# THE ROLE OF CULTURE

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**The role of culture in establishing the terms of conflict is another vital component that has increased in importance in recent operations.** War among Western powers has always been seen as an adjunct to politics and commerce, and often as a dangerous distraction from them. The rewards of war are physical; psychological reinforcement comes predominantly from war's spoils, not from war itself. In general, this view has led Western powers to try to force resolution as quickly and "cheaply" as practicable (in all but comparatively rare civil and religious wars), to seek decisive engagement with the enemy when possible, and to focus warfare upon defeat of the enemy's fielded military forces. This was true even during Industrial Age conflicts, where the total moral and physical power of the nation-state was mobilized for war. This is the cultural legacy that has most heavily influenced the modern use of airpower.

People in other cultures often view things differently, and Airmen should be sensitive to these differences. In a number of non-Western societies around the globe, the cultural motivation for war is more deeply felt, causing them to fight in ways and for reasons that may seem strange to Americans. Some adhere to a warrior ethos, in which the act of waging war provides its own important psychological reinforcements. Some do not separate church, state, and popular culture in the Western manner, but see religion, politics, warfare, and even trade as part of a seamless whole. Thus, the wars they wage may take on the single-mindedness and ferocity of religious or civil wars.



*When one is attempting to change minds, rather than blow them away, local beliefs and attitudes assume high strategic importance.*

— Colin S. Gray, *The Airpower Advantage in Future Warfare*

US commanders should consider these factors when devising strategies to deal with adversaries from such cultures. They should seek to understand how the adversary thinks and not "mirror-image," placing a premium on regional and cultural awareness and language capabilities of our advisors. For example, during the Vietnam War the United States assumed that North Vietnamese motivations, priorities, and interests were similar to our own. This incorrect assumption significantly hampered the process of devising a winning strategy and prolonged the war. The United States should also carefully plan

for stability and other operations that follow major combat, and constantly keep the conflict's ultimate end state in mind during combat operations, considering all possible means for creating effects and achieving objectives, not just those conventionally used for destruction of fielded forces.