



Local boys observe activity within village of Sharmai, Paktika Province, Afghanistan, February 18, 2013, as Human Terrain Teams speak with locals (U.S. Army/Raymond Schaeffer)

Human Terrain at the Crossroads

By Brian R. Price

The task now falls to us to leverage [Human Terrain System's] lessons learned and make evolutionary progress toward the systematic inclusion of sociocultural information in all-source analysis to support peacetime engagement as well as combat operations.

—LIEUTENANT GENERAL MICHAEL T. FLYNN, USA

The U.S. Army's Human Terrain System (HTS) was created in 2007 amid fears of defeat in Iraq and Afghanistan. Responding to clear

needs expressed by military leadership, HTS was offered as an experimental effort to embed academic social scientists with Army and Marine Corps units to dramatically increase local sociocultural knowledge on the battlefield.¹

Following a test deployment in Khost, Afghanistan, in February 2007, and actively supported by General David

Petraeus, the program rapidly expanded to place personnel with 31 teams in both Iraq and Afghanistan, where groups from five to nine were embedded at the brigade, division, and theater levels. These teams were devised to provide cross-functional capability built around the expertise of one or two academic social scientists, a team leader (generally

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Human Terrain Team consisting of U.S. Army Soldiers and civilians, along with Afghan interpreter, meet with local citizens of village near Kandahar Air Field, Afghanistan (U.S. Army/Stephen Schester)

a military officer, Active duty or retired), several field data gatherers (research analysts), and one or two members to manage data and classification (research managers).

The program left Iraq in 2012 with the drawdown and was gradually reduced in Afghanistan starting in 2013 with sequestration and as brigades left theater. In September 2014, the program appeared to have met a quiet budgetary demise. It was hurried to its expiry on a wave of criticism from *USA Today*,² independent journalist John Stanton,³ and anthropologists opposed to the wars and to their discipline's participation in them.⁴ Some military officers, like Ben Connable and Gian Gentile, believed HTS to be starving the Army and Marine's ability to acculturate themselves.⁵ These critics, reporters, and their congressional allies coalesced into a vocal opposition

to leverage blogs and newspaper reports that put the program on the defensive almost from the beginning, complicating the nontrivial managerial and leadership challenges facing the program as it deployed without a test period into Iraq and Afghanistan. Sociologist Paul Joseph of Tufts University concluded that the HTS concept failed because it did not alter the war's strategy.⁶

The narrative advanced by HTS critics was that the program finally shut down because of its expense and manifold failures. Indeed, the program *was* expensive—costing as much as \$800 million over 7 years—and it suffered from significant growing pains characterized as “catastrophic success” in the words of HTS founders Montgomery McFate and Steve Fondacaro.⁷ Like other Federal employees in Iraq and Afghanistan, some members abused the freedoms in

the combat zone, where little oversight was practical in a program so quickly expanded. As with similar but more extreme cases by deployed members of the Department of Justice, some HTS members were accused of falsifying timesheets.⁸ Some alleged sexual harassment, and Army investigations did find some evidence for this. Team dynamics were often problematic and team leadership uneven.⁹ Mapping the Human Terrain Toolkit, the technology package intended to preserve HTS research and enable sociocultural mapping at the unit level, cannot be said to have been a success as it was cumbersome and failed to interface with major systems such as DCGS-A (Distributed Common Ground System—Army) or the cleverly named package used by the Marines, *Palantir*.

In the early days especially, HTS ability to recruit quality personnel was

hampered by dysfunctional contractor control, making the assembly of functional teams designed to work smoothly in the high-tempo world of a deployed combat brigade extremely difficult. The controversial conversion of HTS personnel from contractor to Department of Defense (DOD) civilian status in 2009 strained both the leadership and morale of HTS personnel, who often spent considerable time “outside the wire” to the breaking point. This created significant bad blood that fueled further criticisms and brought unwanted attention to HTS’s press-shy parent organization, the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC). Even as HTS secured better control over hiring and retention, many researchers fielded by HTS believed they were poorly treated, eroding the managerial and leadership climate.

Despite these criticisms, the need for and the assessments of the program by those making use of HTS products consistently returned positive results. In four separate studies based on interviews, commanders asserted that through HTS contributions kinetic activities were reduced and counterinsurgency initiatives were more creatively designed and effectively run.¹⁰ Engagements with key leaders and local constituents were reported to be stronger. Notably, HTS’s unique ability to deliver creative perspectives on local issues was a product of the embedding of civilian experts into a military environment. While these contributions are difficult to quantify (as is progress in counterinsurgency generally), the consistent support for the program by brigade commanders, despite its cost, suggests that HTS filled several important gaps.

This support goes a long way toward answering a question as to why the Army persisted in supporting the program into 2013 and 2014, despite negative press reports and turbulence of the early years. Commanders and successive secretaries of the Army and of Defense backed the program because field commanders deemed it effective.

Even before its shuttering, HTS management, in partnership with its new contractor, CGI Federal, attempted to find a new home. Early on, the potential

for Human Terrain Teams (HTTs) deployed in Phase Zero, in advance of kinetic or stability operations, was clearly recognized. Even as HTTs were removed from Iraq in 2012, a small team was deployed in support of U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM). Small cells supported other combatant commands, and a larger cell was proposed but never funded for U.S. Pacific Command. Other efforts were made, as a National Defense University (NDU) study recommended, to move the program to special operations forces (SOF), while advocates such as Lieutenant General Michael Flynn and Kerry Patton believed HTS capability should be consolidated with other intelligence assets. Some critics within the force, such as Ben Connable, believed HTS had competed with and retarded necessary growth in cultural competence, especially in civil affairs. Clifton Greene suggested HTS-type expertise become part of a renewed Civilian Expeditionary Force. Others suggested the Department of State would be a better fit.

Where should HTS-like capability be housed? Within DOD, within the Intelligence Community, at the Department of State, or with a contractor? To answer this question, it is necessary to identify the potential benefits, resources necessary to provide the capability, and potential costs. Rather than jettisoning nearly \$800 million in hard-won experience, finding a rational way forward to preserve what has worked is the purpose of this article.

Benefits

Sociocultural Analysis. HTS’s *raison d’être* was the mapping of the human terrain. In the non- or semi-permissive environments that characterized Iraq and Afghanistan, trained professionals could uniquely and quickly offer qualitative exploratory research to combat units. Reliable quantitative data were difficult to acquire (though it would be easier in a preconflict society). HTT analysis was built on a powerful research reachback capability, today preserved as the Global Cultural Knowledge Network at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The Phase Zero environment, more

extensive baseline assessments, and local connections could potentially be established and social science could be used with a greater degree of reliability, so long as political and cultural sensitivities were observed. If operations move to more kinetic phases, reliably trained and vetted social scientists could provide insight into the rapidly changing dislocation that accompanies conflict. As designed, HTTs were to work as cross-functional teams at the brigade level, providing both intelligence-gathering and analysis. In practice, many teams dispersed to support battalion, company, or even platoon operations as individual contributors, expanding the capability in an unforeseen way in direct support of combat units in the field. Therefore, the cross-functional team structure was not necessarily required to achieve remarkable results. Far less expensive individual contributors, surged as necessary, could provide much of the capability with much less cost.

Continuity. Between unit rotations, HTTs often provided a valuable store of local knowledge and experience. HTS’s own rotation policy was somewhat problematic with teams in a constant state of flux, but overall HTTs did provide a measure of continuity between unit rotations.

Alternative Perspectives and Bridging. As noted in a 2008 West Point study, “Commanders and staff appreciate the alternative perspective HTTs bring.”¹¹ It noted further that some HTT members earned trust “sufficient to take on the role of special advisor,” though this was not universal. Within the diverse world of “enablers,” HTT social scientists could bridge the academic/military divide, shaping input and contributions according to the unique command environment and requirements for each unit, leveraging their own diverse backgrounds. HTTs were not tied to the institutional bias and agendas for other contributors, nor were they completely bound by the reductive character of the military decisionmaking process. Their stance enabled considerable creativity and adaptability, countering institutional inertia and conflict. HTTs worked not only with brigade elements but also

with the State Department, Provincial Reconstruction Teams, and allied and host-nation officials, often helping to bridge the gap between civilian, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and military operations. Moreover, team continuity supported longer term viewpoints than the relatively short-term perspective of deployed military units.

Profiling Success

Commanders assessed their teams as successful if they brought understanding of the local environment, proved themselves by strong working relationships within the staff and with other enablers, and supported the brigade's efforts with their unique skills sets.

Despite considerable effort, HTS never established a comprehensive profile for what a successful "social scientist" looked like. Education and adaptability were known attributes, but alongside social scientists, those with a background in the humanities also excelled, so mission success was not necessarily limited by particular disciplines, such as anthropology. This had been suggested in the aforementioned 2008 West Point study, though it further complicated a troubled selection and assessment process. Clifton Green has argued recently that the HTS program turned itself around in 2012 and that it was a model program under the guidance and leadership of Colonel Sharon Hamilton. Until a more thorough organizational history is conducted, we may never know, but HTS did demonstrate the utility of embedding academics within combat units in theater and with combatant commands (USAFRICOM, U.S. Special Operations Command), as well as on a limited basis within special operations.

What is clear from the testimony of those who served with HTS is that *adaptability* and *flexibility* were key attributes. Also important was a comfort with military culture, key to not only bridging the local and military culture but also working with many other enabling agencies. As information gatherers, they needed the ability to interface smoothly with representatives of the host nation, and as analysts they needed the educational

depth to apply diverse methodologies to the complex issues that were sharply differentiated at least at the provincial level, if not the district or village.

Proposals

Sociocultural Information as an Intelligence Function. One stirring debate surrounding HTS concerned whether its function was intelligence or something else. HTS founders McFate and Fondacaro maintained that in order to be effective, HTS needed to forge ties within academia. They hoped that by focusing HTS products on unclassified material and widely disseminating them in an unclassified manner, such ties could be forged. In 2012, I argued for the gathering and collating of local and oral histories into an archive available to academics in a further effort to bridge the "academic/military divide," as both McFate and I have termed it. But HTS was also a kind of intelligence function, reporting to TRADOC G2 (Intelligence). In 2010, its new director, Colonel Hamilton, had been deputy G2 at TRADOC and moved the organization in a direction more in line with G2 parameters. Almost all material generated was caveated For Official Use Only, with much of it being classified SECRET. As such, it was not easily available to constituent civilian counterparts, local or partner officials, and it fed the opposition's favorite narrative of HTS as a supporter of lethal targeting, spying, and general nefariousness. Plus, it sharply reduced the availability of HTS products outside the defense community and virtually eliminated the possibility of collaboration with academia.

Members of the Intelligence Community have argued that such in-depth sociocultural intelligence should be formalized as an intelligence function. In 2010, Lieutenant General Flynn argued for stability operations information centers that would aggregate and disseminate much of the same kind of information gathered by HTTs. Furthermore, in his foreword to the 2013 NDU study on HTS, he suggested the "systematic" inclusion of sociocultural information into intelligence operations.

Along these lines, in *Sociocultural Intelligence: A New Discipline in Intelligence Studies*, Kerry Patton advanced an argument for and description of "SOCINT" in an attempt to articulate Flynn's vision. And indeed, such jobs have been advertised since at least 2012, generally administered as contractor-provided intelligence support. The positions as advertised require a *current* TOP SECRET/Sensitive Compartmented Information (TS/SCI) clearance and a much lower educational requirement, often just a bachelor's degree. Such requirements exclude experienced HTT personnel and reduce the pool of available expertise to a small number of already experienced intelligence officers who bring the same DOD/Intelligence Community perspective to their work. It specifically excludes academics owing to the current clearance requirement. These advertisements reflect the DOD and Intelligence Community's reflexive allergy to openness. The self-referential world of defense contractors, professional military education, and defense/intelligence sector enforces limited left-right limits on creative thinking. I argue that in the creative world of contingency/stability/hybrid/counterinsurgency operations, intellectual curiosity, creativity, and adaptability are prerequisites to success. A SOCINT analyst is not likely to provide the alternative thinking that HTS provided to commanders and staff. Their educational breadth is likely to be narrow, and their grasp on the relevant literature, social science, and humanities methodologies comparatively weak. And their products are likely to be classified, unavailable to the breadth of civilian, NGO, host-nation, and alliance partners who need the information.

These positions are analyst positions, not collectors; HTT combined collection ("gathering"), analytical, and collation functions, arguably yielding a more thorough approach that was more flexible to the needs of local conditions.

Finally, such formal adoption by the Intelligence Community is likely to feed continued negative press and hostility within academia, reducing the quality of recruits available to staff those functions,

just as Project Camelot and HTS evoked open and sustained hostility, bringing unwanted negative press to DOD. Critics David Price and Roberto Gonzáles, among others, accused HTS of neocolonial spying, just as sociologists accused the Special Operations Research Office of spying and subversion during the mid-1960s. In both cases the result was the same, and I have written elsewhere about the cycle of retrenchment that has repeated itself in the wake of a turbulent effort to engage the assistance of academia in the study and understanding of foreign populations.

If the Intelligence Community wants to develop an HTS-like capability, it will need to reduce the reliance on TS/SCI cleared personnel and instead find ways to integrate more highly educated and broadly oriented individuals who can contribute in a more fundamental way to the integration of sociocultural knowledge within the intelligence process.

House It Within U.S. Special Operations Command. In Afghanistan, one HTT served with SOF, where members often accompanied teams on missions while accessing reachback capabilities and connections with other HTTs. Special Forces in particular have long held a similar interest in sociocultural knowledge in their missions relating to foreign internal defense. Housing HTS permanently with SOF was the recommendation of the carefully wrought 2013 NDU study, *Human Terrain Teams: An Organizational Innovation for Sociocultural Knowledge in Irregular Warfare*.

The special operations community also employed Cultural Support Teams (CSTs) comprised of female Army personnel who were “attached” to the unit and who could serve for a year before returning to their units. CSTs went through a 6-week preparatory course before joining their special operations unit. This was similar to the Female Engagement Teams deployed alongside conventional Army and Marine units.

From at least 2012, HTS leadership explored the possibility of moving from TRADOC to United States Army Forces Command or SOF, but without success.



Soldier holds Afghan child and wears Kandahari hat to show solidarity during key leader meeting in Koshab Village near Kandahar Air Field, Afghanistan (U.S. Army/Stephen Schester)

Moving HTS into the special operations world make sense on several levels given the organization’s historical interest in local cultures and their relatively light footprint, less likely to trigger local immune responses. Without knowing why these efforts failed, it is impossible to comment on potential issues. But, as with the Intelligence Community, their products would likely be classified and compartmentalized, unavailable to broader DOD/State/Intelligence constituencies, and this does not help line

brigade or regimental commanders, their staffs, and teams in their efforts to understand the sociocultural environment. Moreover, the pool of available academic experts would likely be small, given the more rigorous physical and security requirements. Still, this would seem to remain a viable alternative.

Contractors: Sociocultural Consultants. Another approach is to house the capability within the orbiting contractor community. A number of ex-HTS personnel have advocated

this approach. Companies such as Civil Solutions International (CSI) are attempting to establish businesses providing sociocultural analysis services to defense and corporate markets. As an exemplar, CSI provides assessment/reconnaissance in Phase Zero operations, humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, and civil affairs, emphasizing “counterinsurgency by civil affairs,” seeking to drive change that it is hoped reduces the appeal of radical ideologies.

Contract services have advantages of being able to surge on demand and not directly involving DOD personnel, they may move more fluidly within local environments, and they might leverage knowledge gained in commercial contracts and establish credibility through positive civic and humanitarian action. But there are disadvantages, too—potential lack of accountability and control (issues that plagued contractors in both Iraq and Afghanistan), lack of connectivity within the military units, and potential lack of a cohesive approach built over time by the military units they serve.

Currently CGI Federal administers to the Global Cultural Knowledge Network. This is the remnant of the formal HTS program; CGI is charged with preserving the HTS product library and has additional training/educational capabilities. This solution has the advantage of maintaining some level of human terrain expertise, especially the reachback research centers, with the probable intent to expand at the combatant command level or surging in the event of greater demand. While it keeps the profile of the program low, it has not escaped the antipathy of its academic and congressional opponents. For this proposal to work, combatant commands would need to budget for HTT cores that could be surged as need required, as proposed (but not funded) by U.S. Pacific Command.

Establish Permanent Brigade-Level Presence of HTTs. Another possibility is developing a permanent capability within Army brigades or Marine regiments. In *The Humanity of Warfare: Social Science Capabilities and the Evolution of Armed Conflict*, Sam J. Striker argues for such a capability that serves corporate and

governmental demand, noting that in “peacetime” HTTs contribute to team training and advising. Striker maintains the structure as a team, concurring with the NDU study with respect to the team’s strength as a cross-functional entity.

Permanently embedding teams at the brigade level would build relationships therein and enable focused research on likely zones of deployment. It would also enable a slower and more considered selection of personnel and provide valuable preparatory training to the Brigade Combat Team/Regimental Combat Team, but it would also be likely to militarize the position. In this scenario, the HTT leader would likely become a staff position, integrating it into the reductive Military Decision Making Process. The expansive and “out of the box” role of the better HTT members would be lost.

Strengthening Civil Affairs: House HTTs Here? Here I propose a compromise: consider housing sociocultural research expertise within civil affairs or attaching it to Foreign Area Officers working out of Embassies (much of the early work on the program originated in the Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth). If established as a Reserve function, academics could serve as Reserve officers, much as other civic expertise is leveraged within civil affairs. Social scientists/area experts/humanities professionals could form the core around which a surge capability could be built in wartime, with more junior analysts being added as needed. The advantage would be that such officers could seek additional language and cultural training relevant to their potential areas of deployment, maintain and connect the program within academia, and conduct summer research designed to create a significantly greater Phase Zero awareness. Summers could be spent working out of an Embassy (if agreed and approved by the State Department). Such a solution would enable significantly better connectivity into academia, better acclimatize academics to the military environment, and enable surge capability in the case of deployment. In this arrangement, the social scientist could be the team leader,

eliminating overhead and fusing subject matter expertise with leadership. This newly conceived team lead could coordinate efforts of the Female Engagement Team. More extensive training could better prepare academics for service in the field, and relationships within the unit could be built before deployment.

On the downside, the potential as special advisor would be reduced, though most initiatives that have been proposed have the same problem. The ability to provide continuity as units rotate through a deployment would also be lost, though it could be argued that the entire civil affairs teams could be staggered with longer deployments.

State Department Function?

Arguably, the sociocultural function as described may overlap with similar functions within the Department of State. This was the historical problem with similar research conducted during the Cold War, as chronicled by Seymour Dietzman’s 1976 *The Best-Laid Schemes: A Tale of Social Research and Bureaucracy*. It is generally agreed that in counterinsurgency environments, close coordination or even fusion of diplomatic/civic and military efforts is necessary. In Iraq and Afghanistan, HTTs often worked closely with State Department personnel through Provincial Reconstruction Teams or as brigade enablers. In theory, it could be possible to house an HTS-like capability within State, reducing the academic angst associated with DOD or the Intelligence Community. Working out of Embassies, HTTs could establish themselves before conflict begins, perhaps with a representative housed with potential deployed brigades on a rotating basis to build military relationships. This could bring them into closer working relationships with the Foreign Area Officers and the long-term strategy, but careful management would be necessary to preserve their credibility with the brigade staff.

Conclusion

The Intelligence Community is already moving to capture some of the sociocultural analysis space, but this solution likely reduces sociocultural understand-

ing to a subordinate position within a community where “red layer” concerns are paramount. Housing an HTS-like capability with SOF has some merit but has not been realized for undisclosed reasons. HTS housed with the State Department would likely run into budgetary constraints since State’s budget for research is so much smaller than that afforded by DOD. The Army seems to have adopted a hibernation strategy, preserving a core of HTS capability, in theory in preparation to surge or support combatant command demands should they arise. This strategy does not, however, provide significant pre-conflict analysis.

But here is another possibility: hybridize the capability either by making it a part of the Army’s civil affairs organization or attaching small teams to work in Embassies, perhaps attached to Foreign Area Officers.

HTS did not, as sociologist Paul Joseph concluded—indeed, could not—provide the silver bullet that would fix a flawed counterinsurgency strategy. It is perhaps unfortunate that the program was unable to develop into a strategic asset, though it seems to have been productive at the tactical and, arguably, operational level. The Human Terrain System was never a “system,” but it did succeed in increasing local understanding and provided much-needed perspective to commanders, staffs, and Soldiers/Marines as well as other enablers.

While retrenchment into preparation for “regular” operations has, as after Vietnam, gripped DOD, the challenge of complex, hybrid, contingency, stability, or operations other than war remains, and HTS’s valuable experience should be preserved and integrated. The fruitful collaboration of academic, military, and diplomatic personnel is absolutely necessary as the United States continues to engage in operations around the globe. JFQ

Notes

¹ Montgomery McFate and Steve Fondacaro, “Building a Rocket in the Garage: Reflections on the Human Terrain System

During the First Four Years,” *PRISM* 2, no. 4 (2011), 63–82.

² Michael C. Davies, “Institutional Failure: *USA Today* and the Human Terrain System,” *Small Wars Journal*, March 28, 2016.

³ John Stanton published a wide range of critiques of the Human Terrain System (HTS) on political Web sites such as *Zero Anthropology*, *Cryptome*, *Intelligence Daily*, and *Pravda*. He continues to publish on the Global Cultural Knowledge Network.

⁴ A number of anthropologists organized themselves into the Network of Concerned Anthropologists (NCA), publishing a myriad of sharp critiques of the wars as neocolonial, characterizing HTS efforts as subversive intelligence aimed at domination and spying. The NCA’s long drumbeat of opposition began almost immediately as HTS was founded and continued even after the 2014 demise. They were frequently featured prominently by *USA Today* reporter Tom Vanden Brooke in his steady stream of critical reports. Many NCA articles appeared on the political blogs *CounterPunch* and *Zero Anthropology*. See David H. Price, *Weaponizing Anthropology: Social Science in Service of the Militarized State* (Petrolia, CA: CounterPunch, 2011); and Catherine Besteman et al., *The Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual: Or, Notes on Demilitarizing American Society* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2009).

⁵ Ben Connable, “All Our Eggs in a Broken Basket: How the Human Terrain System is Undermining Sustainable Military Cultural Competence,” *Military Review* (March–April 2009).

⁶ Paul Joseph, “Soft” *Counterinsurgency: Human Terrain Teams and U.S. Military Strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

⁷ McFate and Fondacaro.

⁸ Office of the Inspector General, *An Investigation into Overtime Payments to FBI and other Department of Justice Employees Deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Department of Justice, December 2008).

⁹ For an in-depth analysis of the dynamics of the teams, see Christopher J. Lamb, James Douglas Orton, Michael C. Davies, and Theodore F. Pikulsky, *Human Terrain Teams: An Organizational Innovation for Sociocultural Knowledge in Irregular Warfare* (Washington, DC: Institute of World Politics, 2013). This is the most in-depth, complete analysis of the HTS program, though it is marred by its assumption that HTS research was best served through the cross-functional team structure. In practice, many teams divided their resources, sending individuals out to serve with battalions, companies, and even platoons. Such individual contributors often served the HTS mission more efficiently than the often-conflict-ridden teams could.

¹⁰ The four studies were conducted by 1) Cindy R. Jebb, Laurel J. Hummel, and Tania M. Chacho, “Human Terrain Team Trip Re-

port: A ‘Team of Teams,’” unpublished report prepared by the U.S. Military Academy’s Interdisciplinary Team in Iraq for U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command G2 (Intelligence), 2008; 2) Yvette Clinton et al., *Congressionally Directed Assessment of the Human Terrain System* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, November 2010); 3) *Contingency Capabilities: Analysis of Human Terrain Teams in Afghanistan—Draft Final Report* (Washington, DC: Institute for Defense Analyses, December 2011); and 4) Lamb et al.

¹¹ Jebb, Hummel, and Chacho, 4.