



Civilian Expeditionary Workforce member engages local business owner in discussion regarding poultry feed production, Kandahar Province (Kentucky National Guard/Dallas Kratzer)

Turnaround

The Untold Story of the Human Terrain System

By Clifton Green

The U.S. Army's Human Terrain System (HTS), a program that embedded social scientists with deployed units, endured a rough start as it began deploying teams to Iraq and Afghanistan in 2007.¹ These

early experiences had a lasting impact on the program. Although critics have written extensively about HTS struggles with internal mismanagement, most accounts simply cataloged problems, yielded little insight into

the organization's progress over time, and ultimately gave the impression that HTS was never able to make needed corrections. Far from being a failure, though, HTS is a remarkable turnaround story and should serve as a case study for how organizations can implement fundamental organizational changes. Even more importantly, the reformed version of HTS provides

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Human Terrain System member speaks with Afghan during Key Leader Engagement in Kandahar Province to discourage locals from hiding contraband for Taliban (DOD/Crystal Davis)

a template that could significantly improve existing Department of Defense (DOD) support to deployed civilians, thousands of whom have provided critical services to war-fighters around the globe.

History

Inception to Government Transition.

HTS was developed as a response to concerns about mismanagement of U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, in particular the lack of cultural understanding of these countries demonstrated by the U.S. military. Soldiers, commanded by leaders with limited cross-cultural experience, were being asked to navigate a complex foreign environment with little or no training, and they were failing.

Prior to U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, cultural research and analysis had only a small place in the Army thought process. HTS changed that. Designed to provide a better understanding of indigenous populations in these countries, it was hoped that HTS would help U.S. and allied forces reduce violent misunderstandings and dampen the insurgencies. In 2006, the Army, facing progressively worsening situations in Iraq and Afghanistan, needed new ideas and thus backed a \$20 million, five-team HTS proof of concept. Even before all five teams had been deployed, early reactions from theater commanders were favorable. Within a year, the requirement for Human Terrain Teams mushroomed to 26 teams as the price tag surpassed \$100 million annually.

In the mad dash to fill positions, HTS hiring standards ranged from minimal to nonexistent. In many cases, new employees were not even interviewed. When combined with high starting salaries, this lack of selectivity caused HTS to attract a peculiar mix of highly qualified personnel, absolutely unqualified personnel, and everyone in between.

As the number of workers swelled at the HTS base of operations in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, two distinct camps emerged. Army Reservists, with varying levels of military experience, formed one group, while contractors formed another. Although it is contractors who typically play a supporting role to government and military personnel, in the early days of HTS it was the military members who lacked a clearly defined role. The vast

majority of deployed team members and support staff were contractors, while HTS acquired Reservists with no plan to integrate them. In some cases, military personnel battled the contractors for control, but the HTS support contract required that contractors administer most daily operations. This difficult situation was exacerbated by the fact that HTS's program manager and its contract oversight were both based a thousand miles away in Virginia.

To deal with these problems and provide better government oversight, a deputy program manager was appointed at Fort Leavenworth in late 2008. His role was to oversee the work of both contractors and military personnel. It was a difficult task. HTS's highly matrixed organization, internal rivalries, and lack of controls had created a dysfunctional work environment, which operated in an ad hoc manner in almost every way. Policies and procedures were virtually nonexistent, and most work was done by key employees with narrow areas of expertise. Mid- to senior-level managers were, in too many cases, absent or ineffective.

Some HTS managers who did work hard to address the program's problems were overwhelmed. When decisions were made, they were often inadequate to resolve the problem or simply too late to matter, and the staff required to implement the decisions was insufficient. Such problems were largely due to management officials who had difficulty navigating the unstructured work environment. Instead of establishing systems and frameworks to deal with problems, managers generally approached each problem as a unique circumstance. At the same time, the lack of structure enabled many employees to perform poorly and face few consequences. Without structure to regulate behavior, HTS employees often succumbed to a kind of organizational attention deficit disorder. This combination of factors created serious deficiencies for HTS quality of support.²

In late 2008, these problems were compounded by a new looming crisis. The United States and Iraq had signed a Status of Forces Agreement that put U.S. contractors working in Iraq within

the jurisdiction of the Iraqi legal system. Panicked that Iraqi police (or insurgents masquerading as Iraqi police) might arrest employees, HTS initiated a plan to convert all 150 Human Terrain Team (HTT) members from contractors to government employees. To facilitate the process, a government transition assistant was assigned to manage the conversion from Fort Monroe, Virginia, with HTS designating several personnel to assist. All HTS team members had to become government employees by May 31, 2009, or return to the United States.

The conversion, which seemed simple in the abstract, quickly became a nightmare. HTS employees, a notoriously vocal workforce, were bewildered by the turn of events. They deluged the transition assistant with thousands of questions, complaints, and pages of paperwork, and productivity in the theater declined while employees wondered about their futures and haggled for better terms. At the same time, numerous other issues, from travel orders to timesheets, required HTS to establish a large number of new internal processes. Like HTS managers, the transition assistant had no system to handle the volume and was quickly overwhelmed. As the situation deteriorated, it was unclear whether the deadline could be met, or if HTS would be forced to embarrassingly remove all personnel from theater.

Fortunately, through furious last-minute efforts by HTS and U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) staff members, the conversion process was completed on time. However, tremendous damage had already been done to HTS credibility, and dozens of employees (over one-third of the HTS deployed workforce) had quit. Bureaucratic infighting caused several staff principles, including the deputy program manager, to depart in mid-2009, and a large portion of the organization was suddenly moved from Fort Leavenworth to Virginia. Although HTS had survived the crisis, many inside and outside of the program began to question HTS's fundamental level of competence.

Wandering in the Wilderness. After the conversion debacle, HTS drifted. The

decision to relocate several sections of the organization caused further division. At the same time, the lack of strong management limited the organization's ability to make necessary changes. Competing HTS staff elements struggled to fill the vacuum, resulting in a critical lost year.

In the middle of the conversion process, the HTS program manager created a Program Management Office-Forward (PMO-Forward) in both Iraq and Afghanistan in response to real problems, including the lost accountability of employees in a war zone. The role of the PMO-Forwards, however, was never clearly established, and HTS staff members generally viewed the PMO-Forwards as deployed staff elements. The PMO-Forwards, by contrast, considered themselves deputy program managers. Mutual mistrust inhibited collaboration, and a months-long standoff ensued. In spite of the need for internal cooperation, HTS program management never publicized or enforced clear guidelines for how the PMO-Forwards should interact with the staff. Staff meetings between PMO-Forwards and U.S.-based support staff devolved into uncomfortable stalemates. The ensuing discord severely restricted HTS capacity to improve support processes and fed into the HTS culture of dysfunction.

Once teams were staffed with government employees, HTS found itself poorly equipped to meet the needs of its workforce. Contractor-to-government transition planning had been exclusively focused on the conversion process; little preparation had been made for actually supporting government civilians. As contractors, HTS personnel had been supported by corporate human resource (HR) and finance sections, but now those organizations were out of the picture. While regulations and support agencies already existed for government civilian HR and finance issues, those agencies were unequipped to deal with the range and complexity of issues presented by HTS employees.

HTS needed experts to create processes and integrate systems. Lacking both, the newly formed HTS HR Directorate was drowning in problems.

For instance, the HTS finance section was staffed by one timekeeper, a Soldier with no background in civilian finance. The lack of support caused the number of pay problems to snowball over time, damaging morale and productivity. Meanwhile, employees in theater had received virtually no training on proper pay practices and would regularly claim to be working in excess of 12 hours per day, 7 days a week. This led to real integrity problems for the organization. While the tempo of operations in theater was certainly high, reports suggested that not everyone was being truthful on their timecards. One team leader did implement significant restrictions on the number of hours employees could claim and was immediately hounded from theater—“fired” by a PMO-Forward who had no legal authority to fire anyone. With no one controlling payroll and a generally lawless atmosphere, team productivity was highly variable. Unfortunately, there is little doubt that some HTS employees took advantage of the situation to pad their timecards while doing little work (a practice that was regrettably common among deployed Federal workers in Iraq and Afghanistan, not just at HTS).³

HTS was simply not operating in accordance with established rules. However, with the government transition complete, it had inherited a rather large rulebook. At the same time, HTS often lacked clear lines of authority within its mix of military, civilian, and contract workers, all of whom were led by a program manager who served on an Intergovernmental Personnel Act agreement, an unusual employment arrangement that further confused matters. The lack of administrative clarity created an overall impression that HTS had no rules, and large numbers of disgruntled HTS employees soon found their way to the inspector general, various elected representatives, and Equal Employment Opportunity offices. Between late 2009 and early 2010, Congress had withheld tens of millions of dollars from the HTS budget and had directed the Center for Naval Analyses to perform an assessment of the program. Other investigations, including an Army Regulation 15-6 inquiry

and an internal audit by the TRADOC Internal Review and Audit Compliance office, were bubbling up as well. HTS’s flaws had become impossible to ignore.

Reform. Virtually every HTS employee acknowledged the need for change. The real question was what shape reform would take. Many wanted the program to simply break away from the intrusive rules and regulations, and believed that most problems could be solved if HTS left TRADOC, which they viewed as both unhelpful and adversarial, and moved to U.S. Army Forces Command or U.S. Special Operations Command. Others thought this analysis missed the point. In their view, HTS would have to adapt to the Army and to civilian employment law regardless of which command it fell under. Resistance was not only futile but also destructive and would only cripple the program. HTS would have to learn how to follow the rules.

This conflict had remained unresolved for most of the program’s history. The HTS program manager had often made a point of emphasizing the program’s uniqueness and claimed that this made HTS incompatible with the Army’s existing bureaucracy. TRADOC, which provided oversight of HTS activities, represented that bureaucracy, and as a result was often perceived as an existential threat and met with hostility within HTS. This animosity was at times mutual. Many viewed HTS fiscal wastefulness and poor internal regulation as something of a threat as well, since it would be TRADOC—not the HTS itinerant workforce—that would be left to clean up after HTS failures. TRADOC managers also found HTS’s grandiose plans, such as a training directorate with more staff than students, to be exasperating. These conflicting perspectives caused the relationship between the two organizations to sour over time, and TRADOC found itself confronted daily with the question of how much leeway to give HTS. With the United States engaged in two concurrent wars, there was no easy answer.

Nevertheless, several abortive efforts to clean up aspects of the program from within had taken place. Unfortunately,

each had been hindered by a lack of expertise or a failure to follow through. While HTS had a large staff, most staff members were unaware of the mechanics of how the program functioned. The few “old hands” who understood the nuts and bolts of HTS typically tried to fly under the radar amid staff infighting. When ideas did coalesce into concrete proposals, HTS staff principals were generally unable to implement changes due to being overwhelmed by problems and uncertain of the second- and third-order effects of any proposed solution. HTS program management had done little to encourage organizational discipline of any kind. This created an environment largely free of formal consequences, such as reprimands or terminations, even in the face of egregious behavior. To become more legally compliant and effective, HTS would need to irritate many of its longtime employees, who had become accustomed to the consequence-free environment. Taking them on, however, risked pushback from both employees and other managers, so most managers found it safer to do nothing.

Because HTS was overseen by TRADOC G2 and had, over the course of several years, proved unable to effectively self-manage, TRADOC gradually took on a more active role. Unfortunately, the logistics of this relationship were problematic. Most of HTS was physically remote from the TRADOC G2 offices. TRADOC G2 lacked experience overseeing a program such as HTS, and it had both limited access to what was going on within the program and limited manpower. Additionally, HTS sometimes attempted to replicate TRADOC management functions within itself, creating confusion and making cooperation difficult. These factors prevented TRADOC G2 from being able to implement reforms unless HTS was an active and engaged participant. Unfortunately, because HTS leadership generally viewed TRADOC with suspicion, there was little in the way of productive dialogue.

In early 2010, a small group of HTS personnel and TRADOC G2 management officials operating out of

Fort Monroe, Virginia, began intensive work on overhauling the program's administration. The group had detailed insight into the workings of HTS and significant expertise in civilian HR and finance. Over the next few months, a number of policies covering a range of issues were drafted and sent to HTS program management for review. At the same time, the group received additional manpower and was able to improve payroll processing, eliminating a backlog of over 80 pay-related complaints that affected most deployed employees. Unfortunately, implementation of other policy changes was limited. Although the proposals provided a clear and legally compliant model for managing the program, they remained in limbo, neither approved nor rejected. The HTS program manager was simply not enthusiastic about institutionalizing the program.⁴

By mid-June 2010, the pressure of the investigations and HTS management's continuing resistance to reform brought the situation to a breaking point. Two key changes, however, appeared to signal a fresh start for the program. First, the position of program manager was eliminated. Second, an Active-duty Army colonel, who had previously served as the TRADOC Deputy G2 and was thus familiar with the HTS program and its difficulties, was named director. The new director had longstanding and positive relationships with TRADOC G2 staff members and thus understood how to balance the considerations of TRADOC with the goals of HTS. Most importantly, she was more pragmatic than her predecessor, who had generally declined to focus on day-to-day management issues.

Anxious to implement change, the HTS director gave the green light to a number of the policies drafted by the Fort Monroe group. The group also gained authority and leadership support in a number of significant areas, including program administration, program development, payroll, travel, hiring, and separations. These changes significantly improved efficiency, transparency, regulatory compliance, and internal controls.



Afghan girl peeks around door as U.S. Special Forces and Cultural Support Team speak with her father, Uruzgan Province (DOD/Kaily Brown)

New guidance documents eventually covered dozens of topics, and improved internal processes gave managers better insight into how well HTS was running. In addition, new HTS policies established a change management structure that allowed the program to continue to improve. Finally, more discipline was imposed on the hiring process, resulting in more accurate recruitment targets and 61 percent lower attrition in training.⁵ As positive change continued, many employees expressed relief that HTS was finally turning a corner.

Not everyone agreed, however. For example, although travel privileges had been significantly misused, some supervisors were annoyed about having to ask for permission under the new, more accountable procedures. Timesheet reviews turned up cases of excess that, when addressed, created some hostility. The PMO-Forward positions, which lacked accountability to other staff elements, were abolished and replaced

with the position of Theater Support Officer, which reported to the HTS director of operations.

While process improvements occurred rapidly, improving the HTS workforce took longer. Because HTS had been willing to hire almost anyone in the early days, it had a large number of unproductive employees. Other employees were competent professionals but had a contentious relationship with the program as a result of the years of mismanagement. By 2012, however, a combination of changes had significantly improved workforce quality. These included better management, the termination of more than a dozen employees, more stringent hiring criteria, and a requirement that most employees separate from HTS at the end of their deployment. Employees wishing to deploy again could reapply just like anyone else. This not only improved workforce quality, but it also enhanced the program's ability to fine-tune recruiting requirements. By 2013, terminations for cause had declined

Soldiers from Charlie Troop, 2-38 Cavalry, and DA civilians, Human Terrain System, with local Afghan villagers during Key Leader Engagement in Kandahar Province (DOD/Crystal Davis)



greatly, reflecting an increasingly stable and professional workforce.

Although HTS had made remarkable internal transformations, media coverage of the program was stuck in 2009.⁶ HTS's most frequent critic, a blogger named John Stanton, had written numerous articles that reflected extensive employee disgruntlement and captured some of HTS's chronic mismanagement.⁷ As things improved, however, critics either minimized or failed to notice the changes made in the program. While this may have been intentional, it seems more likely that they simply were not aware of what was happening. The HTS of 2009 was wide open to the media, a decision that did not serve the program well. To combat this, HTS post-2010 was more closed. Public relations and other outreach efforts continued, but other forms of openness diminished. At the same time, investigations into HTS's 2009-era failures were being broadly disseminated on the Internet. Even though the program had significantly improved, HTS critics had few ways of discovering this, as they received most of their information from public sources and disgruntled employees. Given the lack of information, they assumed that little had changed.

They were wrong. HTS had, in many ways, become an example of how to do things correctly. A 2013 external review pointed out progress toward institutionalizing the program.⁸ Subsequent internal reviews, audits, and investigations conducted during 2013 and 2014 found an effectively managed organization that complied with regulations. This was verified by a comprehensive audit conducted by the Army Audit Agency in 2014. The HTS experience offers important lessons that can shape the way DOD deploys civilians during the next conflict. It also offers broader lessons about how to improve the government's employment practices.

Implications

Centralizing Support for Deployed Civilians. While poor management limited HTS during its early years, the program was also hindered by DOD's ineffective civilian deployment system. The U.S. military is capable when deploying

uniformed Servicemembers, but its civilian deployment process is minimal and poorly integrated. For small organizations, or units with only a few civilians, this is a nuisance to be endured. For HTS, which deployed civilians at a larger scale, the system's weaknesses created massive challenges to mission accomplishment.

The effects were significant. The U.S. Government spent almost \$800 million on HTS from its inception through the 2014 Afghanistan drawdown, a period of over 7 years. During much of that time, mismanagement, excess attrition, inflated salaries, and poor support practices wasted hundreds of millions of dollars. Furthermore, assuming HTS provided value to battlefield commanders, the years it took to fix these issues and field more effective teams may well have cost lives and worsened the outcomes in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Some might argue that waste was an inevitable byproduct of the program's rapid creation in the middle of two conflicts. There is truth to that. However, if a civilian deployment infrastructure had existed prior to the creation of HTS, the program could have used it directly. Instead, HTS, like other programs that deploy civilians, had to figure everything out, build its own infrastructure, and endure numerous failures on the road to getting things right. That was a phenomenally inefficient way of doing business. It was also completely unnecessary.

DOD should establish a program to manage the recruitment, training, deployment, and sustainment of government civilian personnel in overseas environments. This centralized program would enable deployed forces to quickly obtain needed civilian skills to augment their capabilities. At the same time, it would allow programs and supported units to focus on core competencies rather than administrative distractions. Finally, such a program, by eliminating inefficiencies, could save the government hundreds of millions of dollars during future conflicts. While that may sound like an overstatement, the HTS experience demonstrates that cost savings of this magnitude are not theoretical.

While HTS provided civilian cultural expertise in Iraq and Afghanistan, future

wars may require wholly different and unexpected types of knowledge. In the past, such needs were often filled through the contracting process. However, government civilians may be preferable to contractors for several reasons: they are more cost effective; they fall under the direct control of government authorities; and they can perform inherently governmental functions. In other cases, the use of contractors is unnecessary because the desired expertise already exists within DOD's permanent civilian workforce. This capability was previously leveraged through the Civilian Expeditionary Workforce (CEW) program, which provided opportunities for existing government civilians to deploy. Regardless of the source, though, experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan prove that such skills will be required.

Unfortunately, civilian personnel are often inadequately prepared to deal with the military deployment bureaucracy, which is focused primarily on military personnel and contractors. As an example, HTS employees who received care at military treatment facilities in theater would often be categorized as "contractors" simply because there was no option for "government civilian," creating unnecessary challenges to medical support. Civilians drawn from the private sector had even greater difficulty adapting to the military's way of doing business. These distractions made them and their organizations less productive and increased the amount of turnover. The HTS experience demonstrates that an entire program's operations can be hobbled by the investigations, negative publicity, and employee issues that accompany deficiencies in administrative support.

A centralized DOD civilian deployment program would provide support throughout the entire tour, from the receipt of notice to deploy through to the end of the deployment. Programs and units sending civilians downrange would use this program's centralized support capabilities and expertise. It would prepare civilians for deployment, ensure coordination with deployment centers and receiving units, account for them in theater, ensure a smooth redeployment home, and provide accurate administrative, finance, and logistical support throughout the entire process. It

would also ensure that deployed civilians received proper assistance and care, while making certain they performed the work they were hired to do.

Such a program would need to accommodate itself to the reality of defense budget cycles, expanding and contracting as required. During peacetime, it could be sustained by a minimal number of employees; during wartime, it would expand by using limited-term government employees and contractor support. The program would serve individual deployers as well as large organizations and would centralize functions currently duplicated across DOD, paying for itself by eliminating waste. As a "one-stop shop," the program would encourage consistent support of deployed civilians while maintaining administrative best practices, reducing the amount of waste and fraud committed during deployments.

Naturally, there are always concerns about the use of government employees rather than contractors. First, government hiring is an extremely slow process. To circumvent this issue, HTS developed a hybrid contractor/government hiring process that utilized the strengths of the private sector to augment government hiring methods. Contract recruiters were able to find large numbers of potential candidates with needed expertise. The candidates were screened and their names were then submitted for government qualification. If qualified, the candidates attended a training class prior to being sworn in as government civilians. This approach allowed HTS to provide a volume of personnel that would never have been possible using normal government recruiting methods.

The second main issue with government workers is the concern that they become permanent employees who are difficult to remove from service. This is not the case. Term-limited appointments allow management to decline employment extensions as needed. Term employment thus makes adjustments to the size of the workforce relatively easy, avoiding the need for a reduction in force, and provides a mechanism to release underperforming employees while avoiding the difficult and emotionally draining termination process. Employment can end with the expiration

of an employee's term rather than through termination, allowing the employee to save face and ensuring that he or she is able to file for unemployment. Unfortunately, however, termination can be necessary in some cases. At HTS, 18 employees were terminated over a 5-year period, a rate considerably higher than normal for the Federal Government. This was possible because of effective coordination between HR, supervisors, and program leadership. An effective civilian deployment program could provide supervisors with the necessary expertise to separate employees with performance or behavioral issues.

Clearly there is an unmet need to improve support for deployed civilians. While the CEW program performed some of the functions mentioned above, it was limited in scope and served mainly as a matchmaker, posting deployed positions that individuals could apply for. Although it filled a useful role, CEW did not provide the kind of "cradle to grave" support that is necessary for maximum workforce effectiveness.

DOD must act quickly to improve support before more institutional knowledge is lost. A 2012 Government Accountability Office report outlined how DOD neglected to learn from civilian deployment experiences in Bosnia, which led to costly and preventable failures in Iraq and Afghanistan just a few years later.⁹

Sadly, history seems to be repeating itself. In March 2014, the CEW Web site announced that the program would no longer provide a "sourcing solution for joint civilian requirements," and that this function would instead be performed by the Army G1.¹⁰ (The remnants of the CEW program have since migrated to U.S. Army Central Command.) With drawdowns continuing, cuts to CEW were inevitable. Unfortunately, it appears that this migrated function, now renamed the International/Expeditionary Policy Office, will provide fewer capabilities than CEW did. A less effective organization is not the answer. Senior leaders must understand this challenge and recognize that supporting civilians properly is not just the right thing to do; it also improves effectiveness and makes sound financial sense.

Pay and Performance. Prior to the 2009 HTS conversion from contractor to government workforce, deployed team members typically made between \$250,000 and \$400,000 per year. While this rate of pay was not unusual for deployed contractors at the time, large salaries alone were not sufficient to recruit top-quality personnel for Human Terrain Teams. In some cases, team members lacked even basic social science and research skills. Despite these shortcomings, individuals were uniformly paid large salaries, with highly inconsistent results.

Over time, the salaries paid to HTS employees gradually diminished. After the government conversion, the salary range for HTS employees dropped to roughly \$180,000–\$300,000 per year. Not only was this less than they had made as contractors, but as government civilians every dollar of salary was taxable as well. (Contractor salaries enjoy significant tax benefits.) In addition, the team leader and social scientist positions that had been graded as GG-15 were reclassified as GG-14, cutting the top end of the salary range by another 15 percent.

In 2013, sequester restrictions forced Army commands to implement restrictions on overtime work for all employees, including deployed civilians. While these restrictions were not well enforced by many units in theater, TRADOC G2 implemented meaningful restrictions on overtime use. As a result, the average annual salary of a deployed HTS team leader, which had hovered around \$400,000 in 2008, dropped to around \$200,000 in 2014. Although HTS employees were generally displeased with these changes, support to deployed units remained consistent, and internal assessments showed that commander satisfaction remained high.

Despite this dramatic cost savings, there is no evidence that HTS employees in 2014 were any less capable than employees in 2008. While comparing the two periods is difficult due to the lack of verifiable metrics from 2008, deployed commanders and staff who responded to internal surveys in 2014 almost uniformly agreed that HTS products were relevant, aided decisionmaking, and added to the

unit's sociocultural understanding of the environment. More importantly, HTS, which in the early years suffered a significant number of team implosions, mutinies, and cases of job abandonment, saw a substantial decrease in these types of incidents. Furthermore, while HTT members in 2008 often lacked basic competencies (human terrain analysts were sometimes considered suitable only for vehicle washing duties), by 2014 the average HTT member was significantly more capable.

How was HTS able to cut salaries in half and yet still achieve superior results? First, the exorbitant salaries of 2008 were simply part and parcel of the military's institutional culture at the time. With Congress appropriating hundreds of billions of dollars as part of the late war surges, budget discipline was significantly relaxed. Unfortunately, while those excessive salaries lured few serious academics, they did attract a wide variety of individuals who were more interested in cashing in than achieving the Army's goals. At the same time, HTS's no-rules internal culture imposed significant costs on supervisors who tried to conscientiously enforce restrictions. When HTS team members were contractors, the company lost money if personnel were not deployed and claiming long hours. At the same time, the HTS leadership team believed that it needed to fill teams at all costs. The incentives within HTS were strongly arrayed against any kind of internal restrictions, with all of the attendant disciplinary problems. As a result, HTS quickly earned a reputation as a haven for problematic personalities, which harmed future recruiting efforts and created a negative feedback loop.

Over time, as salaries shrank and regulations governing conduct increased, the greedy gradually departed. While this was a positive step, the large salaries set at the beginning severely limited the ability to hire employees at the proper wage. It also ensured higher program costs throughout the program's lifespan. While the excessive salaries of 2008 may have enabled HTS to build its workforce more quickly than it could have otherwise, it is unclear that employees obtained this way were worth having at all. The HTS experience demonstrates that high salaries are

not necessarily beneficial for hiring and that they can be more destructive than helpful, both financially and operationally.

Process Defeats Politics. During its early years, HTS was an organization driven by personalities, not procedures. When difficult or unusual situations involving HTS employees arose (an almost everyday occurrence), staff members would many times quickly defer the question to the program manager, who was not physically present and likely would not make a decision. This was a symptom of HTS's broader challenge wherein the organization's decisionmaking process had failed to evolve in the face of rapid growth. Because the program had few policies or guidelines, even a minor variation to a routine procedure created decisional gridlock. As a result, every decision point became an opportunity for organizational politics or simple inertia to run the program aground.

To meet this challenge, HTS generated internal policies, an employee handbook, a pay and allowances guide, and more than a dozen internal "bulletins" that explained the nuances of complex issues such as workers' compensation and emergency leave. Because of the continuously changing nature of the HTS program, a fixed catalogue of policies would have been inadequate. Documents were thus revised as necessary to ensure that they remained relevant, sensible, and responsive. In addition, HTS policies were designed in such a way that they were not only enforceable, but would also actually be enforced. This proved crucial to making the changes work. Where possible, consequences were applied automatically rather than at the discretion of a manager. This limited accusations of favoritism and ensured fair treatment across the workforce.

As these reforms were implemented, some within the program argued that a policy-centric and enforcement-based approach was too heavy handed. Unfortunately, HTS's toxic environment required far greater articulation of the rules and far more comprehensive enforcement strategies than would ordinarily have been required in a program of its

size. Employees, supervisors, leadership, and support sections all possessed limited faith in one another's abilities and motives. Additionally, the "short timer" mentality of many employees, a high turnover rate, and a lack of coordination all enhanced this lack of confidence. When employees asked a question and received an answer they did not like, they had learned to simply ask another decisionmaker until someone provided the desired answer. Leaders often had trouble saying no to reasonable-sounding requests that were, in fact, not reasonable. By establishing clear and enforceable written policies, HTS significantly reduced this deeply ingrained and disruptive pattern of behavior. Given the complexity of government personnel rules and the volume of turnover, merely establishing informal guidelines would not have been effective.

This approach benefited HTS in numerous ways. The amount of attention from management that was required to administer the program declined significantly because routine matters could be handled at a lower level. In addition, rather than having to bargain for everything, employees could review HTS policies and understand what they were and were not entitled to. As a result, when disgruntled employees disagreed with established policies and filed complaints, it was relatively straightforward to have the complaints dismissed. Finally, once the values animating those policies became entrenched, a cultural change took hold and HTS became a radically different place at which to work.

While HTS may be remembered for its chaotic early blunders, the program's later, quieter years demonstrate the effectiveness of its turnaround. Although the program may not survive in today's difficult fiscal environment, future sociocultural research efforts will likely be institutionalized in new and different ways. However, there does not appear to be any equivalent effort to improve DOD's poorly functioning civilian deployment system. It would be a shame to throw away \$800 million worth of hard-won experience. After more than a decade of counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare, leaders must recognize

the important role civilians will play in winning future conflicts. JFQ

Notes

¹ For a detailed account of Human Terrain System (HTS) history, see Christopher J. Lamb et al., *Human Terrain Teams: An Organizational Innovation for Sociocultural Knowledge in Irregular Warfare* (Washington, DC: Institute of World Politics Press, 2013), which is detailed, even-handed, and accurate. Unfortunately, it does have some blind spots, but this article fills in some of those.

² *Ibid.*, 147. Lamb et al. reference three types of Human Terrain Team (HTT) members: "ne'er-do-wells," "fantasists," and "workers." While these categories are crude, they are also quite accurate. Within the HTS staff, the vast majority of personnel could be categorized as ne'er-do-wells or fantasists. Even if new arrivals did not begin their tenure with HTS in one of those two frames of mind, the environment tended to have a negative effect on those exposed to it. Workers were rare.

³ It is important to note that timecard exploitation was routine for civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan. To HTS's credit, team members never approached the excesses of deployed Department of Justice employees, who often claimed to continuously work 16 hours per day, 7 days a week. See Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, *An Investigation of Overtime Payments to FBI and Other Department of Justice Employees Deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Department of Justice, 2008), available at <www.justice.gov/oig/special/s0812/final.pdf>.

⁴ Lamb et al., 73–74.

⁵ Based on decline in attrition from HTS training, from 2009 to 2013.

⁶ Tom Vanden Brook, "Army Plows Ahead with Troubled War-Zone program," *USA Today*, February 28, 2013, available at <www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/02/17/human-terrain-system-iraq-afghanistan/1923789>.

⁷ John Stanton's articles were the product of numerous sources within the program, but were also largely based on second- or third-hand rumors. In many if not most cases, his specific allegations were inaccurate. However, his articles often did accurately reflect the tone of internal dissent within HTS.

⁸ Lamb et al., 78–79.

⁹ Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Afghanistan: Improvements Needed to Strengthen Management of U.S. Civilian Presence*, GAO-12-285 (Washington, DC: GAO, 2012), available at <www.gao.gov/products/GAO-12-285>.

¹⁰ Department of Defense, "The Civilian Deployment Experience," available at <cpms.osd.mil/expeditionary/home.html>.