General Raymond T. Odierno, Chief of Staff of the Army, learned from his three combat tours in Iraq that the U.S. military needs to better understand local populations and their social, political, and cultural attributes. He concluded that the more we understand the human domain, the less combat force it takes to prevail in counterinsurgency. Similarly, during his confirmation hearing before taking command of U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Afghanistan in June 2010, General David Petraeus told Congress that the decisive terrain in counterinsurgency was “the human terrain.” These leaders understand that effective counterinsurgency requires protecting and eliciting cooperation from the population—the human terrain—which, in turn, requires a keen understanding of the population’s social and cultural characteristics.

By CHRISTOPHER J. LAMB, JAMES DOUGLAS ORTON, MICHAEL C. DAVIES, and THEODORE T. PIKULSKY
The Army created Human Terrain Teams (HTTs) to provide combat forces in Afghanistan and Iraq with knowledge of the human terrain, or put differently, “sociocultural knowledge.” HTTs are small, cross-functional teams of specially trained military officers, research managers, and civilian social scientists that are typically appended to brigade-sized units. If HTTs do their job well, they can advise commanders on how to win popular support and isolate insurgents. If HTTs perform poorly, or are used unwisely or ignored by commanders, military operations are more likely to alienate populations and make success unattainable. The performance of HTTs is therefore intrinsically important both now in Afghanistan and in any future military operations against irregular forces.

In the past, the U.S. military has been slow to recognize the need for sociocultural knowledge, much less to institutionalize the capability to provide it. Now, however, with glowing endorsement that captured the attention of Congress. Later, it became apparent that while HTTs often did good work and were widely appreciated by commanders, they were slow to provide value, inconsistent in performance, and insufficient in number. Ultimately, the HTTs failed to ameliorate growing cross-cultural tensions between U.S. forces and Afghans and were unable to make a major contribution to the counterinsurgency effort. Eventually, performance concerns precipitated a number of internal and external reviews of HTS and HTTs.

Commanders viewed HTT performance differently than others. Most commanders, when asked, state that their HTTs are quite useful, while HTT members themselves—those who have studied them and those charged with their oversight—are more likely to state that HTT performance is variable. The new study from NDU explains the origins of the performance variation, why the large majority of commanders found HTTs useful, and why HTTs collectively were unable to make a major contribution to the counterinsurgency effort. It also explains the tremendous challenges the HTS program faced in starting and rapidly expanding a nontraditional military program and why some challenges were met successfully while others were not. This article identifies HTS management challenges with an in-depth history of the program and provides an internal assessment of HTT performance based on 10 key small-team performance factors.

Any study of HTTs must address the criteria for evaluating their performance. Previous studies agree that HTT performance should be judged by how well a team provides sociocultural knowledge to improve a commander’s decisionmaking. They also agree that feedback from commanders is the primary means of making that assessment. Our study used this criterion and these data, but also considered performance evaluations from other sources. The study relied on interviews with more than 100 team members, former HTS managers, commanders, and other experts to assess the factors that best explain variations in team performance. Before analyzing team performance, however, we first developed a detailed chronology of HTS history and management issues.

Historical Overview of HTS

A former HTS director acknowledged some of the controversy surrounding the program when she observed that the “HTS story is one of challenges, rewards, stumbles, and successes.” The hundreds of articles written about HTS are polarized around advocates who focus too much on the program’s rewards and successes and critics who emphasize its challenges and stumbles. To conduct a rigorous study of HTS, it was first necessary to generate a thorough and balanced history that recognizes program achievements without ignoring shortcomings. That history can be summarized as a set of sometimes overlapping developmental periods.

The first period, gestation, began following the terror attacks on September 11, 2001, when the need to understand human terrain in order “to help narrow the search space for terrorists and terror groups” became evident. The momentum for more investigation in sociocultural knowledge increased after the intervention in Iraq when experts pointedly told Congress the United States did not have sufficient knowledge of the human terrain to conduct a counterinsurgency operation. However, it was not until 2005 that a new organization supporting warfighters funded an effort to produce a device that would store information about the human terrain of a defined area including the social networks involved in the production and placement of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Several HTS progenitors convinced the Joint IED Defeat Organization (JIEDDO) that the solution required a nontechnological component with human experts, a shift in perspective that advanced further when 10th Mountain Division submitted an operational needs statement in late 2005 requesting such a capability.

The second HTS phase began with its actual birth in June 2006 when JIEDDO officially agreed to fund five test teams. Getting the HTS program off the ground proved difficult and time-consuming. HTS leaders had to quickly recruit a management team and find a way to field teams to test the concept. Rapidly hiring 25 people to populate the first experimental teams was not possible, so by September the number was scaled down to a single team to be fielded in early 2007.
The third developmental stage of the program was its proof of concept. The 82nd Airborne Division agreed to test the first experimental HTT with one of its brigades deploying to Afghanistan in early 2007. The HTT, designated AF1, arrived in Afghanistan in February 2007 to join 4th Brigade, 82nd Airborne, in Khost. Initially the brigade had no idea how to use the team. The team members tested a variety of activities to demonstrate their utility, but it was not until Operation Maiwand in June 2007 that the brigade realized how useful the HTT could be. The brigade commander and his staff concluded that the HTT’s work with the population in advance of operations helped reduce kinetic activity and therefore lowered brigade casualties.

Meanwhile, multiple requests from other field commanders coalesced into a Joint Urgent Operational Needs Statement issued by U.S. Central Command in April 2007 that requested 26 HTTs across two theaters of war. The original HTS model for developing HTTs changed with the sudden increase in demand. Previously, HTS management focused on the need to create, field, and test the experimental team in Afghanistan.12 Now there was little time to analyze the AF1 experience critically. Instead, the replacement team for AF1 and five new teams that were quickly being trained and deployed to Iraq became the proof-of-concept effort for the HTS program. The performance of the five Iraq teams, IZ1 through IZ5, was mixed. For example, the level of interpersonal conflict on IZ1 was so “untenable” that individual members left the team to work directly with battalions, and IZ5 “fractured” and had to be withdrawn.13

Given developments at the theater level, the emphasis on building operational HTT capacity was understandable. The Pentagon was firmly backing new capabilities for irregular warfare. In November 2007, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates cited the program as an example of necessary adaptation for irregular warfare. He noted that bringing in “professional anthropologists as advisors” was healthy and was “having a very real impact.”14 A few months later, after negative depictions emerged, Gates continued to back the program, characterizing any missteps as “attendant growing pains” common in new programs. With U.S. Central Command, General Petraeus, and Secretary Gates all supporting HTS, the nascent effort was safe for the time being and its budget was expanded to cover the costs of deploying more teams.

HTS then entered a period of rapid expansion that its leaders would later describe as a “catastrophic success.”16 HTS managers quickly had to recruit, select, train, and retain qualified personnel to field 26 teams. For one thing, securing quality recruits was a challenge. To attract and select personnel, HTS was obliged to use the existing omnibus contract TRADOC had in place, a contract that was later described by the HTS program manager as “totally and completely inadequate” for this purpose.17 Consequently, questionable personnel were screened into the program. Even so, HTS struggled to fully staff the growing
Human Terrain System Soldiers and civilians speak with Afghans during key leader engagement in southern Kandahar Province.
number of teams. In 2008, the program had a 30 percent attrition rate during training that effectively cost $7 million\textsuperscript{18} and meant a training cycle had to be about 50 percent larger than absolute demand.

The overwhelming number of trainees who left the program simply quit. Much of their dissatisfaction was attributed to the inadequacy of the training program, and in particular, the poor relationship between the training and the tasks performed in the field. The factors that produced high-quality team performance were unknown, so training involved an element of trial and error. HTS management did not systematically collect feedback from field experience, but adjusted the training curriculum based on its impressions of what worked well in the field. The training was also complicated by variation in class composition. It was not uncommon to have an incoming class with many more team leaders and research managers than social scientists or human terrain analysts. An uneven distribution made it difficult to assemble teams and have them train with brigades prior to deployment.

Recruitment, training, and other management challenges were exacerbated by increasing public criticism. In October 2007, the American Anthropological Association cited perceived ethical shortcomings,\textsuperscript{23} and in May 2008, the Society of Applied Anthropology similarly expressed “grave concerns” about the program. Some well-publicized HTT failures in the field worsened the perception that the program was struggling, and it seemed like the tide of informed opinion was turning against it. For example, a July 10, 2008, editorial in Nature stated that the program could be a win-win effort for local populations and the U.S. military. Five months later, the influential magazine reversed its position and called for the “swift close” of the program, concluding, “In theory, it is a good idea. . . . In practice, however, it has been a disaster.”\textsuperscript{24}

In fall 2009, HTS entered a critical yearlong period marked by the need to expand HTTs in the field while management conflicts were on the rise. HTS leaders had to resolve training and retention problems, counter negative publicity, improve HTT performance, and find a way to prevent HTT disasters that alienated commanders and hurt the program’s reputation even while overseeing the drawdown of HTTs from Iraq and increasing the number of teams in Afghanistan from 6 to 22. Afghanistan’s human terrain was the centerpiece of General Stanley McChrystal’s new campaign plan for Afghanistan, and there was great pressure to field capable HTTs there quickly. Congress increased funding to meet the new requirements in Afghanistan, but it also signaled reservations about the program by requiring a study of the management and organization of HTS to be delivered by March 1, 2010.\textsuperscript{25} In a March 31 meeting with reporters, Secretary of the Army John McHugh also implied the program was on a probationary status by refusing to endorse it, stating instead that he was “neither happy nor unhappy”\textsuperscript{26} with HTS.

While HTS took on these challenges, TRADOC moved to exert more control over the program. TRADOC leaders approved a new contract with the company that HTS thought was the root cause of its recruitment problems and agreed to job descriptions for HTT positions that were not accurate and that complicated recruitment and retention of quality personnel, all without HTS input.\textsuperscript{27} TRADOC also initiated two internal investigations of HTS,\textsuperscript{28} and finally, in June 2010, replaced the HTS program manager with a trusted insider from the TRADOC staff. Other members of the original HTS team left as well, and soon there was a completely new management team in place that was firmly under TRADOC control.

Under the new management team, the program entered a period of more intense Army institutionalization at a precarious time for HTS.
HTT Performance: An Explanation

To explain HTT performance, it is first necessary to explain why commanders typically rated HTTs more highly than the people who managed or studied them did, and second, to identify the optimum role HTTs could play in an integrated cultural intelligence architecture. It is clear that the large majority of commanders thought their HTTs were useful (see table 28). However, it is not immediately apparent why commanders valued HTTs (or not).

To determine levels of commander expectations for HTT performance, we categorized commander praise and criticisms of HTTs according to three levels of cultural knowledge previously postulated by some subject matter experts. The levels roughly equate to the social science objectives of accurate description, explanation, and prediction:

■ First level: Cultural awareness. Basic familiarity with language and religion and an understanding and observance of local norms and boundaries. This roughly equates to good description of human terrain. It was often observed by commanders that such description is needed at the tactical level, down to battalion and company levels if not below.

■ Second level: Cultural understanding. The “why” of behavior embodied in perceptions, mindsets, attitudes, and customs. This roughly equates to explanation of human terrain effectively. The implications of these behaviors and their drivers. This roughly equates to anticipa-

tion of popular behavior. The ability to anticipate reactions can shape theater-level decisionmaking.

Brigade commanders were not predisposed to believe HTTs would make contributions at one level of cultural knowledge or another. They generally had a “wait and see attitude” about HTT performance. However, the majority of those commanders who provided more specific reasoning for why HTTs were helpful underscored their contributions at the first level, noting they provided continuity of situational awareness across multiple brigade deployments and faster situational awareness than was possible without an HTT. They also noted that the teams could help spread this basic situational awareness through their forces by providing training on basic Afghan customs (dos and don’ts) and instruction on how to collect information on human terrain effectively.

Fewer commanders, typically those who worked with the handful of widely acknowledged superlative HTTs, testified that the HTTs contributed at the second level of cultural knowledge. These teams not only helped describe the human terrain, but they also explained the behaviors in ways that helped commanders tailor their brigade operations. In this vein, commanders stated that with HTT help, they could better understand the consequences of their decisions, which facilitated course of action analysis and other benefits, such as:

■ reduced friction with the population (which in turn reduced casualties)
■ support for political reconciliation by identifying who had power, trust, and resources, and what their motives were

■ improved information operations by helping tailor message content and style to reach Afghan audiences better
■ better “damage limitation” when untoward events occurred that had to be explained and compensated for with the Afghan populace.

Rarely did brigade commanders assess HTT performance in ways that suggest they were capable of the third level of cultural knowledge, which provides deep insights on the origins and implications of Afghan behaviors and decisionmaking. The best explanation for why U.S. forces need all three levels of cultural knowledge is a 2010 paper by Major General Michael T. Flynn, USA, and other military officers entitled Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan. The paper articulates a cultural intelligence architecture that makes it possible to identify the ideal role for HTTs and to better interpret commander reactions to HTTs in practice.

Fixing Intel notes that in counterinsurgency, “the most salient problems are attitudinal, cultural, and human,” and that theater commanders need to keep abreast of these concerns on a daily basis. In a counterinsurgency, small units supply key intelligence to higher commands rather than the other way around. For this reason, all soldiers must be intelligence collectors who enable higher level analysts to create “comprehensive narratives” for each district that “describe changes in the economy, atmospherics, development, corruption, governance, and enemy activity” and “provide the kind of context that is invaluable up the chain of command.” However, General Flynn argues that brigade-level commanders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison of Studies Sampling Commander HTT Assessments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Point Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center for Naval Analyses Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute for Defense Analyses Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Defense University Study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
must authorize a select group of analysts to retrieve information from the ground level and make it available to a broader audience, similar to the way journalists work. These analysts must leave their chairs and visit the people who operate at the grassroots level—civil affairs officers, Provincial Reconstruction Teams, atmospherics teams, Afghan liaison officers, female engagement teams, willing [nongovernmental organizations] and development organizations, United Nations officials, psychological operations teams, human terrain teams, and staff officers with infantry battalions—to name a few.31

In short, primary collection is done at the small unit level where there are “many sensors,” and analysis of the diverse descriptive inputs is done at the brigade level, where there are more resources, and then the information is passed along to the regional (or division) level to create a comprehensive composite understanding of the situation.

The Flynn explanation for how the entire force, aided by “select teams of civilian analysts,” should produce cultural intelligence helps make sense of the diverse commander assessments of HTT performance. The few, small, and costly HTTs best served brigade commanders at the second level of cultural knowledge rather than being used at the first level as small-unit data collectors. If the teams were used as data collectors, they perhaps pleased commanders but ultimately were too few in number to make a difference. As one brigade commander commented, using HTTs as collectors was like using a squirt gun to fight a forest fire. HTTs cannot serve as a substitute for a larger, more comprehensive effort to collect and analyze cultural intelligence. Instead, the optimum role for HTTs is to perform at the second level of cultural knowledge where they can help explain local human terrain to the command staff and facilitate decisionmaking. HTTs that did so improved brigade command decisionmaking and received the most effusive commander praise.

With the nuances of commander assessments and the optimal role for HTTs clarified, it is easier to make sense of other factors that determined the teams’ performance. There were several broad preconditions for HTT productivity, the first of which was beyond the control of HTS and the HTTs:

- HTTs had to be appended to a brigade commander and staff that were committed to a population-centric counterinsurgency approach.
- HTTs had to prove to typically skeptical commanders that they could make a contribution.
- HTTs had to overcome the many intrinsic constraints on productivity that characterized the HTS program at the organizational, team, and individual levels.

These preconditions for success underscore several points. First, there are limits to what any sociocultural program can do without a consensus among brigade commanders on the critical importance of human terrain, the role their own troops play in collecting human terrain data, and the analytic capability HTTs are supposed to provide to the brigade staffs as part of a larger, theater-wide human terrain-centric intelligence architecture. Absent a “whole force” approach to developing and using sociocultural knowledge such as General Flynn envisioned, the ability of HTS or any other small sociocultural teams to make a difference is quite limited.

Moreover, even if brigade commanders were open to the population-centric approach to counterinsurgency that theater commanders were emphasizing—and this has never uniformly been the case32—they still took time for HTTs to prove themselves. This reduced efficiency, especially given the yearlong brigade tours for Afghanistan that forced teams to repeatedly adjust to new commanders. In such circumstances, it was important to field cohesive teams that could be immediately productive. Ideally, HTTs should have been given more general expertise on Afghanistan and greater access to specific information about the areas they would operate in as early as possible. They should have been well-functioning teams composed of individuals with diverse expertise that trained together, bonded, and found their place on brigade staffs prior to deployment. They should have relieved predecessor teams in the field with a period of overlap with the outgoing teams, not as individual replacements. They should have had longer periods of deployment to deepen their expertise on local conditions and to permit the desired overlap with relieving HTTs and brigades (see the larger study for a detailed explanation of small cross-functional team performance factors).

For a variety of reasons, none of these conditions applied. Instead, HTTs were conceptualized, created, and managed in a way that made it hard for them to serve as cultural knowledge integrators for brigade commanders. Among other things, quickly winning commanders’ confidence was difficult given the way HTTs were raised and trained. Since HTT members were individually assigned to teams after arriving in country, they did not typically have a chance to get to know the other members, much less the brigade commanders and
staffs. Without predeployment training as a team, HTTs could not work out team dynamics in a less stressful environment or establish team decision-making processes until they reached the field where each new team member’s arrival potentially disrupted established productive team practices. Deploying members singly inadvertently signaled that they were valued as individual assets rather than as teams. In a stressful combat environment, the failure to bond as teams was sometimes crippling.

Moreover, the training the teams received was not based on a theory of HTT performance that was tested by feedback from actual in-country experience. Thus, the HTS program had no way to improve HTT learning and prepare teams for the significant challenges they would face. Some teams overcame their interpersonal conflicts and learned how to channel conflict into productive avenues that improved team performance, but many did not. If teams could not resolve conflicts productively, they stood little chance of developing a cohesive team culture or trust. In addition, the quality of HTT recruits was highly variable. Many recruits were alienated during training or joined for the wrong reasons and were unproductive after they deployed. In many cases, team members were not mentally or physically conditioned to operate in hostile or austere environments. In the rush to institute the program, HTS relied on high individual member remuneration, and even so it was hard to find and attract individuals with deep regional and linguistic expertise. Job satisfaction on high-performing small teams is more a function of team bonding and productivity than individual remuneration, but the program was structured to make the former difficult and to rely on the latter.

With so many impediments to high performance, HTTs were critically dependent on stellar and versatile leadership. Leaders had to get their teams operating smoothly and prove themselves to commanders quickly since their standard length of deployment was only 9 months.

leaders had to get their teams operating smoothly and prove themselves to commanders quickly since their standard length of deployment was only 9 months.

by repeatedly integrating newly arriving members who deployed individually in staggered timeframes rather than as teams. This was a difficult proposition, and unfortunately, HTT leader performance was as variable as HTT performance. Autocratic team leaders were particularly out of place given the composition of the teams and their mission. They were a major factor in notable team failures. Those leaders who were able to overcome the many impediments to HTT effectiveness were indispensable and heroic catalysts who were much admired by their team members. The HTS selection process did not screen team leader candidates for the attributes that correlated with such high performance; their presence was largely a matter of happenstance.

With performance constrained by so many external and internal factors, it is not surprising that it was variable. Even so, most commanders valued HTTs, which is a testimony to the people who populated high-performing HTTs, but also to the general lack of sociocultural knowledge in U.S. military forces that made even limited HTT contributions so necessary and conspicuous.

Future of HTS

The HTT experience demonstrates that it is difficult to develop sociocultural knowledge quickly; difficult to retain, update, and transfer that knowledge between units; and almost impossible to do these things without a well-developed concept for HTT performance that is based on empirical feedback from actual experience in-theater. Thus, the U.S. military needs a standing capability to generate a HTT-like capability when U.S. forces go to war. To execute this transition, HTS will have to overcome a great deal of organizational inertia. The U.S. military has a strong cultural aversion to irregular warfare and to devoting resources to sociocultural knowledge.33 This aversion is demonstrated repeatedly as the military abandons sociocultural knowledge and the means to acquire it once conflicts are over. Despite expressions of senior leader support, the HTS program is now being curtailed to save resources, and many believe it is an open question whether the knowledge painfully acquired by the program will be retained.

One way to make the future of HTS more secure would be to house it in an organization that is predisposed to value sociocultural knowledge. The U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) meets the requirement for an organization that is familiar with what it takes to field small, high-performing, cross-functional teams such as HTTs. USASOC commands Special Forces, which already use a female version of Human Terrain Teams as well as civil affairs and military information support operations units that would benefit from better sociocultural knowledge. USASOC is part of U.S. Special Operations Command, which is often assigned the lead for irregular warfare and has other units (for example, Navy SEALs) that use Human Terrain Teams of one sort or another. For these and other reasons, USASOC might be a good fit for HTS.

Whether or not HTS is housed in USASOC, the need for a standing program to provide sociocultural knowledge should be well recognized after a decade of difficult military operations. Some Army observers, for example, believe the need for cultural understanding is one of the “top 5” lessons learned from the post-9/11 wars.34 If this lesson is acted upon and HTS survives, those who lead it into the future hopefully will benefit from a thorough understanding of how and why HTTs performed as they did over the past decade. In that case, it should be possible to improve both HTT performance and chances for success in future irregular warfare operations. If, however, the program cannot learn from the past, or fades away for lack of support or other reasons, it is quite likely that the future of sociocultural knowledge in the
U.S. military will be much like its past—a story of too little knowledge, obtained and disseminated at great cost, often arriving too late to ensure success. JFQ

This article is based on the authors’ book entitled Human Terrain Teams: An Organizational Innovation for Sociocultural Knowledge in Irregular Warfare (Institute for World Politics Press, forthcoming).

NOTES

1. Doyle McManus, “McManus: A smaller, smarter military: The best-equipped army in the world can still lose a war if it doesn’t understand the people it’s fighting,” Los Angeles Times, April 22, 2012.


5. For an explanation of the variables, see James Douglas Orton with Christopher J. Lamb, “Inter-agency National Security Teams: Can Social Science Contribute?” PRISM 2, no. 2 (March 2011), 47–64.


13. Ibid., 155, 236–237.


16. TRADOC, Office of Internal Review and Audit Compliance, results briefing, May 12, 2010, attached as appendix G to Clinton et al., 237–250.

17. Steve Fondacaro, former HTS program manager, interview by authors, October 25, 2011.

18. TRADOC, Office of Internal Review and Audit Compliance, results briefing, May 12, 2010, attached as appendix G to Clinton et al., 237–250.

19. AAA; Zenia Helbig, Personal Perspective on the Human Terrain System Program, delivered at the AAA’s annual conference, November 29, 2007; Fawzia Sheikh, “Army to Boost Human Terrain Team Effort Despite Growing Pains,” Inside the Army, no. 22 (June 2008).


24. Ironically, what is publically known about these investigations substantiated HTS management’s view that elements of TRADOC responsible for contracting and personnel hiring performed poorly. See Clinton et al., 42, 135, appendix G.

25. HTS established new “policies and procedures in areas as diverse as ethical certification, human resources, peer product review, civilian evaluations, team product quality control, and individual position qualification.” See Hamilton.


27. U.S. Special Operations Command had some classified programs related to human terrain under way earlier.

28. Jebb, Hummel, Chacho, 3; Clinton et al., 153; data obtained from S.K. Numrich, IDA, email on April 18, 2012.


31. Ibid., 17.

32. Not all unit commanders have embraced or supported a population-centric counterinsurgency campaign plan for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The debate over its value continues to the present day. See Elisabeth Bumiller, “West Point Is Divided on a War Doctrine’s Fate,” The New York Times, May 27, 2012.
