

The Human Terrain System: Clashing Moralities or Rhetorical Dead Horses?

Written by Marc W.D. Tyrrell

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MARC W.D. TYRRELL, FEB 5 2012

In *Understanding the Human Terrain in Warfare: A Clash of Moralities* [1], Dan Cox produces a vintage 2007 “argument” for supporting the Human Terrain System (HTS).[2] His argument, however, is long on rhetoric and short on both logic and facts concentrating, as it does, on an argument of moral rectitude rather than actually bothering to examine the HTS and its institutional environment.

At the start of his article, he notes that the HTS is a proof-of-concept program; a “cutting edge experiment”. Really? Various military forces have been using socio-cultural knowledge for over 2,000 years in the Western world (and longer in China),[3] and there is a long history of U.S. military engagement with such knowledge going back over 200 years to the Lewis and Clark expedition. The use of socio-cultural knowledge by the U.S. military during and after World War II is quite well documented. Indeed, one of the foundational articles dealing with the HTS draws an explicit parallel with the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) system from Vietnam.[4]

Cox makes a very interesting assertion when he says that “the need to understand the human terrain is just as pressing for the just and efficient prosecution of warfare”. Indeed, his general argument in this area is compelling both from a utilitarian standpoint and from the standpoint of current and historical military practice. What is not compelling is his specific argument that such knowledge of the “human terrain” implicitly comes solely from the Human Terrain System.

Indeed, there are much “better” systems operating inside the U.S. military establishment if we define “better” using a purely utilitarian scale: the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity’s Geospatial Intelligence Directorate, the U.S. Army’s Foreign Area Officer program and the U.S. Special Operations Commands’ alpha teams to name only three of over fifty programs that integrate socio-cultural knowledge into military operations.

The real issue at stake for the U.S. military – the “cutting edge experiment” – is not the use of socio-cultural knowledge and advisers but, rather, a) who they will be, b) where and how they will be used and c) where and how they will be most effective in supporting military operations. In order to even begin to answer these questions, we have to move beyond rhetoric and start to examine the actual effectiveness of the Human Terrain System.

What do we actually know about the operations and effectiveness of the Human Terrain System that would allow for an evaluation of it? In December, 2008, I called for a program evaluation of the HTS along three main lines[5]:

1. First, there should be an evaluation of the truth-claims made by the program within the military context. Is it actually reducing kinetic operations? Is it increasing the effectiveness of COIN[6] operations? Is it materially hampering the operations of the “enemy”? Is it measurably changing the attitudes of military commanders and troops in terms of the TTP’s[7] they employ?
2. Second, there should be an evaluation of the efficiency of the program in bureaucratic terms. In comparison with other programs of a similar size and age, is it managed “efficiently”? Are its HR policies and practices in keeping with “industry standards” [of other bureaucratic programs]? Are its technical assets (e.g. the reachback centre, the MapHT program, etc.) on developmental par with other, similar programs? Are its

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- accounting procedures on par with similar programs? Etc., etc., etc.[8]
3. The third set of evaluations should be “ethical”. Some people inside the Anthropology crowd do not appear to realize that the US Department of Defense has some of the most stringent ethics guidelines for research conducted on human subjects. Consider, by way of example, Title 32, CFR, Part 219 – Protection of Human Subjects from the Office of the Secretary of defence.[9] This established a minimum baseline for research actions taken by DoD employees, and it should be compared and contrasted with the AAA Code of Ethics[10] to establish points of overlap, agreement, disagreement and differing extensions (i.e. areas where there is no overlap). The actions of HTTs should then be compared against this composite ethical “baseline”.[11]

Over the past three years, we have only limited answers to these questions. Often, the “answers” we have, at least concerning the actual effectiveness of the HTS, have appeared in short articles. For example, on April 12, 2010, Matthew Arnold published *Improving the Coalition’s Understanding of ‘The People’ in Afghanistan: Human Terrain Mapping in Kapisa Province* in the Small Wars Journal.[12] According to Arnold:

This article provides a summary of the work being currently undertaken by the Human Terrain Team (HTT) of TF [Task Force] La Fayette (TFL), the French Brigade, to better systematically understand local populations in Kapisa Province. Specifically, TFL’s efforts mean undertaking Human Terrain Mapping (HTM), which in the context of Coalition efforts in Afghanistan can be understood as the collection, collation, and presentation of the socio-political information necessary for a field unit to decisively influence a local population. Concurrently, this paper also articulates the role that HTM could play in the day-to-day campaigning of other Coalition units trying to better understand local populations.

A comment posted by Joshua Foust, and ex-HTS social scientist who also worked in Kapsia Province, contains an interesting, and unanswered, question:

I remain confused by one point, though. He’s not the first HTT social scientist to note the complete lack of systematic collection methods, nor the first to try to implement a solution. If he’s as successful as this essay suggests, I’d be interested in learning how he was able to get broad adoption of his HTM methods, since we spent years trying to convince deployed HTTs on the need for standardized interview forms stored in a central place, and everyone obsessed on knowing the precise details of the people in their AOs [Areas of Operations]. The thing is, most of those efforts fizzled out, partly because the HTTs didn’t have good equipment or mandates to really implement these ideas, and partly because some HTTs have such enormous leeway in carrying out their missions few saw the need to cater their methods to a CONUS-based research center... and a number of them were so busy they didn’t have much time or opportunity to specifically tailor their collection methods to any AO-wide standard.

Foust was not the only person “confused” by Arnold’s truth-claim. The last comment on the article (October 10th, 2011), by CPT Erhan Bedestani, is quite illuminating:

I was deployed to Tagab as the SF [Special Forces] Detachment Commander during the time period that Dr. Arnold was there. I will tell you first and foremost his assessment of the coalition and its understanding of the local populace is INCORRECT. This is the second article I have seen him write and I am making it a point to clarify that his assessments are wrong. The methods he proposes we use, to better engage are indeed being used and were being used long before Dr. Arnold arrived in country.

As I noted earlier, most of the evidence of actual effectiveness is *de facto* anecdotal, such as the Arnold article. The single, open-source piece of evidence that I am aware of is contained in a set of interviews conducted as part of the Congressionally Directed Assessment of the Human Terrain System by the Center for Naval Analysis (CNA)[13] where commanders experiences of the HTS are synopsized (Table B-2, page 153):

Category Number of Interview Number of unique HTT Percentage of unique HTT Very useful 5 3 21 Varied in usefulness 8 8 57 Not useful 3 3 21 Total 16 14 100

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These results are not an actual indictment of the programs' effectiveness. Then again, they are certainly not evidence of the cultural "Silver Bullet" implied in many of the early, pro-HTS articles. When looking at the results, it is important to note that the commanders interviewed had their dealings with HTS in 2008 and 2009, and the interviews were conducted in May and June of 2010.[14] The reason why this is crucial to keep in mind during current debates is that this is before COL (Ret'd) Steve Fodacaro was replaced by COL Sharon Hamilton as program manager (June, 2010).[15]

The CNA analysis of the HTS program was, in many ways, an indictment of the management of the program (specifically of management structure), rather than of the programs' intent or effectiveness. Indeed, the body of the report contains many conclusions that go towards answering my second set of evaluation criteria, i.e. a comparison with similar bureaucratic programs. The report concludes with the following (page 145):

Although there may be others, we identified six specific problems or challenges that have faced the HTS program as a result of one, or some combination of the factors listed above:

1. The recruiting of unqualified team members
2. High rates of attrition of HTS team members deployed during conversion to DAC
3. Contract ceiling was reached and HTS operations were halted
4. Timecard problems
5. Determining permanent duty station/no TDY pay for DACS for time spent at Ft Leavenworth
6. HTS program management

With the notable exception of point 6, HTS program management, these are all human resources issues (recruitment, retention, standardized HR processes, etc.). The CNA report notes that while some of these problems may have come from a lack of TRADOC oversight,

It is also important to note that some of the problems with the program identified in this chapter are beyond the scope of TRADOC's ability to resolve by itself. Such as:

- Problems resulting from federal government regulations such as requiring timecards for HTS employees while deployed
- The consequences of establishing a permanent duty station at Fort Leavenworth for deploying employees
- The consequences of slow federal hiring practices or understaffing and
- The lengthy DoD authorizations and funding process may constrain some programs requested by the U.S. military fighting in two theaters.

So, let us think about this. We have problems, many serious, with a program that, at the time of the CNA analysis (2010), was four years old, that was stood up in the middle of two ongoing wars to provide battlefield support to commanders but was staffed by contractors rather than by government employees.[16] Anyone who has studied large organizations or been involved in them should be aware that there will be inevitable problems with them. Consider, by way of an academic example that is dealing with a much simpler problem, just how long it takes to get a brand new Ph.D. Program up and running.

There is another factor that needs to be considered as well, which is the entire issue of how and where problems with the HTS were being publicly reported. While John Stanton[17], one of the prime HTS critics, cannot be described as "anti-military" or "anti-war", the same cannot be said for other HTS critics.[18] Indeed, the reaction against this perceived anti-military bias with the military use of social science in general and Anthropology in particular is very clear in Cox's piece when he states:

The baggage these and other anthropologists carry from their "Vietnam experience" and their general loathing and

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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.

When I was a child, my grandmother used to say “it’s easier to catch flies with honey than vinegar”, and the validity of that piece of folk wisdom is quite obvious here. Indeed, the effects of the polarization of the “debate” surrounding the HTS probably made it more difficult for structural problems inside the program to be fixed while it was on the road from a proof-of-concept program to a program-of-record.

The final part of the evaluation I called for, on the ethics of the program, has not been conducted. “But”, I hear people cry, “what about the AAA report on the HTS?”.[19] The CEAUSSIC report does, indeed, contain an excellent section on ethics (pages 47 – 49) that lays out the core of how such an evaluation should be conducted and what would need to be considered. The problem, however, is that much of the debate centres on two problems: a) does HTS research require an Institutional Review Board (IRB) and b) where is the HTS Code of Ethics? These two questions have not, over two years later, been publicly answered and, without them, the over-arching evaluation cannot be conducted.

I sub-titled this piece “Clashing Moralities or Rhetorical Dead Horses” for a reason. The moral arguments in Cox’s piece do not and cannot substitute for an actual examination of the operation of the Human Terrain System, especially when he uses a utilitarian argument. When Cox states “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,” he merely shows his inability to produce an actual argument in favour of the HTS.

Do the military need and will they continue to use socio-cultural knowledge in order to complete their missions? Yes. Is this only provided by the HTS? No. It is more than time for us to stop flogging a dead rhetorical horse and start looking at the reality of the various and multiple engagements between the military and socio-cultural knowledge.

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Marc W.D. Tyrrell is a Senior Research Fellow at the Canadian Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies at the Norman Patterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada and a member of the Editorial Board of the Small Wars Journal. He is a symbolic Anthropologist whose research focuses on how people make sense of perceived reality (symbol systems) and how this is communicated. He blogs at the Small Wars Journal (occasionally) and his own blog In Harmonium.

[1] Posted January 18th, 2012 available at:

<http://www.e-ir.info/2012/01/18/understanding-the-human-terrain-in-warfare-a-clash-of-moralities/>

[2] This style of “argument” shows up continuously in the popular press, especially in 2007. For examples on the pro-HTS side, see Kambiz Fattahi US army enlists anthropologists, BBC News, October 16, 2007 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7042090.stm> and ‘Academic Embeds’: Scholars Advise Troops Abroad, NPR interview with Montgomery McFate and Roberto Gonzales, October 7, 2007 available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=15124054> For an example on the Anti-HTS side, see Bryan Bender, Efforts to aid US roll anthropology: Some object to project on Iraq, Afghanistan, Boston Globe, October 8, 2007, available at http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2007/10/08/efforts_to_aid_us_roll_anthropology/

[3] See Tyrrell, Marc W.D. *The First Culture Turn: ethnographic knowledge in the Romano-Byzantine military tradition*, paper presented at the 2008 Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, Royal Military College, Kingston, November 2008 available at <http://marctyrrell.com/uploads/TFCT.pdf>

[4] J. Kipp, L. Grau, K. Prinslow and D. Smith *The Human Terrain System: A CORDS for the 21st century*, Military Review, September-October 2006, available at http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20061031_art005.pdf

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[5] December 22nd, 2008, blog entry “Evaluating... What?” available at <http://marctyrrell.com/2008/12/22/evaluating-what/> NB: the original listing of points, quoted here, assumed a certain level of comfort with military acronyms. I have expanded several of these in endnotes for those who are not familiar with them.

[6] COIN: COunterINsurgency

[7] TTP: Tactics, Techniques and Procedures

[8] Today, I would also call for a point by point comparison with other programs dealing with socio-cultural knowledge.

[9] Title 32, CFR, Part 219 Protection of Human Subjects available at <http://www.dtic.mil/biosys/downloads/32cfr219.pdf> or http://www.tricare.mil/hpae/_docs/32cfr219.pdf

[10] AAA: American Anthropology Association. The AAA's Code of Ethics is available at <http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm>

[11] NB: part of the reasoning for this goes back to the basic question asked earlier of who these advisers would be and how they would operate. The issue of ethics and ethical conflicts is one of the major points of contention with Anthropologists working within the HTS.

[12] Available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/human-terrain-mapping-in-kapisa-province>

[13] Yvette Clinton, Virginia Foran-Cain, Julia Voelker McQuaid, Catherine E. Norman and William H Sims, “Congressionally Directed Assessment of the Human Terrain System” [CDA-HTS], Center for Naval Analysis, November, 2010 available at <http://info.publicintelligence.net/CNA-HTS.pdf>

[14] See CDA-HTS, *op. Cit.* Appendix B

[15] COL Hamilton has, since her appointment as HTS program manager, moved the entire program to be more in line with other organizations under TRADOC. In a recent interview with InsideDefense.com, she noted that “What it [the CDA-HTS report] really reinforced was that we truly were an organization that needs to switch from an entrepreneurial approach to a more established institutional approach, which means you put standards and processes in place so that you do have recurring actions, so that you do have normalcy with how you handle administrative processes.” *Army Increasing Number Of Human Terrain Teams; Advising Allies*, January 28, 2012, available at <http://defensenewsstand.com/NewsStand-General/The-INSIDER-Free-Article/army-increasing-number-of-human-terrain-teams-advising-allies/menu-id-720.html>

[16] The issues surrounding the use of contractors in the HTS are part and parcel of the human resources problems mentioned in the CDA-HTS report. An adequate examination of the use of contractors would require a separate article.

[17] See <http://cryptome.org/0001/hts-stanton.htm> for a listing of Stanton's articles. In many ways, Stanton became the preferred venue for people inside the HTS to communicate problems with the program.

[18] It should also be noted that even Stanton's reporting tended to be dismissed and ignored by many in the U.S. military in part because of its tone.

[19] AAA Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the US Security and Intelligence Communities (CEAUSSIC), “Final Report on The Army's Human Terrain System Proof of Concept Program” (Submitted to the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association October 14, 2009) available at http://www.aaanet.org/cmtes/commissions/CEAUSSIC/upload/CEAUSSIC_HTS_Final_Report.pdf

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