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Understanding the Human Terrain in Warfare: A Clash of Moralities

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Human Terrain Systems (HTS)—initiated as a proof of concept program in 2007 to help the U. S. Army better understand the people, cultures, and, in general, the operating environment in their counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan—is far from perfect. Proof of concept programs are, by their very nature, cutting edge experiments funded by the U. S. Army in an endeavor to enhance the efficiency and morality of the warfare they are charged with conducting. So, it skirts the edge of ludicrousness to assume that these programs will come out of the box perfect. And, the need to understand the human terrain is just as pressing for the just and efficient prosecution of warfare, whether or not the HTS program designed to glean this information is as perfect as critics allege it should be.

Even if these critics are correct and we go so far as to accept all of the allegations leveled against the HTS program as true, killing the program without immediately replacing it with a similar program would be morally wrong. The reason it is wrong is simple. Failure to allow the U. S. Army the greatest chance to understand the human environment they are operating in will result in *more* collateral damage, not less as so many American anthropologists have argued. Furthermore, it will lessen the chances of success in any military operation carried out by U. S. and coalition partner forces. Worse still, denying American forces as accurate a portrayal of the human terrain as possible denies them the right to act as moral warriors, for they will be less able, perhaps unable, to discern who are friends, foes, and innocent bystanders. Further, despite the vociferous outrage from the anthropological field, led by Hugh Gusterson, David Price, Marshall Sahlins, and Roberto Gonzalez, denying the U. S. Army the ability to understand the human terrain will result in more cultural destruction because the Army will be operating largely blind in non-western foreign cultures. The U. S. Army becomes less of a precision instrument and more of a bull in a china shop under such circumstances.

It is ironic too, that many of the criticisms leveled by Hugh Gusterson, Roberto Gonzalez, and others against the U. S. Army's attempt to use anthropologists and other social scientists to understand better the local people and culture equates HTS to the alleged hit squads they claim the U. S. Army operated in Vietnam, as the mission of HTS is quite the opposite. The main goal of HTS is to *ensure* that no one, especially innocent civilians, is unjustly targeted because of a lack of understanding of the local culture and populace. In fact, it is hoped that a greater understanding of the local culture might lead to a situation where violence can be avoided in many situations altogether.

The baggage these and other anthropologists carry from their "Vietnam experience" and their general loathing and distrust of both the U. S. Army and the U. S. government is coloring perceptions of the positive impact anthropologists and other social scientists can have in *lessening* the violent impact of war.

Anthropologists attempt to claim the high ground by arguing that individual anthropologists and the field as a whole will be tarnished if its members collude with the U. S. military in any combat environment. This appeal to morality denies that there is an equally, if not greater, appeal to morality that can be made by the soldiers themselves who wish to conduct themselves as moral warriors. Despite what Hollywood portrays, almost every soldier in the U.S. Army would rather die than kill an innocent civilian. However, denying the soldier the ability to understand the intricacies of the local culture and the people in his or her area of operations increases the possibility that just such a tragedy will occur. In the end, the leadership of the field of anthropology does not have a monopoly on moral

arguments regarding the use of anthropologists in warfare.

What is most disconcerting is to see the American Anthropological Association's (AAA) leadership use the bully pulpit to threaten and coerce anthropologists away from participation in any endeavor by the U. S. Army to understand the human terrain. The Network of Concerned Anthropologists, founded by past and present leaders of AAA, has garnered over 1000 signatures from "concerned" anthropologists condemning the HTS program. Whether or not these signatures represent willing participants or not is in some question as the AAA, influenced by these same critics of HTS, passed bylaws indicating that any anthropologist who worked in a combat zone for the U. S. Army would be summarily expunged from the field and denied any chance at a career in academics. These actions are particularly ironic as anthropology, which this author believes to be an important academic endeavor, is dying. Just as a lucrative and important practical purpose for anthropologists is divined and a massive opportunity is offered, the leadership, colored by their own left-leaning, anti-war bias,[1] turns its back on this opportunity and figures out a way to coerce most of the anthropologists in the field with them.

In the end, the anthropologists do not have the high ground and at best there is a clash of moralities between the anthropological community and the moral warrior. The prediction by Hugh Gusterson that HTS would have a hard time finding qualified anthropologists as time passed is coming true. When the leadership in a field threatens careers if one does anything to help the U. S. Army better understand cultures and peoples in order to conduct the most precise, effective, and moral warfare it is no wonder that few anthropologists find the fortitude to cross the party line. But in the final analysis, the people whom the leaders in anthropology so vociferously claim they wish to protect will surely suffer mightily if their criticisms of HTS win the day.

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For more on this topic see Dan G. Cox's forthcoming article, "Human Terrain Systems and the Moral Prosecution of Warfare," in the Autumn 2011 edition of *Parameters* due out sometime in the Spring of 2012. Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author, and do not represent the views of the U. S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies, the U. S. Army Command and General Staff College, the United States Army, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency.

[1] These are Hugh Gusterson's words, not mine. See Hugh Gusterson, "When Professors Go To War: Why the Ivory Tower and the Pentagon Don't Mix," *Foreign Policy*, online edition, (21 July 2008), http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2008/07/20/when_professors_go_to_war (accessed 29 July 2011).

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