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Organizational Culture and Military Innovation in the US Marine Corps

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Strategic Analysis & Assessments

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to delineate the main characteristics of the organizational culture of the US Marine Corps and identify the ways these cultural attributes may influence organizational innovation. Before turning to this task, two issues need to be addressed.

First, organizational culture can be broadly defined as the assumptions, ideas, and beliefs of an organization. Organizational culture is normally conceived as norms. There are two types of cultural norms: those that express actors' identities and those that define standards of appropriate behaviour. Cultural norms shape action by enabling actors to construct identities that give meaning to their actions and the actions of others and by furnishing actors with ways of defining problems and responding to them appropriately. Military culture, then, establishes expectations about who the actors will be in a particular environment and how these particular actors will or should behave.

A military organization's history, particularly its battlefield history, serves as the foundation for the development and sustaining of its culture. Put another way, the historical narratives an organization and individual members use to describe what the organization has accomplished, and how, constitute its culture. Thus Marine Corps culture and self-identity are bound up in the stories that the Marine Corps tells itself and that individual Marines tell each other. The narratives that form identity, however, are not always based solely on historical fact, and may include apocryphal, legendary, and mythical elements. For this reason organizational culture is unlikely to be self consistent; it may encompass traits that are only partially compatible or are incompatible. Moreover, some traits may only exist in the organization's image of itself, with no or little foundation in actual behaviour.

A second issue is to establish what is meant by innovation or change. There is no consistency across studies of the subject in terms of what they seek to explain.[1] This paper utilizes the definition set forth by Farrell and (b)(6) in *Sources of Military Change*, which is "change in the goals, actual strategies, and/or structure of a military organization." In practice this means that the focus is on major military change, which can be treated as

[1] Different studies examine change in terms of, for example, doctrinal change, organizational goals, or new combat arms.

synonymous with military innovation. Minor military change, or adaptation, has fewer resource implications and does not involve the adoption of new military goals, strategies, or structures.[2] According to the definition used here, it is the *outcome* of military change that determines whether it is major or minor in character.

The Military Culture of the US Marine Corps

National military organizations have cultures that are distinct from the broader society they serve, and each military service, while it may share cultural characteristics or attributes with its sister services, will have its own distinct culture or, to use Karl Builder's term, "personality." The US Marine Corps certainly has a storied history, and hence a complex tradition, which is reflected in its own symbols, rituals, and practices. As Gen. Tony Zinni, USMC (ret) has noted, its history and traditions are "part of the essence of the Marine Corps."[3] The Corps' devotion to its history furnishes a means for sustaining and reinforcing its culture by defining what the Marine Corps is and what it means to be a Marine.

An important starting point for the analysis of the culture of the Marine Corps is *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps*, by Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, USMC (ret.). Krulak's book, while broadly historical in its development, is divided into six main sections, each of which examines critical aspects of what it means to be a Marine. . In order, these sections are titled The Thinkers, The Innovators, The Improvisers, The Penny Pinchers, The Brothers, and The Fighters.

Organizational Paranoia (The Thinkers)

Krulak's section titled 'The Thinkers' focuses on the various political struggles of the Marine Corps to survive as a separate military organization within the greater US military establishment since the service's founding in 1775. The survival of the USMC, he argues, was never assured. Writing in the early 1980s, he notes that through its history the Marine Corps has been faced with five serious attempts, and a number of minor attempts, to

2 Worth noting is constant adaptation, or minor change, may accumulate in time to become a major change.

3 The Marine Corps commitment to its history is reflected, for example, in its annual Birthday Day celebration each 10 November

disband it, emasculate it, or to fold it, in whole or in part, into one or another of the other US services. Well known within the Marine Corps is the story of General Randolph McC. Pate, then Commandant, asking Krulak in 1957, "Why does the U.S. need a Marine Corps?" Krulak's response was that he "would find it most difficult to prove, beyond question, that the United States does truly need a Marine Corps." Krulak further acknowledged that the Army and the Air Force could carry out the roles and missions of the USMC, including the amphibious landing operations for which the Marine Corps claimed a 'mystical competence,' equally well.

The Marine Corps thus understands that it arguably does not provide any particularly unique military function and competes with both the Army and Air Force for roles, missions, and resources. Moreover, the Marine Corps sees its status in the American military establishment as, in Krulak's words, "perennially the smallest kid on the block in a hostile neighborhood." As a consequence, he observes that, "[b]eneficial or not, the continuous struggle for a viable existence fixed clearly one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Corps – a sensitive paranoia, sometimes justified, sometimes not."

This 'organizational paranoia' manifests in several ways. First, the Corps is perennially wary of the implications for its organizational survival of external pressures for change. Second, it is vigilant to the ramifications of change in the strategic, military environment, lest a failure to adjust make it appear effectively irrelevant as a distinct organization. Third, it is constantly wary of the aspirations of the other services when it comes to its survival. Finally, the Marine Corps is perennially concerned that it not be seen as encroaching on the functions of the other US military services, or, worse, perceived as providing little more than a redundant military capability.[4]

An important corollary of this sense of paranoia is that the Marine Corps strives to ensure it has a role or character distinct from the other US military services. The success of the Marine Corps in the long and terrible Pacific island campaign during World War II

4 What distinguishes the organizational paranoia of the Marine Corps as a cultural trait, rather than simply a reasonable response to environmental conditions, is its pervasiveness and persistence, even when there is no one out to get the Corps, and the propensity it creates to perceive any and all challenges, real or imagined, significant or insignificant, as putative threats to the very survival of the Corps as a service and to react accordingly in a forceful manner.

consolidated the service's unique role as a sea borne, amphibious force, which was reinforced by its success in its early campaigns in Korea during 1950. Since World War II the Corps has also stressed its expeditionary character, variously represented as America's "first to fight," "911 force," "ready force" and so on. Although the Corps certainly has an expeditionary character, its amphibious nature and attendant roles and missions, which distinguish it from the US Army, are the true touchstones of its culture and identity. Amphibious warfare is effectively synonymous with the Marine Corps, in the perceptions of both Marines and the society they serve.[5]

The Marine Corps sense of paranoia and its self identification as an amphibious fighting force may influence innovation in complex ways. On the one hand, the Corps' sense of paranoia strongly suggests that it will be open to major innovations that enhance its unique status or sustain its battlefield effectiveness. Such receptivity to innovation is likely to be more pronounced in periods when resources are scarce or when the Corps feels its survival is at stake. On the other hand, the Corps is, and will remain, sensitive to innovations that may detract from or significantly alter its sea borne character or that make it appear to be little more than a second land army., For example, the development of the scalable, combined arms Marine Air Ground Task Force concept, which can be considered a major change in organizational structure, was consistent with the Marine Corps' expeditionary, amphibious character and its ability to handle a wide range of missions. In contrast, the Corps resisted adopting a substantial heavy armor capability when faced with the prospect of engaging more numerous heavy armored Soviet or Soviet-styled forces in the 1970s. Doing so would have significantly affected its ability to conduct amphibious operations and would have made it more like the Army.[6] Thus, while the Marine Corps 'sensitive paranoia' may make it more open to innovation, it also shapes which innovations are and are not acceptable. It may even prove to be an obstacle to innovations that are perceived as adversely impacting the Marine Corps' sea borne, expeditionary character.

5 It is little wonder that the Marine Corps claims to have a "mystical competence" in amphibious operations.

6 In debates in the 1970s, some Marines boisterously argued that the Corps needed to adopt heavy tanks and heavy tracked APCs. The Corps solution, among other initiatives, was to buy lighter, wheeled APCs and eventually to adopt maneuver warfare as its warfighting approach (though this latter initiative was strongly contested internally).

Warriors (The Fighters)

One of the personalities of the Marine Corps examined by Victor Krulak is that of being "fighters" or, to use current parlance, "warriors." In the introduction to the final section in his book he contends that, "[o]f the various enduring faces that have come to distinguish the Corps, the first to emerge was the conviction that fighting was its business, conflict its way of life." Elsewhere he notes that, "[t]he Marines are an assemblage of warriors, nothing more." Zinni, in his comments on the qualities of Marines, makes similar observations; "[e]very Marine is a fighter...All of us are warriors."

The ethos of being a warrior permeates the Marine Corps. At its very core this ethos involves, as Krulak argues, the perception of Marines as tenacious fighters who endure and succeed even in the most desperate conditions and situations. This particular self image is reflected, for example, in the idealization of many past Marines such as Lewis "Chesty" Puller who have faced savage combat and adversity with courage and aplomb, and hence are role models for Marines; the tendency of the Corps to foster the image of Marines as mud-caked, dogged fighters; and a preference for the offensive over the defensive even in the face of overwhelming odds. Yet the warrior ethos encompasses other important traits of the Marine Corps as well: its propagation of values, such as honor, courage, integrity, and honesty, and its commitment to upholding high standards of conduct; a keenness for the quest for excellence in the art and practice of warfare (however this may be conceived); its dedication to the education of Marines of all ranks; its sense of camaraderie with and self sacrifice for other Marines;[7] and its pride in the toughness of its recruit training and the 'selectivity' of its membership.

The specific elements of the Marine Corps' warrior ethos reinforce each other and foster and support the Corps' self image of Marines as warriors and of itself as an elite fighting force. Each Marine is a "warrior," and through individual faithfulness to each other, collective esprit de corps and selfless teamwork, these Marines form an elite fighting force. Put differently, the Marine's self image is that they constitute a warrior class, or warrior caste, separate from the society they loyally serve, with the whole – the Marine Corps – being greater than the sum of its parts – individual Marines or warriors.

7 Krulak identifies this attribute as a separate trait in the section of his book subtitle 'The Brothers'.

The distinction between the individual as a warrior and the Corps as an elite fighting force may be subtle but the bifurcated nature of the Marines' warrior ethos significantly shapes how this cultural attribute may influence innovation. The Marine Corps' perception of itself as an elite fighting force, for example, may encourage a belief that it has no need to innovate. Why innovate if you are already a highly effective, elite fighting force? The warrior ethos may also impede innovations, such as new organizational goals, roles, or missions, that require new education, training or even new units or organizational structures unrelated to warfighting. In other words, any innovation that undermines the self sense of what it means to be a warrior or detracts from the self image that the Marine Corps 'fights' is likely to be deemed incompatible with being a Marine. As an example, opponents of maneuver warfare in the 1980s and early 1990s objected that the concept implied that battle could be won without engaging and killing the enemy.[8] Their opposition was in part predicated on the belief that what Marines do as warriors is fight.

The elemental nature of the Marine Corps' warrior ethos also conditions its effect on innovation. Elemental facets of an organization's self image are difficult to alter; hence, they may pose obstacles to innovation. If an innovation changes or undermines the self conception that Marines are warriors, the warrior ethos, because it is an elemental cultural artifact, may very well slowly yet steadily reassert itself. As a result, the innovation may fail to win acceptance over time and languish unimplemented. Even more subtly, innovations that improve the battlefield effectiveness of the Marine Corps, and thus have no apparent adverse effects on its status as an elite fighting force, may nonetheless arouse organizational opposition because they impact negatively on the self conception of the individual Marine as a warrior. The 1996 Hunter Warrior experiment, for example, was criticized because the concept transformed Marines into little more than forward based sensors for long-range, indirect fires. Although it may be pushing the idea too far, the general wariness of the Marine Corps regarding the bruited benefits of the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs and the subsequent effort by SecDef Donald Rumsfeld to

8 During the debate in the 1980s, being termed 'a "maneuverist" implied 'a giddy, carefree vision of flitting about the battlefield – moving for the sake of movement alone', while in 1990 manoeuvre warfare was equated with '[t]rying to confuse [the enemy] to death.' The view of those arguing against, or at least unconvinced by, maneuver warfare is aptly summed up in the reported comment that 'Marines do not tiptoe around the battlefield'.

transform the US military through the application of information and other technology could be interpreted as additional examples of such resistance.

Innovators (The Innovators)

Krulak, in the part of his book subtitled "The Innovators," lists a range of significant innovations produced by the Marine Corps that he boldly claims "have changed the character of a war." He contends that "Marines have...thought up or caused to come into being, some of the most exciting – and useful – developments in modern operational concepts, weaponry and equipment." The primary innovations he notes are the development of the techniques and equipment of amphibious warfare employed with great impact in the Pacific Theater in World War II; the first use of aircraft for dive bombing in the interwar years and the subsequent perfection of close air support techniques and weaponry in World War II; and the development of the concept for the use of helicopters for ship to shore envelopment after World War II. Zinni cites the same historical innovations to support his contention that "[we] have a reputation for innovation." The historical track record of creative and bold innovation by the Marine Corps thus feeds a perception that it has an innovative character that is a significant trait of its personality, or self-identity.

Marines certainly believe that their service is innovative, and that the Marine Corps is ostensibly more willing to undertake major innovations than are the other US services, or indeed other military organizations. Yet whether the Marine Corps is really as innovative as it perceives itself to be must be questioned. First, the innovations to which Marines point in order to sustain their claim occurred during a period from the 1920s to the 1950s. Since the 1960s the only major change, or innovation, undertaken by the Marine Corps has been the adoption of maneuver warfare as its approach to waging war.[9] Thus the Marine Corps' perception of itself as an innovative service is largely based on efforts that occurred 50 or more years ago, not on a sustained track record of constant innovation.[10] Second, the claim

9 That Victor Krulak writing in the early 1980s did not mention the adoption of maneuver warfare as an important innovation is understandable, whereas that Zinni, writing in the first years of the 21st Century, did not mention this innovation is surprising.

10 Moreover, the claim that the Marine Corps was the first to utilize dive bombing is not supported by the historical record; this belief is organizational folklore.

of being innovative obscures the historical reality that past innovations were often met with considerable internal resistance. During the 1920s and 1930s, there was considerable debate and contention about whether the Marine Corps should focus on being an amphibious force or being a 'small wars' force, with those arguing for the latter ultimately losing the debate. Equally, the resistance to the adoption of maneuver warfare was so significant that not until 1993 was it claimed that the Corps had accepted this new way of warfare (some 13 years after the idea was introduced in 1979-80 and some three years after it was officially promulgated).

Major innovations such as the development of amphibious warfare and heliborne ship-to-shore movements were driven by concerns that without such changes the Marine Corps as a service might have been marginalized, putting its survival in jeopardy (organizational paranoia). An impetus behind the development of its signature amphibious capability was Plan Orange for the waging of a potential campaign against Japan. Without the development of a viable amphibious capability, the Marine Corps' role in such a conflict would likely have been at the margins (as would have happened if the Corps had opted to focus on small wars as some Marines advocated). Equally, the development of heliborne ship-to-shore movement was a response to serious questions about the impact of nuclear weapons on the practicality of amphibious attacks as practiced during the Pacific Campaign. The historical evidence indicates that the Marine Corps will innovate when its organizational survival may be at risk (or at least when it perceives that its survival may be at risk), but otherwise it is no more and no less innovative than any other US service or national military organizations.

In sum, as General Charles C. Krulak observed, somewhat ruefully, following his failure as Commandant to implement the changes he thought the Corps needed to adopt to prepare for 21st-century warfare, the Marine Corps "is not really as innovative as it likes to think it is." His explanation was that "[t]he Marine Corps is tremendously attached to tradition, and its hand... is always on touchstones of the Corps." To put it another way, other cultural attributes more powerfully influence how Marines perceive themselves and the Marine Corps, and hence what is deemed appropriate behaviour for Marines, than the Corps' self identification as an innovative organization.

Adaptive (The Improvisers and The Penny Pinchers)

One suspects that in no small part the cultural perception that the Marine Corps is an innovative service stems from a conflation of adaptation with innovation. For the Marine Corps is an adaptable service. Victor Krulak provides two central reasons for the adaptability of the Marines. The Corps has historically been forced to operate with limited resources, and thus it has developed a culture that fosters creative and effective solutions. A second reason, he argues, is that "[i]mprovisation has been a way of life for the Marines." The Marine Corps as an expeditionary organization must deploy quickly with what means it has to hand to conduct a wide range of possible missions. This has created a mindset of creative, adaptive thinking about how to achieve missions with the means and material they can bring or that are available in theater.

The adaptive quality of Marine culture is a function of historical and current necessity and will be a persistent trait of the Corps. The adaptive nature of Marines means that a mindset exists within the Corps that seemingly will support innovation when necessity, particularly operational necessity, demands. But adaptation is not the same as innovation, given the definition of military change employed here. Adaptation is about making minor changes, permanent or temporary, that improve the capability of the Corps to achieve its mission ends but do not result in any substantive change in its organizational goals, strategies, or structures. Hence while the adaptive character of Marines furnishes a positive base for possible innovation, it may not hold in periods when there are no immediate operational pressures for change.

Peering into the Future

The Marine Corps is currently exploring a range of both minor and major changes as it seeks to adjust to new operational realities. The final section of this paper examines the possible implications of the argument developed above regarding the potential impact of Marine Corps culture on innovation for some of these current efforts.

First, of immediate relevance here is the effort of the Marines to develop cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, and cultural intelligence. In the context of the argument

made above, this move to cultivate 'cultural capabilities' is a minor change, or adaptation. The present implementation of this change will not result in a substantive change in the goals, strategies, or structures of the organization. The pursuit of this 'cultural skill set' is consistent with the adaptive character of Marines and the Marine Corps, and does not have an evident adverse impact on those cultural traits that may serve as obstacles – indeed the adoption of 'cultural skill sets' arguably is compatible with the warrior ethos and amphibious/expeditionary character of the Corps. The caveat to this observation is whether this change will persist instead of being a temporary operational expedient. This question is pertinent since the Corps learned the importance of culture during the war in Vietnam, yet allowed its 'cultural capability' to fade in the decades after that conflict, only to rediscover the need for such a capability in the current operational environment. To rebuild its cultural capability, it is now offering university-level courses on culture for officers and is working to infuse the Marine Corps' educational programme with the significance of cultural awareness and knowledge as well as to incorporate relevant cultural factors in training exercises. As long as these efforts are sustained over the years, 'cultural skill sets' will increasingly be embedded into the Corps mindset and approach to missions.

Potentially more problematic may be the maintenance of cultural intelligence as a standard capability of the Corps. Culture is not fixed in its details or in the way it influences the behaviour and interactions of individuals and groups within a society. Tracking shifts in both the details of a society's culture and how those details influence behaviour and interaction is a core task of rigorous cultural intelligence that will be of real operational value to Marines and their commanders. This means that Marines working cultural intelligence must have the intellectual skills of a cultural anthropologist, a cultural sociologist, and indeed a cultural ethnographer, as well as being sufficiently fluent to recognize and understand the subtleties of the relevant language(s). These skills are not quickly developed, rather they are the products of lifelong study and practice. Thus, retaining a high degree of expertise in cultural intelligence will require the Marine Corps to furnish the appropriate inducements and promotional pathways for individual Marines to choose it as, in effect, their primary Military Occupational Specialty. At the same time, the Marine Corps

must ensure that specialization in cultural intelligence throughout a career will not result in a form of segregation from Marines who pursue a traditional career path.

Finally, the Marine Corps is currently contemplating focusing much more attention and resources on irregular warfare than on the more traditional forms of conflict it has emphasized in the past. Such a reorientation, if undertaken, will very likely have significant consequences for the goals, strategies, and structures of the organization, and hence can be considered a major change or innovation.

A case can be made that the Marine Corps will be receptive to adopting this change and be able to successfully implement it. At present, in line with the dictate of 'everyone step to the right', the US Army is attempting to increase its expeditionary capability. This step to the right by the Army impinges on the unique expeditionary (amphibious) nature of the Corps, to the point where the Marine Corps may not be able to argue compellingly that its expeditionary character and capability distinguish it from its sister service. The "sensitive paranoia" of the Marine Corps suggests that concern about its survival will make it receptive to innovations that create or re-establish unique qualities and capabilities that distinguish it from the other US military services. Developing a specialization in irregular warfare that the Army does not have would serve this end very well, for while the Army is seeking to become more expeditionary, the changes it has implemented, at least to date, have not substantially altered its organizational goals and strategies.[11]

Equally there are reasons to suggest that cultural impediments may make the implementation of such a change at least difficult and at worst unsuccessful. If one were, as some do, to simply equate irregular warfare with counterinsurgency (COIN), there would likely be few cultural impediments to the acceptance of this form of warfare.[12] It is at least broadly compatible with many of the cultural qualities of the Corps. Irregular warfare, however, encompasses much more than just COIN.[13] A holistic, practical approach to IW

11 This author is somewhat sceptical of claims that the Army definitely will retain a strong counterinsurgency capability long after this service has moved past the current operational demands it faces in Iraq and Afghanistan. But only time will really tell.

12 As COIN operations involve long campaigns, mostly on land, there undoubtedly will be concern that an emphasis on COIN could make the Corps too much like a second army.

13 There have been indications that the Marine Corps sees COIN as a key part of its future. But developing a persistent COIN capability may not be sufficient to sustain the unique character of the Corps given the claims by

would include, beyond COIN/combat operations, training and advice for host nation forces, information operations, essential service provision, stability and reconstruction operations (including economic development), civil-military operations and governance, integrated intelligence operations, and joint/interagency coalition operations. Some of these elements of IW are reasonably compatible with Marine Corps culture. Yet other elements, such as essential service provision, stability and reconstruction operations (including economic development), and civil-military operations and governance, are less, potentially much less, compatible with core aspects of the organization's culture. Marines certainly are currently engaging in such operations as they have adapted to succeed in their missions, but to develop these as permanent, core specializations of the Corps is a different proposition.

Should the Corps seek to decisively reorient itself to provide a specialized, and unique, IW capability that no other US service does, it may require the development of high levels of expertise in all the components of IW. Such a shift might very well result in internal resistance stemming from concern that such specialization undermines the warrior ethos of Marines, particularly if implementation requires the generation of new MOS's for Marines in these areas. Further, there may be resistance from Marines who perceive the adoption of such 'non-fighting' missions as altering substantially the traditional character of the Corps. Furnishing the number of Marines needed to effect such missions could be seen as reducing the combat capacity of the Corps, possibly very substantially if the current situation of overstretch persists. The creation of new units and specializations oriented to these 'non-military' operations also could reasonably be perceived by many Marines as altering substantively the traditional character of the Corps. A demonstrative analogy is that the Marine Corps has already tapped an artillery brigade to develop a secondary specialization in civil-military skills; if one reverses this to conceive of a unit whose primary specialization is CMO with artillery skills being only a secondary specialization, the potential implications, real or perceived, for the character and nature of the Corps will likely prove more problematic for Marines to accept.

Army officials that, unlike post-Vietnam, they will retain this hard won capability. Whether in fact it will do so may not be especially relevant, for much more relevant will be the perception of the American people, Congress, and the presiding Presidential Administration (particularly the OSD) about whether there is a significant overlap in the capabilities the Marine Corps and Army each provide.

The Marine Corps can expect to encounter cultural impediments if it moves to reorient its mission focus to irregular warfare at the expense of downgrading or even marginalizing those it has traditionally stressed. It would be faced with the very real risk that the success of implementation efforts may, at least, be very uneven across the different necessary components of IW, with a consequent degradation of the desired capability, or, at worst, prove to be so uneven or just generally problematic due to the persistence of cultural obstacles that the implementation of a IW capability stalls or eventually fails. Hence, the Marine leadership, if it does decide to develop a core specialization in IW, will need to gauge very carefully and self critically the impact on the many facets of the character, or self identity, of Marines and the Corps. It will also need to develop initiatives to ease the impact, or perhaps even think through how to shift Marines' understanding of the particular cultural qualities that will be most resistant to change so that the organizational culture will be more compatible with irregular warfare.[14]

14 For an analysis of a potential approach to reshaping specific cultural attributes, based on two cases drawn from the US Marine Corps, see (b)(6), 'Warriors and Innovators: Military Change and Organizational Culture in the US Marine Corps', *Defence Studies*, Vol. 6, no. 2 (2006) pp. 1-33.