

'The rush to the intimate'

Counterinsurgency and the cultural turn

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In the years following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the *New Yorker* published a series of critical reports by its investigative journalists, notably Seymour Hersh and Jane Meyer, on the conduct of the 'war on terror' and the invasion and occupation of Iraq. But during 2006 the magazine began to outline an alternative scenario. Staff writer George Packer was a veteran of four tours in Iraq and the author of an acclaimed book on the war whose title, *The Assassins' Gate*, provides a brilliant metaphor for the occupation. The gate is the main entrance to the Green Zone in Baghdad, but its Arabic name is *Bab al-Qasr*, Palace Gate. 'Assassins' Gate', Packer explained, is an American invention, 'a misnomer for a mirage'. 'Iraqis complained about the way the US military renamed their highways and buildings and redrew their district lines', he continued. 'It reminded them that something alien and powerful had been imposed on them without their consent, and that this thing did not fit easily with the lives they'd always known.' Travelling back and forth between the Green Zone and the Red Zone that was the rest of Iraq, Packer became 'almost dizzy at the transition, two separate realities existing on opposite sides of concrete and wire'. In a tortured landscape that was 'neither at war nor at peace' firepower was 'less important than learning to read the signs', but an aggressive series of counterinsurgency sweeps revealed only that 'the Americans were moving half-blind in an alien landscape, missing their quarry and leaving behind frightened women and boys with memories.'¹

Packer's disillusionment with the war (which he originally supported) made him receptive to a new, culturally informed strategy of what he called, after Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, 'knowing the enemy'. In January 2006 he visited Tel Afar in northern Iraq, where he found troops implementing an improvised counterinsurgency strategy that emphasized the cultural dimensions of warfare. 'You can't come in and start

talking', their commanding officer told him, 'You have to really *listen* to people.' The next month Packer attended a workshop at Fort Leavenworth on the draft of a new *Army Field Manual on Counterinsurgency* where he heard much the same. After interviewing several of its authors, Packer argued that social science could redefine the 'war on terror' as a global counterinsurgency and direct attention away from the diffuse, shape-shifting spectre of pervasive Terror – which the Bush administration had found so rhetorically convenient – towards an engagement with the norms and forms of specific adversaries with their own 'structure, meaning, agency'. Such a strategy would require 'deep knowledge of diverse enemies and civilian populations', but Packer concluded that these 'revolutionary' ideas had 'yet to penetrate the fortress that is the Bush White House'.²

That same month, however, the final version of the *Field Manual* was released (*FM 3-24*), which showed that these ideas had breached at least the outer wall of the Pentagon. The civilian was placed at the centre of counterinsurgency (COIN); the first priority was no longer force protection, with troops sequestered in Forward Operating Bases, but protecting the civilian population. To that end, the *Manual* insisted on the importance of 'cultural knowledge', and in a single paragraph outlined a hermeneutics of counterinsurgency:

American ideas of what is 'normal' or 'rational' are not universal. To the contrary, members of other societies often have different notions of rationality, appropriate behavior, level of religious devotion, and norms concerning gender. Thus, what may appear abnormal or strange to an external observer may appear as self-evidently normal to a group member.

For this reason, it was necessary 'to avoid imposing' American ideas of the normal and the rational on other people. This was an extraordinary injunction, given the conduct of American foreign policy, the pursuit

of accumulation by dispossession, and the violence of military occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq. But, not surprisingly, the *Manual* drew a different lesson. In most COIN operations, it warned, ‘insurgents hold a distinctive advantage in their level of local knowledge. They speak the language, move easily within the society, and are more likely to understand the population’s interests.’ Cultural knowledge was therefore essential to combat insurgents and to redress the basic concerns of the population. That twin focus should not be overlooked. A key objective was to generate actionable intelligence about insurgency to inform lethal targeting, so that cultural knowledge was not only a substitute for killing but also a prerequisite for its refinement. The presentation of the new doctrine also, however, focused public attention on non-kinetic operations and non-lethal targeting, and re-presented counterinsurgency as a form of ‘armed social work’ (‘attempts to redress basic social and political problems while being shot at’) whose legal and ethical entailments were front and centre. The *Manual* reaffirmed the obligations imposed by the Geneva Conventions and rejected the cruel and inhumane treatment of prisoners. It also drew attention to the counterproductive potential of overwhelming force. ‘Sometimes the more force is used, the less effective it is.’ Humiliating, injuring or killing civilians and destroying their property is a gift to insurgents, the *Manual* cautioned, whereas ‘using force precisely and discriminately strengthens the rule of law that needs to be established.’³

The revised doctrine drew on the experience of highly educated commanders in the field – ‘a small band of warrior intellectuals’ – and described counterinsurgency as ‘the graduate level of war’. The *Manual* also made much of its incorporation of the work of anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists, and the involvement of the Carr Centre for Human Rights Policy at Harvard. These intellectual credentials were intended to signal a departure from previous protocols: as *The Economist* had it, ‘After smart weapons, smart soldiers.’⁴ Given American public culture, such an appeal to the humanities and social sciences was audacious, and some critics feared its seductive power. Tom Hayden warned, for example, that ‘the Pentagon occupation of the academic mind may last much longer than its occupation of Iraq, and may require an intellectual insurgency in response.’⁵ By December 2007 he had his wish. Many anthropologists were up in arms at the Pentagon’s attempt to enlist them in its Human Terrain Systems (HTS) project, which was part of a wider plan to incorporate knowledge of adversary culture into military operations. The Executive

Board of the American Anthropological Association expressed grave concern at the HTS project, and the Network of Concerned Anthropologists pledged ‘not to undertake research or other activities in support of counterinsurgency work in Iraq or in related theatres in the “war on terror”’.⁶

While these scholars were right to expose the historical roots of ‘mercenary anthropology’ and to sound the alarm at its ethical implications, arguments about the selective appropriation of anthropology and the proper citation of sources (in the *Manual*) and informed consent and ‘enabling the kill-chain’ (in relation to the HTS) have been drowned out by a chorus of commentaries on the effectiveness of the new doctrine: thus, ‘Army social scientists calm Afghanistan, make enemies at home.’⁷ Indeed, Kahl claims that counterinsurgency has become ‘part of the zeitgeist’, and media reports trumpet the success of the ‘surge’ in Baghdad, which they attribute in large measure to the new, culturally sensitive strategy pursued under the command of General David Petraeus.⁸ The importance of these developments thus extends far beyond their ethical implications for anthropology itself. They also have *political* implications for war that need to be subjected to the closest public scrutiny. It is in order to bring these into view that I want to plot the contours of this ‘cultural turn’ in more detail.⁹

Late modern war and the city as visual field

Towards the end of the twentieth century, American military theorists argued that most wars of the near future would be fought in the cities of the global South, and focused on urban warfare and the ‘urbanization of insurgency’.¹⁰ In this optic, the city was visualized as both target and terrain, hollowed out and emptied of human life. Air operations reduced enemy cities to strings of coordinates and constellations of pixels on visual displays, and ground operations reduced cities to three-dimensional object-spaces of buildings and physical networks.

The Revolution in Military Affairs promised total mastery of battle-space: a hi-tech combination of omniscient surveillance and ‘bombing at the speed of thought’. This martial God-trick commingles what Harris calls ‘the mundane and the monstrously violent’. He shows how the USA developed a three-day targeting cycle for the first Gulf War, a cascading series of translations from images through data to targets and back again, whose mediations worked to obscure the violence on the ground in Kuwait and Iraq from those organizing it at the US command-and-control centre in

Saudi Arabia.¹¹ This optical detachment is reinforced by the syntax of deliberative targeting, which implies the careful isolation of an object – the reduction of battle-space to an array of *points* – whereas in fact targets are given a logistical value by virtue of their calibrated position within the infrastructural *networks* that are the fibres of modern society. The complex geometries of these networks displace the punctiform coordinates of ‘precision’ weapons, ‘smart’ bombs and ‘surgical’ strikes so that their effects surge far beyond any immediate or localized destruction. Thus air strikes on Iraqi power stations in 2003 were designed to disrupt not only the supply of electricity but also the pumping of water and the treatment of sewage, which depended on the grid. By then the targeting cycle had accelerated to a matter of hours. The kill-chain is compressed still further by adaptive targeting, which depends on the identification of targets of opportunity by ground forces who call in close air support.¹² At the same time, the distance between target and command centre has increased, a process that reaches its temporary limit in the deployment of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in Iraq. Take-offs and landings of Predator drones, armed with heat-seeking cameras and Hellfire missiles, are controlled by American pilots at Balad Air Force Base north of Baghdad, but the missions are flown by pilots at Indian Springs Air Force Auxiliary Field in Nevada, some 7,000 miles away. ‘Inside that trailer is Iraq,’ one journalist was told, ‘inside the other, Afghanistan.’ It is hard to overstate the degree of optical detachment implied by such casual reduction.¹³ But it is symptomatic, for, as these examples imply, contemporary targeting depends on an electronic disjuncture between the eye and the target, ‘our space’ and ‘their space’. The techno-cultural form of this disjuncture makes the experience of war (for those in ‘our space’) less corporeal than calculative because it produces the space of the enemy as an abstract space on a display screen composed of co-ordinates and pixels and emptied of all bodies.¹⁴

The city as terrain

Ground operations initially transposed the visual logics of targeting to render the city as a three-dimensional object-space. The *Handbook for Joint Urban Operations*, prepared for the Joint Chiefs of Staff in September 2002, treated the city as a space of envelopes, hard structures and networks whose solid geometry confounded surveillance, reconnaissance and manoeuvres. The same emphasis reappeared in pre-deployment training. Since November 2003 thousands of soldiers have trained for convoy duty by

driving through a virtual Baghdad, and from February 2005 an enhanced three-dimensional database of the city has been used by the Combat Studies Institute to conduct virtual staff rides to study the ‘Thunder Runs’ made by armoured brigades during the invasion. The simulations render buildings, bridges and streets with extraordinary fidelity: yet the inhabitants are nowhere to be seen. ‘The important thing for us is the terrain’, explains the officer in charge.¹⁵ The latest US *Army Field Manual on Urban Operations (FM 3-06)*, released in October 2006, thus opens by emphasizing the sheer complexity of the ‘multidimensional urban battlefield’ and diagrams the city as ‘an extraordinary blend of horizontal, vertical, interior, exterior and subterranean forms’.¹⁶ These visualizations are closely connected to the city-as-target. In fact, they are often part of the same process, and assume the same highly sophisticated, technically mediated form as detailed images from satellites, aircraft and drones are relayed to display screens in command centres and combat zones. According to one observer, staring at the brightly lit screens of the Command Post of the Future (CPOF) outside Fallujah was ‘like seeing Iraq from another planet’.¹⁷ Mundane models are part of the same discourse of ‘object-ness’. In November 2004, before the second US assault on Fallujah, Marines constructed a large model of the city at their Forward Operating Base, in which roads were represented by gravel, structures under 40 foot by poker chips, and structures over 40 foot by Lego bricks. Army officers made their own model using bricks to represent buildings and spent shells to represent mosques.¹⁸

These reductions of the city to physical morphology have three powerful effects. First, they render the city as an uninhabited space, shot through with violence yet without a body in sight. This repeats the colonial gesture of *terra nullius* in which the city becomes a vacant space awaiting its possession; its emptiness works to convey a right to be there on those who represent it thus. Second, they are performative. As John Pickles shows, ‘mapping, even as it claims to be representing the world, produces it’.¹⁹ Before the final assault on Fallujah, one captain instructed his platoon commanders: ‘The first time you get shot at from a building, it’s rubble. No questions asked.’ But in an important sense the city was rubble before the attack began; the violence wrought by the US military in Fallujah cannot be separated from the violence of its visualizations of it.²⁰ Third, these representations have legitimating force; they circulate through public spheres to prepare audiences for war and desensitize

them to its outcomes. The reduction of the city to a visual field is naturalized through the media barrage of satellite images and bomb-sight views (city-as-target) and through representations that hollow out the city on the ground. In a striking graphic from the *Los Angeles Times* tanks rumble down a street, soldiers scramble across roofs and hug walls: but there is no other sign of life. Similarly, videogames based on the war register only the spectral figures of terrorists and insurgents. *KumaWar* combines faux news reports, satellite imagery and mission briefings with first-person shooter games, and in *Fallujah: Operation al-Fajr* the city is empty of civilians but ‘swarming with Sunni insurgents’. Yet Fallujah was neither empty nor the exclusive preserve of insurgents; the US military threw a cordon round the city and refused to allow men and teenage boys to leave before the attack.

I have made so much of Fallujah because many military commentators regard the US assault as ‘a model of how to take down a medium-sized city’. Air strikes had pulverized the city before the ground offensive, but the decisive innovation was the use of persistent intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance from air and space platforms. This ‘God’s eye view’ made it possible to pre-assign targets, and during the attack UAVs provided visual feeds to command centres and combat troops. These airborne sensors ‘opened up a full-motion video perspective on the street battle’ so that, as one ground controller put it, ‘We knew their alleyways better than they did.’²¹ But other military commentators viewed this as a problem rather than a solution. Pentagon orthodoxy may have regarded the enemy ‘as less important than his labyrinth’, as Mike Davis notes, but some field commanders insisted that knowing the skeletal geometry of a city was no substitute for understanding its human geography. Such abstracted renderings of the city have been sharply criticized from outside the military, but Ricks claims that with its new cultural awareness ‘the Army is turning the war over to its dissidents’: it is this critique from inside the machine that now needs interrogation.²²

Genealogies of the cultural turn

Soon after President Bush’s announcement of the end of major combat operations in May 2003, it became clear that the war in Iraq was going badly. There were many reasons for this, not the least of which was the complacent conviction that occupation would be mistaken for liberation and the consequent inability to comprehend the basis of insurgency. The cultural turn was a response to these failings.

The US military relied on thousands of young men and women who had been abruptly transferred from small-town America to a cultural landscape for which they literally had no terms. They were given two expedients. One was a fold-out *Iraq Visual Language Survival Guide*, which included a list of Arabic instructions (‘Hands up’, ‘Do not move’, ‘Lie on stomach’) and point-at-the-picture cartoons showing ambushes, booby traps, vehicle stops and strip searches. The other was an *Iraq Culture Smart Card* whose twenty panels provided a basic Arabic vocabulary, a bullet-point summary of Islam, and terse tabulations of Iraq’s cultural and ethnic groups, cultural customs and cultural history. This may have been more effective – it’s hard to imagine it being less – but it had limitations of its own that derived as much from how culture was conceived as from how it had to be abbreviated. The panel on ‘Cultural Groups’ in the 2006 version, for example, was concerned exclusively with ethno-sectarian divisions: ‘Arabs view Kurds as separatists [and] look down upon the Turkoman’; ‘Sunnis blame Shia for undermining the mythical unity of Islam’; ‘Shia blame Sunnis for marginalizing the Shia majority’; and ‘Kurds are openly hostile towards Iraqi Arabs [and] are distrustful of the Turkoman’. Culture was a forcefield of hostilities with no space for mutuality or transculturation.

Commanders were at a loss too, confronting an adversary ‘that was not exactly the enemy we war-gamed against’, as one general famously complained. The Pentagon was so invested in high technology and network-centric warfare against the conventional forces of nation-states that it was radically unprepared for the resurgence and reinvention of asymmetric warfare in so-called ‘new wars’ waged by transnational, non-state and non-hierarchical adversaries in the margins and breaches of former empires.²³ In short, the military was in a high state of readiness for precisely the wrong enemy. It had not revised its doctrine on counterinsurgency for twenty years and in an attempt to shore up the situation an interim *Field Manual on Counterinsurgency* was hastily released in October 2004; but it remained rigidly ‘tactical-technical’.²⁴ That same month retired Major-General Robert Scales repeated arguments he had made before the House Armed Services Committee in an influential essay on culture-centric warfare, in which he called for cultural awareness to be given a higher priority than the technical fix of ‘smart bombs, unmanned aircraft and expansive bandwidth’. Commanders in Iraq had found themselves ‘immersed in an alien culture’, he said, ‘an army of strangers in the midst of strangers’, and forced

to improvise.²⁵ Many officers turned to email to share their experiences, and the interim *Manual* was soon eclipsed by developments in the field. By December 2005 a COIN Academy was established in Baghdad, emphasizing the importance of the civilian population and the cultural, and twelve months later the capstone was put in place with the publication of the revised counterinsurgency doctrine.

This spare chronology does not provide a conceptual trace of the cultural turn, and I need to make a series of deeper cuts into its construction. In what follows, I concentrate on just four of its architects, but the cultural turn cannot be reduced to the forceful projection of individual wills. It is a heterogeneous assemblage of discourses and objects, practices and powers distributed across different but networked sites: a military *dispositif*, if you prefer. As such, it is a contradictory machine. For war, occupation and counterinsurgency are not coherent projects; they are fissured by competing demands and conflicting decisions, and they are worked out in different ways in different places. So it is with the cultural turn.

From cultural morphology to the cultural sciences

The groundwork had been partly prepared in a paper on ‘Military Operations and the Middle Eastern City’ by Lieutenant-Colonel Louis DiMarco.²⁶ The lead writer of *Field Manual 3-06 on Urban Operations*, by the fall of 2003 DiMarco was involved in planning the invasion of Iraq. This was widely expected to centre on urban warfare, but DiMarco realized the gulf between the generalities of *FM 3-06* and the situational exigencies of Iraq’s cities. His new analysis did not provide geospecific studies of Baghdad, Fallujah, Karbala or Najaf, however, but a geotypical survey (whose examples included, disconcertingly, Cairo and Istanbul) in which the object shifted between the Middle Eastern city, the Islamic city and the Arab city. These are all problematic constructs, but the nuances of contemporary cultural theory or cultural geography were beside the immediate point. DiMarco’s concern was kinetic operations and his language resolutely one of ‘attackers’ and ‘defenders’. The need to move beyond the abstract geometries of *FM 3-06* convinced him that an analysis of built form and topography would be insufficient. What he had in mind was a revolutionary emphasis on *cultural* morphology. ‘The idea of analyzing urban populations and culture was not recognized,’ he told me, ‘much less accepted.’ Yet his remained a morphological approach, modelled on Stefano Bianca’s *Urban Form in the Arab World*, and

its sense of the spatialities of culture captured in urban models, plans and diagrams was neither fluid nor trans-actional. Consistent with the essentialist diagnostics of Orientalism, little attention was paid to the modern Arab city, which was seen as axiomatically normal and so non-threatening. The focus was on the ‘traditional’ city, which was viewed as the epicentre of radical Islam. As such it was invested with cultural meanings that required translation but, following the morphological imperative, these were inscribed in physical places and structures: the sacred geometry of the mosque and its network of community services; the market and its webs of trade; the neighbourhood and the architectural codes through which privacy is maintained; and the home as a place which ‘no person [should] enter uninvited’. However, these affordances turned out to be preliminaries to their tactical reversal. Throughout the text ordinary meanings were retrieved, interpreted and then subjected to a *détournement* in which military meanings took absolute priority: mosques isolated from the community by shaping operations, neighbourhoods controlled through checkpoints.

These were textbook recommendations, however, and in practice such reversals threatened to capsize the American mission. By the summer of 2004, Major-General Peter Chiarelli, commanding the 1st Cavalry Division in Baghdad, was convinced that the doctrinal progression from combat to ‘stability operations’ was mistaken. Attempting to see military actions ‘through the eyes of the population’, he concluded that a purely kinetic approach to insurgency risked alienating local people not only through its spiralling circles of violence but also through its indifference to their predicament. ‘The cultural reality is that no matter what the outcome of a combat operation, for every insurgent put down, the potential exists to grow many more if cultural mitigation is not practised.’ The image of ‘growing’ an insurgency derives from an organic model of what he called ‘full-spectrum operations’. ‘We went after the insurgents,’ Chiarelli explained, ‘while at the same time – really simultaneously – we maximized non-lethal effects’ that targeted the provision of basic services, local government and economic regeneration. DiMarco had sutured poverty to political radicalism in similar terms. ‘Insurgents use the grievances of the urban poor to garner recruits, support and sanctuary,’ he warned, so ‘commanders must become engaged in these neighbourhoods because it is here that discontent turns into radical action. Poor neighbourhoods become the breeding ground for terrorists and insurgents.’²⁷

But Chiarelli’s Baghdad was not the ‘traditional’ city of classical Orientalism. Before deploying to Iraq,

he and his officers consulted city administrators in Austin, Texas, and while he said he ‘knew we weren’t going to create Austin in Baghdad’, he also knew they would be confronting a modern city whose infrastructure had been degraded by years of air strikes, sanctions and war. Chiarelli recognized the significance of cultural knowledge, and laid his model of modern urban infrastructure over ‘a fully functional model of the norms of the Arab people [and] the current status of Baghdad services and government’. It is not clear



what the first of these entailed, but the second was more straightforward. A major focus was Sadr City, which had been designed by Constantinos Doxiadis, funded in part by the Ford Foundation, as part of the 1958 master plan for Baghdad. It was no Orientalist labyrinth but a modernist, hyper-rationalist grid that had become a vast, sprawling slum. Chiarelli used a prototype of the Command Post of the Future to implement a spatial monitoring system – an ‘event-ful’ visualization of a city in motion rather than a static morphology – that revealed that

[Mahdi Army] cell congregations, red zones and anti-coalition, anti-government religious rhetoric originated from those areas of Baghdad characterized by low electrical distribution, sewage running raw through the streets, little or no potable water distribution, and no solid waste pickup. Concurrently, unemployment rates rocketed in these extremely impoverished areas and health care was almost nonexistent.

In short, ‘areas where local infrastructure was in a shambles became prime recruiting areas for insurgent forces’ and, in turn, danger zones for US troops. This is not as reductive as it sounds. The Mahdi Army

‘target[ed] disenfranchised neighbourhoods’, providing both services and shadow government, and Chiarelli’s response was to target the same districts and to focus on producing visible improvements in people’s daily lives.²⁸ But the logic was one-sided: poverty, ignorance and manipulation by malcontents provoked insurgency, and military occupation could not see itself as a legitimate cause for resistance and rebellion.

Chiarelli’s approach was to treat counterinsurgency as ‘armed social work’. The phrase is David Kilcullen’s, an ex-Australian Army officer who was seconded to the US State Department as Chief Strategist in the Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism; he was a key contributor to *FM 3-24* and, until July 2007, served as Senior Counterinsurgency Adviser to General Petraeus. ‘Your role is to provide protection, identify needs, facilitate civil affairs,’ Kilcullen wrote in a memorandum for company commanders, ‘and use improvements in social conditions as leverage to build networks and mobilize the population.’²⁹ Insurgent violence was part of ‘an integrated politico-military strategy’ that could only be met by an integrated

politico-military counterstrategy. Precisely because counterinsurgency was population-centric, it required cultural awareness and what Kilcullen called ‘conflict ethnography’; otherwise it would be impossible to understand the connections between the insurgency and the population at large. ‘Culture imbues otherwise random or apparently senseless acts with meaning and subjective rationality’, he argued, so that it was actively unhelpful to locate insurgents outside the space of Reason. He also argued that the spaces through which contemporary insurgencies are conducted are compound and plural, a reticulation of the local, the regional and the transnational. The fluid, multi-scalar geography prompted Kilcullen to conceptualize insurgencies as dissipative structures and self-synchronizing swarms, and he turned to the language of complex systems theory to characterize their emergent properties. But he also used a more familiar model to describe the transnational structure of al-Qaeda as ‘an intricate, ramified web of dependency’, bound together by networks of friendship and marriage, mutual obligation and financial transaction. Seen thus, he claimed, al-Qaeda is ‘a variant on a traditional Middle Eastern patronage network’ that

functions ‘more like a tribal group [than] a military organization’.³⁰

This characterization has had extraordinary influence, and what was originally an analogical model of ‘the global jihad’ has seeped into general models of insurgency and assumed a starkly concrete form. Although the urbanization of insurgency is one of the cardinal distinctions between classical and contemporary insurgency – ‘the cover is in the cities’, Kilcullen wrote, and so are the targets – his commentaries on counterinsurgency in Iraq have consistently privileged tribalism. When critics complained that *FM 3-24* paid insufficient attention to religion, for example, Kilcullen’s response was dismissive: ‘When all involved are Muslim, kinship trumps religion’; the ‘key identity drivers’ are tribal. During the summer of 2007 he reported widespread Sunni resistance to al-Qaeda in the province of Anbar, and explained its tribal origin and operation. He then propounded ‘the Baghdad variant’. Although he conceded that the capital ‘is not tribal as such’, Kilcullen argued that there are such close connections between city and countryside that ‘clan connections, kinship links and the alliances they foster still play a key underlying role.’³¹ I have no doubt that they do; but while some military authors have written about ‘tribal cities’ as a

category apart from the ‘hierarchical cities’ that ‘we Americans know’ – which is not, I think, Kilcullen’s intention – it is misleading to treat Baghdad in such one-dimensional terms. Indeed, in what is probably the most thoughtful discussion of ‘tribal engagement’ from the US military, Lieutenant-Colonel Michael Eisenstadt cautioned that ‘it would be a mistake to overemphasize the role of the tribes or to regard the tribe as the central organizing principle of Iraqi society today.’³²

Perhaps this simply indicates Kilcullen’s distance from anthropology, but a close connection between counterinsurgency and the cultural sciences raises its own red flags. In a combative series of essays Montgomery McFate, a cultural anthropologist and a former AAAS Defense Fellow at the Office of Naval Research, called on anthropology to set aside its ‘self-flagellation’ – its colonial guilt and its postmodernism – and reclaim its historical role ‘to consolidate imperial power at the margins of empire’. In her view, ‘cultural knowledge and warfare are inextricably bound’, and

counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq demanded nothing less than ‘an immediate transformation in the military conceptual paradigm’ infused by the discipline ‘invented to support warfighting in the tribal zone’: anthropology. It is not difficult to see why so many scholars were riled, but McFate was adamant that ‘cultural intelligence’ was not a scholastic exercise. It was important strategically, but it also made a crucial difference operationally and tactically, so that the thrust had to be on the production, dissemination and utilization of ‘adversary cultural knowledge’ on the front lines. In November 2004 McFate organized a conference on Adversary Cultural Knowledge



and National Security, sponsored by the Office of Naval Research and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). ‘The more unconventional the adversary’, she told the delegates, ‘the more we need to understand their society and underlying cultural dynamics.’³³ Over the next eighteen months, McFate’s ideas were transformed into the Human Terrain System, for which she is currently Senior Social Science Adviser. The HTS aims to provide field commanders with a ‘comprehensive cultural information research system’ – filling the ‘cultural knowledge void’ – through a visual display of ‘the economic, ethnic and tribal landscapes, just like the Command Post of the Future maps the physical terrain’.³⁴

All of these contributions rely on visualizations of one sort or another. But Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, one of the lead contributors to *FM 3-24*, was more interested in what the visual displays could not show: ‘The police captain playing both sides, the sheikh skimming money from a construction project’, Nagl asks, ‘What colour are they?’³⁵ The examples are

telling; the cultural turn is never far from a hermeneutics of suspicion. But Nagl's question also speaks to the presumptive intimacy of cultural intelligence. In one sense, the reliance on visual displays to capture adversary culture combines optical detachment with the intrusive intimacy of the biometric systems used by the US military to anatomize the Iraqi population. But the cultural turn also implies another sort of intimacy that extends beyond the compilation of databases to claim familiarity, understanding and even empathy. A primer for US forces deploying to the Middle East emphasizes that cultural awareness involves more than 'intelligence from three-letter agencies and satellite photographs'; Scales's vision of culture-centric warfare required an 'intimate knowledge' of adversary culture; and Kilcullen defined conflict ethnography as a 'close reading' of local cultures.³⁶ While this 'rush to the intimate', as Stoler calls it, is conditional, forcefully imposed, and unlikely to be interested in thick description, it is clear that 'the ethnographic has become strategic military terrain'.³⁷ Just like military knowledge of any other terrain, it has to be taught. 'The military spends millions to create urban combat sites designed to train soldiers how to kill an enemy in cities', Scales told Congress. 'But perhaps equally useful might [be] urban sites optimized to teach soldiers how to coexist in a simulated Middle Eastern city.'³⁸

Rescripting Iraq

US troops prepare for deployment by rotating through Combat Training Centres. The arc of these theatres of war runs from the United States through Germany to Jordan and Kuwait, but the main Mission Rehearsal Exercises are conducted at the Joint Readiness Training Centre at Fort Polk, Louisiana; the National Training Centre at Fort Irwin, California; and the US Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Training Centre at Twentynine Palms, California. Each includes prefabricated settlements to train troops in urban operations. In contrast to DiMarco's concern with cultural morphology, there is little attempt at similitude. The same physical structures serve for Afghanistan and Iraq, as though the two are interchangeable, and the buildings are rudimentary approximations. One journalist described 'Wadi al Sahara' at Twentynine Palms as 'an impressionist painting'. From the surrounding hills it could be mistaken for part of Basra or Fallujah, but 'a walk through its dusty streets shows it to be only a vast collection of shipping containers'.³⁹ This too has performative consequences. Shipping containers are an improvement on poker chips and Lego bricks, but reducing living spaces to metal boxes and studio flats

conveys a silent message about the sort of people who live in them.

The focus at all the training centres is on interactive realism, and the cultural turn has transformed the terms of engagement. In the early stages of the 'war on terror', the emphasis was on air strikes and ambushes, and on state-of-the-art special effects that drew on the visual and pyrotechnic skills of Hollywood and theme-park designers. Exercises still include kinetic operations, though these now focus on combating IEDs and suicide bombings, but the main objective is no longer scoring kills but 'gaining the trust of the locals'. More than 1,000 Civilian Role Players are now on call at Fort Polk alone, including 250 Arabic speakers, many of them recruited from the Iraqi diaspora, who play community leaders, police chiefs, clerics, shopkeepers, aid workers and journalists. New scenarios require troops to understand the meaning of cultural transactions and to conduct negotiations with local people. Careful tallies are kept of promises made and fulfilled by US commanders, and the immediate consequences of civilian casualties are dramatized in depth. Mock newscasts by teams representing CNN and Al Jazeera remind troops that their actions can have far-reaching consequences. 'It is no longer close in and destroy the enemy', one Marine officer explained: 'We have to build relationships with Iraqis in the street.'⁴⁰

These Mission Rehearsal Exercises have become increasingly expensive and they pose formidable logistical problems. Yet, for all their size and complexity, they cannot convey the scale of operations in a city like Baghdad; and, precisely because they are conceived on the grand scale, it is difficult to inculcate the face-to-face sensibility on which the cultural turn relies. For these reasons, the military has become increasingly invested in computer simulations and videogames.

Remodelling Iraq

Although videogames are also used to train for kinetic operations, there has been a major effort to devise 'first-person thinker' games that model non-kinetic operations. In parallel with the introduction of Civilian Role Players to Mission Rehearsal Exercises, the Pentagon's cyber-cities have been peopled too. The first attempts to model civilians treated them as aggregations. Computer-generated crowd federates animated the city as a series of physical trajectories and collective behaviours ('flocking', 'path following'), but this was a *danse macabre* that conveyed little sense of the city as a space of meaning, value and transaction. MetaVR has introduced highly realistic 3D crowd animations into its Virtual Reality Scene Generator,

but these are typically part of the scene and provide few opportunities for interaction. More significant are those simulations that attempt to incorporate the transactional intimacy of the cultural turn by using Civilian Role Players in Massively MultiPlayer Online Games or by using Artificial Intelligence to model cultural interactions.

Forterra Systems produced the first closed virtual world for the US military in 2004 to simulate checkpoint operations in 1 square kilometre of a geotypical Baghdad. Avatars represent American troops, insurgents, Iraqi police and Iraqi civilians, all played by role-players who log on from remote stations, including Arabic-speaking Civilian Role Players from Fort Irwin. Interactions are unscripted, and players communicate through speech, text, facial expressions and gestures. A principal investigator explained: 'They will learn, if a woman comes up to a checkpoint and she has a baby and a bag, here's how you handle it.' Forterra has also developed an enhanced suite of scenarios as part of its Asymmetric Warfare–Virtual Training Technology. These require troops to negotiate with a community leader to improve the delivery of food and medical supplies, and 'to establish rapport with shoppers in a Baghdad market, only to confront angry civilians as well as insurgents who chose to launch an attack with an IED and small arms.' Media coverage consistently emphasizes the non-kinetic priorities of the training: 'AW–VTT is more about social interactions than fire-fights', for example, or 'Forterra creates sandboxes where people learn to interact.'⁴¹

The University of Southern California's Institute for Creative Technologies has spearheaded the application of Artificial Intelligence to replicate military–civilian interactions. These simulations mimic the closeness and intimacy that is the fulcrum of the cultural turn in three ways. First, they are highly immersive: ICT claims to transport (even to 'teleport') participants 'experientially' to its virtual worlds. When ICT first released *Every Soldier a Sensor Simulation* (ES3), for example, it was a web-delivered patrol-training game in which the player navigates a three-dimensional neighbourhood modelled on Sadr City, and has to read the signs and react appropriately to people, including civilians, security personnel, NGOs and insurgents. The objective is to develop situational awareness and to collect actionable intelligence measured by an Information Operations score. Soon after its release, however, ES3 was integrated with a platform that uses a helmet-mounted display with a motion tracker system 'to provide a high performance, immersive environment that enables soldiers to move naturally

in a 360-degree environment with spatial 3D audio and the ability to interact with their environment in a manner that is much closer to reality than a desktop system.'⁴² The immersive possibilities have been taken still further with experiments in 'mixed' reality. ICT's *FlatWorld* integrates digital flats – large rear-projection screens that use digital graphics to produce the interior of a building, a view to the outside, or an exterior – with physical objects like tables, doors and windows, and immersive audio, lighting and smell. Players can walk or run through these simulated rooms, buildings and streets, without any helmet-mounted display, and move 'seamlessly' between physical and virtual worlds. It is also possible to project ICT's 3D Virtual Humans onto the flats and have them engage players in dialogue. These simulations mount a renewed assault on optical detachment; as Leopard argues, *FlatWorld* and its Virtual Humans (who even seem to breathe) actively interpellate players, entreating them to respond in particular, engaged ways to the situations in which they are immersed.'⁴³

Second, these virtual worlds are often local, even domestic. Military operations are staged in the places of everyday life, not in an abstracted battle-space but in homes, neighbourhoods and clinics, and they require close, personal interaction with individuals, 'face work' that involves learning to read gestures and expressions. *Tactical Iraqi*, for example, was developed at USC's Information Sciences Institute to provide troops with the language skills and cultural knowledge necessary to accomplish specific tasks. The player is a US Army sergeant who must find a community leader who can help locate a source of bricks so that his platoon can rebuild a girls' school damaged in a fire with *fedayeen*. The player interacts with adults and children and, if successful, navigates his way from public to private space.'⁴⁴ In an ICT simulation, the player is a US Army captain who must negotiate with two full-body avatars, a Spanish doctor who works for a medical relief organization and an Iraqi village elder, to persuade them to move a clinic to a safer location.'⁴⁵

Third, *Tactical Iraqi's* Social Puppets and ICT's Virtual Humans invoke the inter-personal by making trust central to cross-cultural interaction. In *Tactical Iraqi*, as Losh puts it, 'trust is both the precondition of play and the currency of the game'. If the sergeant succeeds in gaining the trust of the local people, measured by a 'trust-meter', they will cooperate and give him the answers he needs to advance in the game. A crucial part of doing so is observing the social formularies and protocols that establish the sergeant's knowledge of

and respect for Iraqi culture.⁴⁶ In ICT's clinic scenario, trust is a function of shared goals, believable claims and, again, ritual politeness. In a model dialogue, the clash between combat operations and the work of the NGO is made clear from the beginning. The doctor tells the captain: 'This conflict is madness, it is killing people!' When the captain suggests 'it will be a problem to stay here', the doctor replies: 'You are the problem, your bombs are killing these people.' As the dialogue develops, non-verbal behaviour changes to mirror the progress of negotiations. As in the Mission Rehearsal Exercises, promises made must be ones that can reasonably be kept: 'The doctor is unlikely to be swayed by an offer of aid if he does not believe the captain can and will fulfil his commitments.'⁴⁷

The cultural (re)turn

These developments represent significant departures from reductions of the city to target and terrain, and the cultural turn has been advertised as a 'counter-revolution' in military affairs. But there are three continuities with its predecessors. First, the cultural turn is consistent with the neoliberal armature of late modern war in opening up new opportunities for private contractors. Revising pre-deployment training has involved extensive outsourcing. Cubic Applications Inc., for example, has been the contractor for support

Palms, and has trained over 55,000 Marines at its own facility in San Diego.⁴⁸ Similarly, the Pentagon has preferred to leverage commercial videogames and to collaborate with engineering and software companies, videogames companies and the academy. The ICT was established in 1999 to develop advanced military simulations with a multi-year, \$45 million US Army contract, which was renewed in 2004 for another five years for \$100 million. In 2003 DARPA funded the development of *Tactical Iraqi* at the Information Sciences Institute, and in 2005 the project was spun off into a new private-sector company. Forterra also had its origins in DARPA sponsorship, in a panel to investigate Massively Multiplayer Online games in 2003, and it too was spun off from its parent in 2005. In 2007 Forterra recruited the Chief Technology Officer of the US Army Program Executive Office for Simulation, Training and Instrumentation to head its new National Security Division. These examples could be multiplied many times over, and the connections within the military-industry media-entertainment complex have become ever more intricate: but it is clear that the martialization of culture marches in lockstep with its commodification.⁴⁹

The cultural turn is also consistent with the Orientalism that has underwritten the 'war on terror' since its inception. In its classical form, Orientalism constructs

the Orient as a space of the exotic and the bizarre, the monstrous and the pathological – what Said called 'a living tableau of queerness' – and then summons it as a space to be disciplined through the forceful imposition of the order that it is presumed to lack: 'framed by the classroom, the criminal court, the prison, the illustrated manual'. American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq are paradigmatic cases of a martial Orientalism; in fact, Davis describes the Pentagon's vision of urban warfare as 'the highest stage of Orientalism'.⁵⁰ Although the cultural turn is supposed to soften these dispositions – part of its purpose is to displace the monstrous if not the

pathological – it remains an inherently disciplinary programme (and is, in my view, part of a more general bio-political project).⁵¹

The Orientalist cast of the cultural turn is strengthened by its constant citation of T.E. Lawrence. The title of Nagl's book on counterinsurgency *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, is taken from Lawrence's *Seven*



services for Mission Rehearsal Exercises at Fort Polk since October 2001, involving 1,500 full- and part-time employees for instrumentation, special effects and role players. Its contract, valued at \$375 million, expired in 2007 and was renewed for the next ten years for \$468 million. Another company, Strategic Operations, provides support services at Twentynine

Pillars of Wisdom, and I doubt that it is a coincidence that the Human Terrain System is based on ‘seven pillars’. Its lead authors describe Lawrence’s writings as ‘standard reading for those searching for answers to the current insurgencies’, and the pre-deployment primer dutifully reprints Lawrence’s ‘27 Articles’. Kilcullen’s seminal memorandum was entitled ‘28 Articles’, and his admiration for, even identification with, Lawrence could not be plainer. No army will ever have ‘more than a small number of individuals’ with a gift for ‘cultural leverage’, he declared, mavericks ‘in the mould of Lawrence’.⁵² Lawrence is a totemic figure, a powerful representation of a close encounter with an other who remains obdurately Other. But his talismanic invocation also repeats the classical Orientalist gesture of rendering ‘the Orient’ timeless: calling on Lawrence to make sense of modern Iraq is little different from expecting Mark Twain to be a reliable guide to twenty-first-century America. And yet the cultural turn places America outside history too, because there is little recognition of the part that its previous interventions in the Middle East play in provoking opposition and resistance. In *Tactical Iraqi*, Losh emphasizes that the avatars are ‘incapable of speech acts that are not scripted by the US military’ and cannot ask awkward questions about US foreign policy or military operations. Similarly, the model dialogues in ICT’s clinic scenario acknowledge American violence in the present (‘Your bombs are killing these people’) but not the long shadows cast over cultural memory by American violence in the past.⁵³ Those antecedents, which spiral through the constitution of the colonial present, are obliquely present in a second citational figure haunting the intellectual landscape of contemporary counterinsurgency. For Galula’s *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* was based on his experience as a French officer during the ‘pacification’ of Algeria.

Finally, the cultural turn continues the exorbitation of cultural difference that is at the heart of the ‘war on terror’. There is little room for an Arab modern in many of its versions – hence the ‘traditional city’ and ‘tribal society’ – because Muslims or Arabs opposed to US foreign policy and its military adventurism are supposed to be outside and opposed to the modern. The cultural turn acknowledges that there are cultural practices and values to be understood, but locates them in a completely separate space. Perhaps not surprisingly, the sense of alien estrangement is most

vividly conveyed in Virtual Reality. Here is the project director of *FlatWorld* explaining its versatility:

‘In the morning you could be training in Baghdad, and in the afternoon you could be in Korea,’ she says. Or on Mars. One moment, the windows of FlatWorld look over a simulacrum of the Iraqi desert; when [she] dials in stereoscopic images from Pathfinder, the flood plain of Ares Vallis extends to the red horizon. ... Suddenly a translucent 3-D rendering of a robot walks into the room, pauses in front of me, and walks back out. When a more sophisticated version of this 3-D projection is fortified with artificial intelligence and bathed in ... virtual lighting, the mechanical invader will become a *Fedayeen* soldier.⁵⁴

The emphasis on cultural difference – the attempt to hold the Other at a distance while claiming to cross the interpretative divide – produces a diagram in which violence has its origins in ‘their’ space, which the cultural turn endlessly partitions through its obsessive

Close air support/precision strikes

		2004	2005	2006	2007
Afghanistan	Total sorties	6,495	7,421	10,519	12,775
	Major munitions dropped	86	176	1,770	2,926
Iraq	Total sorties	14,292	16,924	15,676	17,893
	Major munitions dropped	285	404	229	1,119

preoccupation with ethno-sectarian division, while the impulse to understand is confined to ‘our’ space, which is constructed as open, unitary and generous: the source of a hermeneutic invitation that can never be reciprocated. ‘That a twenty-first century colonization can be reduced to a matter of cross-cultural communication’, Vivienne Jabri argues, ‘is itself testimony to the de-politicization of war, invasion and resistance to occupation.’⁵⁵ This effect depends on the production of a public and is, of course, profoundly political.

Therapeutic discourse and the production of a public

The cultural turn has been remarkably public. Countless articles have described the new Mission Rehearsal Exercises, videogames and simulations; clips are available on the websites of news media, companies like MetaVR and Forterra, and YouTube. When *FM 3-24* was posted on the web it was downloaded two million times in the first two months, and the paperback edition published by Chicago University Press became an Amazon bestseller. Some of its lead authors made a round of television appearances: Nagl on John Stewart, Kilcullen and then McFate on Charlie Rose. This

publicness is, in part, a response to the mediatization of late modern war, and armies of democratic states should explain themselves to the public to whom they are accountable. But this carefully staged space of constructed visibility is also always a space of constructed invisibility. And what has been made to disappear, strangely, is the conduct of the war.

The cultural turn has *not* replaced enframings of the city as target and terrain, but it has deflected attention from the continuation of kinetic operations. The Air Force has been highly critical of the relegation of air power in the new counterinsurgency doctrine. The commander of the USAF Doctrine Center complained that *FM 3-24* reflected ‘a very two-dimensional view’ of war and involved ‘too much hand wringing over the potential for collateral damage’.⁵⁶ While the opportunities for cultural nuance are limited at 60,000 feet and a range of 7,000 miles, the objection is misleading. For the cultural turn is *designed* to yield actionable intelligence – hence the Human Terrain System and *Every Soldier a Sensor Simulation* – and Petraeus himself acknowledges that late modern war is a hybrid that includes air strikes. In fact, the air war has intensified since the end of major combat operations, and although this has been under-reported in the mainstream media, air strikes increased significantly between 2006 and 2007 in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Even the spare summary shown in the accompanying table is a considerable understatement, because ‘major munitions dropped’ exclude 20/30 mm cannon and rockets. The 30 mm family of ammunition was developed for Apache helicopter air-to-ground missions, and the close air support A-10 Thunderbolt fighter was designed around the Avenger gun system, which fires an alternating mix of 30 mm high explosive and armour-piercing incendiary rounds with a high-density penetrator of depleted uranium. These are not rubber bullets.⁵⁷ Indeed, Kilcullen concedes that ‘there is always a lot of killing, one way or another’ in counterinsurgency, and on the most conservative estimate – body counts are a battlespace of their own – non-combatant deaths caused directly by US military action in Afghanistan and Iraq increased by 70 per cent between 2006 and 2007.⁵⁸ *FM 3-24* ‘doesn’t say that the best weapons *don’t* shoot’, Petraeus reminded a bemused reporter, ‘it says *sometimes* the best weapons don’t shoot’. And, as he went on to insist, ‘sometimes the best weapons *do* shoot.’⁵⁹ Evidently more often than one might think.

The cultural turn also deflects attention from the role of military occupation in provoking violence. The new doctrine consistently refers to the military acting

in support of the ‘Host Nation’ (HN), as though war, occupation and counterinsurgency were events in some deadly Olympic Games. The circumstances in which the United States invaded Afghanistan and Iraq hardly correspond to Derrida’s unconditional hospitality and yet, far from acknowledging the conditional sovereignty of these states, the doctrine advertises itself as intrinsically therapeutic. Counterinsurgency’s image as ‘armed social work’ is driven home – literally so – by simulated missions like rebuilding a girls’ school or moving a medical clinic. *FM 3-24* describes the three stages of counterinsurgency in medicalized terms that are congruent with the biopolitical project of which it is a part:

- ‘Stop the bleeding’: ‘similar to emergency first aid for the patient. The goal is to protect the population, break the insurgents’ initiative and set the conditions for further engagement.’
- ‘Inpatient care – recovery’: ‘Efforts aimed at assisting the patient through long-term recovery or restoration of health – which in this case means achieving stability ... through providing security, expanding effective governance, providing essential services and achieving incremental success in meeting public expectations.’
- ‘Outpatient care – movement to self-sufficiency’: ‘expansion of stability operations across contexts regions, ideally using HN forces.’⁶⁰

But the cultural turn is therapeutic in an altogether different sense, through the weight its public presentation has placed on doctrine and training. The US Army defines military doctrine as ‘a common language and a common understanding of how Army forces conduct operations’, and public discussion of *FM 3-24* has directed attention to the normative construction of military operations in ways that have foreclosed questions about their practice. This has been compounded by media coverage of the new Mission Rehearsal Exercises, videogames and simulations in which the distinction between the virtual and the real has been consistently blurred. Report after report begins with a vivid description of military operations that is interrupted by variations on the same cut-line: ‘Only this isn’t Iraq; it’s Fort Polk/Fort Irwin/Virtual Iraq.’ The implication is that the hyperrealism of the simulation mimics the conduct of the war: we are in another *FlatWorld*, moving seamlessly from the virtual to the real, and encouraged to mistake the one for the other. The joint focus on doctrine and training, the normative and the virtual, is an invitation to step through the back of the wardrobe into a martial Narnia where the

American military consistently follows the rules and intervenes for the greater good. Whatever the practical efficacy – or otherwise⁶¹ – of the new measures, there can be little doubt that the rhetoric that underwrites their public presentation is therapeutic for the *American public*. It sends the strong message that the military has learned from Abu Ghraib and the running battles over the treatment and torture of prisoners. It enables the public to participate in what Losh calls ‘the “rhetoric of walking” in these virtual Iraqs’ in order to witness putative solutions ‘to persistent and perhaps intransigent problems in the theatre of battle.’⁶² And, as the back cover of the Chicago edition of *FM 3-24* notes, it represents ‘an attempt by our military to redefine itself’.

The American military is not only redefined but also repositioned as an innocent and virtuous bystander. Sarah Sewall from the Carr Centre, who was instrumental in the review of the draft of *FM 3-24*, indicts the Iraqi government (among whose failings she lists sectarianism, fecklessness and corruption) and the Bush administration (about which one might say the same), while absolving the culturally aware and ethically driven US military. ‘While the administration gambles away civil liberties at home and abandons human rights abroad’, she declares, ‘the US military has recommitted itself to protecting the rights of foreign citizens of all nationalities and faiths.’⁶³ The long-term solution to insurgency must be political rather than military, as the new doctrine emphasizes, but the cultural turn places so much emphasis on cultural difference and division that the multidimensional violence in Iraq is reduced to an ethno-sectarian conflict from which the United States is causally absent. Many commentators have concluded that the American military’s new reserves of cultural tact and ethical sensitivity mean that the responsibility for continuing violence lies with the Iraqis alone, a logic measured by the distance from *Newsweek*’s cover of 15 October 2001 – ‘Why they hate us’ – to *Time*’s cover of 5 March 2007: ‘Why they hate each other’. The locus of the problem remains the same (‘them’), but *Time* removes ‘us’ (US?) from the frame altogether.

This is thoroughly fraudulent. The very presence of American troops and private military contractors is a provocation to violence, although the focus on ethno-sectarian killings distracts attention from deaths directly attributable to American military and paramilitary action, and the American political and military apparatus has been directly implicated in a process of sectarian involution. In a typically colonialist gesture, the Bush administration reactivated and institutionalized sectarian divisions in the political

constitution of its ‘new Iraq’, and American military commanders have cut deals with local militias to buy a precarious peace that entrenches those divisions. The diminution in ethno-sectarian violence that started in the closing months of 2007 is inseparable from the ethnic cleansing that preceded it and that is memorialized with visceral clarity in the blast-walled fiefdoms of Baghdad.⁶⁴ There are additional reasons for the diminution in ethno-sectarian violence, including a fragile ceasefire with the Mahdi Army, but, for all its newfound cultural awareness, the military is markedly reluctant to acknowledge the impact of the violent recomposition of Baghdad on its body counts.⁶⁵ Instead, the public version of events focuses on the new counterinsurgency policy, ‘a belated emergency triage’, according to reporter Jon Lee Anderson, which artfully reinforces the therapeutic effects of the cultural turn.⁶⁶

Late modern war and the colonial present

In one of his less delphic observations as Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld is supposed to have said that ‘death tends to encourage a depressing view of war’. So it does, which is why representations of war as waged by America and its allies have become aestheticized and sanitized. This is a general diagnostic of modernity, where death is no longer seen as part of life, as in other cultural and social formations, but is sequestered in screened and medicalized spaces. This reaches its apotheosis in contemporary war, where an enterprise expressly devoted to killing magically proceeds without death. The cultural turn is another modality of the re-enchantment of war.⁶⁷ It reintroduces corporeality to war – cyber-cities are re-peopled, Virtual Humans made to breathe – even as it snuffs out mortality. If the ‘virtual citizen-soldier’ is produced within the grid of the military–industry media–entertainment complex, as Stahl suggests, the enlistment of the ‘arts’ academy through the cultural turn provides this spectral figure with a dress uniform decked out in the colours of the humanities and humanitarianism. Just as the global North justifies its interventions in the global South by appealing to ‘military humanism’, so the cultural turn legitimates its conduct of these new wars.⁶⁸

This should surprise nobody. It is thirty years since Said’s critique of Orientalism drew attention to the close connections between culture and power and, as Eyal Weizman has reminded us, ‘cases of colonial powers seeking to justify themselves with the rhetoric of improvement, civility and reform are almost the constant of colonial history’.⁶⁹ Those claims

were self-serving, to be sure, and behind its genteel facade colonialism routinely resorted to exemplary violence as an assertion of sovereign power. So, too, the cultural turn not only recentres counterinsurgency on the population at large; it also refines the kill-chain. It does more than this, however, and is more than an alibi. Refusing the reduction of enemy space to empty space, rejecting the dehumanization of adversaries, rehabilitating the concept of the civilian: these are all crucial ways to limit the horrors of war. But it is a measure of how far we have fallen that they count as major advances.

Stahl's virtual citizen-soldier is a hybrid that blurs the distinction between 'the political role of the citizen and the apolitical role of the soldier' – the one asking questions, the other following orders – to foreclose the space of public deliberation. Stahl argues that its production is part of the depoliticization of the public sphere, or, more accurately, 'a reprogramming of the citizen subject' in accordance with the logics of late modern war. This is a compelling thesis but, as Stahl knows very well, 'reprogramming' is mercifully not axiomatic and can be interrupted, even subverted, by asking awkward questions.⁷⁰ The cultural turn is not confined to cyberspace, but the public projection of its hybrid humanism is directed at the same dismal vanishing point of politics. In a depressing little hurrah for the martialization of culture, Jager demands that scholars choose between 'doing nothing' (and 'leaving the fighting to the military') and censuring those who 'do something'. But this is a false choice that evades the critical responsibility to question what that 'something' is and what that 'something' does.⁷¹ Even on Jager's own diminished terms, a partisan appropriation of the cultural sciences that refuses the reflexivity of the return gaze, treats culture as inert and ignores the relations of power involved in all cultural forms and practices is unlikely to provide much insight into the conduct of war. Neither, more importantly, will it be of any help in the search for peace. President Bush may not know the difference between the two – 'When we talk about war', he once pronounced, 'we're really taking about peace'⁷² – but for this very reason cultural awareness cannot be confined to the academy or the military. It needs to spiral through the public sphere and inform public debate and public policy. For only then can those awkward questions can be asked of our masters of war. As Stoler suggests, 'While government sights are set on "the enemy", ours might be set on them and how this rush to the intimate structures new sites of imperial governance.'⁷³ I hope this essay might be read as a modest contribution to that protect.

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