

A COMBAT ADVISOR'S GUIDE
TO TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT

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HISTORY, LAW AND WAR AS
OPERATIONAL ELEMENTS

PATRICK JAMES CHRISTIAN

with a foreword by

BRIG. GEN. (RET.) DAVID L. GRANGE



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*A Combat Advisor's Guide to Tribal Engagement:
History, Law and War as Operational Elements*

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*“Wars over ideology have given way to wars over religious,
ethnic and tribal identity.”*

US Government, National Security Council, 2010



Photo 1: Negotiating Cultural Boundaries:
Tribal Militia near Tandubayah, Darfur Region of Sudan, 2005

FOREWORD

The need for combat advisors conducting tribal engagement in un-governed or undergoverned areas will remain and grow for decades to come. Such tribal engagement requires a long-term approach to sort out the elements of conflict, thereby controlling escalation to avoid war. The combat advisor's task is to influence the action, structure and direction of cultural political entities in unpredictable environments. This duty is always hazardous, since advisors work in small teams embedded with indigenous forces and accompanied by little coalition support. Combat advisor duty is prevalent during irregular warfare activities: unconventional warfare, counter-insurgency operations and foreign internal defense.

Lieutenant Colonel Patrick Christian's *A Combat Advisor's Guide to Tribal Engagement* offers a "how to" tutorial for military and other government agency leaders tasked with advisor duties. This guide is based on an interdisciplinary approach to tribal engagement combining the psychological imperatives of human cultural identity, historical narrative, and generational memory with social constructs of law and the physical constraints of military coercion and diplomatic persuasion.

LTC Christian describes how to penetrate the crust of a culture, getting below the waterline and understanding the influence, norms, social ordering and psychological identity of local tribes inhabiting assigned operational areas. Since all tribes are cultural-political entities, their understanding and influence are crucial to mission success, which in turn affects inter- and intra-state conflict. Tribes do not recognize state boundaries or politics. They focus on historical

norms, self-sacrifice, the meaning of struggle, local power, respect, trust and family.

A Combat Advisor's Guide to Tribal Engagement provides a combat advisor the means to recognize the psychological identity of a tribal group, employ the skills outlined in this handbook, and balance the perspective of local needs with national and international needs—determining success in complex tribal engagement.

DAVID L. GRANGE
Brig. Gen. (Ret.)

INTRODUCTION

In 1861, Union Doctor William Keen was assigned to serve as an assistant surgeon for the 5th Massachusetts Infantry during the American Civil War. His first posting was to a makeshift field hospital converted from a church near the northern edge of the Bull Run battlefield. It was called Sudley Church, and the field hospital it contained was overflowing with the dead and dying.

Both inside and outside the hospital, medical activity was frenetic and groans filled the air. From their perch in a small upstairs gallery, those with minor injuries craned their necks to observe the physicians in full view of the assembled, with blood splattering those too near, including the next victim of the surgeon's scalpel. Keen, assisting at an amputation of a shoulder, quickly realized that the operating surgeon had little knowledge of the anatomy of the upper arm. To keep the soldier from bleeding to death, Keen had to tell the surgeon where to cut and sew. (Rutkow, 2005, 3-4)

The state of medical knowledge at the time of the Civil War was primitive. Doctors did not understand infection and did little to prevent it. It was a time before antiseptics and a time when there was no attempt to maintain sterility during surgery. No antibiotics were available, and minor wounds could easily become infected and turn fatal. While the typical soldier was at very high risk of being shot and killed in combat, he faced an even greater risk of dying from disease (Civil War Medicine, 2010). Compared to the advances found in current battlefield medical practices, Civil War medicine seems bar-

baric by today's standards. Dr. Jonathan Letterman, the Civil War era director of medicine for the Northern Army of the Potomac, referred to its practice as 'butchery' after the battle of Antietam (Goellnitz, 2010). But medicine did advance, and the field hospitals on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan bear little resemblance to those of past conflicts. The sophistication of medical equipment increased in direct proportion to our knowledge of the anatomy and inner workings of the human body, its organs and operational systems. Unfortunately, our ability to manage violent conflict in a more scientific and precise manner has not similarly kept pace. American and NATO field leaders continue to operate in a war whose anatomy remains opaque even as they wield some of the most fearsome weapons in our arsenal. Our ability to cut and destroy has increased beyond measure from 1861, but our knowledge of the anatomy of the type of conflict we are fighting has remained primitive. As the great ideologically-driven wars of the 19th and 20th centuries have given way to the wars over ethnic, religious and tribal identity, our methods for violent conflict resolution have remained barbaric in design and near genocidal in application.

There are few current knowledge resources for combat advisor personnel inside the Special Operations community and even fewer in the conventional military training system. There are practically no reference works for tribal engagement despite the increasing number of military and civilian personnel conducting this mission. Despite any flaws in this publication, it is a first step in deepening the knowledge base of how we will engage intra-state conflict over the next several decades. Today's wars are quite unlike those of the past, as we cannot calculate a relative power assessment against enemies who use self-sacrifice and martyrdom to destroy psychologically that which they cannot defeat physically. Many of our own warrior leaders, imbued as they are with an innate willingness to reduce all conflict to kinetic force, levels of gunpowder, speed of transportation and national technical intelligence assessments, still cannot understand how such a measurably inferior force can bring a mighty war machine to a standstill at a fraction of the total material cost. The way of war has changed in the 21st century, and the modern warrior

must change with it or face obsolescence and abandonment. This guide is a signpost in the direction of that change; in a sense, it is still being written by those on battlefields not yet recorded in the history books.

I

A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The combat advisor is often a practitioner of tribal engagement in conflict zones in ungoverned and under-governed territories. As such, he finds himself questioning his role every day; is he one more warlord with a heavily armed team representing foreign interests? Is he a field psychological therapist looking for a symbolic 'tribal couch' with which to treat a patient? Or is he an arbiter of social ordering on behalf of an international force dispensing finance and resources to negotiate the legitimacy of a struggling state's sovereignty? If he is successful, he may seem to be all three at the same time. (NTC Joint SOF Training Branch, 2008)

At the heart of all successful missions in counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare is an effective tribal engagement. Tribal engagement is defined by DoD as a military mission that is historically part of the Army Special Operations community's low-intensity conflict spectrum of operations. Since the onset of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, this mission has expanded into the day-to-day responsibilities of mainstream military and diplomatic forces. Tribal engagement is a military mission because tribes and other cultural-political entities possess (*de facto* or *de jure*) sovereignty of cultural-political identity, as well as many other elements of nation-statehood. These elements include control over culture, language, protective forces, resources (legal or illegal) and physical territory, as well as maintenance of independent relations with external organizations. The employment by the tribe of these elements of nation-statehood often runs counter to the interests of the internationally recognized state as well as regional stability and security. Examples of such ongoing situations include the Somali tribes in Somalia and Ethiopia; Chechen and Ingushetia tribes of the Northern Caucasus; Arab, Fur, Zaghawa and Masalite tribes of Sudan and Chad; Kurdish tribes of Iraq, Iran and Turkey; and Pashto tribes of Pakistan and Afghanistan. These nations-within-states often play a key role in either stabi-

lizing or destabilizing the political state's legitimacy, both internally among the other sub-cultural groups and externally amongst the community of states in the region. The stimuli for conflict for these cross-border tribes emanate from a host of sources, including inter- and intra-state conflict and divisions within the tribe on one or both sides of the international border. As such, tribal engagement of one tribe may result concurrently in the engagement of one or more political states.

In fact, it would not be a stretch to imagine tribal engagements conducted within the same tribe, on different sides of an international border of two political states at odds with each other. Such an engagement could result in the same organization conducting simultaneous yet separate missions as they execute policy in support of one half of the tribe against the other half across that international border. The tribal engagement mission is at the heart of nearly all of today's conflict and is fraught with stark ramifications of regional and international politics. In tribal engagement, the tactical is strategic, and missteps with one tribe in one political state can reverberate throughout international border areas housing the disparate parts of the larger tribal network. For this reason alone, tribal engagement must be better studied by the US military and by other international forces conducting COIN, UW, IW and Peacekeeping/Stability Operations.

The emerging importance of this mission set has led US Naval Special Warfare (NSW), Marine Special Operations (MARSO) and conventional units engaged in counterinsurgency (COIN) and irregular warfare (IW) to begin advanced training in this complex combat mission. All too often, however, this training consists of 'drinking tea and practicing polite talk' with role players from the targeted region. The training that US military units have received over the past decade in tribal engagement has failed to prepare them to successfully engage cultural-political entities involved in organized violent conflict in ungoverned and under-governed states. In large part, this failure is a result of ignorance on the part of joint service trainers about what exactly tribal engagement is and what the targeted objectives are of this military mission set. What few successes the military

community has produced in this mission set have been sporadic at best, with only a few leaders possessing the necessary knowledge and skills needed to break through what psychological anthropologist Howard Stein (1994) calls the crust of culture and effect any real, positive influence on the battlefield. The growing importance of this mission requires that we do better. We must begin to map out the military mission set of tribal engagement and figure out what works, why it works and how to replicate this success.

Tribal engagement is conducted to influence the action, structure and direction of cultural-political entities, normally as part of a larger military or diplomatic campaign plan. The reason that military personnel as opposed to diplomatic personnel and units conduct this mission is due to the often hazardous nature of the duty and because force or threat of force is often part of the influencing strategies. Additionally, practitioners of tribal engagement must be trained in the use of micro-force and micro-diplomacy as they negotiate small group sovereignty in irregular warfare environments (Christian, 2006). There are significant differences between micro-diplomacy and the type of formal diplomacy conducted by Foreign Service officers. Normal diplomacy is conducted between professionals in different political organizations using highly structured rules and procedures. The type of diplomacy that combat advisors practice in tribal engagement more often involves tireless negotiations over difficult issues of identity, ethnicity and societal trauma with tribal leaders and those who influence them in hazardous and unpredictable environments.

The sovereignty that characterizes tribal life involves the psychological communal ownership of society's authority, its right to act and right to exist. This sovereignty is usually invested in, or expressed by, one or more tribal leaders based on age, skill, knowledge and/or right of inheritance. The ownership of social authority and its corresponding rights to act and exist are fiercely protected in environments of ungoverned and under-governed lands. The combat advisor conducting tribal negotiations works to negotiate the tribe's social ownership and their right to act and exist as a separate entity of a larger social ordering. This work is done despite the fact that the

tribes or cultural entities being negotiated with often do not recognize a larger social ordering outside their own. Additionally, this larger social ordering (such as a state) tends to be dysfunctional, providing little reason for the tribes to trust their judgment or abilities outside of what military power they can bring to bear against them. Further complicating this work is Article 2.7 of the United Nations Charter which restricts and regulates foreign intervention internal to the political state. Combat advisors must understand and be able to employ a multi-disciplinary approach in politically sensitive tribal engagements.

Military personnel are not anthropologists, sociologists or psychologists, but rather use the full range of these fields in the application of persuasion and coercion in order to reduce their dependence on kinetic (lethal) activity. As such, military personnel are not constrained by the same research ethics that bind the scientific community. The morality of this approach lies in the fact that tribes and cultures that military personnel are dispatched to work with in the conduct of tribal engagement are already either at war or harboring the elements of violent conflict. Either way, a successful tribal engagement is planned and conducted in order to eliminate or reduce violence or neutralize the tribe's participation in national or international conflicts. Tribes and cultural-political entities engaged in violent conflict act as if they are separate nations because, in a sense, they are. A nation "is a human group that may or may not control its own state [whereas] ...a state is a political organization that may or may not correspond to all of one, and only one, nation" (Handler, 1988, 6). As 'micro-nations,' tribes or cultural-political entities seek to own and control their own sovereignty, even at the expense of the political state. The combat advisor conducting tribal engagement uses cross-cultural leadership to help leaders and cultural influencers build a definition of tribal cultural identity, protect that identity, and identify reasonable levels of identity propagation without the use of organized violence as a method of negotiation with the state or neighboring tribal entities.

This guide uses an interdisciplinary theory of human social science to explain the operational elements of engaging cultural-

political entities (tribes) involved in, or affected by, organized violence. This explanation includes discussion of the context in which organized violence occurs and fundamental methodologies for reducing its intensity while resolving the underlying causes that create and sustain it. This effort is especially important given the nature and direction of the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan (AF/PAK), the Middle East and the northern tier states of Africa. In *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism*, Dr Vamik Volkan (1998) cites conflicts in Afghanistan, Algeria, Angola, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Burundi, Cambodia, Colombia, Georgia, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Liberia, Myanmar (Burma), Peru, Philippines, Rwanda, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkey, the United Kingdom and Zaire as having claimed hundreds of thousands of lives due to ethnic contests of identity definition. This guide uses the concepts of tribe and cultural-political entity interchangeably; however, while all tribes are cultural-political entities, the reverse is not always true. Cultural-political entities may be self-selected cultural organisms based on religious, linguistic, geographic or identity grouping features other than blood and marriage family structures. All cultural-political entities (tribes especially) have a psychological identity that binds the members with invisible strands of fealty, belonging and (to various degrees) obedience.

An interdisciplinary approach to tribal engagement combines the psychological imperatives of human cultural identity, historical narrative and generational memory with social constructs of law and physical constructs of military coercion and diplomatic persuasion to positively affect the tribe, its leadership and general membership. In this instance, positive effect on the tribe refers to coaching and advising the tribe into alignment with existing national and/or international conflict resolution initiatives as well as counterinsurgency and stability operations. Whereas current approaches rely on clumsy attempts at manipulation followed by exasperated uses of kinetic force, the approach outlined in this guide relies on longer-term and cost-effective strategies that seek to influence the internal direction of the tribe. The change that this influence seeks to make is to either align the tribe with the central political state or neutralize it as an

extremist cultural-political entity. For those lacking experience in tribal engagement and combat advising, concepts such as psychological identity, historical narrative and generational memory may seem strange, especially considering most conventional military units use power (which is resisted) and money (which corrupts) as coercive and persuasive methods of altering individual and group behavior of tribes in military operations. Anyone who has had *successful* experience in tribal engagement and combat advising will attest to the fact that these immature methods ultimately fail to achieve long-term military and diplomatic goals.

Tribal engagement rejects the use of large battle formation structures such as those used in Iraq and Afghanistan. Tribal engagement favors the use of small, highly-trained teams of combat advisors working under long-term strategies with low levels of funding and modest resources, similar to the support strategy for Colombia. The development and implementation of tribal engagement is dependent on extensive campaign planning prior to deployment and engagement. Once tribal engagement begins, each action, decision and statement on the part of the intervening non-host force creates a social construct that is difficult to change or repair if damaged. There is a clear difference in how combat advisors operate in tribal engagement versus how conventional forces operate in the conduct of high-intensity, major combat operations. Conventional military personnel are trained, equipped and organized to operate along scientifically defined systems of knowledge and understanding so they can 'close with and destroy' a similarly armed adversary. This conventional adversary is engaged principally with the use of kinetic force or threat of kinetic force leading to physical annihilation, a threat that is universal in its application to cultural-political entities that present normal psycho-cultural historiographies. To rephrase, conventional adversaries analyze relative combat power to determine their potential for success or failure, and act or react in a predictable manner. As we have seen in Asia, South America, the Middle East, Africa and AF/PAK, unconventional adversaries neither act nor react in the same predictable manner even when facing annihilation or threat of annihilation. There exist many cases where threat of annihilation is

not a politically available option given that unconventional or irregular cultural-political entities exhibit a willingness to pay physical costs (such as martyrdom) greater than what the intervening forces are willing to inflict. Against such enemies willing to suffer martyrdom in an attempt to force the state and its international allies to commit genocide, new methodologies and strategies must be developed and implemented.

Tribes - like most civil societies - operate along psychological lines where the definition of ingroup versus outgroup binds and nurtures the collective id and ego. The theory of ingroup/outgroup behavior simply posits that for a group of humans to possess a collective psychological identity, they must be defined both by what they are as well as by what they are not; without the 'other' there can be no inner group to hold that identity (Stein, 1982). This behavior represents a normal part of all human group psychology, providing insight into tribal social pathology. In medicine, pathology studies the causes, nature and effects of diseases on an organism. Similarly, in this guide, tribal social pathology is defined as the social conditions, causes, structures or elements of the historical narrative that bring the tribe into violent conflict or create the conditions for its possible extinction. The tribe's establishment of an 'ingroup' identity sparks the creation of simplistic norms of threat versus safety and tyranny versus martyrdom, as a means of defining the inner/safe and outer/threat. These shorthand group identity markers exist in every society, ours included, if you know where to look for them. The gulf between the two (inner and outer) creates the adversarial definition necessary to sustain the group's identity and cultural definition. Likewise, the two poles (threat/tyranny and safety/martyrdom) share at least one other commonality of interest in tribal engagement: the power to compel (Kierkegaard, 1959). This locus of power found in psycho-cultural identity is the primary factor in the development and sustainment of insurgency and rebellion.

The etiology of this adversarial approach is documented by researchers in the emerging multidisciplinary field of psychoanalytical historical cultural anthropology such as Howard Stein, in *The Dream of Culture* (1994), Charles Lindholm in *Culture and Identity* (2008)

and William McKinley Runyan in *Psychology and Historical Interpretation* (1988) to name just a few. In 2004-2005, I led a combat advisory mission in support of the African Union mission in Darfur where we negotiated with African and Arab tribes engaged in genocidal warfare. We engaged the Arab, Zaghawa, Fur and Masalite tribes to resolve historical enmities, shore up cultural identity and negotiate disputes over resources and social ordering between animal herders and agrarian farmers. During every negotiating session, tribal historical narratives operated to further internalize the self-sacrifice (martyrdom) of the tribe's members as part of its own cultural definition and as a political weapon. In this war over one land and two opposing cultural visions, a contest of political wills inundated the international observers as they intentionally or unintentionally served as scorekeepers of suffering and aggression. Each side fought for the high ground to be used both in the press and at the negotiating table. Every attempt by the actual state authorities to rely on sheer military force to pressure one side or the other into a resolution was met with increasing amounts of counter-violence and a demonstrated willingness to suffer vast deprivation and loss.

Cultural theorists Hardt and Negri (2004) frame the political act of martyrdom as part of a struggle to overthrow unjust social orders and their corresponding forms of power. When the non-state or weaker opponent is willing to suffer through greater and more horrific losses, they do so in a calculated manner to increase international political pressure against their stronger adversaries and to take control of the production of their cultural identity in a compelling historical narrative.

In Darfur, as in other examples, leaders of the respective tribal cultural-political entities resist attempts at dispersing their members into a diaspora, which reduces or eliminates their ability to influence the international observers (scorekeepers). Two psycho-cultural mechanisms come into play here: first, that sacrifice during martyrdom can translate into a 'legitimacy of purpose' relative to the larger community of cultural-political entities, and second, that the stronger the resistance on the part of the cultural-political entity, the more defined the entity becomes, and the greater its leaders are able to

solicit new members and retain existing ones. Combat advisors attempting tribal engagement are often perplexed about the motives, actions and purpose of the members and leaders of tribal cultural-political entities and how they build political, social and cultural power. A good example of how some errant tribal leaders build social, political and cultural power is found in the activities of suicide bombers. US leaders are often confused about the psychological motivations of the bomber, the families that send them, and the cultural-political entity's leaders that recruit them. Their perplexity increases when this seeming madness results in increased authority for those cultural leaders. For a deeper explanation of the psychoanalytical process of individuals engaged in suicide martyrdom and their social support system, see *A Cultural-Psychological Theory of Contemporary Islamic Martyrdom* by Guss, Tuason and Teixeira (2007), as well as Speckhard and Akhmedova's (2005) *Talking to Terrorists*.

From a modern, First-World perspective, the practice of suicide attacks is inexplicable outside of insanity or drug-induced brainwashing. From the perspective of a tribal cultural-political entity just barely hanging on to its psychological identity, existential meaning and generational memory, suicide bombings make perfect sense as they unify the remaining group members, establish a standard of self-sacrifice, give meaning to the struggle for those who remain and actively publicize their existence and struggle to the larger community of surrounding cultural-political entities. For cultural leaders and their followers, such suicide activity is made rational by the fact that they have nothing to lose when facing annihilation. They dread and resist this annihilation at all costs because it encapsulates their looming inability to transmit their psychological cultural identity over time and space; it is a break in the transmission of generational memory.

Over time, the struggle between tribal cultural-political entities and those who would intervene (foreign peace-keepers and state-directed security/development forces) develops a cyclical rhythm that Stein (1982) calls an *adversary symbiosis*. Such a symbiosis holds that the cycle of fighting, sacrificing and regrouping becomes an inherent identity-building and socializing force for one or both of the adversaries