MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE: REBUILDING CULTURAL CAPABILITIES - AGANT

By Kerry Fosher, Lauren Mackenzie, Allison Abbe and Ron Granieri
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Ron Granieri: Welcome to A Better Peace, the WAR ROOM podcast. I'm Ron Granieri, professor of history at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and podcast editor of The War Room. It is a pleasure to have you with us. Here at A Better Peace, in addition to discussions of current events and security policy, we aim to introduce our audience to some of the most interesting new works of military history, social science, the interaction between the two. Today, we are pleased to welcome three scholars to discuss their new book, _The Rise and Decline Of U.S. Military Culture Programs 2004 To 2020_ from Marine Corps University Press. In nine essays, a roster of scholars discusses the role of culture programs in American military policy since 2004, when war in Iraq spurred renewed interest in teaching war fighters about the places where they would be fighting their wars, and the collection discusses the persistent challenges such programs face.

One particularly stubborn challenge is the question of how much depth such programs can or should present when the military itself is not clear how much culture it needs or how such programs should survive what the editors call, quote, "The tendency of the Department of Defense to gradually shift uncomfortable ideas back into business as usual." Our guests today include the editors of the collection, Dr. Kerry Fosher and Dr. Lauren Mackenzie, as well as one of the contributors, Dr. Allison Abbe.

Kerry Fosher is a cultural anthropologist and director of research at Marine Corps University. She worked on military and intelligence community culture programs from 2006 through 2020, including 10 years as the director of research for the Marine Corps' service-wide program that provided cultural, regional and language training and education. Lauren Mackenzie is Marine Corps University's professor of military cross-cultural competence. Her research interests revolve around the impact of cultural differences on difficult conversations to include end of life communication, relationship repair strategies, and most recently, the role of failure in teaching and learning.

BH

Finally, Allison Abbe is professor of organizational studies at the U.S. Army War College. From 2006 to 2011 she led a program at the Army Research Institute on assessing and developing cultural skills in military personnel. She holds a PhD in social and personality psychology, and currently teaches strategic leadership, defense management, and inclusive leadership. Welcome to A Better Peace, colleagues.

Allison Abbe: Thanks, Ron.

RG: So to start, I want to ask Kerry and Lauren, what led you to this topic and to create this collection of essays and how does it fit with your previous research?

Kerry Fosher: Well Ron, first thanks for having us here today. We appreciate the chance to talk about the book. I'll lead off and let Lauren chime in as she sees fit. So certainly, the catalyst for getting the project started was the closure of the Marine Corps' Culture Center, which happened in June of 2020. But we had known for quite a while that a book like this was needed, that militaries and the intelligence community's interest and culture and the people who study it, it's cyclic.

KF: There were programs in World War II and Vietnam. Allison has written some about this, but they didn't last, the capability gets shut down and then recreated every couple of decades. The consequences of that, and the lack of continuity that it brings are borne by junior military personnel and the people that they interact with. I could tell you that in this most recent cycle, it wasn't easy to find information about what worked and what didn't work last time, so a lot of programs started from scratch rather than learning from the past. So, we wanted to create a book that was going to be useful to people still working on culture, but also a message in a bottle for the next group of people who have to rebuild the cultural capabilities.

A lot of the literature about the last 15 years of culture programs was either written about programs that were not training and education oriented, like the army's Human Terrain system or science and technology projects. There's very little about training and education programs. It may have been because we were all too busy building them to write about them, but there just wasn't much out there.

A lot of the rest of what was available was written by outside scholars, who didn't have very in-depth understandings of the programs that they were writing about. So, we wanted to put together a book that would capture lessons learned from the inside before everybody scattered to the four wins, and also one that emphasized that importance of education and training across all the different services.

RG: So before I go to Lauren-

Lauren Mackenzie: And if I could add to what Kerry said?

RG: Oh, please.

LM: I think there was also somewhat of a personal and relational dimension to our motivation to put this edited volume together. So, if I could just back up for a second, so oftentimes when we're talking about cultural values, or if I'm teaching an intro to culture type of class, I'll often say to students that oftentimes we don't know what our cultural values are until they're violated. So, think about your preoccupation with personal space, for instance, or obsession with being on time, something like that.

I found that I didn't recognize how connected my professional identity was to the Marine Corps Culture Center until it closed down. I found myself lost at first, and while I was looking for a new place here at Marine Corps University to belong to, and then simultaneously we had some unexpected time stuck at home due to COVID, this project became especially meaningful, as a way to capture what we've learned. Like Kerry said, a message in a bottle to future folks who might be charged with standing up a culture center at some point in time, but also the relationships we formed. It was a wonderful walk down memory lane with colleagues from across branches of service and different academic disciplines.

So, I guess as the saying goes, the research became "mesearch". It became very personal and, in a way, sort of therapeutic reaching out to colleagues that I might have lost touch with, that are still actively working in the culture community, but that maybe didn't have a reason to connect with. So, I'm grateful to Kerry, this was her brainchild and it was just a really meaningful and rewarding project to be part of.

RG: See, that's very interesting. I was thinking when Kerry was initially talking, there's the old highfalutin line from Hegel that the owl of Minerva flies at dusk, so it seems there is a connection between closing down these programs and deciding to write and think about them. But I also like your reference to research as mesearch, that this is ... and I guess one of the things we'll probably get to in the course of this conversation, is why we close such programs down and it is worth noting Kerry, the comment that you made, that there didn't seem to be a lot of reference to previous efforts. I was talking to Allison just the other day, learning about counterinsurgency, the military studies it, and then they can't wait to say, "Boy, I'm glad I'm never going to have to do that again," until I rediscover it 20 years later. But to talk about who is included in a program like this, or in a volume like this, for the editors and also for Allison as a representative contributor, what kinds of criteria did you have for the selection of topics and contributors to the volume and how did you make those editorial decision?

LM: Well, I'll kick this one off, but since I just spoke, I'll quickly turn it back over to Kerry and Allison. So initially, our goal was to include a blend of three kinds of differents together. So first, we were interested, as I said just a moment ago, we were interested in various academic backgrounds. So for example, we have folks here contributing from the field of international relations, anthropology, psychology, and communication. Along with that, we were interested in contributions from folks who had an affiliation or experience with different branches of service. So, in this case, we have Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Army.

And then finally, and then I think this is important for those who might be interested in reading the book to understand our logic, as we were ordering or thinking about the sequence of the chapters. We were interested in different types of involvement in the DoD culture effort. So, one of the first chapters is devoted to the need for the culture capability, writ large. That's then followed by the complexities, challenges and lessons learned, we associated with teaching culture in the PME or the professional military education context.

Then finally, we were also interested in capturing some of the programmatic efforts to both launch and run various culture efforts. Then I guess I'll just close by saying, we were also able to close the edited volume with a chapter that is in the form of an interview with the gentleman that both Mr. Jeff Bearor, who initially stood up the Marine Corps Culture Center, and then Mr. George Dallas, who closed the Marine Corps Culture Center in June of 2020. So, we were able to capture some of what they've learned and some messages that they wanted to share. Then again, as Kerry alluded to earlier, all of this is in the hopes of preventing a cold start the next time the DoD decides to reinvest in a culture capability, but that was our logic as we were putting this together, but maybe I'll turn it over to Kerry if she wants to just say a few words about some things that maybe we wish we had mentioned and didn't, or some folks we wish we had acknowledged, but didn't.

RG: Sure. Go ahead, Kerry.

KF: So, certainly there's a lot that we were not able to cover in the book, but for the purposes that we're at today, I'll just say that one thing that I really regret not getting more of into of the book is discussion about the work that was done by some of the early proponents. I think about people like Remi Hajjar, who's now on the faculty at West Point, but was part of the army's culture center at a time when he was absolutely critical to the development of concepts of cross-cultural competence that went on to shape programs across the services. Paula Holmes-Eber and Barak Salmoni, who were instrumental in establishing the Marine Corps' Culture Center and getting a foothold in Marine Corps professional military education. And then, I think most importantly, all of the military personnel who helped think about people like Todd Lyons, John Bird, Bill McCollough, and a lot of others who made substantive contributions, but they also are

the people who carved out the organizational spaces and gave us the top cover that we needed so that we could all get the work done.

The book ended up being written mainly by scholars, although a few people in there with military backgrounds, but we've only ever had one piece of this puzzle, and getting anything at all done requires partnerships with all of the other people who had the other pieces. I actually hope one of the things that people take away from this book is that building and sustaining cultural capabilities, or I guess really any large complex capability takes a lot of collaboration. It takes a lot of compromise and it does take a willingness to recognize that no one of us has all the answers.

RG: Right, that's great. And so Allison, for you, as a contributor to the volume, you obviously had your specific experience that you brought to it as well. So, your aspect of the "mesearch" as well as the research, but how would you describe your contribution to the volume and your experience with cultural program?

AA: So, my background as a psychologist, working a little bit on the periphery of these programs was as an early career behavioral scientist without any experience engaging with policy makers. So initially, some of the learning experiences that I had engaging with the Training and Doctrine Command, as they shaped the army culture and foreign language policy, working with the TRADOC Culture Center and across services with some of the other culture centers and programs, was really challenging for me without having that experience beforehand. So, my goal in my chapter was to talk about some of the lessons that I learned along the way that I wish I had known before I started, that would've been helpful in being maybe more effective at conveying the state of the science and transitioning that to inform the programs and the policy more effectively. It did have some success. As Kerry noted, it was because of some of the uniform personnel that carried the message. So in my chapter, I tried to convey some of those lessons that I think would've been helpful had I known before I had started down that path.

RG: But you ended up in it anyway. I guess, for many of us, sometimes we think we know where we're going, but we don't realize where we were going until we get there. But a question for all of you to think about this, is the very idea that cultural programs in cultural centers are opened and closed and expertise is called together and then, I don't know, sent back out into the wild. Do you think it is a problem that the United States military views culture programs as something that is optional and temporary rather than a permanent piece of training war fighters in their future roles for United States security policy? I throw that open to the floor, but I'm curious what anybody has to say about that.

KF: Well, I'll kick off. This is a question I've had to answer a fair amount at academic conferences, where-

RG: I can imagine.

KF: ... people are just scratching their heads. So, I mean, yes, it is a problem, but it's a highly predictable one, like rain in Seattle. You know it's going to happen. I think a fair number of us knew when we started us work, that the interest is cyclic. We hoped that we would be able to overcome it, but certainly we're not counting on it. I think what is more problematic, any large bureaucracy is going to have a well-developed forget-ery and is going to reinvent things from time to time. But the really important thing is to have systems in place so that you can archive the capabilities, keep track of the ideas, because there will always be a few people around in any large bureaucracy who remember what was done. You just have to make sure that they're equipped with the materials so that they can get things rolling again. I know that's not a very satisfying answer, just I think it's a realistic one having looked at big bureaucracies for the last several decades.

RG: Oh, I totally get that and I got to say-

LM: And maybe if I could add on to that.

RG: Sure, yeah, go ahead, Lauren.

LM: And maybe if I could add on to what Kerry just said, I think we'd be remiss if we didn't mention the Air Force Culture and Language Center. So unlike the Army, Navy and Marine Corps culture centers, the Air Force Culture and Language Center is thriving, run by Mr. Howard Ward down in Montgomery, Alabama, Air University. He is a very strong, robust team of faculty and their culture center comprised of scholars and practitioners is alive and well, and they've been able to find a way to keep things going and to stay alive in a way that I think could become a model for the other branches of service. Although again, we all have different missions, but I would be remiss if we didn't recognize that team. I think they're doing a lot of great work and they hold the annual LREC, the Language, Regional Expertise and Culture Symposium each year.

I believe this past year, a few of us were part of it. I think it was called Hindsight 20/20, then Kerry and I talked about our book and we brought together some of the contributors like Allison, Susie Steen, Angelle Khachadoorian, Brian Selmeski and others to talk about their contributions to the work. And we're just lucky and feel lucky that our community is kept alive through a number of different events throughout the year. But the LREC symposium is the premiere I would say.

RG: Well, that ... Oh Allison, yeah.

AA: I would just like to point out the irony of that observation by Lauren, that it's the Air Force that has retained the most cultural capability for its personnel than the land services, the Marine Corps and the Army, which have largely divested in that training for their personnel, and will have to at some point reinvest in it in the future.

RG: I'm so glad you said that Allison, I was thinking about that as I was trying to decide, one of these things is not like the other. What is it about the Air Force that makes them more interested in maintaining language when they're the ones who can stay thousands of feet away from other cultures with which they're interacting?

KF: Although I think it's worth pointing out, that a lot of the current efforts also started at Air University.

RG: Ah-ha, So there's a tradition there.

KF: Yeah, they were fortunate to have an individual by the name of Dan Hank, who very early on, tried to start bringing people together. So, while there were these nascent little pinpoints of culture programs going on. Allison was already working on this, a few other people were already working on this. He had the foresight to start trying to bring us together. All of that happened through the little cross-cultural competence initiative, which later turned into the culture center there.

RG: But this raises a question that I wanted to make sure I asked all of you, is what should the role of PME institutions like Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air War Colleges, what should their relationship be to these cultural programs even if there are not formal cultural programs? Is there something that we can do in professional military education to keep some kind of cultural understanding cultural learning alive, even in the absence of extensive programs?

LM: I guess one of the things that I'd like to bring up, this was really emphasized by the director of the Marine Corps Culture Center, George Dallas. I mean, he really encouraged me years ago to try to move beyond national difference when we're talking about culture. So, I think as the years have gone on, what has resonated more, I think with PME students has been to think about culture more broadly, perhaps culture as a lens, but yeah, to think beyond national difference. So, to think about gender differences, generational, cultural differences, organizational culture differences, and that could be more enduring.

It's not to say that that personnel don't need just in time culture-specific training before they deploy, or PCS, of course they do. That's very valuable, but at the same time, it's also inherently dependent on a lot of different kinds of context that I think sometimes a more culture general, as

Kerry and I have talked about, and Allison, over the years culture general approach is a little bit more enduring and is a little bit less reliant on the presenter or the teacher, him or herself. So, doesn't rely as heavily on when you lived in a place or what region of the place that you lived in. So we, here at the university, at the Marine Corps University, focus a little more broader on cultural differences from an organizational perspective. So, I think there's a lot more I could say, but the last thing would be that, I think it also helps and I've been really impressed by some folks in our community that focus on cultural heritage or cultural property protection, because it's tangible, it's something that students and folks can latch onto.

LM: I feel sometimes, my background's in communication, and though I really do feel strongly about the idea that we don't interact with cultures we interact with people, so I tend to focus on the communication skills, they still can be somewhat nebulous to people. They can be a little bit squishy. So, I'm always looking for ways as we make the case for the value of culture education, to start off with something more tangible like cultural property protection or cultural heritage. So, that's just one angle or one approach to your question, but I'll turn it over to Kerry and Allison if they have anything to add.

RG: Sure. Kerry, Allison?

AA: I would add to that, that I think one of our goals in professional military education is to broaden the thinking of our students. So, even if the services don't recognize an immediate application for cultural training, they can still recognize that understanding culture is part of a broadening education. In the last couple of years, we've had a lot of discussion around the notion of strategic empathy and culture is a lens. I think that helps students acquire strategic empathy for understanding adversaries, competitors, as well as allies. So, that's been one way, I think, to incorporate cultural considerations into the curriculum, even though the overt recognition of the need for cultural understanding is not as widely as accepted as it used to be 10 years ago.

KF: I'll just emphasize one aspect of what's already been said by Lauren and Allison is that it's really important to keep the pilot lights on in terms of the military's cultural capabilities. I think the best way that you can do that is to help the military personnel build the conceptual knowledge and the skills that they need, and then they can make their own decisions about the utility of that. I think in all of our experience, the people who use the concepts and skills, whether they're using them overseas, or they're using to deal with diversity in their workplace, or to deal with the State Department, or whatever it is, they often become the biggest advocates and the best way to keep creating those advocates who can keep some degree of capability going is through professional military education.

RG: When we talk about skills and communicate, one of the things I did come across in reading the essays in the book was the somewhat, let's say ambivalent, or even fraught relationship

between cultural programs and language programs. That language acquisition is a specific skill and military likes specific skill. So, sometimes it's easier to want to encourage people to learn languages than it is for them to really think about cultural differences, but language alone is only going to get you so far. I did notice the book included one of my favorite quotes that somebody can speak three languages and they were jerk in all of them, but that's not really very helpful, but language programs persist even when the programs come and go. I mean, are the language programs a way to keep that pilot light lit or are they in a completely different silo than cultural programs?

KF: I think that they have some promise in that regard, but in my experience, most of what was being provided by language programs was culture-specific if it was there at all and it really did not get at the transferable concepts and skills that we were trying to build, that people could use regardless of where they went. That doesn't mean that those programs could not be realigned to do that, but at the moment, I think they survive in part because they produce a visible, audible and tangible skill, and one that the military has figured out how to quantify. That is what makes it easier for them to maintain funding, maintain attention.

AA: They were only able to do that because of substantial investment in developing scales and validating those scales. And they maintain that capability in terms of the assessment and developing the oral proficiency interview and things like that for a number of different languages. That kind of a financial investment has never been made in cultural skills, of even a fraction of the investment has never been made in cultural skills. So, we still don't have really good, validated tools to assess the cultural skills of military personnel, even after the number of years of these cultural training programs, assessing the learning outcomes, was never really received the kind of investment that it needed to be able to demonstrate those quantitative outcomes to the same degree that you have with language.

KF: I think it might be worth pointing out at this stage that one of the pieces of this particular arc of culture programs, that I think isn't broadly understood is that, although it seems long there was, I would say, maybe eight to 10 years of, particularly on the training side, programs being very, very heavily focused on getting training to people who were deploying and needing it right now. That was the emphasis and any attention to assessment or anything else was seen as secondary. Then you had maybe three or four years when it would've been possible to really get senior level attention to the kinds of developments Allison is talking about. Not that they weren't needed earlier, not that people weren't trying to get it done earlier, they were, but just getting the necessary attention to it. Then we immediately moved into the decline. So, I think, although you could say that this particular cycle has lasted about 15, 16 years of intense activity, there really was a relatively short window when you could do things that were sensible and taking a long view of the capability development.

AA: There was some science and technology investment during that period, but it was largely invested in modeling and simulation, and the idea that you could use automated tools to understand cultures, rather than using science and technology to help advance the skills of personnel. It was in the idea that you could model your way into cultural understanding rather than enable the personnel to understand the cultures. So, there was an opportunity there with some of the science and technology programs like the Human Social Behavioral Modeling Program, but it was invested in other goals than in supporting personnel and training.

RG: I mean, it is a legitimate problem, that developing cultural knowledge, cultural understanding is difficult. You cannot predict where the future problems in the world are going to be. So, unless you want to prepare everybody for everything, there will be reactions to problems, but it's I guess, like John Kennedy said about going to the moon, we don't do these things because they're easy. We do them because they are hard. So, as we wrap up this half hour, which is basically flown by, I am curious for each of you, what is your hope for the future? If this book is a message in a bottle, what do you hope will be done with it when somebody bothers to pick the bottle up and open it? What role can or should civilian academics play and civilian institutions play in keeping this kind of interest alive, so that they can step back in when the time comes to step back in?

KF: So, I think I have a number of hopes. One is that people will actually look in the archives and look in the literature rather than starting from scratch next time, but also that between now and then, we will do some work to help with the relationships between the military and certain scholarly community that are very, very fraught.

I've done a lot of work on that over the course of the last 20 years, particularly with anthropology, but also with some other disciplines. While I think we made some progress on getting academic communities to think differently about the military, have a deeper understanding of what military organizations and military personnel are trying to do when they reach out for help from social sciences, I'm less persuaded that the military learned how to approach academic communities more effectively and that has a really significant impact.

It's not just about playing nice. It's about being able to effectively access the expertise that you need when you need to ask difficult questions. So, my hope is that the military will take advantage of this time period, to actually start trying to rebuild those relationships in a more sustainable way, and also looking for more enduring ways to integrate these sciences, not just culture programs, but also more broadly across PME, as Lauren and Allison have spoken about, and in other ways that are just not so vulnerable to disappearing when one type of capability is cut.

RG: Fair. Very good. Lauren, what do you think?

LM: I'll just start it off and I'll be brief about this, but I just want to make a quick mention that while I was working on my particular chapter for the book, I was also doing some research devoted to the role of transparency about failure in teaching and learning. I'll circle this back to your question in a second. But my chapter includes a lot of my own teaching failures and what I did with those failures to try to simultaneously, one, help junior faculty learn from them, maybe by offering some faculty development sessions and things like that and two, to use them as a means for connecting with colleagues about something real. I'll just, as a quick example, during one of my first class, my first culture classes at Marine Corps University, I had a student look straight at me while I was teaching and say, and this is a quote, "I'm so sick of this squishy culture shit." And you can delete that out if you don't want the swear and the podcast but I can promise you I did not have-

RG: Oh, I think we're going to have to leave that in.

LM: We may just have to, this is a PG13 podcast, right, Ron? So, as you can imagine, I did not have a short, pithy, intelligent response to that proclamation, that I wish I had. So, some of the piece of advice that I give in my chapter are specifically about things that I wish I had known, like based on my own teaching failures, things that I wish I had done differently, and the importance of strategic messaging about the value of culture. I mean, we are in a people business and so the ability to message that culture, isn't just about something that other people have out there in Iraq or Afghanistan, but rather that we not only have, but live every single day, I think is a really important and message that I wish I had thought to emphasize earlier in my career.

I learned the hard way from a series of failures. I mean, not getting promoted when I was down at Air University, I learned the hard way that it's not so much what you do, but what people perceive that you do, tends to be the message that is valued on promotion committee. So, I'll just wrap up by saying that it's a double-edged sword with failure. We need them to grow, we need them to develop. We need them to connect with colleagues in a real and meaningful way, but at the same time, they can work against us on our teaching evaluations, or maybe the perceived value of our research, and again, how soft and squishy it is.

So, yeah, all that's to say, there's a lot I wish I had done differently. I tried to capture that in the chapter, but I've used those failures as a way to reconnect with civilian colleagues at civilian universities and to try to be better about building those relational bridges across culture and communication. I guess, as they say, in education as in life, our mistakes are often our best teachers. I've made plenty of them, but I'll stop there and turn it over to Allison.

RG: That's all right, that's a very good point. Allison, what are your thoughts, hopes for the future of culture as a subject?

AA: So, my hope would be that from this round of cultural capability and training, that the military has learned to ask more critical questions of the academic community when they're developing these kinds of programs and capabilities so that they can use social science effectively. On the social science side, I hope that social scientists and behavioral scientists that engage with the military can learn to better communicate their findings to the military in a way that's useful to them. I think there have been a lot of lessons and quite a few successes, I think, in these cultural training programs that I hope will be retained for the future.

So, for example, the adoption of the culture general approaches to culture training in education was a success story. It hasn't been retained as much as we would like, but that was a success story and we see repeatedly with other issues where there are trendy social science topics that pop up in the military. I'd like to see leaders become more critical in asking questions about these issues. So, one of them that we see now is the whole notion of generations.

So, there are some social scientists that are now trying to be more prominent in questioning the whole idea of the notion that generations are fundamentally different from each other. So, there's some good, critical questions about that and how you manage personnel from different generations. So, I think that the cultural lessons can apply to some of these other areas where behavioral and social science could be really useful to the military if leaders are asking the right kinds of questions and how they use it, and if social and behavioral scientists are more effective in communicating the state of the science in a way, and the limitations of the science in a way that can be useful to the military.

RG: Well, that makes a lot of sense. I guess in the end, it all comes down to wanting to encourage as much regular communication as possible. We, are certainly very pleased here at A Better Peace, that Kerry Fosher, Lauren Mackenzie and Allison Abbe decided to join us today to talk about their work about military culture programs. There's a lot more to talk about, but unfortunately that's all the time we have for now. So, thank you to the three of you for joining us today on A Better Peace.

AA: Thank you, Ron. It was a great conversation. Appreciate it.

LM: Thanks for having us.

KF: Thank you.

RG: You bet, and thanks to all of you for listening in. Please send us your comments on this program and send us suggestions for future programs. If you have not already, please subscribe to A Better Peace on your pod-catcher of choice. And after you have subscribed, because why

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