

Everyone Else is They

A New Framework for Operational Culture

by Megan Kraushaar

It is unlikely that the conflicts the U.S. military and intelligence communities will face in the future will be simple, conventional clashes. Rather, horizontal and vertical integration of the world add layers of complexity and competing alliances and identities that will continue to muddy the operational environment. Second-, third-, and fourth-order effects will result from even minor interventions in the increasingly complex system of the international environment. Trade relations and commercial business decisions could affect the internal dynamics of a failing state, sparking conflict or creating stability more effectively than an armed intervention might. The U.S. military must recognize the competitive influences within these complex systems and acknowledge that seldom can a line of effort or course of action be imagined within a vacuum or without the influence of a myriad of outside, uncontrolled actors.

As the U.S. continues to be engaged in the far corners of the world, its leaders cannot rely on laminated cultural “smart cards” when attempting to evaluate the desired end states and outcomes of intervention. The cultural understanding necessary to foresee the type of catastrophe that occurred in Iraq requires extensive consideration of complex social science theory and true openness to realities other than liberal democratic traditions. The “tactical culture” that governs interpersonal interaction does not provide any tools for decisionmakers to consider alternate approaches and end states not derived from the American worldview. Debating the definition of culture in Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, draws focus from the more relevant question: Are the concepts of culture in FM 3-24 useful in operational planning? The answer, unfortunately, is they are not.

The U.S. military and intelligence communities are adept at collecting information and facts,

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correlating them, and drawing conclusions based on what is available.¹ But in complex situations, simply accruing facts, arranging them into a series of pamphlets, and expecting this knowledge to be useful is disastrous. One of the concerns with FM 3-24's concept of culture is that it compiles litter—artifacts and pieces of information that may form part of the skeleton of a society—without making the necessary connections between these facts to give them meaning and without making the relationship between these facts and the desired end state apparent.

To that end, social science theory is more useful for evaluating the role of culture in conflict and defining desired end states. The foundation of this framework is the differentiation among multiple logics at work in a society. These logics operate at different levels and play important roles in ordering society, maintaining that order, and potentially changing that order. The social logic, which articulates what can be observed about a culture, is constructed by the observer, and it is used to explain the practices at hand.² The constructs proposed in FM 3-24 address mainly the social logic of a society. They remain concerned with describing the “other” and foreign practices, thus missing opportunities to evaluate end states in light of cultural realities.

Political logic, which explains how and where points of contestation develop within a society and what conflict arises from differing political views, is more relevant to operational culture. The political logic shows where consensus is achieved in a society, as well as where dissent arises and resists the existing logic.³

The ways in which political logics, through contestation and challenge, give rise to institutions provide a means to design and implement logical lines of effort in support of the end state. Good governance, security, and stability are all desired end states articulated in FM 3-24, though the suggested paths to achieve

these goals are constrained by American concepts of political legitimacy. By considering the logics of equivalence and difference unique to the society in question, leaders can arrive at meaningful end states and lines of effort to reach those goals. Areas of contestation and fissures in the established political order also provide opportunities for intervention, particularly if a given regime is failed or failing. Addressing these areas of contestation, the U.S. can

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advocate for a socially-relevant and culturally -acceptable form of political logic to replace that which came before.

The question arises as to how those political institutions survive despite emergent challenges to the status quo. The answer is a third level of logic. Fantasmatic logic papers over the fissures in society that result from the competitive, exclusionary process of political life. The fantasmatic logic tells a story to the people, particularly the disenfranchised, as to why things must be the way they are. This fantasy sublimates dissent and hides social emergence that could lead to change, and it reinforces the existing system as the only solution by preemptively absorbing alternate political logics.

An illustrative example is the fantasy that maintained the regime of Hafiz al-Assad in Syria.⁴ Irrationality, at least as a spectator would identify it, at one level creates and reinforces irrationality throughout.⁵ The Assad regime required adherence to a cult of personality around the Syrian president, calling for elaborate displays of support for the regime and ever-

present photographs of Assad, which the entire population understood to be entirely inauthentic. And yet the ability of the regime to enforce compliance, despite the acknowledgement of disbelief, further shored up Assad's dominance and prevented the emergence of real challenges to the regime.⁶

The result of this enforced fantasy for such duration was the abrupt (and violent) expression of all those points of contestation in the political logic that remained stifled throughout both Assad regimes. An observer may have constructed a social logic that over-valued the cult of personality around Assad, without considering

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the other reasons the fantasy prospered. Thus, the social logic and observable "otherness" of a foreign society can be understood as "culture" but can just as easily be a fantasmatic logic designed to conceal political and social resistance within that society. If U.S. military and intelligence professionals are not able to identify that a fantasmatic logic is at work, the fissures in society that present opportunities for intervention may not be identified.

Articulating the social logic at work in a country is generally the easiest process, but unfortunately the U.S. efforts at understanding another culture tend to stop with the social logic. In order to conduct military and intelligence operations effectively, leaders must instead address the presence or absence of both political and fantasmatic logics. It is only through changing these logics, or establishing others to replace the existing logics, that they can hope to make meaningful change in the manner

described in FM 3-24.

The issue of how a society arrives at an acceptable political logic, or one that requires hearty fantasmatic logic, is relevant to planners dealing with societies in conflict. The creation and maintenance of these logics is achieved through stories of peoplehood and narrative construction. While the U.S. has engaged in institution- and nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan, it has paid little attention to the necessity of creating a sense of peoplehood within these countries.

The U.S. cannot lift the American tradition of liberal democracy and simply present it wholesale to the Iraqi people and expect it to take root. Rather, leaders must understand the stories of peoplehood that unite and divide the people of a given society, such as Iraq, and understand how these narratives can create or undermine good governance as that society defines it.

In *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership*, Rogers M. Smith discusses two assumptions about political peoplehood that are relevant to understanding the political and fantasmatic logics and how they can aid in operational planning: (1) No political people is primordial, and all are derived from pre-existing forms of peoplehood; and (2) Asymmetric and constrained relationships between leaders and constituents create the sense of peoplehood.⁷ Aspiring leaders must work with constituents with established senses of identity based in other memberships and interests, all of which will influence what narratives and stories these individuals and groups find compelling. It is possible to adapt these identities but only through the thoughtful creation of other identities.

Stories of peoplehood are also utilized to construct and maintain institutions, as these narratives define who is a member of the group and who is not, and can be used to express the identities, values, and interests of the group in

an official way.⁸ As such, narratives can arise from and reinforce the political institutions that order a society. Indeed, the narrative is a vital part of maintaining the fantasy of why a society must operate as the political in-group wants it to operate, with narratives defining enemies and threats that justify papering over legitimate contestation in society.

Smith identifies three types of stories that help to accomplish these goals. These stories are combined in different ways and to different degrees, depending on the goals of the leadership and the interests of the constituency, but they include economic, political power, and ethically constitutive stories.⁹

The economic story may closely correlate with the social logic, in that it is rather easily observed and understood by the outside observer. Examples include struggles over resources and the role of perceived economic deprivation relative to other groups. These economic stories promote trust by arguing it is in the interests of a leader or specific group to advance each member's economic well-being, while offering a sense of motivation through the potential for increased wealth.¹⁰

The political power story is associated with both the political and fantasmatic logics, as stories of political power can shore up both types of claims. These political power stories motivate constituents through the idea that a political community will exercise power through institutions and policies that distribute power to each member, generally through alleged virtual or actual representation.¹¹ All groups engaged in a struggle for power wish to create a coalition large enough to seize and maintain power, while limiting the size of the group to ensure maximum political and economic payoff for their constituents.¹²

Of the three types of narratives, the ethically constitutive story is the most relevant for the idea of operational culture. The ethically constitutive narrative provides a story that

belonging to a particular people is intrinsic to who its members really are, and it affirms that “members’ culture, religion, language, race, ethnicity, ancestry, history, or other such factors are constitutive of their very identities as persons, in ways that both affirm their worth and delineate their obligations.”¹³

These narratives in particular are important to intervention. Doctrine does not account for how these identities, particularly ethnic and religious identities, are malleable. If operational culture views these narratives as contestable and their client groups as constructed rather than born, there are areas for intervention within the group. Furthermore, history has shown there is “no such thing as an impossible alliance in the context of a multiparty civil war. . . . Nor is any group, however homogenous, safe from internal fractionalization.”¹⁴ These identities are constructed and abandoned as needed, which bears particular relevance as leaders seek to intervene.

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The ethically constitutive story, then, is very much a fantasmatic object. It illustrates to the population, in terms of “us versus them,” why belonging to a specific group is preordained, and why the organization of society “must” be a certain way.¹⁵ It provides a goal and envisioned end state of society that must be attained in order for the constituents of the ethically constitutive story to prosper. Groups that mobilize their followers according to an ethically constitutive story are primed to establish a fantasmatic logic

over their political order if they achieve power.

There is danger for the student of operational culture in concentrating too much on the ethically constitutive story as being the primary motive for conflict. Much has been written about the role of ethnic, religious, and racial differences in creating and perpetuating armed conflict, and it seems as though the U.S. defaults to the categorization of groups and persons involved in a conflict according to

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their linguistic or ethnic identities.¹⁶ This can create a superficial and dangerous view of the operational environment, as in Afghanistan, where Tajiks and Uzbeks were immediately correlated with the Northern Alliance and thus considered uniformly anti-Taliban.

In *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*, Fotini Christia discusses the means by which leaders in civil wars blend stories to facilitate shifting motivations.¹⁷ This blending of stories creates a flexibility in alliance formation and fractionalization that bears out in the American experience in Afghanistan. There is evidence the elites will pick allies based first on power considerations and then construct the narratives justifying the alliance, identifying characteristics or historical occurrences that are shared with their allies but not shared with others.¹⁸ The U.S. cannot direct attention only to the outward manifestations of divided groups (their social logic) or their allies, but must understand the political power stories in the political logic of a conflict to get to the root of who cooperates with whom and why.

Though elites manipulate the identity aspects of these narratives, to include the ethically constitutive stories, identity attributes can have emotional impact on the rank and file; thus, identity factors do not drive alliance choices, but are useful to justify elite choices and establish stories for public consumption.¹⁹ These narratives thus fulfill the role of fantasmatic logics, even without an established political logic, in the midst of ongoing conflict.

When considering the creation and maintenance of ethically constitutive stories and the fantasmatic logic, one must ask how it is possible to sell these types of deceptions to an entire people. Without additional insight, outsiders may be unable to identify the narratives present or understand the semiotics supporting political and fantasmatic logics.

When we attempt to understand political pronouncements in a society that is not ours, and whose language we likely do not speak, the relationship between political language and political reality becomes more important. The flexibility of language plays a role not only in creating a political reality but in creating narratives, strengthening the political logic, and developing the fantasmatic logic.

Despite this, a conversation about political language and the ways in which words can be used is distinctly lacking in the dialogue of operational culture. Political language is about the construction of beliefs within a constituency and evoking meaning in order to legitimize some actions while condemning the alternative. Political language contributes to the creation and support of narratives and stories of peoplehood, as well as the political and fantasmatic logics that underlie a society. As we consider the challenges of constructing a sense of peoplehood, we must acknowledge the fluidity of meaning inherent in political language.

In addition to the flexibility in the language itself, Edelman observes that the material

situation in which a person lives makes that person sensitive to some political language but not others, largely because the material situation defines what that person’s “reality” is.²⁰ What is important is not necessarily the material circumstances themselves, but rather the effect they can have on the understanding of political dialogue and construction of personal and public narratives. This sensitivity to some political language may also predispose parts of the constituency to hear economic stories or political power stories more strongly than others and identify with groups that weight concern toward those ends.

Most important, from Edelman’s view, is that political language constructs the political reality.²¹ Politicians choose from a set of stock texts when using political language, which are largely derived from the stories of peoplehood that support the political and fantasmatic logics currently at play within the society. These stock texts are effective in maintaining political support, not because they are “true” in any empirical way but because they accurately reflect the hopes and fears of the population.²² The potency of this political language derives from reflecting these fears and from reconstructing a powerful interpretation of the past, while evoking the hope of the future.

Practices of meaning-making shed light on the stories at work in society, as well as whether a fantasmatic logic is at work. These semiotic practices refer to meaning-making in which agents’ practices interact with their language and symbolic systems and describe how these symbols in turn create meaning and observable political effects.²³ Unleashing the “right” symbol, or destroying the meaning in another, can eliminate the inertia of social practices and spur instead the vector of political practices.

The interaction between symbols and action in foreign cultures is often opaque to Americans, as evidenced by difficulties experienced in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The practices and

their meanings thus always play a dual role: the outside spectator observes one meaning, while the actors understand their own actions in a different context.²⁴ If we stop analysis at the social logic, we never view the deeper, more relevant meaning intended by the actor.

Starting with meaning-making practices that illuminate “how people attempt to make apparent, observable sense of their world—to themselves and others—in emotional and cognitive terms,” operational culture is better served by identifying the semiotic practices relevant to a given operation and exploring how those practices work, than attempting to create a human terrain map of an entire country.²⁵

The symbols supporting a political regime may be absurd and widely understood to be superficial but can still serve their purpose in establishing and maintaining social order.²⁶ Discussions of the Assad regime reveal how symbolic practices, such as hanging pictures of the president in every home and business, reinforced the regime’s political power, even as citizens privately acknowledged the ridiculousness of doing so. The power of semiotics should not be disregarded in operational culture, as it can serve an important role in establishing a political and even ethically constitutive narrative to maintain order and enforce compliance with the existing political logic.

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Finally, and perhaps most importantly for operational culture, concentrating on semiotic practices within a society creates explanations

for how political groups are formed, particularly in concert with different stories of peoplehood, as well as how groups are solidified and maintained. Semiotics can also account for how alternative narratives and “possibilities of belonging” were dismissed, which can provide valuable insight into how and why a society chose its political logic, its narrative, and its system of signification.²⁷

The semiotics in a society is often reflective of popular creeds, as these creeds contribute to both the story of peoplehood and the stock texts available to elites within that society. A creed supplies the critical components of an individual’s belief structure. The manifestation of our creed in a public context results in our sensibility as we interact with others. The relevance for our understanding of operational culture is the formation of what Connelly terms “existential faith,” or the combination of creed and a distinctive sensibility.²⁸ The importance of this existential faith is twofold: (1) It can be

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engaged intellectually at some levels and not at all at others; and (2) It informs political thinking and theory, from micropolitics in an individual’s life to the macropolitics of an entire state.

An existential faith is not merely a measured, considered application of philosophy to world events, but rather it is “a hot, committed view of the world layered into the affective dispositions, habits, and institutional priorities of its confessors.”²⁹ Deconstructing

an ethically constitutive narrative or fantasmatic logic may become easier if the analyst can first articulate the existential faiths in competition. Understanding the contradictions or potential conflicts present in existential faith across a society can also provide insight into what narratives would be useful within that society, as existential faith is not immune to new concepts and interpretations.

These concepts provide flexibility in understanding and action. The U.S. process usually involves identifying an end state—often liberal democracy with a human rights focus—and then developing lines of effort that will notionally get the U.S. from point A to point B. Rarely do the end state or lines of effort have input from what is achievable, given the state of affairs on the ground or cultural reality. Rather than picking a goal for Iraq, Afghanistan, or Syria that plays well in the American media, leaders should identify relevant, desirable, but still achievable end states that reflect the values, narratives, and realities of the society in which they propose to intervene.

The speech of our adversaries and allies can provide rich fodder for information operations or the creation of dialogue. Understanding the stock texts that are available to a politician in a given society will aid American leaders, whether diplomatic or military, in crafting statements that are familiar to the intended audience, while using the correct semiotics to ensure the American message is palatable. Finally, leaders must take care to minimize creed and sensibility in the conversation, as creed and sensibility dominate tactical culture. They should be more interested in the existential faith that underlies who accepts what narratives, why they do so, and how this applies to the political and fantasmatic logic at work in a society.

Operational culture must address the development and use of narratives, particularly the ethically constitutive narrative, in building peoplehood, as well as the relationship

between meaning and practice. By examining the meaning and interaction of narrative, semiotics, and political language, we can begin to understand how the fantasmatic logic holds a society together (or has failed to do so). The fissures that exist within a society, beneath the fantasmatic logic, afford us an opportunity to intervene to encourage disorder or create stability.

The specific traits and artifacts of a given society are not particularly useful in designing an operational approach or otherwise attempting to build lasting institutions. It is the relationship between these things and the symbolic meaning of the artifacts that inspire people to action. It is only through understanding these outward expressions of culture that leaders can hope to identify places to intervene within a conflict and cause meaningful change, rather than sow chaos.

The question of whether the U.S. should intervene in Syria remains an issue for the U.S. government and the international community. It is worth examining to what extent the U.S. government has considered the narratives and logics of the various Syrian rebel groups that receive economic, humanitarian, and now military aid from the U.S. Addressing these narratives and stories now may provide the U.S. with the opportunity to influence potential allies, or at least identify future adversaries while these groups are still in the nascent stage. Perhaps by evaluating these rebel groups through this framework, the U.S. can identify viable partners for conflict resolution, as well as groups who may represent an undesirable future for Syria and the region. For example, Russia and other global powers play a significant part in constraining the options available to the U.S. and the international community for intervention. The roles of Hezbollah and Iran and the growing tension between Lebanon and Syria over refugees all factor into how this conflict may escalate or implode. Evaluating

Syria's narratives and logic in the context of the Levant, the wider Middle East, and international alliances and obligations could provide global strategic options for intervention for the U.S. If engaging with members of the Arab League, for example, could influence the outcome of the Syrian civil war prior to the need for American boots on the ground, then that possibility should be raised to American policymakers and military leadership. We cannot know the areas of contestation and potential for intervention unless we look for them.

Avenues for further research include applying this framework to specific conflicts or during real-world planning events to gauge the utility and effectiveness of these analytic tools. Use of the framework during ongoing problems and emergent situations may also provide feedback as to the selected courses of action

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or ways to evaluate individual lines of effort. At the operational level, the framework could be useful as part of the overall design when evaluating a smaller part of an overall strategic plan. Future research could also include assessments of newer social science theories related to conflict initiation and termination that may shed additional light on these processes.

Outside of this framework, the theories and ideas introduced here should be a starting point for a greater focus on political theory and the social sciences throughout the military and intelligence communities. Informing policymakers and civilian leaders of potential consequences and outcomes of the exercise of U.S. power, whether diplomatic, military,

or economic, requires cutting edge scholarship and the willingness to challenge the accepted ways of doing business. It is incumbent upon the military and intelligence communities to seek out knowledge that will give our recommendations more clarity or prescience. To that end, it would be worthwhile to consider a greater focus on political theory and social sciences in Army professional military education, in analytical training courses, and other intelligence training. Part of this conversation should also include other interagency partners and the whole of government, in order to better leverage the experience and knowledge of partner agencies and departments. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has a wealth of experience on the ground in the majority of countries in the world and can provide valuable insight into not only the specific societies in which we might intervene, but also the larger regional, economic, and even environmental impact of potential intervention. **IAJ**

Notes

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Operational variables—political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical environment, and time.

Mission variables—mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support available, time available, and civil considerations.

Civil considerations—areas, structures, capabilities, organizations, people, and events.

These acronyms along with the information derived from their parts are fit into matrices and filled out as a way of informing the staff of relevant information, although it may not be immediately (or ever) clear what is relevant.

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- 20 Murray Edelman, “Political Language and Political Reality,” *Political Science*, Vol. 18, No. 1, Winter 1985, pp 10–19.
- 21 Ibid., pp. 10–19.
- 22 Ibid., pp. 10–19.
- 23 Wedeen, “Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science,” p. 713.
- 24 Linda Zerilli, “We Feel our Freedom: Imagination and Judgment in the Thought of Hannah Arendt,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 33, No. 2, April 2005, pp 158–188 and Wedeen, “Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science,” p. 720.
- 25 Wedeen, “Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science,” pp. 721–722.
- 26 Wedeen, “Acting As If: Symbolic Politics and Social Control in Syria,” p. 503 and “Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science,” pp. 713–728.
- 27 Wedeen, “Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science,” p. 726.
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