

THE ARMY TEACHES AMERICAN CULTURE TO AMERICANS

Sorry for my absence over the last week. Mr. EW and I drove to South Carolina to visit his family. I had thought I'd get posting time. It didn't work out that way.

Profuse thanks to Jim White and bmaz for watching the shop while I was gone.

While I was in SC, I read this Secrecy News piece about the cultural literacy flash cards the Army had developed for soldiers serving in Afghanistan.

These cards can be used in many different ways, but they are designed as -fillers|| to be taken out of your ACU pocket and used between tasks or waiting for the next training to begin. Soldiers must understand how vital culture is in accom- plishing today's missions. Military personnel who have a superficial or even dis- torted picture of a host culture make enemies for the United States. Each Soldier must be a culturally literate ambassador, aware and observant of local cultural be- liefs, values, behaviors and norms.

I was interested in the cards because I've had several conversations with fans of CounterInsurgency doctrine. Repeatedly, I've argued the US is never going to be good at COIN, because Americans generally—and a good proportion of grunt recruits more specifically—are too parochial to be able to execute COIN, which requires a fairly acute sensitivity to culture. Hell, we don't even learn other languages—not even Spanish, which is virtually a second language in this country. So I was curious about how the Army tried to overcome this parochialism.

The cards struggle to explain what culture is, generally.

Humans are biologically equipped to create and use culture. Culture is all knowledge passed from one generation to another. Culture can be divided into symbolic culture and material culture. Symbolic culture is all of a group's ideas, symbols and languages. Material culture is tools, clothing, houses and other things that people make or use. It is all human inventions: from stone tools to spacecraft.

[Critical Thinking: What kinds of culture do we take for granted in everyday life?] [brackets and emphasis original]

Having tried to get honors college freshman to understand culture, I get that this is a tough concept for relatively sheltered young adults to understand. The cards, curiously, didn't ask readers to do what has worked for me in the past—a straight inventory of differences between one's own culture and that of others. Rather, it spent pages laying out Afghan culture (without, IMO, distinguishing sufficiently between Pashtun and other Afghan cultures). And then included one page (see page 31) describing what the card authors believe American culture to be. Here's how the cards describe "the characteristics of American Culture":

- Fast-paced.
- Punctuality.
- Women's rights.
- Egalitarian, belief in equal opportunity; not outcomes.
- Goal-oriented.
- Individualism.
- Pragmatism.
- Tolerance.
- Separation of church and

state.

- Value work and personal success.
- Love of technology.

Now, to be fair, the military generally is one of the most egalitarian institutions left in our increasingly unequal country. So I don't blame whatever contractor the Army inadvisedly picked to write these cards for claiming the US still is egalitarian.

But "women's rights"? "Separation of church and state"? "Tolerance"?

Maybe I found these assertions to be all the more laughable because I read them in SC—not known for either its commitment to women's rights or tolerance.

But if you want to point to one reason why we'll never succeed at COIN, you can look to the military's institutional misunderstanding of who we Americans are.