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Beyond the Human Terrain System: a brief critical history (and a look ahead)

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a brief critical history of the Human Terrain System (HTS), a US Army counterinsurgency programme designed to embed anthropologists and other social scientists with combat brigades in Iraq and Afghanistan. It lasted from 2007 to 2015 and at its peak employed more than 500 people. The programme, which was among the most expensive social science programs in history, was controversial for many reasons. Among anthropologists, HTS sparked heated debates about the ethics of professional social science. Soon after its creation, the American Anthropological Association's executive board described the program as 'an unacceptable application of anthropological expertise'. The article explores the reasons behind the program's rapid rise and its subsequent demise, and it also discusses the long-term impacts of the programme – most notably the survival and propagation of the 'human terrain' concept within military and intelligence agencies, particularly as applied to techno-scientific methods of counterinsurgency. The article ends by reflecting upon broader questions of anthropological ethics in the post-9/11 world.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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The Human Terrain System (HTS) was a controversial US Army programme that existed from 2007 to 2015. It cost more than \$725 million, making it among the most expensive social science programmes in history (Vanden Brook, 2016). The programme, which was originally designed to embed anthropologists with combat units in Iraq and Afghanistan, provoked sharp debates among anthropologists regarding professional ethics. The controversy surrounding HTS was so severe that it will likely serve as an illustration of the discipline's ethical dilemmas for many years to come.

HTS's architects claimed that it would increase cultural understanding between US forces and Iraqis and Afghans living under military occupation – and therefore, reduce American and civilian casualties. The programme's leaders insisted that embedded social scientists were delivering sociocultural knowledge to commanders, but the reality was more complex. HTS personnel conducted a range of activities including data collection, intelligence gathering and psychological operations. In at least one case, an HTS employee supported interrogations in Afghanistan (Weinberger, 2011).

HTS served another insidious function: It became a propaganda tool for convincing the American public that the US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan were benevolent missions in which smart, fresh-faced young college graduates were playing a role. It appeared to demonstrate how US forces were engaged in a kinder, gentler form of occupation. Department of Defense photos portrayed HTS personnel sitting on rugs while drinking tea with Afghan elders or handing sweets to euphoric Iraqi children. Here was a war that Americans could feel good about fighting¹ (Figure 1).

When HTS was first announced in late 2006 and early 2007, I followed its development with concern. Along with many other anthropologists, I opposed the programme because of the potential harm it might bring to Iraqi and Afghan civilians. A group of us banded together to form the Network of Concerned Anthropologists during the summer of 2007. We drafted a document called the 'Pledge of Non-Participation in Counterinsurgency', which we circulated among our disciplinary colleagues and posted online.

Apart from anthropologists, HTS had other critics. A small but vocal group of military officers publicly criticised the program, noting that it was 'undermining sustainable military cultural competence' (Connable, 2009) and that in practice, 'the effectiveness of the HTTs [human terrain teams] was dubious at best' (Gentile, 2013). Yet despite these criticisms, the program grew exponentially. At its peak in 2010, HTS employed more than 500 people ranging from career academics with PhDs to retired Special Forces personnel. Over the next few years, more than 30 HTTs were deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan.



Figure 1. HTT member drinks tea with Afghan men. Credit: Michael Casteel/US Department of Defense.

Then in 2014, news reports and official statements about HTS all but disappeared. When I tried phoning its headquarters at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas in early 2015, no one answered the phone.

I became curious about the fate of HTS. I heard conflicting accounts from military social scientists, former employees and journalists who had written about it in the past. A few claimed that the programme had ended – as did Wikipedia’s entry on the HTS. However, none of these sources included concrete evidence confirming its termination.

In an effort to verify the programme’s official status, I emailed the US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), which had served as HTS’s home since its inception. I had resisted contacting TRADOC because in the past, my inquiries had gone unanswered. To my surprise, I received a response from Major Harold Huff of TRADOC’s Public Affairs Office. In a two-line email message, Huff confirmed that HTS had indeed ended on 30 September 2014.

Although several books have examined HTS in its early years (see, for example, Gezari, 2013; González, 2009; Joseph, 2014; McFate & Laurence, 2015), none of these accounts has chronicled the termination of the programme, or the ways in which certain elements of HTS (and the ‘human terrain’ concept more generally) have survived even as David Petraeus’s brand of counterinsurgency warfare has fallen out of fashion. This paper explores how, in a post-HTS world, the idea of a militarised anthropology – a weaponised social science – has diffused across military and intelligence agencies. I argue that even though the HTS has formally ceased to exist, certain aspects of the programme have left a lasting imprint even as the DoD has shifted towards ‘big data’-driven forms of geospatial intelligence and techno-scientific methods of counterinsurgency.

For a more comprehensive picture of HTS, this article analyses different aspects of the programme, including the ethical issues it raised for anthropologists. I begin by discussing the origins of the programme and its rapid growth, from 2007 to 2013. Then I examine HTS’s rapid decline and consider some of the reasons behind its abrupt termination. The article concludes by analysing more recent efforts to incorporate ethnographic intelligence into military planning and operations, particularly in the field of ‘computational counterinsurgency’.

The genesis of the HTS

In 2006, US military and intelligence officials expressed concern about growing chaos Iraq and Afghanistan. As American casualties mounted, some war planners began advocating counterinsurgency tactics (Kaplan, 2013). In a report for the Strategic Studies Institute, anthropologist Sheila Miyoshi Jager noted (2007, pp. 1, 3):

In sharp contrast to former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s heavy-handed approach to counterinsurgency which emphasized aggressive military tactics, the post-Rumsfeld Pentagon has advocated a ‘gentler’ approach, emphasizing cultural knowledge and ethnographic intelligence. [...] This ‘cultural turn’ within DoD highlights efforts to understand adversary societies and to recruit ‘practitioners’ of culture, notably anthropologists, to help in the war effort in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

An early advocate was Major General Robert Scales who drew a direct comparison to British colonial rule:

the British Army created a habit of 'seconding' bright officers to various corners of the world so as to immerse them in the cultures of the Empire [...] At the heart of a cultural-centric approach to future war would be a cadre of global scouts [...] They should attend graduate schools in disciplines necessary to understand human behavior and cultural anthropology. (2004)

Major General Scales would not need to wait long. In 2005, anthropologist Montgomery McFate and Andrea Jackson published a pilot proposal for a Pentagon 'Office of Operational Cultural Knowledge' focused on 'human terrain' and consisting of social scientists with 'strong connections to the services and combatant commands' (McFate & Jackson, 2005, p. 20). McFate is widely credited with having been the principal architect of HTS (see, for example, Gezari, 2013, pp. 29–44).

In early 2007, BAE Systems began posting HTS job announcements on its company website. Soon afterwards, it was joined by Wexford Group (CACI) and MTC Technologies. Before deployment, HTT members received military and weapons training, and in February 2007 the first team arrived in Afghanistan, followed by others in subsequent months. During the summer of 2007, teams were deployed to Iraq (McFate & Fondacaro, 2011).

Proponents insisted that HTTs were 'extremely helpful in terms of giving commanders on the ground an understanding of the cultural patterns of interaction, the nuances of how to interact with those cultural groups on the ground' – a dubious claim, since none of the PhD-qualified anthropologists working in HTTs had prior regional knowledge at the time that Montgomery McFate made this claim (McFate quoted in 'Anthropology and war', 2007). However, HTTs were designed to collect regionally specific data on political leadership, kinship groups, economic systems and agricultural production. The data were to be sent to a central database accessible to other US government agencies. Furthermore, databases would 'eventually be turned over to the new governments of Iraq and Afghanistan to enable them to more fully exercise sovereignty over their territory' (Kipp, Grau, Prinslow, & Smith, 2006, p. 14).

HTTs were to supply brigade commanders with 'deliverables' including a 'user-friendly ethnographic and sociocultural database of the area of operations that can provide the commander data maps showing specific ethnographic or cultural features'. HTTs were to use Mapping Human Terrain software, 'an automated database and presentation tool that allows teams to gather, store, manipulate, and provide cultural data from hundreds of categories' (Kipp et al., 2006, p. 13).

HTS supporters denied that such a database might be used to target Iraqis or Afghans, or that HTTs were essentially gathering intelligence. In a radio interview, HTS architect Montgomery McFate stated:

The intent of the program is not to identify who the bad actors are out there. The military has an entire intelligence apparatus geared and designed to provide that information to them. That is not the information that they need from social scientists. (Quoted in 'Anthropology and war', 2007)

Yet she provided no evidence that safeguards existed to prevent others from using it against informants.

But there is abundant evidence that HTS was deeply involved in intelligence gathering. In the words of former HTT member Evans (2015),

HTS was absolutely an intelligence program and the Army and HTS leaders should have embraced it from the start [...] the program fell under the G2 ('2' indicates 'intelligence') at the US Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) [...] Many human terrain teams, including my own, worked closely with and were embedded with the intelligence staff sections in the brigades they served [...] we absolutely collected and analyzed information that informed military operations.

Marketing counterinsurgency

During HTS's first four years, Montgomery McFate and retired Army Colonel Steve Fonda-caro (who was hired as manager) tirelessly promoted the programme. Their PR blitz included front-page stories in the *New York Times* and *San Francisco Chronicle Magazine* and dozens of articles in magazines and newspapers (see, for example, Kamps, 2011; Mulrine, 2007; Rohde, 2007). The corporate media generally described HTS in glowing terms, and occasionally journalists portrayed McFate as a bohemian bad girl. One infatuated reporter described her as a 'punk rock wild child [...] with a penchant for big hats and American Spirit cigarettes and a nose that still bears the tiny dent of a piercing 25 years closed' (Stannard, 2007). McFate was the perfect shill.

HTS's meteoric ascent paralleled and was accelerated by the rise to power of General David Petraeus, who was a staunch supporter. As a commander in Iraq, Petraeus became known for an unusual strategy that relied upon 'securing' the population by interacting with civilians and paying off local tribal leaders in exchange for political support. This 'population-centric' approach became known as the Petraeus Doctrine and was welcomed by some Army officers (Kaplan, 2013). Many Pentagon officials (particularly Defense Secretary Robert Gates) were impressed with the strategy, which was soon codified when Petraeus oversaw the publication of a new Army field manual, *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency*. Counterinsurgency warfare had an air of theoretical legitimacy – indeed, Petraeus surrounded himself with a team of advisors with doctoral degrees in political science and history. These men referred to counterinsurgency as 'the graduate level of war'. The University of Chicago Press's publication of the manual as a social science text in 2007 appeared to legitimise their claims.

Many brigade commanders fell into line once the Petraeus Doctrine was established as the Army's preferred method for fighting insurgents. Criticising counterinsurgency – or HTS for that matter – was a bad move for officers seeking to advance their careers. Congressmen and women generally liked the new approach because it appeared to be succeeding (at least in Iraq) and because many viewed it as less lethal. And HTS fit perfectly with the narrative that Petraeus had crafted with the help of compliant reporters: counterinsurgency is the thinking man's warfare.

However, HTS encountered a series of obstacles. As mentioned above, the program met organised resistance from academic anthropologists. Less than a year after the first HTT was deployed to Afghanistan, the Network of Concerned Anthropologists was formed and gathered more than 1000 signatures from anthropologists pledging to refrain from participating in counterinsurgency efforts.

Also in 2007, the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association issued a sharply worded statement in which it expressed disapproval of the programme, describing it as an 'unacceptable application of anthropological expertise' (American Anthropological

Association [AAA], 2007). The AAA statement outlined several specific ethical dilemmas posed by HTS, including conflicting ethical obligations (to the US Army on the one hand, and to their informants, on the other); an inability for HTS anthropologists to obtain 'voluntary informed consent' and the possible use of 'fieldwork-derived information' by US military field commanders for targeting populations, therefore, subjecting them to potential harm. The AAA convened a special committee, the Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with US Security and Intelligence Communities, which conducted a detailed study of HTS and suggested 'that the AAA emphasize the incompatibility of HTS with disciplinary ethics and practice for job seekers and that it further recognize the problem of allowing HTS to define the meaning of "anthropology" within DoD' (AAA, 2008).

Lamentably, HTS was beset by tragedy. Between May 2008 and January 2009, three employees of the programme – Michael Bhatia, Nicole Suveges and Paula Loyd – were killed in action. Some suggested that in its rush to supply the Army with social scientists, BAE Systems (which had been granted large contracts to manage HTS) was not providing personnel with sufficient training (Gezari, 2013, p. 168).

It soon became clear that BAE Systems was on a hiring binge and was inadequately screening HTS applicants. Most of the academics who were hired had no substantive knowledge of Iraqi or Afghan culture. Very few could speak or understand Arabic, Pashto, Dari or Farsi. But the pressure was on – the Army needed 'human terrain analysts' ASAP and was willing to pay top dollar to get them. Vanessa Gezari succinctly summarises the results of these bizarre hiring patterns:

Some were bright, driven, talented people who contributed useful insights – but an equal number of unqualified people threatened to turn the whole effort into a joke. The Human Terrain System – which had been described in the pages of military journals and briefed to commanders in glowing, best-case-scenario terms – was ultimately a complex mix of brains and ambition, idealism and greed, idiocy, optimism, and bad judgment. (2013, p. 197)

As early as 2009, reports of racism, sexual harassment and payroll padding began to emerge, and an Army investigation found that HTS was plagued by severe problems (Vanden Brook, 2013). Reports of rampant sexual harassment also surfaced.

To make matters worse, the investigators found that many brigade commanders considered HTTs to be ineffective. In the wake of these revelations, Fondacaro and McFate resigned from the program. Army Colonel Sharon Hamilton replaced Fondacaro as program manager, while anthropologist Christopher King took over as a chief social scientist.

But by this point, HTS was making a transition from 'proof-of-concept' to a permanent 'program of record' – a major milestone towards full institutionalisation. As a Pentagon correspondent told me under condition of anonymity, once such programmes become permanent, 'these things never really die'. This makes HTS's expiration all the more perplexing.

The rapid demise of HTS

Given its spectacular growth and the Army's once insatiable demand for embedded social scientists, one might ask: Why did HTS fall into a downward spiral?

One reason had to do with the scheduled pullout of US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. As early as 2012, HTS's management team was desperately searching for a way to market the programme after a US troop withdrawal:

With Iraq behind it and the end of its role in Afghanistan scheduled for 2014, the operative term used by US Army Human Terrain System managers these days is 'Phase Zero'. The term refers to sending small teams of Army human terrain experts to gather information about local populations – their customs and sensitivities – perhaps in peacetime and certainly before areas boil over into a conflict that might require a larger number of US forces. Human Terrain System advocates see Phase Zero as a way for the program to survive in a more austere military. (Hodges, 2012)

Apparently, none of the military's branches or combatant commands were interested in funding the programme beyond the fiscal year 2014. Perhaps HTS's reputation preceded it. In an email message, an Army reserve officer speaking on condition of anonymity told me that 'like the armored vehicles being given to police departments, they [HTS personnel] are sort of surplus ... mostly looking for customers'.

Others employed by the military have recounted similar stories. For example, an anthropologist who works in a military organisation (who asked not to be named and was not speaking in an official capacity) noted, 'many military personnel did express objections to the program for a variety of reasons. They just expressed their critiques internally'.

Another factor that undoubtedly damaged HTS's long-term survival was Petraeus's spectacular fall from grace during his tenure as Central Intelligence Agency director. 'From hero to zero', reported the *Washington Post* after his extramarital exploits and reckless handling of classified information were publicised (Moyer, 2015). In the aftermath of the Petraeus–Broadwell affair, some journalists began to acknowledge that their enthusiasm for counterinsurgency warfare was due in large part to 'hero-worship and runaway military idolatry' centred around Petraeus's personality cult (Vlahos, 2012). In a remarkably candid confession, *Wired* magazine's Ackerman (2012) admitted:

the more I interacted with his staff, the more persuasive their points seemed ... in retrospect, I was insufficiently critical [of counterinsurgency doctrine] ... Another irony that Petraeus's downfall reveals is that some of us who egotistically thought our coverage of Petraeus and counterinsurgency was so sophisticated were perpetuating myths without fully realizing it.

The Petraeus–Broadwell scandal ripped away the shroud of mystique that had enveloped counterinsurgency's promoters.

By 2013, a fresh wave of criticism began to surround HTS. Anthropologists continued their opposition, but HTS's newest critics were not academics – they were investigative journalists. *USA Today* correspondent Tom Vanden Brook published a series of excoriating articles based upon documents that the newspaper had obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. Independent reporter John Stanton cultivated a network of HTS insiders and published dozens of reports about the programme's seedier aspects. Journalist Vanessa Gezari was another critical observer. After several years of careful research, she published a riveting exposé in 2013, entitled *The Tender Soldier*. In it, she tells readers: 'I wanted to believe in the Human Terrain System's capacity to make the US military smarter, but the more time I spent with the team, the more confused I became' (Gezari, 2013, p. 169). And later in the same chapter: 'The Human Terrain System lied to the public and to its own employees and contract staff about the nature of its work in

Afghanistan [...] [it] would prove less controversial for what it did than for its sheer incompetence' (Gezari, 2013, p. 192).

Another problem facing HTS was the broad shift in Pentagon priorities, away from cultural intelligence and towards geospatial intelligence. As noted by geographer Oliver Belcher (2013, p. 189), the latter 'marks a real move towards conducting human terrain intelligence at a distance within strategic centers of calculation in Washington, DC and Virginia'. Counterinsurgency was a passing fad. 'The US military has a strong cultural aversion to irregular warfare and to devoting resources to sociocultural knowledge', according to researchers at National Defense University (Lamb, Orton, Davies, & Pikulsky, 2013, p. 28). This, combined with HTS's record of incompetence, undoubtedly emboldened those opposing the idea of incorporating social science perspectives in the military.

By 2014, the rapidly growing fields of computational social science and predictive modelling had become fashionable – they aligned neatly with the Obama administration's sweeping embrace of 'big data'. Many Pentagon planners would prefer to collect data from mobile phone records, remote sensors, biometric databases and drones equipped with high-resolution cameras than from human social scientists with dubious credentials (González, 2015). In the words of Oliver Belcher (2013, p. 63), 'It's algorithms, not anthropology, that are the real social science scandal in late-modern war' (Figure 2).

Human terrain in the post-HTS period

The final days of HTS's existence were ugly. By one account, its last moments were tumultuous and emotional. It seems that HTS still had true believers among its ranks –



Figure 2. Biometric information forms part of the military's 'big data' approach to counterinsurgency warfare. Credit: Joseph Scanlan/US Department of Defense.

employees who were in denial even as the plug was being pulled. A former HTS employee (speaking on condition of anonymity) described those on the payroll at the time of closure as 'angry, shocked, bitter, retaliatory ... The last 3–4 months involved some of the most toxic culture of embittered people I have ever witnessed'.

Some voices, most notably former HTS employees, publicly complained over the loss of what they insisted was an indispensable military tool. After HTS's termination was publicised, a series of policy pieces began calling for a new improved version of HTS, reflecting a deep longing by strategists for ethnographic intelligence (Dearing & Lee, 2015; Evans, 2015; Kassel, 2015). Christopher King, HTS's former chief social scientist, reflected these sentiments:

While HTS may be mothballed until needed again, the program did hammer home to the military the need for social science research. Military commanders re-learned the advantage of knowledge as much as possible about the people they are having to interact with on a daily basis. This ultimately led to better decision making on the ground. Today, social scientists still are active in the intelligence and rest of military community as both contractor and government employees ... they are still bringing value added to commanders. (Comments in Perlmutter, 2015)

It would be premature for those concerned about the militarisation of culture to breathe a sigh of relief. The needs of empire – especially an empire in denial – are far too great to ignore cultural concerns. HTS's sudden death can obscure the fact that elements of the programme continue to survive, though in distinct and sometimes unrecognisable forms. The basic idea behind HTS – to equip the military with cultural expertise for battlefield operations – has not been eradicated. If anything, the concept has firmly taken root.

An example of these trends is the emergence of the Global Cultural Knowledge Consortium, which can be seen as an offshoot of the HTS. Four years ago, as HTS funding peaked, the US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) launched the Cultural Knowledge Consortium (CKC). It began in 2011, at about the same time that defence firm CGI Federal was awarded a \$227 million contract to manage HTS. CKC emerged as the Department of Defense's Minerva Initiative reached out to scholars at American universities, seeking to draw in social scientists willing to align their research interests with those of the military.

Minerva forged new linkages between the military and academic researchers. According to a resource guide prepared for the Pentagon's 2nd Annual Minerva Conference, the Army initiated CKC 'to support the availability, analysis, and storage of socio-cultural data to satisfy the information requirements of the COCOMs [combatant commands] and the defense intelligence enterprise' (US OSD, 2011, pp. 4–5). The resource guide outlined an impressive list of objectives to be pursued by 'CKC Scholars' including relationship building, electronic collaboration, regional working groups, the creation of a pool of subject matter experts and the coordination of symposia, seminars and teleconferences.

Despite its lofty goals, CKC had limited impact. It established a (now-defunct) website, <http://www.culturalknowledge.org>, which included a blog, regionally focused discussion boards and lists of resources such as academic journals. The website included a seemingly random assortment of topics including 'current trends in Hungary', Syrian cultural information, analysis of developments in Sudan, and information from humanitarian workers in Somalia (CKC, 2011). It also developed a series of YouTube lectures in 2012 covering

a scattershot collection of topics such as 'Human Trafficking in Moldova', 'The Evolution of Boko Haram', 'The US/Mexico Border and Hezbollah in the Western Hemisphere' and 'Socio-Cultural Fieldwork', the latter of which features Kansas University anthropologist Felix Moos (CKC, 2012). According to a social scientist familiar with CKC speaking on condition of anonymity, the programme ultimately 'didn't produce much' and 'very few people at the commands knew who they were'.

CKC was terminated in December 2013, but TRISA (TRADOC Intelligence Support Activity) officials initiated a project called the Global Cultural Knowledge Network (GCKN) in October 2014 – right after the closure of HTS. TRISA director Gary Phillips stated that he and others began working on a 'transition plan' to provide cultural expertise in the post-HTS era (Doubleday, 2015). At this point, GCKN appears to be a relatively lean operation, staffed by a commissioned officer, a geospatial analyst, three social scientists, and a 'knowledge manager', but as we saw with HTS, small programmes can grow quickly within months. Phillips acknowledged problems with HTS, but stressed that the GCKN would improve upon its predecessor: 'We spent about five months going through everything we learned and [are] building this from scratch to not make the same mistakes again' (Doubleday, 2015).

It seems unlikely that GCKN was built 'from scratch'. One source familiar with GCKN (who wished not to be identified) told me that it was essentially a 'reboot of CKC [...] without the headache of deployed teams and the drama that was HTS's poorly selected personnel'. Perhaps not surprisingly, Phillips nowhere mentions that defence firm CGI Federal – the same corporation that managed HTS in its final years – now manages GCKN.

One social scientist with extensive contacts in the military branches told a similar story on condition of anonymity: 'It will serve as a sort of clearinghouse/reachback capability that allows Army units planning to deploy or conduct exercises to request information or access to expertise.' 'Reachback capability' references a key component of HTS, the so-called Reachback Research Centers. These were designed to link HTTs with specialists who could provide databases of cultural information to assist with counterinsurgency operations, but the effort was plagued with technical problems. The specialists were also notorious for recycling anecdotal information mined from Wikipedia and blogs, mixed with indiscriminate samplings of peer-reviewed literature. 'Reachback capability' was in a sense HTS's unrealised high-tech dream – and this element of the dream is still intact, luring military clients to promises that culture can successfully be engineered for militarised goals.

The 'human terrain' concept survives in other ways and appears to be multiplying. Just months after HTS was being shuttered, the US Army began expanding its cadre of civil affairs officers. According to the *Army Times*, these 'warrior-diplomats' are often organised in four-person teams who operate 'in a low-profile way, leveraging soft power to quietly strengthen and stabilize friendly governments' (Gould, 2015) – tasks that resonate with at least some of the activities conducted by embedded personnel during HTS's heyday. On the surface, civil affairs troops appear to engage with local people ethnographically: 'through their ground-level interactions and understanding of local cultures and the people, [they] are able to glean a sense of local dynamics' (Gould, 2015). But such 'interactions and understandings' are easily mobilised for intelligence purposes or for bolstering psychological operations programmes.

The military branches are increasingly taking an interest in cultural sensitivity as a counterinsurgency tool. An interesting example is the effort to develop gender inclusive approaches. The US Army and Marine Corps have deployed 'Female Engagement Teams' (FETs) for counterinsurgency, under the assumption that 'one of the best ways to achieve strategic goals is to use female marines and soldiers to influence the family unit' (Holliday, 2012, p. 90). More recently, US Army, Navy and Marine Corps Special Operations Commands have introduced 'Cultural Support Teams' (CSTs) which despite its gender-neutral name, were comprised exclusively of female service members. According to Katt (2014),

the primary difference between the two was that FETs were used to soften coalition forces' footprint as they moved through an area, whereas CSTs were designed to provide persistent presence and engagement – a key tenet of population-focused operations conducted by SOF [Special Operations Forces].

An equally disturbing development is the recruitment of human terrain experts by the US Special Operations Command (SOCOM). According to researchers from the National Defense University, SOCOM created 'some classified programs related to human terrain' before HTS was launched in 2007, and it is probably safe to assume these classified programmes continue in some capacity (Lamb et al., 2013, p. 29).

More recently, SOCOM appears to have dramatically stepped up its efforts. In contrast to HTS's brash public relations campaign, SOCOM has taken a quieter approach by contracting small- to medium-sized defence companies relatively unknown to those outside the industry. Today online job search engines to advertise dozens of positions with titles like 'Human Terrain Analyst', 'Cultural Subject Matter Expert' and 'Human Terrain Specialist'.

Conclusion

Some argue that HTS was a good idea that was badly mismanaged. It would be more accurate to say that HTS was a bad idea that was badly mismanaged. Cultural knowledge is not a service that can be easily provided by contractors and consultants or taught to soldiers using a training manual. HTS was built upon a flawed premise, and its abysmal record was the inevitable result. The fact that the programme continued as long as it did reveals the Army's superficial attitude towards culture.

Viewed with a wide-angle lens, it becomes clear that HTS had broader social significance. The programme encapsulated deep cultural contradictions underlying America's place in the world after 9/11 – contradictions that continue haunting our country today. In Vanessa Gezari's words:

[HTS] was a giant cultural metaphor, a cosmic expression of the national zeitgeist: American exceptionalism tempered by the political correctness of a postcolonial, globalized age and driven by the ravenous hunger of defense contractors for profit. If you could have found a way to project on a big screen the nation's mixed feelings about its role as the sole super-power in a post-Cold War world, this was what it would have looked like. (2013, p. 198)

A great deal can be learned by examining the wreckage left behind in the wake of HTS. From one perspective, the programme can be interpreted as an example of the ineptitude, incompetence and hubris that characterised many aspects of the US-led invasions and

occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. Perhaps it is not surprising that wars of conquest would be couched in terms of 'cultural awareness' and securing 'human terrain'. From another perspective, HTS represents the perverse excesses of a military-industrial complex run amok, a system that caters to the needs of the defence industry and celebrity generals rather than the needs of Iraqis or Afghans.

We would be far better off if more government-funded social science was used to build bridges of respect and mutual understanding with people of other societies, rather than as a weapon to be used against them. Perhaps more than any other example in the past generation, the HTS illustrates the ethically problematic nature of conducting anthropological research *for* military and intelligence agencies, rather than research *of* these agencies.

Note

1. Department of Defense photos of HTS personnel have been reprinted in many publications. See, for example, González (2009, p. 4); McFate and Laurence (2015: book cover).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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