The Human Terrain System: A CORDS for the 21st Century

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In accurately defining the contextual and cultural population of the task force battlespace, it became rapidly apparent that we needed to develop a keen understanding of demographics as well as the cultural intricacies that drive the Iraqi population.[1]

—Major General Peter W. Chiarelli, Commander, 1st Cavalry Division, Baghdad, 2004-2005

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CONDUCTING MILITARY OPERATIONS in a low-intensity conflict without ethnographic and cultural intelligence is like building a house without using your thumbs: it is a wasteful, clumsy, and unnecessarily slow process at best, with a high probability for frustration and failure. But while waste on a building site means merely loss of time and materials, waste on the battlefield means loss of life, both civilian and military, with high potential for failure having grave geopolitical consequences to the loser.

Despite these potential negative consequences, the U.S. military has not always made the necessary effort to understand the foreign cultures and societies in which it intended to conduct military operations. As a result, it has not always done a good job of dealing with the cultural environment within which it eventually found itself. Similarly, its units have not always done a good job in transmitting necessary local cultural information to follow-on forces attempting to conduct Phase IV operations (those operations aimed at stabilizing an area of operations in the aftermath of major combat).

Many of the principal challenges we face in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom (OIF and OEF) stem from just such initial institutional disregard for the necessity to understand the people among whom our forces operate as well as the cultural characteristics and propensities of the enemies we now fight.

To help address these shortcomings in cultural knowledge and capabilities, the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO), a U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) organization that supports the Combined Arms

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Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, is overseeing the creation of the Human Terrain System (HTS). This system is being specifically designed to address cultural awareness shortcomings at the operational and tactical levels by giving brigade commanders an organic capability to help understand and deal with "human terrain"—the social, ethnographic, cultural, economic, and political elements of the people among whom a force is operating.[2] So that U.S. forces can operate more effectively in the human terrain in which insurgents live and function, HTS will provide deployed brigade commanders and their staffs direct social-science support in the form of ethnographic and social research, cultural information research, and social data analysis that can be employed as part of the military decision-making process.

The core building block of the system will be a five-person Human Terrain Team (HTT) that will be embedded in each forward-deployed brigade or regimental staff. The HTT will provide the commander with experienced officers, NCOs, and civilian social scientists trained and skilled in cultural data research and analysis. The specific roles and functions of HTT members and supporting organizations are discussed below.

To augment the brigade commander's direct support, HTS will have reachback connectivity to a network of subject-matter experts now being assembled from throughout the Department of Defense, the interagency domain, and academia. This network will be managed by a centralized information-clearinghouse unit nested in FMSO.

At the same time, to overcome the kinds of problems now typically encountered when in-place units attempt to transfer knowledge about their area of operations upon relief in place, HTS will provide for the complete transfer of HTT personnel together with the HTT database to the incoming commander upon transfer of authority. This will give the incoming commander and unit immediate "institutional memory" about the people and culture of its area of operations.

Five HTTs will deploy from Fort Leavenworth to Afghanistan and Iraq beginning in the fall of 2006 to provide proof-of-concept for the HTS. If they are successful, an HTT will eventually be assigned to each deployed brigade or regimental combat team.

Why We Need HTS—History

Cultural awareness will not necessarily always enable us to predict what the enemy and noncombatants will do, but it will help us better understand what motivates them, what is important to the host nation in which we serve, and how we can either elicit the support of the population or at least diminish their support and aid to the enemy.[3]

—Major General Benjamin C. Freakley,
Commanding General, CJTF-76, Afghanistan, 2006

The many complex and unexpected issues resulting from lack of cultural knowledge have often been extraordinarily challenging for newly deployed commanders and their Soldiers, especially in insurgent environments like those of OIF and OEF. To address recent challenges, many military thinkers have independently sought answers by studying practices and procedures from previous historical experiences. Consequently, the writings of T.E. Lawrence and David Galula have become standard reading for those searching for answers to the current insurgencies.[4] Interest has also been rekindled in the U.S. Marine Corps's *Small Wars Manual*, a volume first published in 1940 that outlines doctrine the Corps developed for counterinsurgency in other eras.[5] Other thinkers have reexamined the basics of more recent counterinsurgency practices, in Vietnam and elsewhere, in the search for appropriate and currently applicable counterinsurgency measures.[6] Still others have gone back to the lessons of British imperial and French colonial experience.[7]

What has emerged overall from these varied examinations of the historical record of insurgency is a broad consensus that civil society in Iraq and Afghanistan—as in past insurgencies—constitutes the real center of gravity. The current insurgencies in the Middle East are manifestations of the unmet expectations and desires of large segments of the Iraqi and Afghani populations. Disappointed by their unrequited aspirations, the people tolerate and even support the presence of insurgents, thereby making insurgency possible. Such conclusions logically demand that past experience guide our understanding of how best to meet, in a manner that supports our own military objectives, the expectations and desires of the people at the heart of such struggles. And, to truly understand such expectations and desires, it is imperative to view

them from the perspective of the cultures in which the insurgencies are being waged.

Learning from Vietnam

History has shown that insurgency is a complex form of armed struggle that can only be dealt with effectively if the counterinsurgent makes an effort to understand the conflict from its origin, through its evolutionary stages of development, down to its current situation. Most insurgent wars have been inherently political in nature, and therefore share the characteristic of having been decided by one side or the other's ability to finally win the allegiance of the general civil population in the conflict area.

In contrast, however tempting it may be to advocate "draining the swamp" by force as a solution to insurgency (i.e., denying the insurgency support by uprooting or terrorizing the local population), such policies have historically only increased popular resentment, eroded popular trust, and stimulated the indigenous recruitment of additional insurgents.

While history offers many examples of insurgencies worthy of study, the HTS concept has been largely inspired by lessons drawn from the U.S. experience in Vietnam. During the Vietnam conflict, U.S. Armed Forces essentially fought two different wars: one a conventional war against regular North Vietnamese formations; the other an insurgency war against guerrillas who, for a long time, moved freely throughout the area of operations because they enjoyed the support of a significant number of the rural South Vietnamese people. The record reveals that U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in the early part of the conflict were severely hobbled by a lack of understanding of, or appreciation for, Vietnamese culture, and a paucity of cultural skills, especially language ability.

Subsequently, among the many weapons brought to bear against the insurgency in South Vietnam during the course of the war, perhaps the most effective was one that involved South Vietnamese forces backed by advisors from the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program, a project administered jointly by the South Vietnamese Government and the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). Implemented under the Johnson administration, the CORDS program specifically matched focused intelligence collection with direct action and integrated synchronized activities aimed at winning the "hearts and minds" of the South Vietnamese. CORDS was premised on a belief that the war would be ultimately won or lost not on the battlefield, but in the struggle for the loyalty of the people.[8]

With CORDS, intelligence collection and civil-military operations were consolidated under a single civilian head, in order to shift the focus of military operations from defeating the North Vietnamese Army and regional communist guerrillas by direct military force, to working with the South Vietnamese to gather human and cultural intelligence and to develop economic and social programs. These latter programs aimed to undermine indigenous support for the communist forces.

William Colby, one of the architects of this strategy, later blamed the final loss in Vietnam on failure to fully implement the CORDS strategy. Colby asserted that the "major error of the Americans in Vietnam was insisting upon fighting an American-style military war against an enemy who, through the early years of the war, was fighting his style of people's war at the level of the population."[9] Colby asserted that efforts to transform rural life through economic development would create the conditions necessary to foster peace and stability. Such development, he maintained, would counter any appeal the terrorists might have for the people by creating local opportunities for the people to exercise real freedoms within their own institutions and values.[10]

More recent work appears to validate Colby's assessment. Robert K. Brigham stresses this point in a study assessing the South Vietnamese Army and its linkages to its own society—the society from which the army had to draw its resources and its legitimacy.[11] Colby's views are further supported by the work of James H. Willbanks. In his recent treatment of Vietnamization, Willbanks addresses the tension between defeating the opposing regular force and pacifying the south in the final stages of that war (1968-1975). He underscores the linkage between pacification and Vietnamization, and argues that the former contributed to the overall stability of rural South Vietnam.[12]

Despite CORDS' shortcomings (the overall success of the program is still heatedly debated by historians), it is hard to argue with the statistics from that era. Where CORDS was effectively implemented, enemy activity declined sharply. In memoirs and

records opened in the aftermath of the conflict, North Vietnamese leaders repeatedly express their concern about the effectiveness of the CORDS program in impeding both their operational and subversion campaigns.[13]

A key feature leading to the success of CORDS was an effective information collection and reporting system that focused on factors essential for the promotion of security, economic development, governance, and the provision of needed government services down to the hamlet level. Cultural, economic, and ethnographic reports were paralleled by monthly reports on the training, equipment, morale, and readiness of Vietnamese Armed Forces from the separate platoon level to the highest echelons.[14] Though imperfect, the systematic collection of such information gave both the South Vietnamese Government and MACV sufficient situational awareness, at the granular level of detail needed, to cope effectively with many areas dominated by insurgents. The major problem with CORDS appears to have been that it was started too late and ended too soon.

Sgt. Gary Martens, Co C (Bandido Charlie), 1/16th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division

During the Vietnam War, the CORDS project was administered to win the "hearts and minds" of the South Vietnamese people. In the above photo, a Soldier with the 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, is playing with the children of An Dien, a small village inside the Iron Triangle, which was a Vietcong stronghold northwest of Saigon.

Regardless, the Vietnam-era CORDS experience provides many important lessons to guide the development of an effective cultural intelligence program, one that can support tactical- and operational-level commanders today.

Among the most significant deficiencies evident in the otherwise effective CORDS program was that it had limited reachback capability. This meant that CORDS operators had to rely mainly upon the program's own independently developed databases and sources for information. CORDS was not structured or resourced to take full advantage of the massive U.S. capabilities for cultural and social research and analysis that would have enabled even greater effectiveness in dealing with the culturally diverse environment of Vietnam. Instead, CORDS advisory teams were left largely to their own devices to invent collection systems and methods for storing and analyzing their own data. HTS will not suffer such shortfalls in capability.

Why We Need HTS Today

In the current climate, there is broad agreement among operators and researchers that many, if not most, of the challenges we face in Iraq and Afghanistan have resulted from our failure early on to understand the cultures in which coalition forces were working. In other words, failing to heed the lessons of Vietnam and CORDS, we did not take the steps necessary to deal appropriately with the insurgencies within the context of their unique cultural environments. Moreover, there appears to be general agreement that whatever notable successes we have had in specific localities closely correlate with proactive efforts by coalition units to understand and respect the culture. By conducting operations that took indigenous cultural norms into account, those units garnered support for coalition objectives.

Yet, current intelligence systems and organizations still remain primarily structured to support commanders in physical combat. They are engineered to collect traditional elements of information like order

of battle, enemy dispositions and estimated capabilities, and friendly and neutral capabilities for actual combat. Generally, such data is maintained in automated databases and arrayed on computer screens that depict enemy forces, friendly forces, communications nodes, key logistics facilities, and the like.

But, as the current conflicts have moved further away from combat involving regular formations and heavy maneuver warfare, and more toward insurgency operations with fragile stability operations requirements, it is now apparent that the technical information required for high-intensity conflict has diminished in importance relative to the requirement for the kind of ethnographic, economic, and cultural information needed to stabilize a polity and transfer power to an indigenous government.

Irrespective, today, commanders arriving in their areas of operation are routinely left to fend for themselves in inventing their own systems and methodologies for researching and analyzing such data. Developing a system and processes requires the expenditure of enormous amounts of precious time and involves a great deal of trial and error, together with a steep learning curve. The resulting database is generally accomplished through ad hoc rearrangement of the staff. Nor are these homegrown databases formally linked to other databases to allow the seamless sharing of information or the archiving of data for broader use within the Army. Moreover, the database and institutional memory that go with it are not effectively transferred to relieving units upon redeployment. As a result, new commanders entering the area of operations usually must start again from scratch, developing their own system for researching and analyzing cultural data.

Consequently, it is glaringly apparent that commanders need a culturally oriented counterpart to tactical intelligence systems to provide them with a similarly detailed, similarly comprehensive cultural picture of their areas of operations.

HTS aims to mitigate these problems by providing commanders with a comprehensive cultural information research system that will be the analogue to traditional military intelligence systems. It will fill the cultural knowledge void by gathering ethnographic, economic, and cultural data pertaining to the battlefield and by providing the means to array it in various configurations to support analysis and decisionmaking. Moreover, the forward deployed brigade-level elements upon which the system is based will have reachback capability for research. Additionally, the whole database and institutional memory will be transferred in total to successive commanders upon unit rotation, providing for needed continuity of situational awareness.

HTS PILLARS

- **Human terrain teams (HTTs)**
- **Reachback research cells**
- **Subject-matter expert networks**
- **A tool kit**
- **Techniques**
- **Human terrain information**
- **Specialized training**

A Closer Look at HTS

In its current conception, HTS is built upon seven components, or "pillars": human terrain teams (HTTs), reachback research cells, subject-matter expert networks, a tool kit, techniques, human terrain information, and specialized training.

Each HTT will be comprised of experienced cultural advisors familiar with the area in which the commander will be operating. The actual experts on the ground, these advisors will be in direct support of a brigade commander. All will have experience in organizing and conducting ethnographic research in a specific area of responsibility, and they will work in conjunction with other social-science researchers. HTTs will be embedded in brigade combat teams, providing commanders with an organic capability to gather, process, and interpret relevant cultural data. In addition to maintaining the brigade's cultural databases by gathering and updating data, HTTs will also conduct specific information research and analysis as tasked by the brigade commander.

Teams will consist of five members: a leader, a cultural analyst, a regional studies analyst, a human terrain research manager, and a human terrain analyst.

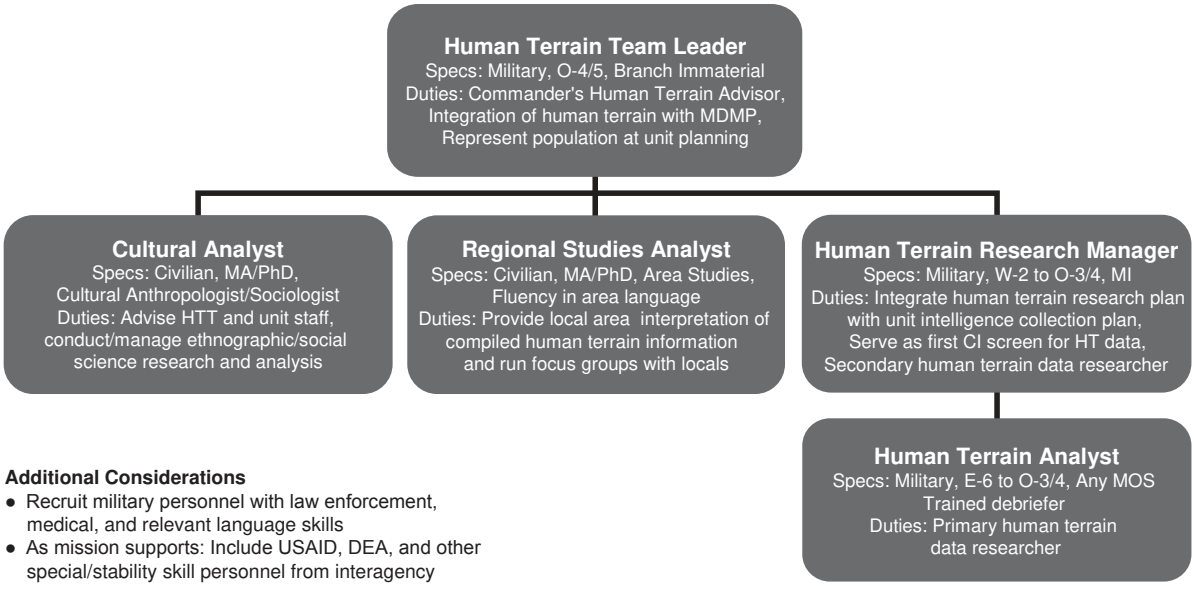

Figure 1. Human Terrain Team (HTT)

• The HTT leader will be the commander's principal human terrain advisor, responsible for supervising the team's efforts and helping integrate data into the staff decision process. He or she will be a major or lieutenant colonel and a staff college graduate, and will have spent time as a principal brigade staff officer.

• The cultural analyst will advise the HTT and brigade staff and conduct or manage ethnographic and social-science research and analysis in the brigade's area of operations. The analyst will be a qualified cultural anthropologist or sociologist competent with Geographical Imaging Software and fluent enough in the local language to perform field research. Priority selection will go to those who have published, studied, lived, and taught in the region.

• The regional studies analyst will have qualifications and skills similar to the cultural analyst.

• The human terrain research manager will have a military background in tactical intelligence. The manager will integrate the human terrain research plan with the unit intelligence collection effort, will debrief patrols, and will interact with other agencies and organizations.

• The human terrain analyst will also have a military intelligence background and be a trained debriefer. He or she will be the primary human terrain data researcher, will debrief patrols, and will interact with other agencies and organizations.

The HTT will be responsible to the brigade commander for three deliverables:

• A constantly updated, user-friendly ethnographic and sociocultural database of the area of operations that can provide the commander data maps showing specific ethnographic or cultural features. The HTT's tool kit is Mapping Human Terrain (MAP-HT) software, an automated database and presentation tool that allows teams to gather, store, manipulate, and provide cultural data from hundreds of categories. Data will cover such subjects as key regional personalities, social structures, links between clans and families, economic issues, public communications, agricultural production, and the like. The data compiled and archived will be transferred to follow-on units. Moreover, although MAP-HT will be operated by the HTTs, the system will regularly transfer data to rear elements for storage in a larger archive, to allow for more advanced analysis and wider use by the military and other government agencies.

• The ability to direct focused study on cultural or ethnographic issues of specific concern to the commander.

• A reachback link to a central research facility in the United States that draws on government and academic sources to answer any cultural or ethnographic questions the commander or his staff might have.

Finally, as previously noted, the team and database will not displace when a commander or unit

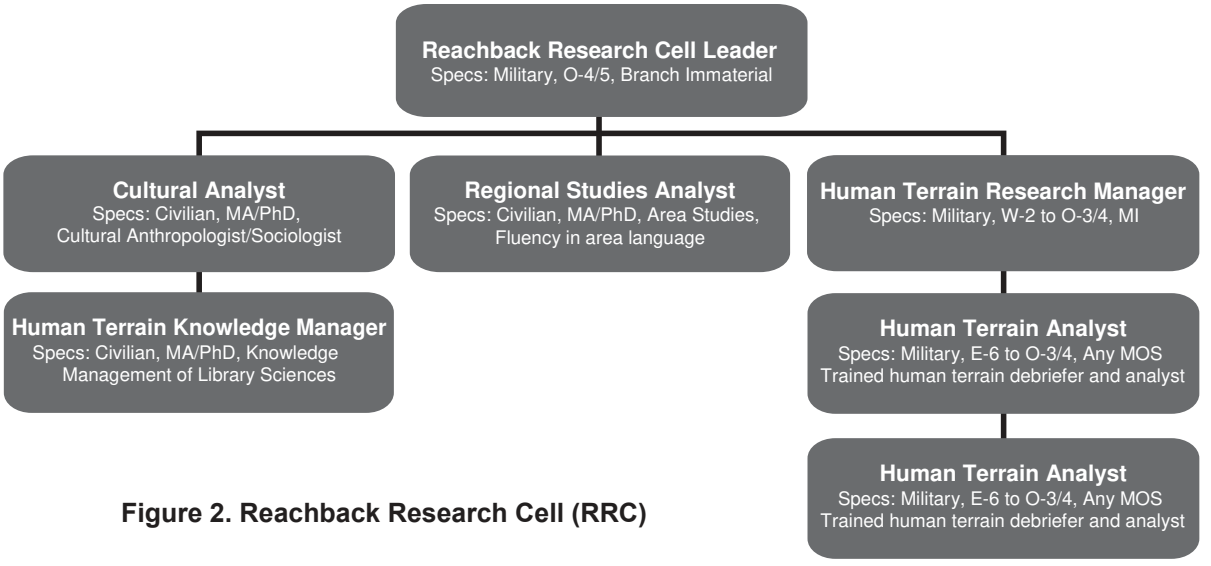

Figure 2. Reachback Research Cell (RRC)

departs upon change of responsibility. Instead, the HTT will transfer in its entirety to the incoming commander and unit.

Reachback Specifics

To provide the reachback that CORDS lacked, an organization called the HTS Reachback Research Center (RRC) will be established as part of the Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth. All HTTs will have direct connectivity with the RRC.

Initially, the RRC will have 14 researchers, all experts in the cultural and ethnographic characteristics of the geographic area they support. The RRC will systematically receive information from deployed HTTs through the MAP-HT system. Data will be collated, catalogued, and placed into a central database. The RRC will also be able to conduct additional analysis in support of forward HTTs.

The RRC's main purpose is to help HTTs answer forward-deployed commanders' specific requests for information. Apart from its own institutional expertise, the RRC will be able to access a network of researchers throughout the government and academia to conduct research and get answers. RRC researchers will also constitute the primary pool from which replacements for forward HTTs will be drawn. RRC personnel will periodically rotate into theater to serve tours as forward HTT members. They will be designated to reinforce in-theater HTTs during an emergency or in a surge period, as required by a brigade commander.

Overall System

In addition to the capabilities the HTS offers to brigade commanders and other decisionmakers in given areas of operation, the data it compiles will be available for the training, modeling, and simulation communities to better support deploying forces in their mission rehearsal exercise scenario development. Other U.S. Government agencies will also have access to the central database. And finally, to facilitate economic development and security, the compiled databases will eventually be turned over to the new governments of Iraq and Afghanistan to enable them to more fully exercise sovereignty over their territory and to assist with economic development.

Getting the Data

Most civilian and military education is based on unclassified or open-source information derived from the social sciences. Similarly, most cultural information about populations is unclassified. To ensure that any data obtained through the HTS does not become unnecessarily fettered or made inaccessible to the large numbers of Soldiers and civilians routinely involved in stability operations, the information and databases assembled by the HTS will be unclassified.

Many Grounds for Optimism

To date, although our brigades have performed with heroism and distinction in Iraq and Afghanistan,

lack of cultural knowledge and language capabilities appear to have been major common factors standing in the way of optimal success. With the introduction of the HTS and its human terrain teams, future deploying brigades will get a running start once they enter theater. They will be culturally empowered, able to key on the people and so prosecute counter-insurgency as Lawrence, Galula, and other practitioners have prescribed—not by fire and maneuver, but by winning hearts and minds. In turn, the Army, our Nation, and the people of Iraq and Afghanistan will benefit from the fielding of this powerful new instrument for conducting stability operations and reconstruction. ***MR***

NOTES

1. MG Peter W. Chiarelli and MAJ Patrick R. Michaelis, "Winning the Peace: The Requirement for Full-Spectrum Operations," *Military Review* (July-August 2005): 5.

2. The concept for the current Human Terrain System was suggested by Montgomery McFate Ph.D., J.D., and Andrea Jackson as described in their article, "An Organizational Solution for DoD's Cultural Knowledge Needs," *Military Review* (July-August 2005): 18-21. Most of the practical work to implement the concept under the title Human Terrain System was done by CPT Don Smith, U.S. Army Reserve, of the Foreign Military Studies Office, between July 2005 and August 2006. Under this concept, "human terrain" can be defined as the human population and society in the operational environment (area of operations) as defined and characterized by sociocultural, anthropologic, and ethnographic data and other non-geophysical information about that human population and society. Human terrain information is open-source derived, unclassified, referenced (geospatially, relationally, and temporally) information. It includes the situational roles, goals, relationships, and rules of behavior of an operationally relevant group or individual.

3. MG Benjamin C. Freakley, *Infantry* 94, 2 (March-April 2005): 2.

4. See T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991); and David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger Press, 1964).

5. *United States Marine Corps Small Wars Manual, 1940* (Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press), 1-2.

6. Lester Grau and Geoffrey Demarest, "Maginot Line or Fort Apache? Using Forts to Shape the Counterinsurgency Battlefield," *Military Review* (November–December 2005): 35-40.

7. See, for example, Andrew M. Roe, "To Create a Stable Afghanistan: Provisional Reconstruction Teams, Good Governance and a Splash of History," *Military Review* (November-December 2005): 20-26; LTC James D. Campbell, "French Algeria and British Northern Ireland: Legitimacy and the Rule of Law in Low-Intensity Conflict," *Military Review* (March-April 2005): 2-5; and COL (Retired) Henri Boré, "Cultural Awareness and Irregular Warfare: French Army Experience in Africa," *Military Review* (July-August 2006): 108-111.

8. See, for example, Dale Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990); Ralph W. Johnson, "Phoenix/Phung Hoang: A Study of Wartime Intelligence Management" (Ph.D. diss., The American University, 1985); Dale Andrade and James H. Willbanks, "CORDS/Phoenix: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam for the Future," *Military Review* (March-April 2006): 9-23; and MAJ Ross Coffey, "Revisiting CORDS: The Need for Unity of Effort to Secure Victory in Iraq," *Military Review* (March-April 2006): 35- 41.

9. William Colby with James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A First-Hand Account of America's Sixteen Year War in Vietnam* (Chicago & New York: Contemporary Books, 1989), 175-192.

10. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 227-248.

11. Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death of the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 1-26.

12. James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 56-58.

13. Andrade and Willbanks, 21-22.

14. Ibid., 14-17.