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Marines Are From Mars, Iraqis Are From Venus

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Introduction: Marines find themselves regularly frustrated by the behavior and reactions of the Iraqi people. There are very fundamental cultural differences between Americans and Arabs, but for a variety of reasons these differences are exaggerated between the Marine tribe and the Iraqi tribe. Our fundamental differences lead to fundamental misunderstandings. As we enter a period of ambiguity leading up to the transition, it may be helpful to look at how we deal with our Iraqi counterparts from a fresh perspective. American Marines and Iraqis are hardwired at far ends of a cultural void not by genetics, but by social conditioning.

These descriptions are necessarily simplified, skewed and hyperbolic toward the ideal to make a point. No two people are the same, not everyone lives up (or down) to the ideal. I've used very sweeping generalizations that may not match preconceived notions or reflect common wisdom on the nature of our two cultures. Both the Iraqi and the American people share the same human spark. Not every American or Iraqi will find themselves in these descriptions. The purpose of this paper is to help Marines in the Al Anbar Province find patience and understanding to help an embattled people.

AMERICAN MARINES:

People in general are hardwired to see obstacles or problems, find solutions for those problems, and execute those solutions. The American culture reinforces this natural instinct in what most other cultures consider an extreme manner. Americans focus on winning, achieving, succeeding, and producing. Our children learn and play aggressive, competitive sports from a very early age.

For example, football, arguably the most popular and widely played American sport is a linear, aggressive, goal-oriented endeavor that usually ends with concrete results. This is a simple construct that satisfies our basic needs. We see a problem (the other team, the goal line), we see a solution, (drive forward, score more points), and we can easily envision an end state – *unambiguous victory*. Ties are a disappointment, not a means to an end. In professional football we have done away with ties entirely because they don't satisfy our Manichean need for a concrete solution.

As children, most of us are taught that lying and cheating are wrong, and that "honesty is always the best policy." You might say that "honor" to an American means never quitting, never betraying your word, living up to a high standard of performance and behavior. "Honor" on the athletic field means playing by the rules and giving your best performance no matter what the conditions. People who give excuses for poor performance are deemed weak and are shunned.

When we are presented with challenges, we are expected to overcome them with personal initiative. People who overcome personal disaster are held up as examples to the rest of us. The worse the disaster faced, the greater the comeback, the better the story. The skier who breaks both legs in a fall and drags himself five miles for help is a

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hero, but it's even better if he crawls all the way back to save his dog from an avalanche. Most Americans are generous to a fault, but we tend to lack respect for those who don't help themselves. Most of us can (still) relate to statements like, "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps," "Self-made man," "I don't take handouts."

We see ourselves as separate and distinct individuals. Choosing our own relationships, memberships, associations, and path in life, we see it as standard practice to move 3000 miles across the country, away from family and friends, to "start over." If we don't like our families, we simply dissociate ourselves from them and seek other relationships. We marry and divorce with impunity, and often without input from friends or family. We decide what is best for ourselves. If we fail, we're generally expected to view it as our own fault. We have responsibility to take care of our parents in their old age, but we often pay someone else to take this burden off our hands.

Most Americans are lucky enough to have a fairly high standard of living compared to the rest of the world. More than ninety percent of families can afford three full meals a day for their children and nearly everyone has an opportunity to go to school. Our safety is buffered by regulatory agencies that protect us from dirty water, dirty air, and even noise pollution. Although we have many bad neighborhoods, there is little threat from brutal torture, state-sponsored mass murder, oppressive martial law, or enemy invasion across our borders. Our health care isn't perfect, but our life expectancy is high and most of us feel good about our futures.

In fact, our ability to envision our future is one of our greatest strengths. Because most of our basic survival needs are met, we have the luxury of a long-term view. Retirement planning is a normal part of life. Most Americans envision their children going on to college, and have no reason to expect they won't be able to fulfill this expectation even if they have to take out student loans. We save money and plan our careers.

Our system of government gives us the perception that we also have a greater role in our collective future. Although many Americans say they feel disenfranchised, our ability to vote elected officials in and out of office gives us an avenue of participation. Our anger and frustration can be vented with the pull of a lever or a letter to our congressman. The fact that the congressman writes back and will probably look into each individual case would shock most people from the developing world.

The respect for the rule of law is the foundation of our way of life. We modify our daily behavior based on the belief that it's our responsibility to follow laws, we will be punished if we don't follow laws, and that most other people will follow laws. Law gives order, protects us from each other and from the government, and oftentimes from ourselves. Our faith in this system of laws is reflected in the amount of time we dedicate to following the creation of law in congress and the adjudication of law in the courts. Publicly, corruption is unacceptable, and when discovered it is usually rooted out.

We take great pride in being a free people. Our unquestioning belief in our rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness make us uniquely American. Unencumbered by the shackles of tyranny, our hearts host the seeds of generosity and altruism. Most of us have an unfailing belief that we make the most of our freedom, living good lives, helping others and trying to live up to our personal standards.

Our altruism and earnestness often make us somewhat naïve. We expect that everyone else can see that our hearts are pure, and we expect them to play by the Marquis

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of Queensbury rules that we try to live by ourselves. When we find out that people in the rest of the world necessarily live by a more survival-oriented set of rules, we're often overly disappointed. We have trouble adjusting to other people's way of life because we think our way of life is the ideal. We have trouble seeing things from other people's eyes because we think they should always see things from our perspective.

Our sense of moral superiority comes from a real desire to help others and do the right thing, but it also gets in our way when we have to deal with those that live by more nebulous rules. Our earnest overtures are seen as false and naïve instead of moral and brave. Europeans cannot believe that we would sacrifice so much in Iraq just to prevent a WMD attack and to help the Iraqi people, because they would never do it themselves. If they have a hidden angle, we must have one too. Sometimes our lack of street smarts catches up to us. When we don't live up to our own expectations on the national stage, we are our own worst enemies. The shame-fest over Abu Ghraib is a case study in American guilt.

Our national character is built on high moral concepts that not many of us live up to, but most of us aspire to. Our nature is to be strong, moral, and productive. We set the bar high.

American Marines take these characteristics and drive them to a new level. With notable exceptions, we tend to be exceptionally aggressive, mission focused, and strong believers in the American ideal. We do not accept weakness, indecision, laziness, or incompetence because we know that these things lead to death in combat. We drive ourselves past normal points of endurance, often damaging our own bodies just to reach a finish line or save a buddy. We expect no less from anyone else, a point that often leads to friction with our old high school friends, our families, and especially other Marines. We have been called extremists, and in many ways we are. Marines can best be described as "extreme Americans."

...American Marines have unusually high expectations...

IRAQIS OF AL-ANBAR:

Although we don't like to call ourselves "Arabs," the Iraqi culture is an Arabic culture. We are a communal people, and our lives revolve around our family; close, extended, and tribal. The paths of our lives are less lineal than the Americans, less "A to B," more nebulous. Our sport of choice is also football, but not the American variety.

We play the sport played extensively everywhere in the world except America. Soccer isn't a direct, aggressive kind of sport like the game you play. In fact, we spend a lot of time kicking the ball backwards instead of towards the goal. Much time is spent on the field lining up shots, less time shooting. The goal is to win, but a tie is okay as long as it was a good tie. ***We often view a tie as a victory if it is against a better team.***

Our perception of victory and success is often malleable to the circumstances. Our honor demands victory, we have trouble accepting anything less. We're not lying to ourselves; we just adjust the standards to fit the situation. The Gulf War was a victory for Saddam because we prevented you from driving into Baghdad. Despite the fact that we were losing on the field, Fallujah is a victory because you could not finish the attack – our will to hold out defeated your will to crush our forces. ***If you push us into a position***

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where we have obviously lost, we become distraught and angry, and our honor demands that we seek a victory to balance things out. This is no different from you – Americans hate losing as well. It is different from you because to us it is all that matters.

This sense of honor permeates everything we do. This isn't the Western definition of honor; it's more like Hispanic honor. Perception of manhood is vital, and in fact it can be a matter of life and death. A man without honor gets no wife, often no work, and in Iraq he may be shunned or killed by his family depending on how grave the offense. Defending honor is part of our cultural heritage and it is a focal point for our behavior. We protect the virtue of our women and the pride of our family. We are disgusted that American men allow their women to act and dress like "sharmuta," or whores. If our wives dressed in public like Brittany Spears we would kill them or burn them with cooking oil.

An Iraqi man unable to support his family has no honor and must take action to counterbalance this loss. It doesn't necessarily matter how we support our families as long as we provide. In many cases, we are pushed out the door by our wives to conduct attacks against the Coalition to regain our honor and to make money. An Iraqi woman knows that a husband without honor is worthless to her and her children.

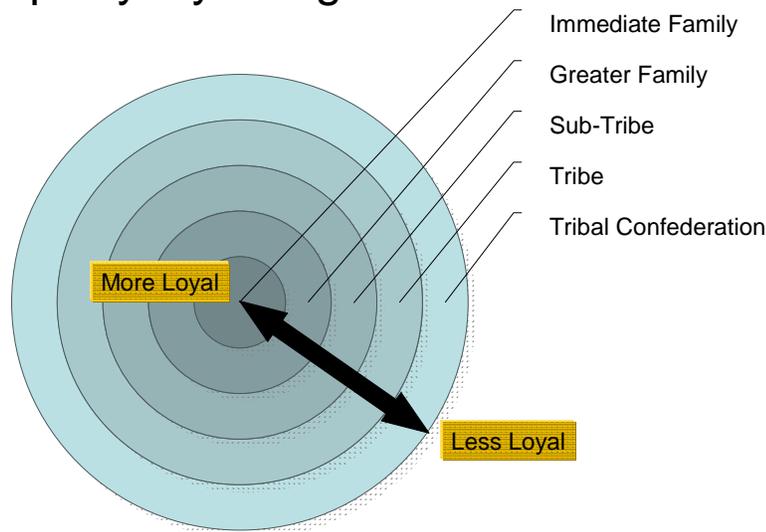
Saddam was a terrible father, but many of us loved him as an abused child loves the parents who beat him. We still act like abused children, playing one side against the other, looking for an advantage, support, and acceptance. We will play you against your boss, against the CPA, and against the government to get what we want. *Don't expect loyalty from us, we are survivors. When we give loyalty to a cause it is to God's cause. When we give loyalty to people it is to our family.*

When we are presented with challenges, we accept the fate prescribed by God. Acceptance of fate is an Islamic trait, and it guides almost everything we do. If we are poor, then it is God's will that we are poor. If there is a task to be completed, then by the will of God it will be completed – *In Sha Allah*. In many cases, except for those of us educated in Baghdad or the west, we see no reason to put extra effort into succeeding beyond the norm. Getting by is good enough because that is our lot in life. We have basic expectations and these are tied into our honor – we need food, shelter, water, electricity, and medical help just like everyone else.

Don't expect any miraculous stories of hardship overcome, "personal best" in the Marathon, or an "I can make it on my own" attitude. These concepts are luxuries for people who live in pampered societies like America. Even when we are poor we have our families and that is enough to keep us happy. When you ask us to do something, we rarely think to ourselves, "Gee, how can I do a great job?" We are answering the call of our stomachs and our screaming wives. Some of us seek much more, many of us seek what we call a normal life.

Our families make us who we are. The family is everything, and only those on the margins of society live without family support. Because we live in a developing country, and our needs are more survival oriented than yours, we have to rely on common survival techniques. People group together to survive, to protect each other, to look out for each others interests. The closer the grouping, the closer the interest of the group. Our immediate families are most important to us, then our larger families, then sub-tribe, then tribe, then tribal confederation.

Iraqi Loyalty Range Fan



Our loyalty expands and contracts based on our survival needs, but we almost always work within this construct. ***If you kill or imprison one of us, you have taken some of our pooled resources and reduced our chance of survival. Because we survive as a group, an attack on one is an attack on all.*** This is why we demand blood money for death, injury, and damage. You must replace the resource you have taken from our pool to balance things out. As long as you recognize that need, we can work together. Here's a real-life example of how seriously we take our tribal resources:

The tribal feud started when three members of one tribe borrowed some money from a sheikh of another tribe. They had borrowed the money because they could not find jobs to support their families. After allowing sufficient time for repayment of the loan, the sheikh attempted to collect the money he was owed by taking possession of a vehicle that the three borrowers had purchased in an attempt to start a small business carting groceries from the market to surrounding towns. An argument ensued between the two groups, and the sheikh threatened to harm members of the three men's families if they didn't repay the money. Upon hearing this, the three men shot and killed the sheikh. The sheikh's tribe immediately vowed revenge. Soon, all three of the borrowers had also been killed by a member of the sheikh's tribe. The feud will continue until blood money is paid, balancing out the losses on each side. Very much like your Hatfield and McCoy's, no?

Pooling resources and interest within a family means that there is little room for individualism. We rarely choose our own path in life. If a father owns a business, the son will almost certainly work for his father. If marriage to another tribe solves an inter-tribal conflict, we marry who we are told. Our parents pick our spouses, and we often have little or no input in who we marry. Only the rich and the elite choose their own life.

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This lack of individuality further reduces of our sense individual responsibility. Again, don't expect us to act like independent Americans.

Our tribalism is tightly bound to our sense of honor. Just as honor is vital to each one of us, it is also vital to the tribe. A dishonored tribe loses "wasta" and therefore influence. Less influence means less money, less power, less ability to support the members of the tribe. Therefore, a tribe's honor is jealously guarded as a group resource. Mistreating a sheikh of our tribe makes him less powerful, making all of us less powerful. Less power means fewer contracts, less money, less food, angrier families. We must regain this honor any way we can. Because Iraqi tradition is violent, we often choose violence to regain our honor. ***If you dishonor our tribe, we have to negotiate with you.... or attack you until our honor is restored.***

We don't ask for much. Our standard of living is low compared to the Western world. If you put us in the United States, most of us would fall well below your poverty level. Since the collapse of the economy last year, many of us cannot afford to feed our families without finding odd jobs, begging money from family members, or supporting the ACF. Look around – most of us live in humble homes, farming small plots with a few animals and a broken down car. ***If we have a big home, we may have had a good job before the war and now we have nothing and are twice as angry as our poor neighbors.***

There are certainly rich people amongst us, but they don't represent the majority. When you tell us you can improve our lives and make us rich, you have an image of your own homes in mind. ***Most of us cannot even imagine what your lives must be like in America, and we do not necessarily value what you value. We don't dream of Outback Steakhouse.*** We are proud of our lives even if they don't meet your expectations.

Unlike you, we do not enjoy the protection of concerned government leaders. Nobody cares if there is lead in our water or pollution in the air. Sometimes our leaders feign concern about our healthcare system, but that's only because our harried tribal leaders take up our cry. Your system is so refined that every little whimper draws the ire of a champion congressman. Our system is so broken our raging screams barely make a sound. We must use the power of our tribes and our religious groups to effect any change, so again, if you weaken our affiliations you weaken our only hope of being heard.

Where you have been protected from invasion, martial law, and torture for nearly two centuries, we have experienced nothing but invasion, martial law, and torture for our entire lives. We have been in a state of almost constant warfare with either the US or with Iran. When we weren't fighting you, we were fighting ourselves in the north and the south. Our sons and brothers were killed fighting to keep Saddam in power, and our lives seemed painfully short. At any time, a government official, police officer, or secret policeman could decide that we had done something wrong and have us killed. They might have to pay off some blood money, but so what?

Just as many of you have become callous about death in combat, we have grown up to be callous about death in everyday life. We are not the Baghdad elite. All of us have seen animals slaughtered and have helped pull their guts from their bodies, so blood is nothing new to us. Beatings are a part of life, pain is a part of life, and death is an ever-present part of life. If pain and death are our lot in life, we accept that as part of God's plan. ***This is how we are able to accept money for a relative you have killed – we***

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accept God's will, and you have balanced out our resources. What can we complain about?

Because our lives are so brutal, we have almost no capacity to view the long term. ***Our inability to envision our own futures is our greatest weakness.*** We are faced with a simple hierarchy of needs. One must breathe before he can think about shelter and security, shelter and security before water, water before food, and so on. It is only by building a normal, healthy society that you can extend that focus into the long range, to think about things like education, leisure time, investment, and retirement. You have heard our complaints. We want shelter, security, water, and food. ***Your talk about democracy and culture and prosperity mean little to people who are simply surviving.***

With this short term view, if you give us money we spend it. ***If you give money to one of our public officials, he'll steal as much as he can because he doesn't even know if he'll have a job next week.*** He has to get more, now, to fulfill basic needs. He can't see into the long term, to see the effect his corruption will have on the future of his community. He may even be a good person, but he has to look out for his family first.

What you see as corruption we see as part of the normal process of doing business. Because most jobs underpay, we always take a cut. This is built into the price of the job. Iraq follows the trend of many other Arab countries – there aren't enough jobs for the expanding population so the government hires everyone. The government can't afford high salaries for so many people, so the pay is low. Because the pay is low, it's expected that you accept bribes and cheat to get by. Everyone knows the rules, even the government.

Typically, we'll take a slice of 10% to 15% off the top of a contract or a work order. Nobody will really get too upset if we keep things in this "normal" range. If we go too far, and take 30% or higher, then we know we are stepping over the line. However, unless you catch on we'll take what we can get. If you're too stupid to figure out what we're doing, it's your fault, not ours. ***There is no real shame in corruption; after all, we're looking out for our families as expected.***

Corruption is natural in a country without the rule of law. We do not respect law the way you do because for us law comes from the end of a gun. In the absence of the gun, we try to respect our families and friends and live by God's will. If the government passes laws, or you give us a transitional law, we don't respect it because we don't respect the government. Government to us means corruption, violence, dictatorship, and rule by fear. In the absence of fear, there is no rule.

We know that Saddam lied to us often. We feel that he did this to protect us, but also to protect himself. We have never trusted our social institutions as much as we trust our families and our friends. It all comes back to the family and tribe. If the government tells us that the Americans are going to enter our town in peace, but our cousin tells us they are coming to murder everyone and rape our women, we will almost always believe our cousin. You have made many promises to us, but kept so few. Why should we believe you? ***In the absence of trusted institutions, our lives are ruled by rumor, and rumor is spread by word of mouth.***

In such a nebulous society, where life is a tenuous prospect, we rarely take responsibility for our own actions. ***"Owning up" for our poor performance or behavior would be a stupid thing to do if it reduces our chance of survival and success.*** If we can put off our mistakes on others, we'll do it in a heartbeat not because we're lazy or

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incompetent but to avoid damaging our honor and possibly losing our jobs. Remember, without honor and a job, we are nothing. So we break a few rules and lie about our mistakes. We don't care about rules anyway; we do things to achieve an effect not because they're right or wrong.

We're masters of achieving effect. Everything we do is designed to coax, cajole, trick, or steer you into doing what we want you to do. This is a standard survival skill, one that you obviously haven't mastered. Your naiveté never ceases to amaze us. You either take us at face value, or you get mad when we "lie." It's not lying if you get what you want, and we almost always get what we want from you. ***We are in a constant state of negotiation, and there are no permanent solutions to any problem.*** You pretend to be so honest, but we see you as the biggest liars of all. You promised us security, jobs, and peace. All we have is crime, unemployment, and war. Who's the liar?

You may have noticed we have a very emotional nature. There's no imperative to control our emotions, and in fact we're encouraged to express ourselves. We wear everything on our sleeves, and we change our minds at will. ***We can be furious at you one minute when you offend us, and truly love you the next minute.*** Every death is a massacre, every accident a murder, every threat is an impending disaster.

Iraqis are complicated people. We can be kind, generous, and forgiving in the worst circumstances. If you are a visitor in our homes, we will feed you our last morsel of food. If you become a true friend, we will die for you. But we see no future for ourselves or for our families.

We are stuck in a rut, and we need someone who has the capacity to see a better future to guide us onto the right path. We may take your hand, or we may bite your hand because we do not trust you. It is on your head to be patient and forgiving, not ours. Do not expect us to be American Marines. If you expect too much from us, you will be disappointed. ***There is nothing worse than unmet expectations, my friend.***

...Iraqis will never live up to the Marines' expectations because they are Iraqis, not American Marines. We haven't lived up to their expectations either...

We freed the Iraqis from the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, and by that action we have assumed responsibility for helping them along the road to recovery. This is a sacrosanct duty, and we cannot allow our personal frustrations to overcome our patience and dedication to their well-being. Understanding both the Marine culture and the Iraqi culture is the first step to envisioning a day when they are strong and healthy, and we can return to our friends and families knowing we've followed through on our inherent promise.

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