Introduction

IN 2005, IN RESPONSE TO THE POLITICAL, CULTURAL, and military challenges facing the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, General James Mattis[1] established a radical new Marine Corps cultural initiative. The goal was simple: teach Marines to interact successfully with the local population in areas of conflict. The implications, however, were anything but simple: transform an elite Spartan military culture founded on the principles of "locate, close with and destroy the enemy"[2] into a "culturally savvy" Marine Corps. Yet how does one create a Marine as equally capable of sitting down crossed-legged and drinking tea with Iraqi sheikhs as seizing the famed island of Tarawa in a bloody and brutal fight?

This book examines the seven-year trajectory of the Marine Corps' efforts to institute a radical, irregular warfare–focused culture policy into a military organization that views itself as structured and trained to fight big "conventional" wars. It is a tale about the internal cultural wars fought over whether and how the Marine Corps should "*return to its killing/destroying business*" (as the one staff sergeant states above) versus a Corps where "*Knowing your surroundings and getting the populace to work with you instead of against you seems to be the most effective way to win the wars of today and tomorrow.*"

In contrast to studies of policy or organizational change, which focus on the policy-*making* organization(s) and/or leadership, this book examines the policy-*receiving* organization and the way that individuals within that organization make sense of the policy and adapt accordingly. The result is
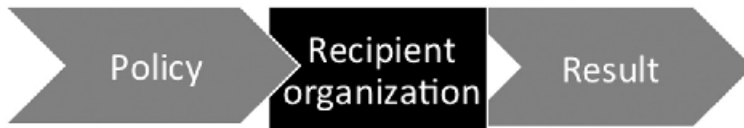
FIGURE I.1 Top-down view of policy implementation

a "bottom-up" rather than "top-down" approach to understanding organizational change and policy implementation.[3] Centering my analysis on the culture and identity of the Marine Corps, I examine the internal processes of interpreting, developing, and reworking Department of Defense (DoD) and governmental culture policies to fit within Marine Corps ideals and ways of thinking about and doing business.

The following pages present the challenges and issues of military adaptation and change from the perspectives of Marines from all ranks across the Corps, using their words, their stories, and their experiences: employing an "emic" (internal or native) rather than an "etic" (external or outsider) interpretation.[4] These emic perspectives are based on data from both a six-year longitudinal and qualitative anthropological study of Marine Corps culture training and education programs combined with the quantitative results of an online survey of 2,406 Marines regarding culture and language training and skills in the Corps. Integrating field data from over eighty in-depth interviews, field observations at five Marine Corps bases and nine schools, policy and doctrinal documents, and the statistical results from the survey, I examine how Marines across the Corps (from recruits to general officers, drill instructors to curriculum writers, aviation mechanics to intelligence officers, and those deployed from Afghanistan to Iraq, the Philippines, Japan, Somalia, or Columbia) have sought to incorporate and reconcile two seemingly incompatible identities—fearless warrior and culturally savvy Marine—into training, education, and operations.

This analysis portrays the Corps (and its Marines) as an organization with an independent cultural identity and will—separate and unique from that of the larger Department of Defense, the U.S. government, or, in some cases, even its senior leadership (including the Commandant). I argue that the Corps is not simply a passive recipient of external policy directed from above (Figure I.1); rather, individuals and groups within the Corps interpret, imagine, redefine, and shape policy directives to fit within the norms, processes, structures, and cultural ideals shared within the organization (Figure I.2).
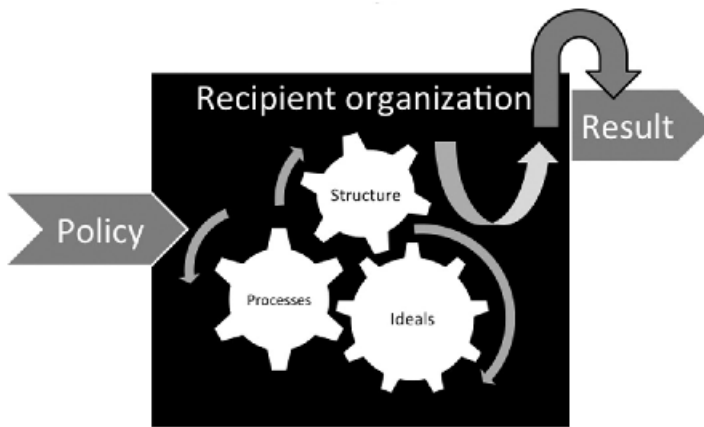
FIGURE I.2 Bottom-up view of policy implementation

As a result, external policies may have entered various Marine Corps organizations in one form, but they "exited" the organization reworked into new forms that fit within the cultural ideals of the Corps. To use a colorful Marine Corps term, the new culture policy became "*Marinized*"—becoming steeped long enough in Marine Corps ways of doing things that it "looks, smells, and tastes Marine."

This process of adaptation and incorporation of the strange "foreign" culture policy into Marine Corps ways of thinking and doing occurred through four unique, though contiguous, methods. As I describe in detail in the chapters that follow, I have termed these four methods: *simplification, translation, processing,* and *reshaping*. Rather than simply rejecting or directly obeying the new external policy directives, Marines and their organizations have used these various methods to adapt and integrate elements of the "foreign" and seemingly incongruous culture policy into Marine Corps ways of acting and seeing the world. The result is a fascinating synthesis of old and new, akin in many ways to the mixing of indigenous and foreign religious elements in syncretic movements.

While this book is based on replicable and comparative scientific field and statistical research methodologies, as Clifford Geertz argues, good ethnographies should provide "thick rich description,"[5] creating a full picture of the world of the subjects in the study by describing intimate complete details of their experiences, rather than painting a thin generalized overall picture. Thus this analysis presents the people in the study using their own words and the world they see through their own eyes.

Equally important, this study takes a culturally relativistic stance, portraying the Marines' viewpoints and experiences without offering judgment, policy, or other evaluations, or any other form of program recommendations. The intention here is *not to evaluate or measure* how well the Marine Corps has adapted to new cultural aspects of the battlespace, but *to analyze and explain why* Marines have interpreted and developed policy and programs as they have. The goal of the study is not to provide an assessment, but to develop a scholarly and theoretical understanding of the internal processes and dynamic changes that occur as a military (or theoretically any) organization attempts to make sense of, adapt to, and implement policy change.

Learning "Marine Speak": Language as a Window into Marine Corps Culture

Perhaps one of the most fascinating aspects of the Marine Corps is its dual identity as an American military organization—with a codified structure and specific governmental and organizational purpose—and as a unique, separate subculture within the United States.[6] Like other subcultures embedded within American society, Marines have a distinct identity, language, history, set of traditions and rituals, and even belief system. However, like all other U.S. government and military organizations, the Marine Corps also has a deliberately created structure and function that must respond to the demands of the secretary of defense and the U.S. government. As a result, the Marine Corps as an institution *deliberately and consciously* reflects upon its cultural ideals and practices—producing mountains of written and electronic materials that promote, advertise, and teach the official Marine Corps culture to civilians and Marines alike.

What is fascinating about this officially created cultural identity—the poster board slogans; the famed quotes of former Marines from commandant to lance corporal; the stark no-nonsense advertising images; the Combat Camera video clips and the eye-catching phrases—however, is that the slogans and images "are not just a bumper sticker," as Major Wagner explained to me in an interview. In fact, many of these classic Marine sayings, and the values and identity that underlie them, have become a cornerstone of Marine Corps folklore, language, and identity, frequently repeated in day-to-day conversations to reinforce and teach basic Marine concepts and beliefs.

As I illustrate in the following chapters, one excellent way to understand and describe Marines is to let them speak in their own language. In fact, Marines have a term for their own unique dialect of English: "Marine speak." These sayings are not simply trite phrases but a window into the Marine Corps way of doing things and its approaches to thinking about and solving problems. For it is through their sayings that Marines teach and model a distinct history and identity that influence how Marines interpret and respond both to external policy and the new aspects of the battlespace.

When I first began my research with the Marine Corps, I viewed these colorful sayings as simply quaint Marine Corps language—propaganda designed to sell a certain image to the public. However, as my research continued, I began to realize how Marine Corps sayings and popular phrases were a cornerstone of Marine self-image: used to teach a moral, to affirm a shared identity, and even to admonish fellow Marines who were not living up to core ideals. In daily speech, Marines would frequently spout out a saying meant to remind their colleagues of a particular lesson or value that needed reinforcing. This cultural norm of expressing emotions and experiences through socially understood sayings is reminiscent of Lila Abu Lughod's[7] analysis of the use of poetry by Bedouin women. Marine sayings, like Bedouin poetry, become a form of culturally understood indirect speech in which the shared stories and meanings behind the sayings or poems communicate concepts or feelings that are unacceptable to discuss in public but completely understood among the speakers.

Due to cultural ideals of toughness, endurance, and invulnerability to pain, Marines do not publicly demonstrate or accept expressions of pain, distress, or frustration. Thus a common response to a fellow Marine who is complaining or expressing difficulty with an issue is not to provide a lecture or (worse) empathize, but to simply end the conversation with a well-understood phrase or saying that illustrates and reinforces the qualities and characteristics that the Marine ought to be demonstrating. For example, a Marine might state, "There's no 'I' in team" (everyone has to work together) to a subordinate who is expressing frustration about another unit that is being uncooperative. No more explanation would be necessary. Rather than directly chide a fellow "Devil Dog" who is waxing too long on a subject, a Marine will respond, "Give it to me Barney style" (give me a simple explanation), or state abruptly, "Where's the 'So What'?" (get to the main point), or "Give me the 80 percent solution" (don't be a perfectionist), emphasizing the need for simplicity and

speed in their work. In discussing an unexpected assignment far outside of one's job description—for example, requiring an infantryman to take on the financial management of the unit's project—rather than offering sympathy, a fellow "Leatherneck" will typically respond, "Every Marine a rifleman" (all Marines are capable of the same work; essentially interchangeable) or "semper gumby" (always flexible), and both Marines would then simply shrug and move on to their work.

One of the most interesting words in the entire Marine Corps vocabulary is the verb to "Marinize" something, which means, as Colonel Irons explained in an interview, "to make it look, sound, smell, and taste Marine." This word, above all else, describes the process that I observed of transforming the new policy of creating culturally competent Marines into something that would fit within Marine Corps norms, ideals, and organizational structures. In the following chapters, I describe this transformation over the six years of my fieldwork. Each chapter is centered around a Marine Corps cultural saying that illustrates core cultural values and Marine Corps ways of doing things. Through these sayings, and the Marines' explanations of the way they see the world, the reader can make sense of each of the steps used to "Marinize" culture policy.

To understand and explain the Marine Corps process of "Marinizing" the new external culture policies into existing Marine ideals and ways of seeing the world, I have divided the book into two parts. Part I, "Ideals," describes and explains Marine Corps culture, ideals, and organization from the perspectives of the many Marines whom I interviewed and observed during my six years of fieldwork. Part II, "Realities," then examines the everyday, gritty reality of implementing a culture policy that requires building skills in negotiation, cross-cultural understanding, and even "tea drinking" into this ideal expeditionary Spartan warrior culture.

Setting the stage for this analysis, chapter 1, "When the Boots Hit the Ground," describes the theoretical and methodological basis of the study. Part I, "Ideals," next begins with chapter 2, "Every Marine a Rifleman." Basing the chapter on this oft-repeated Marine Corps saying, I explain the fundamental philosophy in the Corps that Marines are not individuals but part of a Spartan, selfless, flexible, interchangeable team. Chapter 3, "Soldiers of the Sea," describes Marine Corps history, structure, and function, revealing how the expeditionary nature of the Corps and its close maritime ties to the Navy are reflected in the Corps' focus on mission accomplishment and a

resulting flexible set of structures. Chapter 4, "Honor, Courage, and Commitment," follows the process of inculcating these values through training at the recruit depots. Finally, "Tip of the Spear," chapter 5, examines how Marines' self-concept as leaders (both personally and as a Corps) is developed through officer training and education, creating and selecting officers (both commissioned and non-commissioned) who exemplify the Corps' values of selflessness, sacrifice, flexibility, decisiveness, and bias for action.

Part II then follows the Marine Corps' efforts to implement culture policy—in theater, in planning, in training and education, and through its manpower system—using four overlapping methods: *simplification, translation, processing, and reshaping*. As I argue in chapter 6, "Building the Plane as We're Flying It," Marines first responded to the need for cultural skills in theater by using the method of *simplification*—viewing the early combat years in Iraq not as something radically different or unusual, but rather as simply "doing what Marines always do." Thus initially Marines rapidly and flexibly adapted to the situation, relying on their "semper gumby," can-do attitude and hiring interpreters and native speakers to "decode" what was unfamiliar. This initial sense of success, however, was soon replaced by frustration as it became apparent that cultural understanding was dramatically more complex, demanding an entirely new way of thinking about the problems in the battlespace. In chapter 7, "The 80 Percent Solution," I illustrate how Marines turned to subject matter experts (SMEs) to analyze the situation and then "*translate*" their knowledge into familiar military ways of analyzing information through graphics, PowerPoint presentations, and computerized simulation programs. The resulting difficulties in speaking across military and academic languages, I argue, illustrated that cross-cultural miscommunication was not simply limited to working with foreign cultures. Chapter 8, "Where's the 'So What'?," discusses how the Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL) focused on embedding culture and language training into accepted Marine Corps *processes*, turning the unfamiliar, "squishy," multidimensional concept of culture into a strangely restructured, familiar, linear military training format. Finally, in chapter 9, "There's No 'I' in Team," I illustrate how the Corps *reshaped* original government policy mandates to create culture, language, and regional specialists, paradoxically developing, in response, a *nonspecialist* regional, culture, and language familiarization program. This program fit within the existing Marine Corps organizational structures based on a manpower system designed to move "faces"

into "spaces" rather than specialists into niches. By "*Marinizing*," or creating solutions that truly "looked, smelled, and tasted" Marine, the Corps has been able to assign a cultural and regional specialization to every career Marine without either having to change its fundamental ideal of "every Marine a rifleman" or significantly shifting its manpower system.

By shifting research on the military from a "top-down," outside-in approach emphasizing the national strategic level (with its focus on political/ military leadership) to a "bottom-up" inside-out organizational and internal cultural perspective, this study forces scholars to rethink the degree to which national policy makers and military leaders are the only (or even primary) influence on military institutions and their cultures. Using an anthropological perspective, this study depicts militaries as active participants in translating, redefining, and adapting external policies and directives to fit within their cultural and organizational ideals and ways of doing business. The result is a multifaceted analysis that forces readers to reevaluate their assumptions about the U.S. military, the process of policy implementation, and the role of organizational culture and identity in influencing organizational change. Thus ultimately this book is a cultural case study: both of the Marine Corps and of the challenges of its shifting military identity in a new world of irregular warfare.