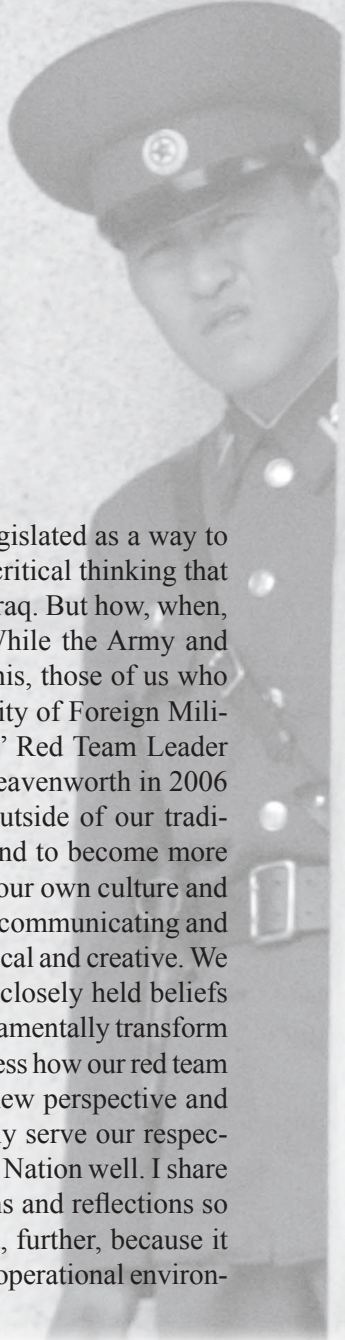


# Reflections from a RED TEAM LEADER

Susan Craig



**R**ED TEAMS HAVE BEEN recommended and legislated as a way to prevent the kinds of failures of imagination and critical thinking that were apparent in the wake of 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq. But how, when, and where exactly should red teams be employed? While the Army and the intelligence community continue to grapple with this, those of us who attended the first University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies' Red Team Leader Training course at Fort Leavenworth in 2006 were challenged to get outside of our traditional ways of thinking and to become more culturally aware (of both our own culture and others), more effective in communicating and negotiating, and more critical and creative. We had to examine our most closely held beliefs and assumptions and fundamentally transform the way we think. Regardless how our red team skills are deployed, our new perspective and approach will undoubtedly serve our respective organizations and our Nation well. I share the following observations and reflections so that you may better understand what a red team is and, further, because it seems that, in our increasingly complex and demanding operational environment, these lessons are relevant to everyone.

## Critical and Creative Thinking

- Being a good red teamer is about asking good questions. Questions should stimulate thought, not cause alienation; they should be more helpful than critical; and they should point out assumptions or factors that are not being addressed. Most importantly, you can't ask a blue question of a red system and expect a blue answer—it is imperative to think within the construct of the culture you are examining. For example, the extensive interviews conducted by U.S. Joint Forces Command published in the Iraqi Perspectives Project demonstrated that both the Americans and Iraqis failed to think outside of the context of their own cultures, so the information gathered both prior to and during Operation Iraqi Freedom was used to reinforce their preconceived notions.

*PHOTO: Two North Korean soldiers observe the south side at the truce village of Panmunjom in the demilitarized zone, 24 July 2006. (AP Photo/ Lee Jin-man)*

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- Doing nothing is a course of action. This may seem contrary to our military's can-do, action-oriented culture, but in order to fully gauge the second and third order effects of our deeds, sometimes you just need to wait and see.

- When you interact within a complex system (such as an economy or ecosystem), you cannot precisely predict the results. Accept that you will never be able to predict this, but if you watch closely and choose appropriate metrics, you should at least be able to recognize patterns. Challenge constructs (such as Operational Net Assessment) that assume that such complexity can be easily understood.

- Identifying the problem is the first, most important, and often most overlooked task of solving it. This is difficult, which is why it is often skipped.

- Using measures of effectiveness is the only way to prevent what we call ballistic decision making—making quick decisions without following up to ensure the intended outcome of the decision has indeed occurred. If you execute without a method to track and measure the results, you'll never know whether the action was successful. But finding the right metric that truly measures whether you're on the right path is difficult. It is not necessarily up to the red team to develop such metrics, but it is up to them to identify poor measures of effectiveness and to think creatively about behaviors or indicators that could provide better feedback.

- Decision making is heavily dependent on experience and instinct: the value of these should not be underestimated. Good decision makers are flexible, appreciate the complexity of their situation, and ask more "why" than "what" questions. Too much information can impede decision making. Compiling data just to reduce the sense of complexity and uncertainty is not necessarily helpful.

- Coalitions are a difficult but necessary component of military operations. An important part of the Army's definition of red teaming is to understand not only our adversaries, but also our partners. A red team leader who understands a partner's constraints, capabilities, and political will can facilitate the development and maintenance of these important relationships.

- Training and Doctrine Command's Threats Division developed twelve critical variables to define the contemporary operational environment: physical environment, nature and stability of state, sociological demographics, regional and global relationships, military capabilities, information, technology, external organizations, national will, time, economics, and culture. These variables serve as a useful frame of reference with which to view the operational environment, and we spent much of our class time trying to characterize these variables in any given situation. But more importantly, we found that it is essential to understand how they influence one another. Identifying a culture's geography is not difficult; how it affects the culture's concept of time, its economic capabilities, or the stability of the state is.

- That said, avoid using a single construct to define the operational environment, and be wary of inappropriate metaphors or analogies. The myriad constructs for defining the contemporary operational environment demonstrate its complexity. For example, some useful ways to bound a problem include using the above 12 critical variables, using Thomas Barnett's "core and gap" model (detailed in *The Pentagon's New Map*), or categorizing challenges as traditional, irregular, catastrophic, or disruptive (as defined in the *2004 National Defense Strategy*).<sup>1</sup> But strict adherence to only one model or application of an inappropriate analogy allows for mental shortcuts that lead to failure. An example of a construct that may limit our understanding is the "network" construct of terrorism. As guest lecturer and terrorism analyst from the Institute for Defense Analysis Mark Stout argued, the network construct limits our analysis to links and nodes, while terrorism may be more accurately portrayed through a "movement" lens, which would require a broader focus on hearts and minds.

- Two things to remember about your adversary: the enemy gets a vote, and they shouldn't be underestimated. The U.S. claims that the war on terror is not about religion. Problem is, the enemy thinks otherwise. To them, it is most definitely about religion. Failing to take their position into account only

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makes the fight harder. Underestimating them, most of all their will and their public support, will also make the mission to defeat them more difficult.

- In the words of experienced red team leader Lieutenant General Paul Van Riper (USMC, Retired), “cast your net widely.” It is only through a wide diversity of readings and experiences that one can think creatively and independently. In other words, go to the opera, read a lot, learn a language, travel—maintain broad and diverse interests, and never stop learning.

## Cultural Awareness

While a red team leader can never understand every culture, he/she can know what to look for in a culture. A red team should be able to ask the right questions and find the right experts. We can also understand our own culture enough to appreciate how and why it is perceived as it is by others. So instead of an impossible ‘round-the-world culture survey, the red team leader course curriculum took a comparative approach, with studies in both Western and Eastern military theory and doctrine, and offered a heavy dose of anthropology.

Understanding our own culture and how it is perceived by others was the first step in our growing cultural awareness. It was only after studying Western military theory that we could recognize the dramatic differences—and similarities—between our military culture and Eastern military culture. Studies of Arab civilizations led to the same finding. The following are some insights from this approach.

- There are several enduring themes in Eastern military thought that distinguish it from Western military theory. The most important of these is the uniquely Chinese concept of *shi*, which loosely translated means the strategic configuration of power. *Shi* is about managing reality through maximizing circumstances, or recognizing what one can and cannot control and then preparing to leverage that which you can control when the time is right. This concept elucidates the Chinese emphasis on preparation, seizing the strategic initiative, and their holistic, “win-win” perspective. Other themes enduring to Eastern military theory that set it apart from Western theory include deception, subtlety, surprise, harmony, and reliance on the unorthodox.

- There are several themes that set our culture apart and cause us to think about the world and our

ability to influence it in a fundamentally different way than others. First, Western culture values the individual and his/her free will. Both Eastern and Islamic culture give precedence to the community and believe that destiny plays a role in determining reality (demonstrated through *shi* as described above and *Inshallah*, loosely translated as, “if Allah wills it”). Second, Western culture emphasizes rational thought. We think of things as right or wrong, black or white. But much of the rest of the world allows for more grey. Eastern use of dialecticism (recognizing the possibility that both the thesis and anti-thesis may be correct) and the Muslim concept of *Taqiyya* (the dispensation given to Muslims to deny their faith under threat of persecution) demonstrate these cultures’ acceptance of cognitive dissonance, contrary to our notion of rational thought.

- While such differences are important, there are also commonalities that provide valuable opportunities for communication, understanding, and shared terms of reference. For example, leadership, training, preparation, morale, the power of the people—these are important concepts in both Eastern and Western military thought. There are also several themes that Christianity and Islam share: the importance of faith, giving alms, heaven and hell, a belief in one God, and the significance of individuals such as Abraham and Jesus.

- Applying anthropological concepts is a good start to understanding a culture. These concepts include examining a society’s formal and informal economy; sociological, political, and religious systems; sociolinguistics; semiotics; and its concept of violence. For example, much of North Korea’s economy is informal, as citizens barter and exchange commodities and the government engages in illicit activities outside the boundaries of international law, such as counterfeiting currency and narcotics trafficking. Appreciating that much of North Korea’s economy is unregulated and non-quantifiable goes a long way toward understanding how the country sustains itself.

- An even greater understanding can be gained by identifying a culture’s ceremonies, rituals, symbols, and myths. Through these, you can effect change, by either working through these cultural specificities or by challenging them. Using North Korea as an example again, the country is bound together by a very strong myth of the “people’s

paradise.” It is widely accepted by North Koreans that they are the most spiritually and technologically advanced country on earth, and their Western counterparts are decadent and corrupt. Recognizing this myth serves first to provide insight into North Korean culture. But further, it creates opportunity. If this myth can be disproved and North Koreans no longer believe it to be reality, Kim Jong Il’s power and legitimacy in the eyes of his people are significantly weakened.<sup>2</sup>

## Red Teaming

Lastly, here are a few of the lessons learned specific to the role of red team leaders and how they can function most effectively.

- A red teamer is different from an intelligence analyst in several important ways. First, the red team is not bounded by the construct/plan developed by the staff or by the need for evidence and corroboration; next, the red teamer is more like a historian (whose job is to ask big, broad questions) than an intelligence analyst (whose job is often to answer very specific, narrow questions); and finally, the red team’s job goes beyond understanding the environment to include understanding how we can shape it.

- Effective communication is vital. This means knowing how and when to ask questions, knowing your audience and the personalities with which you are dealing and for whom you are crafting your message, and using and demanding precise language.

- Diversity in red team composition is very important. The value of diversity—in rank, service, expertise, age, and gender—was evident just by our class composition, which included not only officers and warrant officers from the Army’s Active and Reserve Components, the Marine Corps, and the Navy, but also civilians. Our varied experiences, perspectives, and expertise fostered dynamic classroom dialog and debate.

- To implement a red team’s recommendations requires not just top cover, but also top engagement. Top cover, meaning buy-in and protection of the person at the top, is required for the red team to



AP Photo/APTN

Visitors attending the Kimjongilia Flower Exhibition in Pyongyang, North Korea, 14 February 2007, pass by a poster showing North Korean leader Kim Jong Il holding a child. The flower exhibition was held to celebrate the leader’s 65th birthday.

have access to the people and information it needs to make a good assessment. But in order for a red team’s recommendations to be implemented, they need more than access; they need top engagement, or leadership that is committed to making changes based on red team findings.

- Understanding the organization, its procedures, the personalities within it and their relationships, and the overall dynamics of the system in which you are inserting yourself is necessary to affect change. It is also important to appreciate the organizational impetus *not* to change. Advocacy, persuasion, and vigilance are thus required of a good red team leader.

While you may never interact with a red team in your organization, the mindset and the skills needed to be a red teamer can serve us all. We all know the mistakes that have been made as a result of not questioning our assumptions, not thinking like the enemy, or not voicing our dissent more persuasively. The above insights and reflections can help us avoid similar mistakes in the future. **MR**

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## NOTES

1. Thomas P.M. Barnett, *The Pentagon’s New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: GP Putnam’s Sons, 2004); *The National Military Strategy for the United States of America 2004* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2004), available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Mar2005/d20050318nms.pdf>.

2. Montgomery McFate, “Manipulating the Architecture of Cultural Control: A Conceptual Model for Strategic Influence Operations in North Korea,” *Journal of Information Warfare* (2005): 36.