

My Tribe Is the Marine Corps

Fundamental similarities between tribalism and Marine Corps ethos
by Capt August Immel



The author contends that perhaps some success is that the Corps is also training local forces in tribalism. (Photo by Cpl Triah Pendracki.)

The need for Marines to train, live, and operate with foreign militaries has become of vital importance in the 21st century, given the need for the host nations to counter a new type of threat, that of an unconventional enemy who finds refuge in under- and ungoverned territories. As members of the Foreign Military Training Unit (which eventually became the Marine Special Operations Advisor Group); as military, border, police, embedded, and several

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other types of transition teams; or as infantry units partnered with local national forces, Marines have lived among and mentored security forces in

Iraq, Afghanistan, Georgia, and many other countries and have worked together to develop the host nations' abilities to protect and defend themselves.

As the Commandant of the Marine Corps describes in the introductory pages of the publication, *Send in the Marines: A Marine Corps Operational Employment Concept To Meet an Uncertain Security Environment*, working with the security forces of these states in an effort to help stabilize and secure their countries and citizens will continue to be a principal mission of the Marine Corps in the long war:

Although we will continue to develop our full spectrum capabilities, this war will place demands on our Marines that differ significantly from those of the recent past. Paramount among these demands will be the requirement for Marines to train and mentor the security forces of partner nations in a manner that empowers their governments to secure their own countries. The validation of building partner capacity efforts has already been proven in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The success of partnering missions, most notably in Iraq and Afghanistan, has proven the effectiveness of the Marine Corps in a capacity far different from its role in traditional and conventional warfare. During partnering missions, Marines at all levels are required to interact with and help facilitate the professional growth of members of a foreign military. The success of these particular missions can be attributed to Marines' exceptional training, devotion to duty, and sense of honor and pride. However, Marines of all ranks have been able to relate so effectively to foreign soldiers because of an *inherent* characteristic of our institution, the Marine Corps ethos. Marines believe in a cultural philosophy whose aspects parallel those of tribalism.

The similarities between our Marine warrior culture and tribalism, specifically in the Middle East region, were made apparent during my 7-month tour to Iraq as a member of Military Transition Team 722. Through many conversations with and numerous hours spent observing the local nationals, our interpreters, the officers and soldiers of our Iraqi battalion, and the Iraqi civilians with whom our team interacted in

the local villages and towns, I began to realize why Marines have an innate ability to relate to these foreign cultures that the average American may not possess. In one memorable conversation with an interpreter, I was told to answer simply, "My tribe is the Marine Corps," when asked by an Iraqi to which tribe I belonged. That interpreter knew that the concept of a tribe did not exist in mainstream America and that most Ameri-



The Long War. (File photo.)

cans do not group themselves into such an assembly. He explained that this answer would be the easiest way to continue a conversation because Iraqis identify each other by tribal affiliation. The interpreter inadvertently, but correctly, assumed that the elements of the Marine Corps culture are similar to those of a tribal society.

Tribalism, in the anthropological sense, is simply a description for a sociopolitical structure of a group of people whose common ethnic and cultural identity separates it from members of another group.¹ Unfortunately, because tribes throughout history and throughout the world vary so greatly, there can be no single definition of tribalism that incorporates all aspects of every tribal society. Nevertheless, several predominant, shared characteristics of tribalism

provide a foundation from which the term can be related to almost all tribal societies and, for purposes of this article, can be compared to several principal elements of the Marine Corps civilization.

The first, and probably most noticeable, aspect of tribalism is the homogeneous composition of the group. Members of a tribe are most often kin, so the same genetic traits pass from generation to generation resulting in analogous physical characteristics. Furthermore, the similarities found in the social aspects of a tribal society add to the homogenous appearance of the group. A common language, shared customs, and even similar mannerisms unite the group under a single, general behavior that can be used to identify and describe a particular tribe as a whole.² Although Marines are not DNA-sharing relatives, it is apparent that the Marine Corps does possess a certain element of homogeneity. The standard uniform that is nearly the same for every rank, the regulation haircut, the use of acronyms and Marine slang that to an outsider seems like another language, and the common behavior that a Marine displays demonstrate this first tribal aspect. These shared looks, customs, and even a common swagger result in the general categorization of a small number of Americans as Marines by both those outside and within the group.

Complementary to the collective look and mannerisms of a tribe is the ethnocentric attitude of its members. Generally speaking, a tribe holds the conviction of its own cultural superiority. By no means is this a pejorative statement; the belief in the superiority of the social or cultural group to which a person belongs allows that group to advance and succeed and gives its members a sense of security by increasing internal confidence and reducing fear of a threat from a different group. The appropriate amount of strength, which is drawn from the tribe's ethnocentrism, allows it to face difficult challenges and increases the sense of pride in the tribe. The warriors of the Ma-

rine Corps remain humble, but a certain amount of bravado is required to perform duties and maintain a high level of quality and professionalism. Like members of a tribe, Marines possess an unwavering devotion to the belief that ours is the finest fighting institution in the world. We respect and work with many other forces, foreign and domestic. Because each Marine presupposes the credo of his warrior preeminence, every Marine possesses the ability to overcome any challenge and accomplish seemingly impossible tasks, projecting our reputation as warriors of the highest caliber the world over. The result is that being a Marine makes one a member of a distinctive group with a common style and a common comportment.

A third feature of tribalism that I observed is the allegiance that the group feels to each other and to their tribe. This feature is perhaps the most relatable to the Marine Corps. Found in the Marine Corps' very motto, loyalty is a paramount trait required by all members. In a tribe, unconditional loyalty is a necessary requisite, for the tribe survives as a group. Therefore, it is believed that an attack on any one member of the group is an attack on all. In order to maintain the tribe's strength and integrity, all members must wholly commit themselves to the preservation of its ideals and goals. In a tribal society, a hierarchy based on kinship, as explained by an Iraqi interpreter, prioritizes allegiance. He explained:

In a fight, it is you and your brother versus your cousin; then you and your cousin versus your friend; next, you and your friend versus a stranger (outside the family but in the tribe). Finally, it is you and the stranger versus a tribal outsider.

This loyalty hierarchy of tribes can be best compared to the Marine Corps' unit classification. Loyalty is first to squad, then to platoon, then to company, etc., finally ending with the Marine Corps in general as a single entity. Excluding any mitigating circumstances, according to our ethos, and if there is any truth to this tribalism/Ma-

rine Corps ethos relationship theory, a Marine will find himself understandably compelled to side with another Marine before a member of a different Service.

The unwritten code of honor that governs a tribe and regulates right and wrong is another essential trait of the tribal society. The foundation for tribal justice is built on this honor code; the consequences for violations of the convention result in the imposition of shame for oneself and the tribe as a whole. Shame is the most extreme form of punishment a violator can receive. Honor has been taken from him, and he is viewed by his tribe almost as an outsider. As a result of the honor breach, the tribe's structural integrity has been partially weakened. Thus, this honor/shame standard governs actions of the individuals in the group by placing such a universal corollary that makes the entire tribe a victim of a contravention of the honor code. Ulti-

mately, the honor code and the concept of ethnocentrism are intrinsically intertwined. As it exists as one of our three core values, honor is a critical component of the ethos of the Marine Corps as well. Although part of a society governed by a rule of law and subject to a collection of military laws published as the *Uniform Code of Military Justice*, a Marine also finds that his actions are inherently dictated by a devotion and adherence to an unwritten code of honor and high level of pride in our institution. The shame a Marine would feel for letting down his unit or those Marines who have gone before him and the outcast-like status he might receive for his waywardness are arguably as strong a deterrent as any formal punishment he might receive. The chivalrous and gallant actions of the noble Marine warrior seen time and again during times of extreme duress are the result of this unwritten code of honor.



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The Marines are an exceptional tribe of warriors. (Photo by Cpl Triah Pendracki.)

A characteristic of tribalism with which Americans often have difficulty identifying is the tribe's nondemocratic sociopolitical structure. In a tribe, self-interests are surrendered so that the group may flourish. The common good is security, and the members of a tribe are required to sacrifice portions of their individual freedoms to achieve it. In order for the group to be successful, each individual member of a tribe must put forth maximum effort to achieve high levels of productivity, but not for self-gain; the tribe as a whole is the beneficiary of the actions of the individual. A resulting feature of this tribal aspect is limited ownership and possession. Resources are shared, and property is communal in the sense that it can be redistributed to support the tribe's needs. The source of authority in a tribe is typically found in a recognized and established leader, and his decisions are regarded as law. Members of a tribe do not have the opportunity to elect the leader; it is generally a hereditary position or occasionally obtained through force or other extraordinary means. As

a result of these aspects, tribalism has even been called primitive communism.³ The Marine Corps was a key component in the struggle of the United States to halt the proliferation of communistic ideals, and the United States was founded on principles that are the complete antithesis of communism. However, in order to achieve its mission, the Marine Corps does not and cannot exist as a democracy, nor can it be structured or regulated in the same manner as the elected political institutions that govern the citizens of the United States. In the same fashion as tribalism, Marines obey the orders of their superiors without question. Marines put the needs of their unit, their fellow Marines, and the Marine Corps as a group above their own interests. Marines, however, are also citizens of the United States and enjoy their freedom. This may seem paradoxical (and indeed it is), but within the hallowed walls of the Marine Corps, a Marine must acknowledge his role as a member of the tribe and the structure with which it operates so that it may

flourish and continue its unparalleled battlefield success.

A final attribute of tribalism is the passionate dedication to the preservation of the tribe's history and traditions. In the same manner as the honor code, legends and folklore surrounding the history of the tribe are important ingredients for tribal society as they generate pride and reinforce the sense of belonging and communal life. A tribe is united through tales and fables of illustrious common ancestors who have blazed the trail for the tribe to follow. Because of the reputation generated by a tribe's history, initial respect and status can be automatically granted by an outsider to a member of a particular tribe. Merit and valor were forged by the actions of the tribe's forebears, and in order to honor their efforts, current members of the tribe pass on their exploits to one another. In many tribal societies, history is orally entrusted from one generation to the next, although recorded texts do exist. Oral traditions allow a biographer to take certain artistic liberties that often per-

mit the intensification of the legendary status of previous tribal members. Traditions and customs are passed along in the same manner, with elders instructing the younger generations on the correct manners and rituals of the tribe. This aspect of tribalism is very prevalent in the Marine Corps. Beginning in boot camp and Officer Candidates School and continuing throughout their careers, Marines are regaled by the legendary tales of the heroism of past Marines. Names like Chesty Puller, Dan Daly, Smedley Butler, and John Basilone are spoken with an almost half-whispered reverence that illustrates the awe and respect that contemporary Marines have for those heroes. Furthermore, events, such as the Marine Birthday Ball and unit mess nights, demonstrate some important Marine Corps rituals conducted with strict adherence to customary procedures that were developed by previous generations. All Marines know the lyrics to and proudly stand at the position of attention during the playing of

The Marines' Hymn. Marine officers know why they have earned the right to carry the Mameluke sword; NCOs memorize their creed. Marines respect their history and perform their duties with uncommon valor out of honor for what their predecessors have done and because their current actions will be the history that future generations will honor.

As long as partnering with and training foreign militaries remains a mission of the U.S. military, the Marine Corps will continue its unparalleled success in accomplishing it given the unique advantage its ethos provides. The Marine Corps possesses a unique ability to relate to tribal societies, which will inevitably lead to high levels of efficiency and meritorious achievements in the partnering and advising missions. Each Marine is part of a unique tribe, born in a tavern 235 years ago and forged in the fires of combat in every clime and place since. As long as each Marine understands his obligation in preserving the ethos of

the Marine Corps, it will remain the exceptional tribe of warriors our Nation requires.

Notes

1. Fried, Morton, *The Notion of Tribe*, Cummings Publishing Company, San Francisco, CA, 1975.
2. Ibid.
3. This term became a popular description of tribalism taken from the writings of Daniel Quinn in his novel, *Ishmael*. It is a key element of neotribalism, which is significantly different than the tribalism discussed in this article.

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