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Good Anthropology, Bad History: The Cultural Turn in Studying War

PATRICK PORTER

To wage war, become an anthropologist. Lose the fascination with Clausewitz, and embrace culture as the way to understand conflict. Or so argue a number of strategists, historians, and officers on both sides of the Atlantic. From the academy to the Pentagon, fresh attention is being focused on the value of knowing the enemy. Those who take this view assume that different ways of life produce different ways of war. They see today's global war on terrorism as a clash of profoundly different cultures, between American-led forces on one side, and jihadist warriors or tribal warlords on the other. To make sense of recent military failures, they have turned back to cultural knowledge of the adversary. This also often influences their reading of history. They project the same themes back into the past. Today's military confrontation of "the West vs. the rest," they argue, replays ancient differences between strategic cultures.

This new anthropology has good intentions. It aims to foster greater cultural awareness and sophistication among militaries and governments. And cultural agility is surely important. It matters at every level—strategic, operational, and tactical. It matters particularly at a time of volatile occupations of foreign soil, where soldiers are being asked to act as police officers, nation-builders, and peace brokers. And today's Iraq war demonstrates the costs of misunderstanding the enemy strategically. America was misguided by its narrow conception of war and victory. It assumed that its opponents shared the view that hostilities ended when Iraq's field army was defeated. It neglected post-invasion strategy as a second-order administrative task separate to war and refused for too long to admit the existence of an insurgency. For his part, Saddam Hussein wrongly calcu-

lated that America would never risk a full-scale ground invasion of Iraq, as the rich enemy was too casualty averse and timid. He saw this strategic worldview confirmed in America's retreat from Mogadishu in 1993, and distributed the film *Black Hawk Down* to his generals to make this point.¹ He had underestimated American political will, the same error that misled the ideologues of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan.² Both the American and Iraqi administrations failed, in Clausewitz's words, to grasp "the kind of war on which they are embarking."³

But when it comes to writing history, the "cultural turn" also has a downside. It often comes with an overly determinist view of the tangled relationship between war and culture. Paradoxically, while it aims to encourage greater sensitivity to the nuances that differentiate cultures, it actually encourages a crude view of ancient and fixed ways of war. It risks replacing strategy with stereotypes. This article is not intended to dismiss the cultural paradigm entirely, but it does demonstrate the dangers of applying the paradigm dogmatically.

This article makes four arguments. First, it shows that there has been a cultural turn toward an anthropological approach to war. As part of this cultural turn, some historians and strategists argue that there is an undifferentiated nonwestern way of war, to be found in both strategic texts and historical behavior, and that eastern and western warfare are intrinsically different. Second, it argues that classic writings do not support this notion. Such a notion oversimplifies the western strategic tradition, and overstates its differences with eastern conceptions of war. Third, when it comes to understanding the actual behavior of cultures at war, the cultural turn is empirically unviable. There are too many exceptions and qualifications that must be made to the picture of two conflicting eastern and western ways of war. Finally, by depicting culture as the driver of military history, the culture turn notion risks being politically naïve. This can result in overlooking the many moments where strategic cultures do not control states, but where states control strategic cultures, and where the differences between conflicting approaches to war are dictated less by cultural traditions and more by the hard realities of power, weakness, and pragmatism.

This article accepts the definition of "culture" in the strategic context as "a distinct and lasting set of beliefs [and] values" and preferences regarding the use of force, its role and effectiveness in political affairs.⁴ This includes an

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array of factors, such as prevailing attitudes, habits, and values of the military and in their parent societies, the geopolitical position, historical experience, and collective memory of war, and the military's professional ethos.

The Cultural Turn

Do non-westerners approach war in fundamentally different ways? The question is more than academic. According to traditional wisdom both ancient and modern, one must know the enemy to succeed in war. Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu advised strategists to "know your enemy and know yourself."⁵ Mastering war would require self-knowledge and an accurate reading of the enemy, a dialectical exercise that would reward the strategist with victory upon victory. And cultural illiteracy, the anthropology deficit within the national-security establishment, is being blamed for current failures. America and its allies are confronted with the difficulties of negotiating cultural differences in alien environments. They face the implosion of Iraq, where a bloody insurgency mutates into a civil war, while NATO struggles to navigate the tribal world of Afghanistan and a resurgent Taliban.

American military strategy of the 1990s was marked by a technology-driven quest for a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). The RMA envisaged a future in which the American colossus would prevail against armies in the field by exploiting its strengths, such as information and knowledge of the battlespace, precision munitions, rapid mobility, and decisionmaking.⁶ But the world's dominant superpower now faces a very different world. Neither the doctrine, training, or tools designed to counter the Soviet threat nor the RMA seem capable of dealing with low-intensity insurgency. America's advantages have been offset by the indirect methods its enemies employ, an enemy who refuses to play to these strengths and fight as America would like them to; by the complex terrain and gangland of urban warfare, in which industrial might or superior firepower do not guarantee success; and by their enemies' different organization, more a shadowy network than a traditional command structure. Designed for conventional battles, surgical invasion and withdrawal, and swift, overwhelming strikes, America's military was unprepared for the post-invasion disorder in Iraq, and the intimacy of prolonged contact with a complex foreign society.

Given the shortcomings of the revolution in military technology, strategists argue now for a cultural counter-revolution.⁷ They claim that we should cultivate understanding of the intricacies of tribes, clans, customs, and traditions. We need a better grasp of the relationship between how people fight and their traditions, identities, religion, collective memory, preconceptions, and sheer force of habit. A return to an anthropological approach to war,

it is hoped, “will shed light on the grammar and logic of tribal warfare,” and create the “conceptual weapons necessary to return fire.”⁸

This cultural turn is driven by a number of forces. It is a reaction to the failures of recent American military interventions and also part of a larger debate about whether the nature of war is fundamentally changing, in ways that make it obsolete to talk about universal principles of strategy. And it is inspired by a wider backlash against the universalism of the Bush Administration’s attempt to remake the world in America’s image, a vision which some argue has caused much of the trouble.

There are many signs of this cultural turn. Cultural competence is a central value in the US Army’s new counterinsurgency field manual, which mentions “culture” 88 times and “cultural” 90 times in 282 pages. The manual calls for “agile, well-informed, culturally astute leaders.”⁹ Likewise, senior leaders such as retired Major General Robert H. Scales call for “culture-centric warfare,” arguing that the Iraq crisis requires “an exceptional ability to understand people, their culture, and their motivation.” Then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in 2004 noted the military’s need for foreign language skill and regional and cultural expertise.¹⁰ The US State Department’s new chief strategist for counter-terrorism has a doctorate in political anthropology.¹¹ In Britain, sales have surged of T. E. Lawrence’s classic account of the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, which has also been commended by counterinsurgency experts in Iraq.¹² Robert Kaplan, veteran chronicler of American military expeditions, argues that Herodotus’ ethnographic stories about foreign cultures are a better guide to the present than Thucydides’ attempts to discover the norms of war, statecraft, or human nature.¹³

The cultural turn has also left its mark on history. Several recent military histories and prescriptive guides to counterinsurgency are drawn to culture as an explanatory device. They are premised upon an idea that there has long existed a culture-bound “eastern” way of war, a set of concepts and behavior that differentiate East from West. At its most ambitious, it is treated as an unbroken strategic and military tradition, uniting cultures as dispersed as ancient China, medieval Arabia, and modern Turkey, stretching from the writings of Sun Tzu through the Arab and Islamic insurgencies of today.

This concept is a moving target, as different historians give it different inflections. It was anticipated by military historian John Keegan, who argued that war is culture by other means, and that Oriental warfare is “different and apart from European warfare,” its peculiarities including “evasion, delay, and indirectness.”¹⁴ Political scientist Paul Bracken claimed that eastern war was “embodied by the stealthy archer,” unlike the archetypal western swordsman “charging forward, seeking a decisive showdown, eager to administer the blow that will obliterate the enemy.”¹⁵ Classics scholar Victor Davis Hanson judges

the western tradition superior, crediting its military dominance to its culture's strengths. It spawns shock infantry that seek decisive battle, and draws its lethality from its political freedom, capitalism, self-criticism, scientific inquiry, and civic militarism.¹⁶ A similar concept is the organizing principle behind the recent *Cambridge History of Warfare*.¹⁷ In these works, western culture is the ultimate force multiplier.

But in light of recent difficulties encountered by the American model of warmaking, another version of similar ideas is gathering strength. Military officers such as John Poole have used concepts of Asian or Islamic ways of war didactically to highlight the defects of their own nations' strategic cultures. Poole identifies an "Eastern thought process" stretching from ancient China to the modern Middle East, which generates effective light infantry and fights indirectly with loose encirclements, probes, dispersal, and trickery.¹⁸ This has been endorsed by William Lind, the prophet of "fourth generation warfare" who urged the military to re-imagine the nature of future war and recognise its own deficiencies:

The Oriental way of war is far more sophisticated. It plays across the full spectrum of conflict—the moral and mental levels as well as the physical. Even at the physical level, it relies on the indirect approach, on stratagem and deception, far more than on simple bombardment. Seldom do Asians fall into mindless *Materialschlacht* or "body counts;" and while Oriental armies often can (and have) taken many casualties, their tactics at the small-unit infantry level are often cleverly designed to spare their own men's lives in the face of massive Western firepower.¹⁹

Others share Lind's assumption that different ways of war are fixed. Robert Cassidy, another officer, argues that the eastern way of war is rooted in the philosophies of Sun Tzu and Mao Tse-Tung. It is marked by "reliance on indirectness, perfidy, attrition and protraction" and is "inherently more irregular, unorthodox, and asymmetric than our traditional conception of war."²⁰

East vs. West?

Before questioning it, the hypothesis of the cultural turn should be credited with some important insights. To some extent it represents a healthy corrective to the overconfidence and technological determinism that marked aspects of recent strategic thinking, even if it threatens to replace one determinism with another. Technology cannot ultimately replace human judgement, as the anthropological approach cautions. Geography, custom, collective memory, institutions, and traditions are undoubtedly influential variables in shaping mentalities and behaviour. In terms of the present, the ability to map out the labyrinth of power structures, networks, and confessional or ethnic perspec-

tives in a foreign society is a vital part of activity along the spectrum from peacekeeping to counterinsurgency. It also promotes the healthy practice of overcoming ethnocentrism to imagine others' perspectives.

That said, the culturalist interpretation has a number of weaknesses. There is in some of its versions an implicit self-contradiction. It asserts that there are enduring and ancient patterns in the way cultures approach war. Yet its exponents also often argue that western militaries must adapt to deal better with their adversaries, even to become more like them. Against a historical model of continuity in which strategy is rooted in timeless traditions, it assumes that its own institutions and doctrines are open to transformation. How we can have it both ways is unclear. Anthropologists themselves might also question the implicit model of culture as a system of eternal values, rather than as something historically remade and contested.

The primal scene of the cultural turn is the interpretation of the classic texts on strategy, such as Sun Tzu and Clausewitz. Whereas Clausewitz was fashionable in the circles of military intellectuals around the time of the 1991 Gulf War, the Chinese sage is now in the ascendancy. But just how peculiar to eastern traditions are Sun Tzu's ideas? Sun Tzu may have stressed the value of intelligence and deception, praised the ideal of the bloodless victory, and stressed the economical logic of finding non-military ways to prevail. However, so did the Florentine diplomat and philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli, whose *Art of War* was one of the most prominent western authorities on strategy before Clausewitz.²¹ Like Sun Tzu in the "Warring States" period, Machiavelli lived in a fragile, multi-polar, and predatory political environment of competing city-states, ever-shifting alliances, and meddling foreign powers. Costly mercenary armies and multiple fronts of conflict made war a particularly risky and expensive business. His environment, more than cultural stereotypes, may explain why he asserted that "he who overcomes the enemy by fraud is as much to be praised as he who does so by force."²² Moreover, Machiavelli argued for a synthesis of the sledgehammer power of Roman citizen-armies and the sneaky gambits of maneuver, surprise, and deception, practiced by the Parthian horsemen of antiquity.²³ He resolved the opposition between eastern and western modes of warfare pragmatically: Depending on the circumstances and the terrain, sometimes the caution and indirectness of the Parthians worked better; at other times the bold Roman approach made sense. Machiavelli bridged principles often thought to be opposite, and saw past the limitations of narrow traditions.

So Sun Tzu's concepts were not so culturally specific. What of the Prussian general Clausewitz? Proponents of a new generation of war, such as Israeli theorist Martin van Creveld, claim he is losing his relevance in an age of post-modern "non-trinitarian" war, with a shift of initiative to non-state actors

(from terrorist networks to organized crime), the rise of low-intensity war, and the blurring of boundaries between citizens and soldiers, war and peace.²⁴ Clausewitz may have lived in an era of intense wars and decisive battles between great powers. But he cannot be totally confined to the horizons of his generation. He recognized the phenomena of people's armies and small wars. Stateless forces were part of his world too, from Spain's guerrillas to Russia's Tartars, just as international piracy prefigured today's global black market.²⁵ Clausewitz also stated that war is rarely final, and that popular uprisings may arise after the defeat of state militaries. Echoing his critics, Clausewitz argued that such uprisings were a symptom of the "breaking down of barriers," which had been "swept away in our lifetime by the elemental violence of war."²⁶

As well as emptying strategic texts of their richness, the cultural turn might be slightly naïve when it comes to the issue of reception, or understanding how those texts are read and used. Like sacred texts, the great strategic works have been invoked in very different ways to justify different and conflicting policies. This is not just a problem of interpretation. Rather than just being influenced by these texts, military commanders and rulers at times have selected the parts that fitted their own interests, in other words, have used these texts instrumentally. The Clausewitz of the nineteenth century was invoked by Prussian generals to justify the pursuit of decisive battles to destroy the enemy's forces, to preach the inevitability of heavy casualties and the central value of morale, even to urge civilian government to stand aside as they prosecuted the war. By contrast, decisionmakers in the twentieth century appealed to Clausewitz to argue different and even opposite principles, such as the assertion that the military should be subordinate to political direction and political ends. Such concepts inspired the US Weinberger-Powell doctrine, which codified the principles of prudent statecraft, controlled application of force for achievable goals, concrete national interests, and clear exit strategy.²⁷ Clausewitz as an authority has been ransacked to justify conflicting outlooks and policies.

A similar pattern of opportunism in the relationship between actors and texts can be found in medieval Chinese history. As Alastair Johnston has shown in his study of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), Chinese rulers over centuries took a selective attitude to their supposed strategic culture.²⁸ Johnston argued against the notion that Chinese statecraft was historically inspired by the Confucian-Mencian disparagement of the utility of force, and that it was non-expansionist, non-aggressive, and preoccupied with internal anarchy. Chinese rulers often appealed to this supposed tradition of prudent conciliation and compromise, claiming that they were in tune with ancestral wisdom. But this they happily abandoned when they saw opportunities to go on the offensive. Ming rulers did so with great frequency, externally against Vietnamese, Koreans, Uighers, Mongols, and Tibetans.

“The hypothesis of culturally determined ‘ways of war’ ignores too many awkward contrary cases that cut across its neat frontiers.”

To justify a more aggressive posture, they could appeal to an alternative tradition which was also to be found in their strategic texts—a philosophy of watchful aggressiveness. In this tradition, offensive force was desirable and preferred, to be mediated by sensitivity to the enemy’s relative capabilities. Force could be used when the time was ripe. Supposed strategic traditions did matter, but often only so far as they accorded with the hard-headed calculations of elites. Culture may exist as an influential factor in decisionmaking, but culture does not always drive decisionmakers; decisionmakers often exploit culture.

Strength and Weakness

So much for the use and abuse of strategic texts. The cultural turn is also arguably a dubious account of actual historical behavior. Too often, it falls prey to a crude and false polarity. In one corner, there are the children of Clausewitz, blundering and guileless Western forces obsessed with decisive combat and wielding the blunt instrument of overwhelming force. In the other corner, there are Sun Tzu’s oriental acolytes, weaker but more sophisticated foes, who prefer deception and the indirect approach, and who avoid the excessive slaughters on display at Verdun and Stalingrad.

Historians Jeremy Black and John Lynn both have questioned this picture. Black finds the concept of overarching pan-cultural traditions too monolithic, and insensitive to the variety of traditions for example among Arab militaries such as the Egyptians, Syrians, and Iraqis.²⁹ Lynn argues against a continuous western military tradition, showing that Sun Tzu’s ideas were not uniquely eastern and that supposedly western patterns can be found in ancient China in the Warring States period, where potentates mobilized large conscript infantry armies and equipped them on a scale comparable to western states, for a kind of combat that was often very direct.

To reinforce the criticisms of Black and Lynn, several other difficulties with the cultural turn should be noted. At least as it has been articulated so far, the hypothesis of culturally determined “ways of war” ignores too many awkward contrary cases that cut across its neat frontiers. The longest conven-

tional war of the twentieth century was fought between Arabs and Persians, the Iraq-Iran war of 1980-1988. It featured ruinous economic and human costs, and the fighting was reminiscent of the western front: positional combat over entrenched positions, use of poison gas, and continual waves of young men charging to their deaths, driven by ideologies of martyrdom. Conversely, one of the most elaborate pieces of deception in history was executed by a western alliance. In 1944, Operation Bodyguard was used to mask the D-Day Normandy landings. The Allies misled German spies, built phony equipment and dummies, generated false radio transmissions and newspaper reports, and used the double-bluff to such effect that the Germans continued to believe the Normandy landings were a feint. It was an example used by Edward Luttwak to describe maneuver, “paradoxical action that seeks to circumvent the greater strengths of the enemy and to exploit his weaknesses.”³⁰ This illustrated also that deception and overwhelming force are not mutually exclusive absolutes, but relative parts of a spectrum.

This was a point grasped by the Duke of Wellington and the Spanish irregulars in the Peninsular War of 1808-1814. Many elements that some might classify as oriental were harnessed in this decidedly western struggle. These included strategies of diversion and concealment, effective light infantry, and a popular uprising urged on by local clerics. Such operations culminated in major battles against a demoralized enemy. Significant anomalies such as the examples above have yet to be reconciled with the culturalist approach.

And the cultural turn might neglect the dynamism of culture, of how strategic cultures can change in the course of wars. Although the realm of intelligence is often singled out as the main dividing line between East and West, recent scholarship suggests that British, American, and Australian intelligence capabilities improved dramatically relative to Japan’s over the course of the Pacific War. Before the war, western outsiders dismissively under-appreciated the will and ability of Japan to challenge Anglo-American power. But the Allies eventually surpassed the Japanese in their intelligence assessments and conducted effective information operations, precisely where they overcame racial stereotypes, and developed a wartime strategic culture that valued intelligence and psychological warfare more than Japan did. Why? Partly, Japan had the “victory disease.” It was a victim of its own previous successes against China and Russia and the rapid conquests in Asia. The shock of defeats, by contrast, stimulated the Allies into greater effort. Partly it was the ability to overcome cultural stereotypes. While the Allies improved, the Japanese army was misinformed about its enemies, largely because it was overrun by an arrogant contempt for its Anglo-American foes, reinforced by the nature of the Tojo militarists with their blinding dogma about Japanese supremacy. Partly it was resources. Britain had been preoccupied with the war against Germany, which

meant that its intelligence efforts in the Far East, which had been deprived of adequate personnel and attention, were stepped up after Japan declared war in 1941. And partly, the effectiveness of propaganda and psychological operations was based on battlefield successes, so that the former gained strength from the cumulative impact of the latter. All of these changes were the result of interlocking factors: circumstances, ideology, resource allocation, leadership, and the impact of “events, dear boy, events.” The hypothesis that strategic behavior and military performance is determined by built-in, centuries-old cultural habits is less helpful in explaining this fluidity.³¹

“Know thyself” is also one of Sun Tzu’s commands, yet the cultural turn also offers a misleading portrayal of the west. It overlooks patterns of behavior that upset the clean narrative of a western tradition. Greek hoplites and American infantry may have been attuned to fixing and smashing their enemies, but this should not overshadow a frequent practice in European medieval war, also presumably part of the western tradition of battle avoidance. Regardless of their elite warrior cultures, medieval commanders were often wary of the dangers of pitched battle, and were constrained by problems of supply, hygiene, and of survival itself in expeditionary wars. Defenders also had an advantage. Defensive strongholds enabled one side to refuse battle. Between 1071 and 1328 in often-invaded Flanders, there were only 11 battles of note.³² The weak did not have to be reared in eastern traditions to find alternative ways to combat the strong. When they calculated that they could not resist English invasion through direct combat, Welsh and Scots defenders chose defensive strategies that eastern guerrillas would be proud of, such as scorched earth retreats, cutting off supply lines, punitive raids, and the exploitation of terrain.

Such war is not new, and one does not have to be eastern to practice it. At the risk of stating the obvious, weaker sides of any culture, whether secular or religious, nationalist or Marxist, Arab or Asian, have had to find effective ways to get around their enemies’ strengths and exploit their vulnerabilities. When on the wrong end of a disparity in “hard” power, weaker sides have historically faced the grim arithmetic, that they must be resourceful and flexible and avoid or postpone massed confrontation. No culture enjoys a monopoly over this logic. Being Vietnamese, Islamic, eastern, or oriental was probably not the main driving force behind the asymmetric strategies of the Viet Cong or al Qaeda, any more than being Spanish or American was the main driving force behind the indirect methods of those who took on Napoleon or the British Empire.³³

The cultural turn, therefore, misses out the pragmatism and wiliness of both states and non-state actors at war. To cut it to its proper size without dismissing it altogether, it should be tempered by a less fashionable concept:

power and weakness. The size, wealth, resources, and technology of the adversary are a major driver of behavior in war. Rather than being necessarily determinative, a war culture can be an epiphenomenal adaptation to a material environment. Codes of morality and honor can also be reactions to the distribution of power. Unable to compete in pitched battle, the French Resistance and Hezbollah were scorned by their opponents for hiding among the civilian population, while the frustrations of the powerful were summarized by an American military observer in Southeast Asia in 1964: "If only the little bastards would come out of the jungle and fight like men, we'd cream them."³⁴

One of the problems with the cultural approach is its default image of powerful westerners against weaker easterners. But consider the occasions when eastern cultures have found themselves in a position of dominance, combating weaker foes. It is not obvious that they have consistently wielded their power more subtly. Against the brutality of the Tamil Tigers in its long civil war, Sri Lanka's Sinhalese government replied not primarily with psychological operations, intelligence gathering, or a coherent long-term political plan. Instead, it replied with counter-brutality, deploying paramilitary death squads in reprisal killings.³⁵ If the case of a former British colony doesn't persuade, then what of the mixed record of counterinsurgencies in Nepal, with its often-indiscriminate and politically ineffective "Encircle and Kill" strategy, or China's occupation of Tibet, where demolishing religious shrines or outlawing native language wasn't exactly a "hearts and minds" campaign? The temptation to smash a rebellion—with the raw use of power and unsophisticated techniques—transcends culture.

Furthermore, the claim that easterners are distinctive for avoiding excess or mindless loss of life misunderstands the strategic vision of weaker non-western opponents. From Ho Chi Minh to Osama bin Laden, weaker sides have announced their will to make sacrifice without limit. It is precisely this which they reckon advantages them against the stronger enemy, with its nervous politicians and civilian population reluctant to spend endless blood and treasure. As demonstrated by more than a million dead communists in the North's ultimate victory in Vietnam, bloodless methods and being economical with casualties was emphatically not a war-winning strategy.

As well as oversimplifying the nature of different traditions, the assumptions of the culturalists also paint a misleading picture of moments where eastern and western cultures clash. Consider historian John Poole's account of the failed amphibious Gallipoli campaign of 1915, when the British and French empires tried and failed to storm the Dardanelles Strait against Ottoman mobile artillery, on a boundary between Europe and Asia. Poole shows, with some force, that Turkish light infantry lured the British Norfolk battalion into a trap by withdrawing into the interior and surrounding and am-

bushing terrified Tommies. This trap, he argues, was an example of the military heritage of Asia Minor.

Apart from the problem that the Turks were being advised by the Germans, Poole's account does not tell the whole story about the nature of the western invaders. The most striking exercise of deception was carried out not by the Turks but by the British four months later, who pulled off one of the most difficult tasks in war: a large-scale retreat. British estimates reckoned that the withdrawal from Suvla Bay and Anzac Cove would cost casualties of 40,000. But Sir Charles Monro devised ruses, such as the appearance of routine, fires left burning, and rifles rigged to fire themselves. Eighty thousand men with their vehicles, guns, and animals were evacuated. Only five men were wounded.³⁶

The dogma of cultural determinism, then, often fails to deal with many of the complexities of military performance. Its empirical and conceptual shortcomings reflect a more fundamental problem. Cultural determinism sees what it wants to see in history, making facts fit a theory to confirm its urgent contemporary agenda, which is to alert today's militaries and decision-makers to the profound differences between cultural traditions. But however seductive and well-intentioned the theory, competing ways of war are hammered out in a matrix in which culture was one element that interacts with others, such as material circumstances, power imbalances, and individuals. It would be ironic if the many war cultures of the past were forced into simplistic categories in order to encourage cultural sensitivity in the present.

Conclusion

So what? Why does the history of war and culture matter beyond fireside conversation? As I have argued, those advocating the cultural turn often appeal to a reading of history that is in some respects flawed. By falling prey to cultural determinism, and by lumping disparate non-western cultures together, this misreading of history may also have strategic costs.

Two of the world's leading military powers, the United States and Israel, are paying the price for confusing one nonwestern culture with another. The United States made the error of treating the Iraqi insurgency through the lens of Vietnam. The classic Maoist insurgencies in Vietnam, Malaya, and the Philippines during the 1960s were homogenous, top-down, and unified. Thus they were different from the fragmented and networked insurgency of disparate groups in today's Iraq.³⁷ Misreading history has also cost the Israeli Defense Force. It is still reeling from its discovery that fighting guerrillas in the West Bank made it overconfident in combating the small-unit, agile, media-savvy fighters of Lebanon's Hezbollah in the July war of 2006.³⁸ Though there are certain dynamics that unite insurgencies and non-western war down the ages, it is misleading to overdraw the parallels between the insurgents of the past and the

present. While Marxist revolutionaries, Palestinian nationalists, and Hezbollah net-warriors have something in common—fighting a stronger adversary—the line that links them is a very crooked one. By misconceiving the past, the cultural turn runs the risk of mischaracterising the enemies of the present.

If the technology-driven military revolution of the 1990s failed to deliver on all of its promises, we should also be cautious about the culture-driven revolution. A more careful reading of history will help to guard against seeing culture as the new magic bullet. Today's strategists cannot afford to presume that East is always East.

NOTES

1. Saddam's pre-war decisionmaking has been reconstructed from new intelligence by Kevin Woods, James Lacey, and Williamson Murray, "Saddam's Delusions: The View From the Inside," *Foreign Affairs*, 85 (May/June 2006), 2-28; Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), esp. pp. 55-75; see also Kevin M. Woods, Michael R. Pease, Mark E. Stout, Williamson Murray, and James G. Lacey, *The Iraqi Perspectives Report: Saddam's Senior Leadership on Operation Iraqi Freedom from the Official US Joint Forces Command Report* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006), pp. 14-33.

2. See Gerhard L. Weinberg, "Hitler's Image of the United States," *American Historical Review*, 69 (July 1964), 1,001-21. On how aggressors can draw false confidence from their sense of cultural supremacy, see Michael P. Fischerkeller, "David Versus Goliath: Cultural Judgments in Asymmetric Wars," *Security Studies*, 7 (Summer 1998), 1-43.

3. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Rev. ed.; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), p. 88.

4. This definition is derived from A. Macmillan, K. Booth, and R. Trood, "Strategic Culture" in *Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific Region*, eds. K. Booth and R. Trood (Hampshire, Eng.: Palgrave, 1999), pp. 3-26, 8; and Alastair Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), pp. ix-x, 36. Jack Snyder, who advanced the concept in political science, defines strategic culture as "the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation." Jack Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1977), p. 8. More recently, Kerry Longhurst defines it as "a distinctive body of beliefs, attitudes and practices regarding the use of force, which are held by a collective (usually a nation) and arise gradually over time, through a unique protracted historical process." *Germany and the Use of Force* (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 17-18.

5. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 18.

6. See Tim Benbow, *The Magic Bullet? Understanding the Revolution in Military Affairs* (London: Brassey's, 2004), p. 80.

7. The need for an alternative "revolution" was asserted earlier by Ralph Peters, among others: "[A] new human understanding of the environment would be of far more use than any number of brilliant machines. We have fallen in love with the wrong revolution," *Fighting for the Future: Will America Triumph?* (Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole, 1999), p. 30.

8. Tony Corn, "Clausewitz in Wonderland," *Policy Review* (September 2006), <http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/4268401.html>; see also Montgomery McFate, "Anthropology and Counterinsurgency: The Strange Story of Their Curious Relationship," *Military Review*, 85 (March-April 2005), 24-38.

9. FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (December 2006), foreword, David H. Petraeus and James F. Amos.

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