

PROFILE: DR. MONTGOMERY MCFATE

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At first glance, it may appear that anthropology has little to do with the military. Indeed, the discipline is often associated in the popular mind with kaki-clad academics chasing around a rain forest analyzing the norms of primitive tribes. However, anthropology is about the study of cultures and how they work. In times in which the military finds itself engaged in counterinsurgencies, anti-terrorism, and in humanitarian relief efforts involving cultures that are quite alien to those the Marines, Sailors, and Soldiers left back home, anthropology offers much needed intelligence that can be used in operations and in developing policy and strategy. Tonight's Roosevelt Award recipient, Dr. Montgomery McFate, has actively campaigned for increased use of the tools of anthropology for the Department of Defense and has worked to bring those tools to bear.

"Although 'know thy enemy' is one of the first principles of warfare," she has written, "our military operations and national security decisionmaking have consistently suffered due to lack of knowledge of foreign cultures." This lack of understanding has injured United States' policymaking and warfighting in three ways: "[M]isunderstanding culture at a strategic level can produce policies that exacerbate an insurgency; a lack of cultural knowledge at an operational level can lead to negative public opinion; and ignorance of the culture at a tactical

level endangers both civilians and troops."



On 14 March, Dr. McFate received the Roosevelt Gold Medal for Science at the 104th Anniversary Dinner of the Navy League of the United States New York Council. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).

Dr. McFate has pointed to American failure to appreciate the tribal nature of Iraqi society as a failure at the strategic level. After the fall of Saddam, American planners assumed that the Iraqi public would look to the new central government for leadership. However, because of the strength of the tribal system in Iraq, most people's allegiance reverted back to their tribal

sheiks. Since the sheiks were frozen out of power by de-Ba'thification, the "tribal network became the backbone of the insurgency."

In contrast, the British understood the tribal system and utilized it to their advantage. Sheiks were appointed to local councils and funds were given to these councils for distribution to the populace. By so doing, they reinforced the power of the sheiks while at the same time created a good working relationship. While there has been trouble in the British-occupied areas, it has been less so than in the American areas.

Going forward, Dr. McFate believes, "recognizing and utilizing pre-existing social structures are the key to political stabilization in Iraq."

At the operational level, Dr. McFate has pointed to the Americans' focus on the Iraqi media in trying to get the U.S. message across as an important cultural misunderstanding. While in the U.S. people keep informed primarily by television, radio, the internet and newspapers, in Iraq, people rely primarily on personal communication. Policies designed to protect American troops by keeping them away from the Iraqi population had the unintended effect of excluding the U.S. from the primary means of communication.

On a more positive note, anthropological tools have been used in Iraq to bring about major operational successes. Social network analysis ("SNA"), the mapping and measuring of relationships and flows between people, groups, organizations, computers or other knowledge-processing entities, helped track down and locate Saddam Hussein. This same tool can be used to "identify how to maximally disrupt a

network by intervening with the key players and how to maximally spread ideas, misinformation, and materials by seeding key players. By using data about [former Iraqi Intelligence operatives] and their personal relationships within the Iraqi tribal network, SNA can describe terrorist networks, anticipate their actions, predict their targets, and deny insurgents the ability to act."

At the tactical level, "cultural ignorance can kill." For example, at a roadblock, Marines and Soldiers found that Iraqis would fail to stop when signaled to do so. Such situations could easily degenerate into blood shed. However, what was found was that the traditional American hand signal for "stop" means "welcome" to Iraqis.

The use of anthropology by the military and by strategic thinkers in government is not new. During the British Empire, the British used it both in building the Empire and in maintaining it. In America, the Bureau of American Ethnology was created to assist in fighting the Indian Wars that followed the Civil War. More recently, prominent anthropologists contributed analyzes about German and Japanese culture to help predict the actions of the Axis powers in World War II. Anthropology was also enlisted during the Cold War. However, efforts to use this discipline ran into criticism during Vietnam and the military essentially abandoned such efforts. "This is fundamentally about the broken relationship between the government and the discipline of anthropology. What broke that relationship is Vietnam. And people still haven't recovered from that," Dr. McFate has said.

McFate's interest in the use of anthropology to combat insurgency can be traced back to when she was doing her doctoral dissertation at Yale University. She researched that paper by living in Northern Ireland with both the Irish Republican Army and the British counterinsurgents. She found that insurgency runs in families and social networks held together by common cultural beliefs.

After obtaining her doctorate in Cultural Anthropology from Yale, McFate obtained a law degree from Harvard and practiced with the firm of Baker & McKenzie in San Francisco. Returning to anthropology, Dr. McFate was a social scientist in RAND's Intelligence Policy Center, where her research focused primarily on North Korean culture and society.

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, she became "passionate about one issue: the government's need to actually understand its adversaries." Subsequently, as part of a fellowship at the Office of Naval Research, she interviewed Marines returning from Iraq and documented how the lack of cultural understanding was hampering the war effort. She was awarded a Distinguished Public Service Award by the Secretary of the Navy for her work at ONR.

Dr. McFate is now with the Joint Advanced Warfighting Program, Institute for Defense Analyzes. The Institute for Defense Analyzes is a non-profit corporation that administers three federally funded research and development centers to assist the United States Government in addressing important national security issues, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

“ Much progress has been made on implementation [of anthropological tools]. The Cultural Preparation of the Environment project begun by the JCS J3 has been taken over by the US Army's Training and Doctrine Command and is now known as the Cultural Operations Research - Human Terrain or the Human Terrain System. At the moment, it's considered to be a demonstration program (i.e., not yet a program of record), but we are hoping that by next year it might become permanently institutionalize. As of [early February], the first team of cultural advisors was sent to Afghanistan.”

Just as a commander benefits from having information on the weather and on the topography of the battlespace, a commander benefits by having a knowledge of the “human terrain.” However, units arriving in an area often have an insufficient understanding of the target culture and its impact on operational decisions. This lack of understanding is exacerbated by rotation policies which periodically replace experienced troops with troops that are new to the native culture. Furthermore, the military has limited capability to conduct research, visualize, understand and explain the population in which a unit operates.

The Human Terrain System does not create a new structure for developing knowledge, but ties together multiple existing systems and processes to provide a cohesive approach to understanding the human elements of the operational environment. Part of this system includes Human Terrain Teams which will include military personnel plus civilian cultural analysts and regional analysts to advise units. In addition, the system will have a

Reachback Research Center to support the teams and commanders with anthropologists, sociologists, area experts, and military personnel.

The military is utilizing anthropology elsewhere as well. “The US Army has incorporated anthropology into its redteaming program, the Army Command and General Staff College is introducing social science into its curriculum, the Navy is developing cultural training guidelines, the USMC War College has hired an anthropologist on its faculty, the USMC has established a Center for Advanced Operational Cultural Learning. Even the Air Force has established a Cultural Center of Excellence at the Air War College. While I certainly can't take credit for much or even any of this, it does indicate that priorities and resources have shifted.”