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The Importance of Cultural Awareness

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham, RN (Ret),
KCB, MA, AFRUSI

CENTER FOR CHARACTER & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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Editor's Introduction

In late January 2019, the Department of History and Center for Character and Leadership Development co-hosted Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham, RN (Ret), in support of the Profession of Arms Speaker Series. As the following biography demonstrates, Sir Jeremy brought many years of experience as a naval officer, commander, business leader, and journalist to many cadets, generously sharing his insights about naval history, leadership, culture, and current military affairs. He also served as the guest speaker for the Cadet History Club's annual banquet.

Through the USAFA Endowment, generous donors have established and resourced the Profession of Arms Speaker Series in order to connect cadets to high quality speakers and to provide both classroom and social interactions. The program clearly met its objective during Sir Jeremy's visit. The highlight of the week was Sir Blackham's remarks during the History Club banquet, delivered on Wednesday, 30 January 2019. His theme was that military professionals have a clear responsibility to learn and understand the cultures of the societies with which they interact. Today, this responsibility is perhaps more important than ever. Due to the relevance of the speech to modern military operations and leader development, we have selected his speech to be published as a JCLD Occasional Paper.

Biography of Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham, RN (Ret), KCB, MA, AFRUSI

In a 41 year naval career from 1961 to 2002, Sir Blackham had four sea commands: the minesweeper HMS Beachampton, the Tribal Class frigate HMS Ashanti, the Type 42 destroyer HMS Nottingham, and the Invincible Class aircraft-carrier HMS Ark Royal (when he commanded the first Royal Navy Task Group off Bosnia). Ashore he filled important staff appointments including Commandant of the Royal Navy Staff College, Director of Naval Plans, Director General Naval Personnel Strategy, Assistant Chief of Naval Staff, Deputy CINC Fleet and was the first Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Capability), being a key player in the implementation of the Smart Acquisition Initiative, a major change programme.

On leaving the RN in 2002, he spent three years with EADS (European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company, now Airbus), as UK Country President, before becoming an independent consultant. He is Chairman of Sarnmere Consulting Ltd, of Atmaana plc, Deputy Chairman of CondorPM, and was Chair of the Blackheath Conservatoire of Music and the Arts from 2000-2007. He was a Non-Executive Director of Airbus Helicopters UK from 2007-2016, and has been an advisor to several medium and small companies.

Sir Blackham is a former member of the Chief of the Defence Staff's Strategic Advisory Panel. He was a Vice President, Trustee and Associate Fellow of RUSI (Royal United Services Institute) between 1996 and 2010, Editor of the prestigious in-house Royal Navy (RN) journal *The Naval Review* from 2002-2017, and is a frequent writer on defence, strategic issues and international affairs including acquisition, in many publications and newspapers. He has frequently given evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee. He speaks and

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chairs regularly at conferences in UK and abroad, lectures in Public Management at Kings College London, and is an external examiner at Kingston University. He holds a BA (Hons) degree in history and philosophy and a Masters degree in Classical Studies, and is an active member of the Association of Business Mentors. He is a Spanish Interpreter and is currently learning Afrikaans. His leisure pursuits include music and opera, walking, travel, cricket, reading, theatre and general writing.



The Importance of Cultural Awareness

Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham, RN (Ret), KCB, MA, AFRUSI

I want to talk tonight about cultural awareness, what I think it means and why I think it matters to us as professional military people. I speak not as an academic but as one who has travelled widely in different cultures, both professionally and for leisure, who has a wife who is not English, and as one who, in the 1960s, was sent by my Navy to live in Spain for 6 months to learn Spanish. I was required to find my own accommodation and tuition. I chose to live in a student hostel entirely with young Spanish students. These things have informed my views.

In 2012, the then head of UK forces said that current and likely future operations demanded new levels of cultural education and understanding (including language skills) if international co-operation was to be effective. We need, he said, to understand what drives and motivates our friends, allies and those whom we set out to support, as well as our potential enemies. He went on to speculate on the possibility of sub-specialist careers in the field of cultural awareness. His views were strongly influenced by his own experience as Commander in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan.

So what is this cultural awareness and why does it matter?

In the 19th Century the new English Ambassador to Persia went to his first audience

with the Shah, wearing his best court dress, with a fine hat which he swept off during a deep bow. He gave huge diplomatic offence which lasted for some time. He should have been wearing a special costume which revealed as little of his person as possible and uncovering his head was seen as the height of discourtesy.

Again, on a recent holiday in Istanbul, when walking in the streets and visiting mosques, my wife wore a head scarf and made sure that none of her legs or bare arms should be visible. One of our lady companions wore a t-shirt and shorts, despite advice and the Mosque door was slammed in our face and the people standing around were very angry. We successfully visited other mosques without this lady.

If you call on the ruler of very small Arab states or villages as I have done, and refuse coffee, or take less than two cups, or take a third, and eat or drink anything with your left hand, you will be received very coldly.

If someone coming to England enters early in the morning a railway carriage full of English people and starts to talk loudly and cheerfully to people, he is likely to be regarded as intrusive and impolite.

In my experience, if you try to do business with someone from the Middle East or someone from Japan at the first meeting, the meeting is likely to be terminated.

And so on. These are obviously rather trivial examples but they can give unnecessary offence. Much greater, more important and relevant examples are available. But these few make an important point.

For all of us, our cultures, interactions, behaviours, beliefs, political concepts, forms of governance, etc., are deeply rooted in, indeed inherited from, our historical experience. Studying that experience is the only way to really unpack and understand these things – things so deeply ingrained and taken for granted that we do not even really recognise them in ourselves, let alone explain them to other people as they struggle to understand us.

Some of them are visible – for instance ethnicity, language, religion, institutions, laws and organisations, although the reasons for them may be harder to understand. Some, the most important, are invisible. For instance values, and what Geert

It is those things, beneath the skin so to speak, which most determine our view of life and the world, our political and social behaviour and our beliefs, and whose influence we need to recognise in trying to assess and deal with people from different traditions.

Hofstede called “the software of the mind.” It is those things, beneath the skin so to speak, which most determine our view of life and the world, our political and social behaviour and our beliefs, and whose influence we need to recognise in trying to assess and deal with people from different traditions.

These are the “unspoken assumptions” of different societies. So ingrained in us are they that we barely recognise them ourselves, let alone explain them to others, because for us they are simply the way it is.

Often, there are no words in our language for the assumptions of another society, because we have no need of them. They are the product of environment, geography, and what it means for political, military and everyday life. Above all, they are the product of history, the melting pot for all these things. All societies have them and they are different in different nations. You have them, although you may not immediately know what they are.

Nor is this just true between obviously different cultures. It is true between, for example, different European nations where one of the biggest issues in the UK relationship with the EU is a very different understanding of the nature of democratic government.

For the British, government is a necessary evil, to be reviled as often as admired. Things are permitted unless forbidden, and the less regulation there is, the better we like it. There is a close personal link of accountability between Members of Parliament and their constituents. There is much less central power, there are independent courts, no written constitution, giving much flexibility. Much of our law is “common law” – case law and precedent, made by judges in their judgements, and not statutory law. A person is assumed innocent unless proven by trial to be guilty. The private sector is important. Parliament is sovereign.

You will understand this. Much of continental Europe does not. All their constitutions are written and inflexible. The European Parliament is superior to national Parliaments. The judiciary

is less independent and the burden of legal proof is different. There is often strong central direction: things are often forbidden unless permitted. The most common notice in France is “C’est interdit de.....” (It is forbidden to.....). If you ask a Frenchman

why, he will shrug and say “C’est comme ça” (That’s how it is.) There is a different view of public/private sector relationship. But no two countries have identical views. There is no pan-European view.

I have been simplistic but it is important. Even between Britain and the US with a more or less common language, there is often misunderstanding. We tend to understate things; you tend to the opposite, as just one example.

Why is this important to military men/women and especially military commanders? Because, in a world as interconnected as ours for good or bad, where nothing one country does fails to impact on others, there is likely to be a continuing need to counter radical terrorism and other serious challenges and assist to do so those nations whose own resources do not allow them to do it on their own. To do this we must understand what makes people the way they are.

More importantly, we all have to live with, and trade and negotiate with, our global neighbours if we are to survive. And we have to do this in areas where we currently tend to understand little of the local intellectual, cultural, religious, social and political environments. This shortfall makes it more difficult to understand how to counter threats or promote different ideas, in a way consistent with the cultures of the places concerned. Future success will heavily depend on the levels of understanding across cultures and customs, rather than simply within similar cultural groups – itself a tough enough challenge.

If we are to achieve any kind of peace and stability, politicians, commanders and war fighters need to

know about, and be genuinely interested in, any part of the world where you might operate, and in its indigenous cultures and civilisations. Putting it another way, we need to understand that there is always a reasonable, and usually deeply held

perspective from a very different viewpoint than our own – a principle well known to experienced negotiators. It may be that it is not that we are rational and reasonable and “they” are not, but rather simply that “they” are different, and probably with very good reason.

The relationship of the Western world with much of the world outside Europe and NATO has changed dramatically in the last few decades. The change in status from imperial power to a more normal international relationship is too obvious to need elaboration, although it is possible that our view of the peoples of many of these countries has not changed to the same degree. However, their view of us certainly has. We are no longer - in political, economic, some aspects of technological or perhaps military terms – always obviously superior, or in some cases even equal to these nations. In some cases, their culture and civilisations are very much older and more sophisticated than much modern western culture. Nor is the proposition that Western democratic style governments are what they most want or need, always valid or appropriate. Even in the West there are several very different models of democratic government. Indeed even in the Western world, democracy is historically a great rarity. Very few were in evidence between the first in the fifth century BCE and 18th Century CE. In the period between 1815 and 1914 there were only four really significant democracies in the world – USA, Britain, France and Switzerland. All of them were different from each other in important ways. Even in 1939, there were only about 10. The evidence that democracy is a world wide desideratum is at best patchy.

So what is needed? There are four important questions often missing from our current political and military thinking:

- a. How do “other” cultures/countries/peoples think and what has shaped their thoughts?

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- b. What do "other" cultures/countries/peoples think of us?
- c. What historic role did we ourselves play in setting this relationship?
- d. Does any of this create misunderstanding or even offence? If so, how can we mitigate that?

Even amongst NATO allies it isn't easy. There is rarely a single European view of anything – something which I know irritates our transatlantic friends. It doesn't irritate me – not even when dealing with very weighty subjects –because I personally find much richness, experience and learning, and sheer pleasure in Europe's great linguistic and cultural diversity. I regularly go to at least twice a year to other countries for 3 or 4 week periods, not to lead an English way of life, eat English food, stay in English type hotels and hear English spoken. I can do all that very cheaply by staying at home. I go to learn something new, different and often better. Nothing succeeds like deep and substantial immersion, so I stay in local houses not hotels, shop in local markets for food and never eat in a restaurant unless it is full of local people. I try to get as close as possible and talk to as many local people as possible, although this is only a start.

Whence comes this diversity? From the widely differing geography, climate, experience, language, and culture of the different countries and societies. In a word, from their history. And it brings benefits, as well as difficulties. On the northern and western side of Europe, there is a strong and deep maritime tradition and an outward looking view of the world, characterised over history by maritime exploration, discovery, trade and empire, and today by a keen participation in the world outside Europe. In the centre and east we have more inward and eastward looking traditions, understanding of land warfare, and an understanding of the Slav and Asian worlds, and a particular relationship with Russia. Southern Europe has a history of involvement with an

understanding of Islam, the Maghreb, the Levant and the Arab world. All of us have great historical experience of religious conflict. So each of us can learn a great deal from the others. It tends to give us a feeling of the complexity of things and a tolerance of the differences.

Corporately, we Europeans have a deep understanding of the real meaning of conflict. There have been very few decades in the last 1000 years or so when Europe has been free of conflict. Until recently, there were people in Europe who, twice in their own lifetimes, saw their towns and cities flattened and their neighbours or relatives killed or imprisoned in atrocious conditions. Millions of Europeans still living have been refugees. I was a war baby and lived my early childhood in a part of London where nearly half the houses were bombed sites. In the wars of the 20th Century, more civilians than military men died. The news of bombs falling still awakes folk memories in many parts of Europe of their own experiences, and many millions can remember living under tyrannical "foreign" regimes. They know in their bones what it feels like. All this makes many Europeans reflect carefully in the face of recourse to military action – a very proper human instinct I am inclined to feel. Other nations experiences may be different – better or worse.

How should we proceed? Current strategic thinking is dominated by massive raw data gathering. We tend to be preoccupied with the gathering and categorising of facts and intelligence about our potential opponents and perhaps about our friends too. Many so-called facts are not facts but opinions, themselves influenced by our own cultural beliefs. But this gathering of facts does not, by itself, generate understanding. True understanding is about synthesizing a whole range of human insights that cannot be garnered simply by drones, intelligence reports, photographs, or video feeds, etc. True understanding is only generated though immersion

and engagement over time. In former times, when our diplomats tended to specialise throughout their careers in particular geographic and cultural areas, this was a prime function of our embassies. Today it is less so – too often our political leaders, frequently with little real knowledge of the peoples with whom they are dealing, with no knowledge of their language, have usurped the functions of their professional advisers, to the detriment of their decision making.

Obviously speaking the relevant language is fundamental. Other nations may be obliged often to operate in English but it does not endear us to them and English sometimes lacks the right words. But just the language is not enough; we need to understand how it is used – a very different thing which involves learning how to deal with other cultures and differences. After my six months in Spain, I was fluent in Spanish and even had become hesitant in English, but I didn't sound like a Spaniard because I didn't think like a Spaniard. That takes longer and much more immersion. It involves showing genuine respect for those who are different from us, understanding why this is so, accepting it and gaining a better historical understanding of any context.

To do this, we have first to acknowledge that we all live in different ways. We need to treat “them” with the respect that we expect from them. We must recognise that other cultural boxes might be just as valid as our own; for example, often societies that might look “simple” on the surface, have sophisticated ideas and philosophies. Even in what

we might see as “primitive societies” there exist skills and knowledge that we do not have. Primitive does not mean “ignorant” or “lesser.” We may have an advantage in technology but not necessarily in philosophy or understanding. And other cultures' opinions about “us” (however much we dismiss

them with descriptions like - “illiterate”, “fanatics”, “unreliable”) are just as serious and valid as our opinions about them. Other people may wish to cooperate with us, but they do not want to be like us.

Think for example of Iran. 2500 years ago as Persia, it was a superpower with wonderful communications and engineering for its day and the ruler of the mightiest empire the world had then known. Later on, it possessed an artistic and literary culture, even a cuisine, that is one of the glories of the human race.

True understanding is only generated through immersion and engagement over time.

Or think of the Muslims of Baghdad, Cairo and Cordoba who alone kept the lamp of scholarship burning through the Dark Ages of Europe and to whom we owe the survival and understanding of many vital ancient Latin and Greek texts, not to mention the invention of modern mathematics and astronomy. We may have forgotten this, but these peoples' modern descendents have not; they retain some of these virtues and hanker for due recognition and respect and not always for hostility. Difference does not have to be threatening, if we understand it.

Remember too that we, in our expanding days, drew maps and created nations that were not natural nations or boundaries at all. Iraq is one such and Jordan another. They were convenient administrative divisions – convenient for us that is. We do not need, I believe, to apologise for our forefathers but we do need to understand the consequences of our interventions.

We need to exploit the great laboratory of human experience that is History to learn a greater respect and understanding for peoples and cultures who are not like us and don't wish to be, although they are certainly fellow human beings with all the same desires and needs we have. It will enable

better strategic thinking and diplomatic agility when faced with unforeseen situations, allow us to ask the right questions and imagine creative solutions, even help to prevent costly and unintended combat which invariably has unexpected and very damaging consequences

I believe that the application of military force in the future world will frequently be different from that of the mass wars of the 20th Century and that in those applications, what I have been describing will be a vital tool in the maintenance of global security.

What must we do? The solution is in large part about changing mindsets – perhaps the most difficult thing of all without “immersion.” A good start would be to try to identify and understand our own unspoken assumptions. Dealing with others is easier when we have confidence in our own values and so do not need to dominate or change other peoples’.

Should an element of cultural awareness and of history become an integral part of our way of thinking and lead to a more refined strategic literacy in our civil and military leaders? Emphatically “Yes”. For this we need to recognise that we cannot continue with short term *ad hoc-ery*; we need to build linguistic competencies, area expertise, and specialist regional knowledge. This will be particularly important for deploying forces. But we need to build an understanding of the value of this. We need diplomatic corps steeped in the areas where they serve. Of course such training produces new costs and these need to be carefully balanced against essential existing training; perhaps sideways entry into uniform of suitable people like linguists or even academics, might provide one avenue.

This is ambitious, demanding a level of understanding and generosity that we in the so-called “First World” have not always shown to the “Third World.” It aims at an enduring and ethically defensible habit of awareness. It will enable commanders to make full and valuable use of local intelligence, to interpret it correctly and make more effective decisions. It goes beyond mere lessons in the correct social etiquette. It aims to create a greater nuanced understanding of the world as part of our generic training in strategic literacy. Anthropologists, ex-patriates from other countries, maybe role playing, can help in this endeavour, not merely as hangers-on, but as specialists who can explain the diversity of human societies and their histories. In this enterprise, language is important, but history even more so.

I have barely scratched the surface. Much more is needed if it is to become a reality. It may seem far removed from the conventional concept of military force and its use. But I believe that the application of military force in the future world will frequently be different from that of the mass wars of the 20th Century and that in those applications, what I have been describing will be a vital tool in the maintenance of global security. We only have one world and it is interdependent. We need to celebrate all of it.



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