

# The Impact of Worldviews on Training and Education in Iraq and Afghanistan

*by Ted A. Thomas and Seth George*

**A**s a civil engineer working for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1986, I was assigned as the project engineer for building an F-16 airbase in Beni Suef, Egypt. The airbase was in the final stages of completion, and the heavy equipment was sent to other projects. We had a water line break and needed a bulldozer to excavate in order to repair the line. The Egyptian Air Force owned the base and had some heavy earthmoving equipment, so I decided to borrow it to get the work done. I went to the company commander who owned the equipment. He referred me to his battalion commander, who referred me to the next higher commander. Eventually, I had an appointment with the two-star general base commander the next day.

Neither of us spoke the other's language, but we met for four hours before I received permission to use his dozer. Why did I need to go all the way to the top to get permission, and why did it take four hours of pleasantries to get an okay? I just wanted to get the job done and move on. I had no clue what the general wanted. Reflecting on this experience, I think I know the answer and have an additional insight as to why we were not as effective as we could or should have been in training and working with the Iraqis and Afghans.

The purpose of this article is to develop a more effective approach to training and educating the Middle Eastern population by examining the differing worldviews of the U.S. and the Middle East. People from an "honor-shame culture" such as the Middle East are more collectivist oriented and rely on relational approaches to working together. People from a "guilt-innocence culture," such as the U.S. are highly individualistic, and that individualism is reflected in how it trains its personnel.

**Ted Thomas is Director of the Department of Command and Leadership in the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Thomas graduated from the United States Military Academy and served in various command and staff positions before retiring. He received a master's from the University of Illinois, and a Ph.D. from Missouri University of Science and Technology.**

**Chaplain (Major) Seth George is the World Religions instructor at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. He holds master's degrees in Divinity and in Religious Studies from Sangre de Cristo Seminary and the University of Kansas. George has served during multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan from 2004-2012.**

The authors propose that understanding these differences in worldview can help develop relational teaching methodologies that use a more inspirational approach.

This perspective is absolutely necessary because practitioners, unlike scholars, often face matters of life and death and all the associated questions of organizational ethics and personal morality that follow from these encounters.

### Three Worldviews

Much of the world is influenced by three major worldviews: guilt versus innocence, honor versus shame, and fear versus power.<sup>1</sup> Every culture contains elements of each of these worldviews, but the actual culture that emerges is based on the particular mixture of each view.<sup>2</sup>

Guilt versus innocence cultures tend to focus on right versus wrong. They are more rule, law, or regulation focused. They ask the question,

“What did I do wrong?”<sup>3</sup> These cultures also tend to be individualistic.

Honor versus shame cultures are more relationship focused and tend to be collectivist or group oriented.<sup>4</sup> They ask the question, “Is this honorable? Will it bring honor or shame to me, my family, or my tribe?”

Last is the fear versus power worldview which is more ritual based, may be superstitious, and is founded on power and trust. It is worried about surviving in an uncertain and unexplained world and asks, “Is this taboo or going to bring bad luck or get me killed?”<sup>5</sup> Cultures in this environment tend to be collectivist as well.

This article will only examine the first two worldviews since they more reflect the broad cultural differences between the U.S. and the Middle East. The figure below depicts the interrelationships of the three major worldviews.

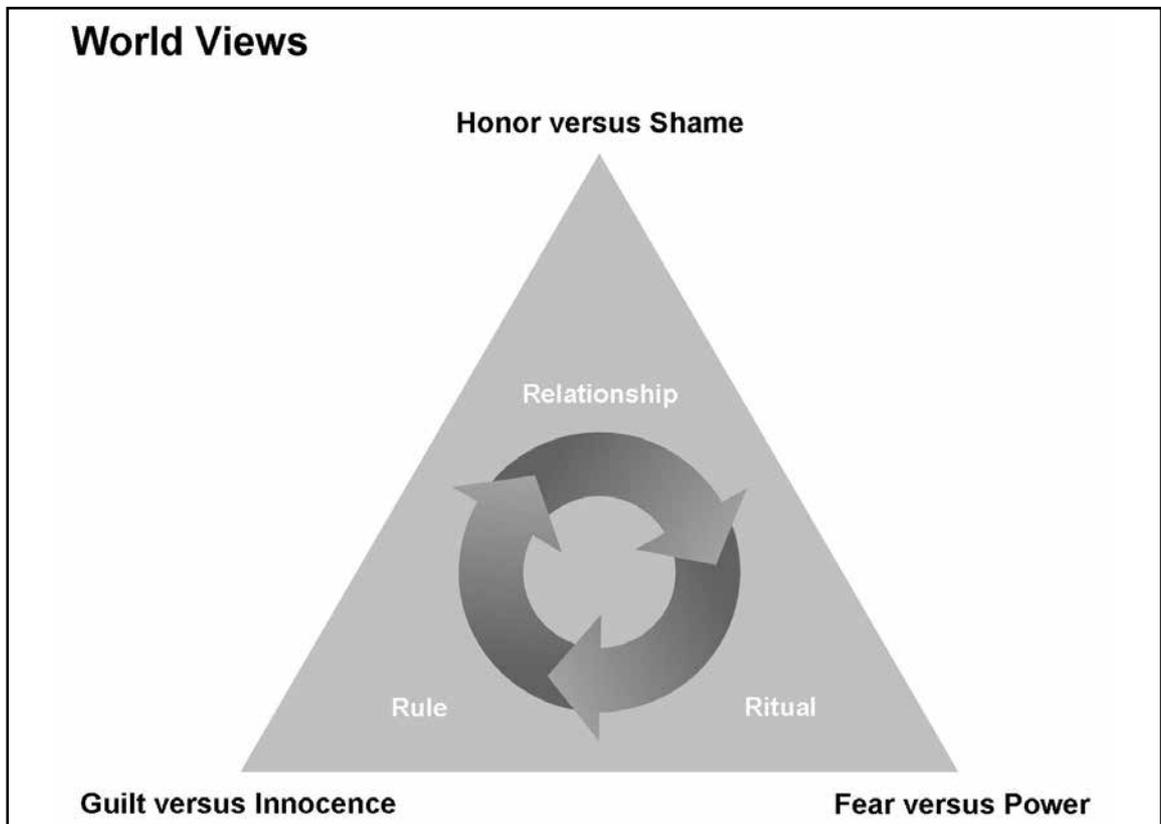


Figure 1. World Views

In guilt-innocence cultures, where individualism is more prevalent, people are not bound to groups, and each person is expected to look after themselves and their immediate family. In honor-shame cultures, where collectivism is more prevalent, people are integrated into strong, cohesive groups from birth. These groups provide lifelong protection in return for loyalty.<sup>6</sup>

In guilt-innocence (individualistic) cultures, speaking one's mind is considered a virtue and is looked upon as being honest and blunt. A clash of opinions is valued in trying to reach a greater truth or correctness.<sup>7</sup> Language in individualistic cultures tends to be precise and explicit, while language in the collectivist culture is more poetic and implicit.<sup>8</sup> Speaking bluntly in individualistic cultures causes uneasiness and discomfort among those in collectivist cultures.

**In guilt-innocence (individualistic) cultures, speaking one's mind is considered a virtue...**

In honor-shame (collectivist) cultures, the personal relationship is more important than the task and must be established first. It is natural and expected to treat one's relations and friends better than others. Nepotism is an accepted way of life. Words are spoken in a manner to avoid bringing shame on another. The words "no" and "yes" are used differently. "No" is seldom used, and "yes" does not necessarily mean approval. "Yes" may merely acknowledge what the other person is saying to keep lines of communication open.<sup>9</sup> The ambiguity and lack of clarity in language from collectivist individuals tend to cause frustration and impatience among those of individualistic cultures who desire clear cut answers.

The decision on whether or not to lie is a good way to illustrate the communication divide. Individualistic cultures value honesty and truth.

Telling the truth promotes innocence and is the right thing to do. In a collectivist society, if a lie is told for purely selfish reasons, it is dishonorable and shameful. However, protecting the honor of the tribe or family is a primary value, and lying to protect honor and avoid shame is the right thing to do. Right or wrong does not matter as much as preserving honor. Lying in one culture is bad and not acceptable, while lying in the other culture can be considered good and is expected.<sup>10</sup>

## **Understanding Assumptions**

Determining why the Iraqi government struggled to succeed on its own after receiving extensive training and resources by the U.S. becomes easier with a general understanding of the differing worldviews of U.S. personnel and their Iraqi and Afghani counterparts. There has been much written about why success was so elusive in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> It has been argued the effort was under-resourced in men, material, and infrastructure, and that publishing our exit strategy led the enemy to just wait us out. Others have blamed poor Iraqi and Afghani leadership; historical, sectarian, and ethnic issues; as well as corruption and morale issues.<sup>12</sup> What is missing from the discussion is the differing worldviews.

In order to guard against paternalistic or dehumanizing views<sup>13</sup> of those we train, we must have an empathetic appreciation for different cultures.<sup>14</sup> This process also requires an introspective approach to understanding how our own culture and values might interact within the operational environment of the Middle East. Overlooking this key aspect can easily expose personnel to the emotional toll of misunderstanding and frustration inherent within the operational environment.

For example, an aviation officer was conducting a training mission in which

Afghan aviators were operating as flight leads during a casualty evacuation. Twenty wounded Afghan soldiers were picked up by two helicopters and flown back to the hospital. One of the wounded had a head injury, prompting the U.S. leader to advise his Afghan counterpart to lower the altitude to maximize the chances of saving the soldier's life. Based on pilot's presupposition that flying higher was safer for the rest of those on board, the requests were denied. In this case, it led to the death of the soldier with the head injury. Nevertheless, the Afghan flight lead was elated that 19 lived and was seemingly unconcerned over the one who had died. The U.S. advisor was not only angry, but felt personally guilty and responsible for the death of that individual.<sup>15</sup>

Training situations like this one make deep impressions on personnel and often leave them with negative feelings toward working with Iraqi and Afghani partners. The minimal cultural training given before deployments was inadequate. Because of limited time and resources, and also because we struggle to understand our own cultural bias, little was done with the anthropological perspectives on worldviews.

Westerners tend to assume that all humans are essentially the same, and that we must focus on our commonality rather than our differences. We assume that focusing on differences might lead to division and dehumanization of the "other."<sup>16</sup> Although it is helpful to recognize shared values,<sup>17</sup> even our commonness is interpreted through dissimilar filters that can result in a totally different understanding of the same values, goals, or outcomes. An overemphasis on finding commonality has betrayed our ability to be effective trainers and educators and prevented us from acknowledging, respecting, and appreciating the differences in those we train.

## **U.S. Paradigm for Organizational Success**

American paradigms for organizational success are based on a guilt-innocence worldview. We have systems designed to select the most qualified, experienced individuals for future leadership positions. We rotate individuals through key developmental positions for their future benefit, typically leaving them in place for two years. The U.S. relies on the diversity of its members for strength in problem-solving, new ideas, and understanding different situations and cultures.

**In a collectivist society, family and tribe are more important than competency and expertise, and there is little trust in diversity.**

In a collectivist society, family and tribe are more important than competency and expertise, and there is little trust in diversity. In a society where grudges among different religions, tribes, and ethnicities can go back hundreds of years, we underestimate the level of distrust and dissension caused by creating diverse units. Nor do we truly grasp how loyalty to one's tribe or family would actually function when positions were given to those who could be trusted rather than to leaders with experience or qualification.

Our leadership is based on a small power distance between leaders and subordinates. It relies upon candid conversation and empowering subordinates. The doctrine of mission command relies on this small power distance. One clear example is the U.S. military noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps. The U.S. military prides itself on a strong, professional, NCO corps. Many lieutenants were first trained by their platoon sergeants and told what not to do and

what to do in order to succeed. Command sergeants major provide unfettered advice to the commander. Initiative, mission orders, and taking prudent risk are all foundational concepts in the doctrine of mission command<sup>18</sup> and are expected of leaders throughout the ranks.

Collectivist cultures tend to have a large power distance between leaders and subordinates. In other words, it is expected and recognized that power is distributed unequally. In this atmosphere, subordinates are highly dependent on their bosses and are unlikely to contradict or even approach them with an issue. Leadership methods that work in the U.S. will not work well in high power distance countries because they “presuppose some form of negotiation between subordinate and superior that neither part will feel comfortable with.”<sup>19</sup> In a large power distance culture, strong mid-level managers are not expected or tolerated and are looked upon as a threat to the leadership. In the Middle East, power and decision making are held at the top levels. Staying in power is one of the signs of a good leader. Subordinates who have initiative and take risk are seen as risks. This behavior is highly frowned upon and will get the person relieved at best and killed at worst.

**In the Middle East, power and decision making are held at the top levels. Staying in power is one of the signs of a good leader.**

Many U.S. organizations rotate their people in and out of the theater every three to fifteen months. By the time relationships are made and established with Middle Eastern partners, a totally new unit or leader comes into theater or leaders are rotated into different positions within theater. The U.S. assumes bureaucratic loyalty, and subordinates are loyal to whatever boss they have at that time.<sup>20</sup> This is a foreign concept to

someone in the Middle East, who usually work in the same area and with the same people for most of their lives.

Our worldview also applies to how U.S. organizations choose their leaders. We often use a board process, with senior leaders who promote the most qualified and those with the most potential. The right thing to do in this context is to promote the most competent. In the Middle East, promotions and assignments are made based on family, tribe, trust, and loyalty. When a sheik is asked whom he wants in charge, he will want the most loyal and trustworthy person available who is relationally connected to his family, tribe, or a close ally. Competency is a far lesser consideration than trust.

One recent study recommended greater cultural awareness on multiple levels and also recommended “a complete paradigm shift in how Afghan officers and NCOs are selected and promoted, such as by merit rather than through nepotism and graft.” While encouraging greater empathy for our counterparts, the study reinforces the stereotype of a guilt-innocence culture contraposing its values on an honor-shame culture.<sup>21</sup>

### **Training, Education, and Inspiration**

Training, education, and inspiration are three methods of teaching. U.S. personnel are some of the best at training and educating, but addressing core beliefs and values fundamental to an inspirational approach to teaching is typically conducted informally through discussions of leadership and values. If we are to continue teaching Middle Eastern partners, we need to understand the importance of inspirational teaching and how worldviews differ in their appeal to values and the importance of relationships.

Training involves teaching what to think and how to perform. It is top down driven and shows people what to do and how to do it. It is centered on the way things are and has a correct answer.

Training is a teacher-centric method in which the instructor is right. Standards are measurable by time, distance, sequence, or result. It is more science than art and more management than leadership. Training involves an input or event followed by some action that has been rehearsed and practiced. After the action is over, there is time to reflect and review what went right and what went wrong. The sequence is input-action-reflection.

Education involves teaching people to think critically and to analyze and synthesize available information. It involves reflecting and thinking. It is centered on the way things can be and is more art or leadership driven. Education is student-centric and tries to achieve situational understanding, to ascertain how events will unfold, and how that will affect operations. It is harder to measure and is often accomplished after events have happened. When a new problem comes up, there may be many answers or solutions. As different solutions are tried over time, a technique or drill may evolve. The reasoning for education lies in teaching principles that can be applied to different situations to achieve a workable solution. In uncertain and ambiguous environments, the actions that work one day may not work the next day, or the actions taken in one area may not work in a different area. The goal of education is to have the intelligence and knowledge to reflect and determine what may work. After this reflection, the leader takes action. Since there is no approved solution, thinking and reflecting are necessary to solve these problems. The sequence is input-reflection-action.

The last of the three methods of teaching is inspiration. It begins with appeals to values and beliefs. This teaching is not necessarily done in a classroom setting. Inspirational teaching addresses why we think or believe certain things. It is based on values, core beliefs, feelings, and emotions. Instead of trying to become situationally aware or to gain situational

understanding, inspirational teaching tries to create the desired situation based on a set of specific values. It is measured one heart at a time and depends heavily upon relationships. Solutions are based on values consistent with a particular set of beliefs. Instead of an event followed by a rehearsed action for a training situation or an event followed by thinking and reflecting for a new situation requiring an education, inspiration starts with reflecting and thinking about the way things ought to be, and then taking action to bring it about. It is followed by looking at the results, reflecting on them, and then adjusting the next action to bring about the desired value or goal. The sequence is reflection-action-output.<sup>22</sup>

### **Inspirational teaching helps explain the appeal of extremist Islamic groups such as Al Qaeda...**

Inspirational teaching helps explain the appeal of extremist Islamic groups such as Al Qaeda, which spent years reflecting on how things should be according to their values and what actions should be taken to achieve certain goals such as an Islamic state.<sup>23</sup> Where they are in charge, their values are indoctrinated into followers by inspirational and relational teaching that fosters an extremist Islamic identity rooted in the collective honor of Muslims and resistant to Western values of individuality and diversity.<sup>24</sup>

### **A Valuable and Necessary Investment**

If U.S. personnel are to be successful in their mission to train local security forces, time and resources must be provided to prepare them to work closely with those who think and act in relational and collectivistic terms. In May of 2011, a study was commissioned to determine why at least 26 blue on green attacks in

Afghanistan were attempted since May of 2007. These attacks resulted in 58 deaths. According to this study, the U.S. personnel characterized the Afghans as dishonest, incompetent, corrupt, and having a lack of mid-level leadership.<sup>25</sup> Conversely, remarks from the Afghan personnel are peppered with statements that refer to the U.S. workers' actions and language toward them or other Afghan civilians as indecent and profane, causing them embarrassment and shame.<sup>26</sup> One observer was struck by the simple question asked by a number of Afghans, "How come the American Soldiers don't talk to us?"<sup>27</sup> It is significant that the study concluded that the growing fratricide-murder trend is a valid measure of the ineffectiveness of our efforts in Afghanistan, primarily because of cultural miscommunication rather than insurgent infiltration.<sup>28</sup>

**If the U.S. is to have a positive effect in future operations in the Middle East, it needs to reexamine the way it teaches others in order to minimize cultural miscommunication.**

Investing the time to understand worldviews and expectations of those we train will help with internal security and mission success. Consider what an element of U.S. Soldiers experienced while training security forces of a local tribe outside Baghdad. A rival tribe killed two members of the local tribe and refused to return the bodies. While on a joint patrol, the local tribe recovered the bodies in a nearby community. Several members of the rival tribe were rounded up. The patrol leader was asked, "Mister, can we kill them?" To the satisfaction of both tribes he answered, "No, but you can take two vehicles."<sup>29</sup> By utilizing the *diyya* or "blood money," further violence was averted because the collective honor of both tribes

was maintained and neither were shamed. Furthermore, the training relationship developed into a wider network of relationships and greater security. Those who have been involved with training in the Middle East quickly realize these are highly relational endeavors in which developing tactical competency is but one aspect of the overall picture.

If the U.S. is to have a positive effect in future operations in the Middle East, it needs to reexamine the way it teaches others in order to minimize cultural miscommunication. No matter how good its training and education is, if it does not engage in conversation,<sup>30</sup> build relationships, and consider the comprehensive nature of values and worldviews, the U.S. will not achieve the security results it and its allies desire.

Success is possible, and many organizations have experienced it in terms of training and security. But success itself should be a cautionary tale. The ability of a diverse group of U.S. and Iraqi or Afghani people to overcome cultural barriers, develop mutual trust, and work together toward a common goal is a remarkable testimony to the human spirit. However, these accomplishments are often reported up the chain of command as story boards of success without realizing how success and cooperation can easily be viewed through dissimilar lens. We must consider that as important as it is for any particular organization to have success, linking the success of one trained Iraqi organization to another is beyond our control.

While our worldview and experience lead us to assume bureaucratic and national loyalty, the worldview and experiences of those we train in the Middle East do not. Rather, the relationship developed between a U.S. and Iraqi organization will only exist between those particular individuals and never transfer to a larger organization, be it Iraqi or American. Furthermore, we may view a successful unit leader as one that will accomplish the mission. For our partners, success may not require this at

all. Instead, remaining in charge, regardless of the action taken or results, may be their understanding of success.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

Understanding the extent of how honor, shame, and collectivism shape the expectations of everyone involved in training is imperative in order to understand what we can accomplish from the direct to the operational level. This understanding requires an investment of critical and creative thinking with at least four initial steps.

First, we must invest in conversation with those we teach in order to understand how to combine inspirational and relationship-based teaching with our ability to train specific individual and unit tasks. Second, cultural complexities must be navigated in real time without arbitrarily subjecting them to our routines, agendas, and worldview bias. Third, when briefing senior leaders and civilian authorities, we must resist the temptation to promise more than we can reasonably deliver given our cultural differences. A realistic assessment of how our partners understand the purpose of their training in terms of their worldview and subsequent relationships and loyalties is necessary. Finally, we must leave trainers in place long enough to determine how shame and honor may be understood as a measure of effectiveness for unit readiness, especially when financial resources are diminished.<sup>32</sup>

Years later, I now understand that the young civil engineer of 30 years ago wanted to get a mission accomplished on a transactional basis. The two-star general wanted to establish a relationship before the transaction to make sure he could trust this young foreigner. I would have been much more patient and understanding and probably more successful if I knew then what I know now. **IAJ**

## NOTES

- 1 Roland Muller, *Honor & Shame: Unlocking the Door*, Xlibris Corporation, Bloomington, IN, 2000, pp. 12–13.
- 2 Ibid., p. 16.
- 3 Ibid., p. 24
- 4 Geert Hofstede et al., *Organizations and Cultures: Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 2005, p. 89.
- 5 Muller, Chapter 5.
- 6 Hofstede, p. 76.
- 7 Ibid., pp.102–103.
- 8 Brian L. Steed, *Bees and Spiders: Applied Cultural Awareness and the Art of Cross-Cultural Influence*, Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co., Houston, TX, 2014, p. 60.
- 9 Ibid., p. 86.

- 10 Muller, p. 51.
- 11 Daniel P. Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York, 2014, p. 431.
- 12 Tommy J. Tracy, "Afghanistan Army Development: What Went Wrong," *InterAgency Journal*, Vol. 6, Issue 1, Winter 2015.
- 13 Richard Landes, "Edward Said and the Culture of Honor and Shame: Orientalism and Our Misperceptions of the Arab-Israeli Conflict," *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 13, Issue 4, October 2007, pp. 844–858.
- 14 Robert M. Hill, "Interpersonal Engagement, The Indispensable Warrior Skill," *Military Review*, Vol. 95, No. 5, September-October, 2015, pp. 49–56.
- 15 U.S. Army officer in discussion with author regarding the events during 2011, Afghanistan.
- 16 Landes, pp. 844–858.
- 17 Hill, p. 55.
- 18 Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-0, *Mission Command*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, December 7, 2015.
- 19 Hofstede, p. 56.
- 20 Steed, pp. 21–22.
- 21 Jeffrey Bordin, "A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility," A Red Team Study of Mutual Perceptions of Afghan National Security Force Personnel and U.S. Soldiers in Understanding and Mitigation the Phenomena of ANSF-Committed Fratricide-Murders, May 12, 2011, pp. 44 and 49–50.
- 22 Ted H. Thomas and Ted G. Ihrke, "The Hands, Head and Heart Leadership Model," *Small Wars Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 11, November 2011.
- 23 Laura Mansfield, *His Own Words: Translation and Analysis of the Writing of Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri*, TLG Publications, Old Tappen, NJ, 2006, p. 201. "The struggle for the establishment of the Muslim state cannot be considered a regional struggle, certainly not after it had been ascertained that the Crusader alliance led by the United States will not allow any Muslim force to reach power in the Arab countries"; see also, "A Letter to al-Zarqawi and the Strategy to Develop a Caliphate," p. 250. Johannes J. G. Jansen et al., *The Neglected Duty: The Creed of Sadat's Assassins and Islamic Resurgence in the Middle East*, Macmillan, New York, 1986. p. 193. "Putting an end to imperialism is not laudatory and not a useful act. It is only a waste of time. We must concentrate on our own Islamic situation: we have to establish the Rule of God's Religion in our own country first, and to make the Word of God supreme."
- 24 Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, Kazi Publications, Egypt, 1964, Chapter 3, p. 26, <<http://majalla.org/books/2005/qutb-nilestone.pdf>>, accessed on August 3, 2015. "Islam, then, is the only Divine way of life . . . for the construction of human society. Those who deviate from this system and want some other system, whether it be based on nationalism, color and race, class struggle or similar corrupt theories, are truly enemies of mankind!"
- 25 Bordin, pp. 12–21.

26 Ibid., pp. 21–28.

27 Theresa Ford, “Religious Engagement and the Seventh Warfighting Function: Time to Stop, Listen, and Engage,” *Military Review*, September-October, 2015, p. 60; Hill, p. 50.

28 Bordin, p. 53.

29 U.S. Army officer in discussion with author regarding the events during 2007, Baghdad, Iraq.

30 Mette Rudvin, “Professionalism and Ethics in Community Interpreting: The Impact of Individualist Versus Collective Group Identity,” *Interpreting*, Vol. 9, Issue 1, 2007, pp. 63–64.

31 Steed, pp. 54–56.

32 Neil Sleevi, Colonel, Retired, in discussion with author, Fort Leavenworth, February 2016.

 **InterAgency Journal**  
**bulk subscriptions available**

**Do you want to use the *InterAgency Journal* in your classroom?**

**Would you like to provide copies of the *InterAgency Journal* to your colleagues?**

**Bulk subscriptions to the *InterAgency Journal* are available!\***

\*Individual subscriptions (one copy per subscriber within the United States) to the *InterAgency Journal* are not charged a shipping fee. Bulk and international shipping fees may apply.  
All Simons Center publications are available online at no cost.

**Contact the Simons Center to arrange a bulk subscription.**  
**913.682.7244 or [editor@TheSimonsCenter.org](mailto:editor@TheSimonsCenter.org)**

