



# PRESIDENT'S VIEWS

## *Marine Corps Culture and Institutional Success: Lessons for the FS?*

BY SUSAN R. JOHNSON

A recent article titled “Masks of War,” by Frank Hoffman, a former Marine who is now a senior fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University and director of the NDU Press, strikes me as relevant to the Foreign Service.



Hoffman uses as his point of departure *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* by the late Carl Builder, an acclaimed defense intellectual who analyzed the organizational structure of the institutions that make up America's armed services. Builder excluded the Marine Corps from the study because, in his view, it lacked a significant voice in strategy or force planning.

Hoffman notes that in the two decades since Builder's book was published, the Marines have achieved a significant voice in national security affairs. Despite their small size and modest budget (7 percent of the Pentagon budget), they “bat well above their weight” and “deliver combat capability well out of proportion to their cost.” He goes on to rectify the omission of the Marine Corps from Builder's analysis of the “distinctive personality or institutional DNA of each of our armed services” and to tie its position as the world's premier crisis response force to today's principal security challenges.

The five elements of Builder's analytical framework for understanding the organizational cultures of the branches of our armed services are: the altars for worship (guiding principles of each service); self-measurement (how each measures itself and its institutional health); toys vs. the human dimension (technology and science vs. art); intraservice distinctions (among branches of each service); and degree of insecurity about legitimacy and relevancy (“paranoia”).

Hoffman applies this framework to the Marine Corps, but AFSA members might find it illuminating and useful to use it to explore the personality or institutional DNA of our own institution. After all, the Foreign Service is also a small but cost-effective institution made up of several “branches” (State, USAID, FCS, FAS, and IBB) more or less permanently deployed around the world.

Applying these categories to the Marines, Hoffman says “the altars are teamwork, the subordination of the individual to the common good of the unit, shunning of first-person pronouns, combat readiness — physically, mentally and morally.” “Once a Marine, always a Marine” is a form of pride in the service and recognition of the arduous process of becoming a member of the Corps. Another altar, he says, is

“an expeditionary ethos” and preparedness for immediate employment in every “clime and place.”

He suggests that the Marines measure themselves by “results in the field, not inputs like funding levels or force size.” Of all the services, he says, Marines most emphasize the human dimension and art of war over science (e.g., technology). The Marine Corps invests the largest portion of its budget in personnel and invests more per capita on selection, initial training and development than any other branch. It makes less distinction between its internal branches than the others and considers every member part of the team.

He finds the Marines to be the military branch most concerned with defending their legitimacy because they do not “own” a distinctive domain of the operating battlespace. But they need not worry, Hoffman concludes, because their “expeditionary ethos and devotion to readiness are highly relevant for today's uncertain age and resource-constrained situation.”

Inspired by Hoffman's article, I would like to hear from anyone interested in studying and describing the organizational culture or institutional personality of the Foreign Service, for the purpose of strengthening its voice in national security affairs and helping us better explain who we are and what we do. Please contact me at [johnson@afsa.org](mailto:johnson@afsa.org). ■