisions considering the local dynamics, values and institutions of the region (Johnson and Zellen 2020). Cultural intelligence is a benefit to decision making regarding intervention and the presence of the foreign military on the ground. Cultural knowledge and awareness allow for intervening countries, like the US, to better their relationship with the local population while also reducing the influence and power insurgents have over the region. I will show how cultural knowledge can be more effective than military tactics for the US in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Explaining the situation and the relationship among the various actors in each state will show the success of utilizing cultural knowledge and how it could have led to success in the cases where it was not used.

### Insurgency Cases and US Involvement

In the cases of Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, it is clear to see where the US succeeded and where the US fell short. These failures can be explained with the US's lack of cultural knowledge in the region and the people occupying it. I will explain the failures of the US military and its interventions in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq and their main focuses when intervening. I will describe how the US could have had success in certain nations if they had

basic cultural knowledge of the people and history of that region, particularly Vietnam and Afghanistan. Iraq can be seen as a success and failure in different periods of intervention. I will explain how the change of tactics from military to population-based intervention was achieved by cultural knowledge and how it led to US's success. These are only two examples of the importance cultural knowledge can have on a country entering a foreign region. It can be argued that cultural knowledge could have improved the situation in Vietnam and Afghanistan, and it has been shown to improve in the case of Iraq. Cultural knowledge is very beneficial to intervention and counterinsurgency, and it should be utilized more in the future.

### *Vietnam*

It is quite evident that cultural knowledge was not utilized in the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War was the first war the US lost as a main global power (Spector 1987). This can be argued that they were not properly prepared for this war. Up until now, the US had a powerful military which was trained and successful in the conventional form of war that had been traditionally fought (Spector 1987). However, this was not the fighting tactics of the Viet Cong and other opposition groups to the United States and the South Vietnamese government ("Vietnam since c. 1990"). If the war was just about military power and weaponry, the US would have defeated the Viet Cong very easily (Spector 1987). The reality was that the US didn't fully understand the insurgent group's goals for fighting, and this resolve proved to be stronger than the US military strength (Spector 1987). Cultural knowledge could have benefited the US in various ways. It could have better identified the Viet Cong and its relationships with other groups as well as being more on the ground and with the Vietnamese population. Utilizing cultural knowledge is significant when combating counterinsurgency, and it could have affected the outcome of the Vietnam War.

The US interest in Vietnam was not necessarily for the people or region, but it was to stop the spread of communism (“Vietnam since c. 1990”). Vietnam was split to north and south, and the US intervened to aid the democratic South Vietnam (“Vietnam since c. 1990”). The communist North Vietnam was backed by other communist powers like the USSR and China (Farmer 1964). Their goal was to have a unified Vietnam under one government, a communist government (“Vietnam War”). It worried the US this idea about the spread of communism, due to the Domino Theory, so they wanted to prevent it from spreading to South Vietnam (“Vietnam War”). The primary concern for the US was to prevent the spread of communism to South Vietnam with little consideration for the region and population.

This lack of attention on the dynamics of the area allowed for insurgent groups to come in and influence the population themselves. As the South Vietnamese government become more unpopular, North Vietnam sent in guerrillas, the Viet Cong, to persuade and encourage civilians to support the North Vietnamese government (Gladwell 2016). In addition to presence of the Viet Cong, the military tactics of the US did not help them with the people. There were many Vietnamese civilian casualties that came out of the Vietnam War (Kocher 2011). The airstrikes and bombings of the US increased the victimization of the civilians, and this ended up being harmful to the US (Kocher 2011). Decision making was coming from Washington and not those on the ground (Rosen 1982). There was a distrust built between the US military and the Vietnamese citizens (Rosen 1982). It was difficult to clearly identify the Viet Cong, so all of the population would be seen as a threat to the US soldiers (Kocher 2011). The US mentality was to go into with the primary goal of killing enemy (“Vietnam War”). On the US side, all of the citizens in South Vietnam can be seen as insurgents. On the other hand, the citizens only saw the US performing areal bombings and strikes that left destruction and many civilian casualties.

Distrust is created on their side because they only saw the US as fighters while the Viet Cong were in their communities (Rosen 1982). Some civilians would give information to the Viet Cong about a future US attack, so they would be able to move fast (Rosen 1982). This shows the importance of the relationship with the population in counterinsurgency because they could very easily side with the insurgents and help them. Prior cultural knowledge could have allowed the military to be within the population and better understand the dynamic of the area. They could have built up that trust with the citizens that could have led to benefits and success for the US. Because of the better relationship, the citizens would have been more comfortable providing information to the US about the Viet Cong (Kilcullen 2017). This relationship and understanding would also aid in better identifying the insurgents (Worby 2010). Knowing the people and community could be very crucial in finding insurgents and their strategy, and cultural knowledge of these dynamics and region and an important way to do this.

The fighting method against the Viet Cong was very unfamiliar to the US and understanding their strategy and interests could have helped the US's military strategy to combat them. The Viet Cong was receiving aid from the North Vietnamese along with the USSR and China ("Vietnam since c. 1990"). This backing was very large, and it was very important for the US to stop this transporting of aid. The US attempted this by performing strikes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but it still didn't hinder the Viet Cong's ability of obtaining these resources ("Vietnam War"). The strategy of the Viet Cong would have been very influential for the US to understand because it greatly affects the type of war fought. The use of guerrilla warfare was very new to the US and not the war method that they were very comfortable with (Rosen 89). They had been used to fighting the traditional and conventional war, like the two World Wars, where they were very strong and successful (Spector 1987). This was not the case during the

Vietnam War. The new style of war, along with the very different terrain, put the Viet Cong at an advantage (Spector 1987). The US continued with their airstrikes and bombings that always seemed to have shortcomings. This is due to the fact that the US didn't fully understand the Viet Cong's goals and interests in the war. The Viet Cong had very high resolve, that the US didn't think they had, and they would continue fighting the US and South Vietnam government ("Vietnam War"). The desire for a unified Vietnam and under a communist government was not fully understood by the US ("Vietnam War"). Knowing this resolve and their tactics would have been instrumental in the US military strategy and decision making. If not to change their tactic, knowing that the Viet Cong wouldn't stop fighting or surrender to the US could have changed their decision to enter the war in the first place. The lack of knowledge that the US political and military leaders utilized can explain why their strategy and military power wasn't successful in defeating an insurgent group.

The political and military decision making in the Vietnam War was not greatly influenced by the cultural knowledge of the region. There were some counterinsurgency efforts made that showed to be effective (Rosen 1982). The US created a program to study the Viet Cong and their motivation and morale (Gladwell 2016). RAND utilized Vietnamese civilians to interview Viet Cong guerrillas and understand their resolve in this war (Gladwell 2016). There was information produced, but it showed the problems of humans analyzing it. Two prominent political scientists came to very different conclusions. The first scientist justified the war efforts saying that they were being successful in reducing the resolve and confidence of the Viet Cong (Gladwell 2016). The second scientist looking at this information came to the opposite conclusion that the war was "unwinnable" due the strong rigor and resolve of the insurgent group (Gladwell 2016). The US had obtained some counterinsurgency information, but they failed in acting on it. They had the

ability to make decisions with vast knowledge about the opposition but didn't. Instead, they used generalized training. In the counterinsurgency education for the military, they just modified their existing training (Spector 1987). The course discussed counterinsurgency problems and generalized ideas that the military officials had to put into practice (Rosen 1982). A universal education is incapable of teaching the various cultures and dynamics of every insurgent group the military encounters. This was not a proper education for the US military going into Vietnam because they weren't taught the specific culture and people of the region. This generalized knowledge and that fact that the large military units were away from the civilians resulted in little interaction between the two sides. This disconnect of only experiencing the bombings and casualties caused by the US makes it understandable why the citizens didn't trust them (Rosen 1982). The opportunity for cultural knowledge to be utilized in counterinsurgency was there, yet the US stuck with their strategy of utilizing their military and airstrikes.

There was more opportunity for cultural knowledge to be utilized when the US soldiers were in the Vietnam. The Vietnam War was a failure for the US. The war was very costly, in lives and in dollars, and it didn't even end with the US victory. When the US withdrew all of its troops, the North Vietnamese overthrew the South Vietnamese government and combined the two under a communist government ("Vietnam since c. 1990"). Because of the enemy-centric mentality, the US was unable to utilize cultural knowledge and a population-based approach to the war ("Vietnam War"). Because of this lack of understanding of the region, the US failed in combatting the Viet Cong and lost to communism in the region (Spector 1987).

### *Afghanistan*

In the case of US's intervention in Afghanistan, the US emphasized military tactics, with no cultural knowledge, and that led to failure in that area. Like other interventions, the US

thought their entrance into Afghanistan would be quick and easy to take control of (Hoffman, p. 44). Their main focus was defeating the Taliban and not the stability of the people and government post-war (Kilcullen 2017). The tactics of the US was military and enemy-based with little presence on the ground and in the communities. Maintaining and securing the population of Afghanistan was the harder task to achieve in their intervention, and the US fell short in that department (Kilcullen 2017). Unlike the US, the Taliban was more consistent with their involvement in the community. They were more appealing to the citizens and gained more support than the US was able to. With this increase in support and presence, their power and influence were able to rise and reach more people. This is one of the difficulties when intervening in a country with different cultures, languages, and social dynamics than one's own. The US and Afghanistan are different in numerous aspects of their societies and interests. The insurgents don't have these differences, or they at least know how to appear to have similarities based on their knowledge of the region. The Taliban's influence over Afghanistan and the failures of the US can have various explanations. The one that could explain it the best is the US's lack of cultural knowledge about Afghanistan. If the US learned more about the nation's cultural dynamics and the people, it would have a different outcome.

If the US took into consideration the insurgents' motive and the culture of the people, they would have been more successful in their intervention in Afghanistan. Knowing the goal and tactics of the insurgent group could have led to a better understanding of the terrain before the US troops entered Afghanistan. The goal of the insurgents wasn't to completely overthrow the Afghan government, but they sought to control the Pashtun regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan (Kilcullen 2017). Having this information about the regional and ethnic relationships could have been useful to know and help make tactical decisions.

Along with their goals for the insurgency and violence, it is also important to understand the Taliban's strategy and hierarchy. The Taliban utilized different tiers of fighters and members that allowed them to expand across many communities and connect with the civilians (Kilcullen 2017). This allowed for them to expand their influence and message across the region. The Taliban was able to build those relationships with the population, whether that was through voluntary support or intimidation, that the US was unable to do (Kilcullen 2017). Not being involved with the community allowed for the Taliban to come in, and they made it more difficult for the US to identify terrorist from civilian (Kilcullen 2017). Cultural knowledge and having more population-based tactics would have prevented the Taliban and other insurgents from having an influence over the people and gaining their support. With prior knowledge about the people and culture, US troops would establish relationships with the citizens and then be able to identify the terrorists living around them (Worby 2010). Cultural knowledge could have led to a different situation in Afghanistan. Due to this lack of cultural knowledge, the US failed in understanding the Afghan cultural and political dynamics (Johnson and Zellen 2020).

Because of the absence of cultural understanding, the US came in and left a power vacuum that led to more problems and violence (Kilcullen 2017). Beginning in 2021, we have seen the state of Afghanistan without the presence of US troops. Like Vietnam, the opposition gained control of the government almost immediately (Thomas 2021). The US made peace agreements with the Taliban for support against other terrorist groups, like Al Qaeda, in return for the withdrawal of US troops (Thomas 2021). The US's decision making was, once again, determined by US and not the interests of the population where they intervened. Having cultural knowledge about the citizens of Afghanistan could have influenced the priorities of the US in their strategy. The intervention in Afghanistan is one example how much cultural knowledge

about the nation and its people can improve or affect the success of the involvement. This shows the need and advantages for cultural knowledge when dealing with counterinsurgency.

### *Iraq*

The intervention in Iraq is a prime example of how much cultural knowledge can impact the success of the external nation. The US involvement in Iraq has two main phases. The first phase was where the military and leadership were enemy based. The use of violent attacks as the only strategy was shown to be ineffective when combating insurgents and gaining the support of the civilians (Johnson and Zellen 2020). The second phase changed to become population based and centered around the stabilization of the people and government. Going into further detail about the two phases will show the shortcomings and consequences to enemy based tactics and the benefits when the intervening nation has the population as the main priority. Focusing on the population is done through cultural knowledge, and it being utilized in counterinsurgency planning. The use and advantages of cultural knowledge can clearly be seen with Iraq, and it proves that all counterinsurgency missions should utilize this program to achieve more victories.

The beginning of the US's involvement in Iraq can be described as a failure due to the military strategies chosen and little interaction with the Iraqi population. First, the US's plan for Iraq did not take into consider the social and cultural aspects of the nation, and the US made assumptions and generic plans for after the intervention. There was an overestimation and over confidence about the US's military might and aggressive tactics (Thrall and Goepner 2021). The enemy-based ideas of "repetitive raids" and the short-term approach to intervention to combat insurgents was misguided and incorrect (Kilcullen 2017). Violence and attacks were initially thought of as the solution to resolve the situation in Iraq. The US came into Iraq expecting to be in and out quickly with little participation in the post-war stabilization (Kilcullen 2017). They

believed that the US would only play a little role in developing Iraq's democracy because of their assumption that the people and government would remain intact after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein (Jager 2007). The initial priority of the US was to come into Iraq, overthrow Saddam Hussein and get out. This mentality meant that the US troops were focused on short-term actions, and that was counterinsurgency using military and forceful tactics (Jager 2007). They were not on the ground and thinking about long-term involvement post-war, and that had multiple consequences (Morris 2019). The only time the US troops were ever seen by the Iraqi population was during military strikes (Morris 2019). Having no oversight post-war, allowed for a cultural and political vacuum to be created, and that was all the US's doing (Jager 2007). The minimal attention given to post-overthrow Iraq gave the opportunity for various nations and terrorist and insurgent groups to come in and influence the country (Powaski 2002). The aftermath was not heavily considered when planning the military intervention into Iraq. If the leaders, both executive and military, understood the political and cultural instability of Iraq, they would have taken post-war planning more seriously.

In addition to the ill planning of the military actions and post-war involvement, the absence the US military had in the Iraqi community also played a large part in the poor decision making and power vacuum that arose. The US was away from the population with the only interactions being military strikes and violence (Kilcullen 2017). With little to no relationship between the troops and the civilians, it led to distrust on both sides. The little knowledge and experience each side had with one another created an "us vs them" mentality (Jager 2007). For the civilians, they saw the US as an external, violent force that they could not connect with. On the other hand, with insurgent groups, the people may fear them, but those groups have more similarities with the civilians than the Western forces (Kilcullen 2017). The local population saw

the US presence as a threat to their community and interests, so they fought with the insurgents and extremist groups against them (Kilcullen 2017). The Iraqi people weren't the only ones that saw the other side as a potential threat. The US, due to their little knowledge and involvement in the area, generated the beliefs and misconceptions that all people living in the Iraqi communities were potential insurgents and threats to them (Kilcullen 2017). The insufficient cultural knowledge and situational awareness hindered the military's ability to identify the insurgents from the regular civilians (Kilcullen 2017). There was no understanding about the other groups and no interaction that built trust and confidence between them. The initial presence in Iraq failed due to the limited intelligence about the region and its people along with unproductive military strategies. If the US had more cultural knowledge going into Iraq initially, it would impact their military decision making as well as their interaction with the civilians and, ultimately, combating the insurgents.

The change of military focus of the intervention of the US in Iraq allowed for cultural knowledge to be utilized, and that led to more successes and better relationships with the communities in Iraq. Military leaders quickly learned that this war would not be solved with aggressive force but with ability to understand and connect with the people of Iraq (Jager 2007). President Bush diverged from the current military strategy to fight the insurgency in Iraq to a more on the ground and population focused approach (Kilcullen 2019). The new plan was focused on Petraeus's idea of "population centric" tactics (Worby 2010). This emphasized the stabilization and security of the Iraqi people as the US's first priority (Worby 2010). Having the main goal be the population and not the enemy put the troops inside the communities, and that created success in building confidence within the civilians as well as deterring insurgents (Kilcullen 2017). The improvement in knowledge of the human terrain in Iraq allowed for the

US military leaders and the troops on the ground to better understand the people and culture of the communities (Johnson and Zellen 2020). This plan of intervention allowed for the troops and US as an external force to be more recognizable in the community to build trust with the people and to increase the security (Kilcullen 2017). The addition of military personnel within the community determined to eliminate the fear and intimidation tactics of insurgent groups and making the civilians confident and comfortable to provide information about the insurgents (Kilcullen 2017). One way the US carried out this plan out was their relationship with local law enforcement. The communities created with foreign troops and local police provided more stabilization and security (“Tactics of Counterinsurgency” 2009). At the same time, civilians seeing the cooperation between the troops and police gave them further trust and confidence in the US. This couldn’t have been done without cultural knowledge learned by the leaders and troops. The cultural information taught the troops in the community how to interact with the people without offending them, and that is very beneficial when combating an insurgent group who is already familiar with the culture and customs (Johnson and Zellen 2020). It is apparent in the case of Iraq the importance of having an understanding about a nation’s culture and people before intervening. Having a population-based strategy and utilizing cultural knowledge can be more effective in counterinsurgency than enemy based military tactics, and that can be proven in Iraq.

### Conclusion

Counterinsurgency has prioritized military and enemy based tactics (Morris 2019). However, this strategy has been ineffective in various cases including Afghanistan, Vietnam, and the initial intervention into Iraq. These failures and shortcomings could have been prevented if the intervening countries, in many cases the US, came in with cultural knowledge about the area

and population. Troops and military leaders would have a better understanding about the culture, the local dynamics, and the people (Johnson and Zellen 2020). This is the best strategy to combat insurgency in foreign regions for various reasons. First, cultural knowledge allows for the intervening country to have a relationship with the civilians. Understanding the people of the region and their culture will improve the trust between the groups rather than both sides only having stereotypes and assumptions to go off of (Johansson 2017). Trust between the troops and civilians is very important when dealing with insurgents. Insurgents can appear as regular civilians and can have an easier time gaining the support and trust of the civilians than the intervening country (Worby 2010). Therefore, cultural knowledge prior to intervention is so important. Knowing the people and the various cultures and dynamics in the area can improve the relationship and interaction between the local population and the intervening country. It also allows for the insurgents to be identified and taken out of the community. The second benefit to the increase of cultural knowledge into counterinsurgency is that it can provide more opportunities to identify insurgents and obtain information. Having a presence in the community encourages the troops and civilians to build trust and confidence in one another, and that is important for the identification of insurgents. Troops would become more familiar with the civilians and be able to distinguish them from insurgents (Jager 2007). On the other side, civilians would be more familiar with the troops in their community that they would become more comfortable to share information about the insurgency group or possible insurgents (Johnson and Zellen 2020). This communication and familiarity would be obtained through cultural knowledge because troops and leaders would have an understanding about the people and be able to be around them and form relationships. The relationships formed with the population can help the post-war stability of the people and government. The third benefit to the

use of cultural knowledge is the presence of the intervening country post-insurgency and supporting them in the stabilizing their country. As seen before, the US has entered a country to fight a war but doesn't stay after. This could be explained by the fact that they were not on the ground and in the population (Morris 2019). An understanding about the social, among other, dynamics of the region would aid the intervening country in their decision making to determine what is the best strategy and plan for the post-war stabilization. Cultural knowledge can be effective and successful in combating counterinsurgency in all the phases and intervention, and it needs to be utilized more.

Cultural knowledge is very critical to combating insurgents. It is important to understand the insurgents and the people's culture and interests in order to distinguish them and combat the insurgency. When cultural knowledge is used by the military, it is clear that there is an impact of the intervening country's presence, specifically the US, in the foreign area. In the cases where the US came in with little to no cultural understanding, the shortcomings and failures are evident. It can be argued that those would not have occurred if they did have cultural knowledge about the area before intervention. Cultural knowledge is very useful when combating insurgents. Cultural information and programs should be implemented into counterinsurgency and put into place before the military intervenes into a country or region. Increasing the teachings of cultural knowledge in counterinsurgency could greatly improve the success of the intervening countries as well as the stability of the people and its government in the foreign region.

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