Is There a Better Home for the Army’s Human Terrain System?

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Academics Go To War Research Paper
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“The future of HTS is unclear,” writes Roberto J. Gonzalez, Associate Professor of Anthropology at San Jose State University and staunch critic of the United States Army’s Human Terrain System (HTS).\(^1\) With the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan drawing to a close and military budgets projected to tighten significantly over the next decade, the professor’s statement couldn’t be more timely and relevant. Initiated in 2006 as a quickly developed capability to fix the military’s admitted lack of sociocultural knowledge about the peoples and regions in which it was deployed, the HTS program quickly became hailed as a vital, and emphatically non-lethal, tool in counterinsurgency operations by some while likewise being decried as a wrongful use of social science by others. The former HTS director and recently retired Army Colonel, Steve Fondacaro, and the program’s former Senior Social Scientist, Dr. Montgomery McFate, coauthored an article published in the journal *PRISM* in which they recounted their experiences while establishing HTS and acknowledged that “despite the positive reception by the deployed military units, HTS was controversial with certain elements of the defense intelligence community and with some academics.”\(^2\) Criticism and support comes from a seemingly widespread audience, but the impetus behind the controversy tends to coalesce around questions of whether social science is morally compatible with military objectives, if it really provides an alternative in military discourse truly void from the threat of coercion and targeting of civilians, and if the insertion of academics into the battle space ultimately serves to help or hinder the military effort. Given present controversy and the benefit of hindsight to reflect on nearly six years of HTS successes and failures, the uncertainty surrounding the future of HTS and its affiliation with the military must be addressed. The ensuing discussion focuses on providing a potential solution.
Formally defined on its own public website, HTS is an Army initiative, supported through the Secretary of Defense, to provide sociocultural teams at the brigade, division, and corps level to aid in the understanding of the local population and apply that understanding to the military decision-making process.\(^3\) Undoubtedly, it fielded a desperately needed social science capability supporting the military’s execution of United States Government (USG) objectives, an effort that was rewarded with growth from a $20 million, 5-team proof of concept in 2006 to a permanently authorized and funded Army program in 2010.\(^4\) However, to realize greater potential and provide a more enduring capability, especially during forthcoming periods of military drawdown and programmatic cuts, the HTS should be reassigned to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), where the need for the capability is greater and where the kinds of work expected of HTS experts is more clearly correlated to civil-political objectives than military. Such realignment would advance the program’s contributions to overall USG objectives by removing the cultural barriers imposed by the military over an esoteric academic effort, increasing the ability of the system to contribute across the spectrum of civil, political, and military operations in theater, and by diminishing the validity of the negative arguments levied against the program by some academic and defense communities.

The first argument for reassigning HTS away from the military is to remove the limitations, intentional and unintentional, that military culture imposes over the academic nature of the work. In his book, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Edgar Schein examines how the culture of an organization impacts its members. He argues that organizational culture, or the pattern of shared basic assumptions and beliefs within a group, will be passed on to new generations of members through deliberative teaching of perceived correct behaviors and actions
stemming from prior organizational success.\footnote{5} In other words, new members brought into an organization are shaped to perform in a manner consistent with existing organizational norms. Obviously, the military professes a distinct and deeply inculcated warrior culture, a belief system that has developed with success through many conflicts. Likewise, those looking at the military from the periphery will assume all of its members share that common ethos. This creates a paradox for the HTS concept as currently employed. On the one hand, the need to gather impartial and unbiased information from subjects is paramount to successful socio-cultural research. But, to what extent is it really possible to achieve this aim if subjects view HTS members as part of the military complex? On the other hand, with reference back to Schein’s principles on cultural assimilation, won’t HTS members inevitably have to assume some military characteristics in order to coexist in a military environment? For members of HTS human terrain teams (HTT), response to the paradox will most likely lead to one of two outcomes. First, for those that join, they necessarily become militarized to at least some extent, whether from an external perspective or internal acceptance, a disposition that inevitably degrades the system’s ability to obtain maximum productivity in anthropological duties. For those that fall short of mirroring the military’s cultural expectations, conflict is likely to occur, sometimes with highly detrimental results.

It is hard to argue that there is an image more identifiable with the U.S. military than a person in uniform carrying a weapon. As Schein would point out, the uniform is an artifact of the military; a visible product of the group that comes to represent many things about an organization to include “myths and stories told about the organization; its published lists of values; and its observable rituals and ceremonies.”\footnote{6} When visiting the publicly accessible
website for the HTS program, one can get a first-hand view of how this military artifact has been injected into the HTTs. The website contains a photograph gallery with pictures of HTT members performing duties, segregated between Iraq, where military uniforms are not a policy requirement, and Afghanistan, where uniform wear is a requirement. However, even in Iraq, all pictures show civilian members of the team wearing at least one vestment of uniform, frequently military style body armor. Moreover, several of the pictures show HTT members either holding a weapon or having it in close proximity and with a fully uniformed military member at the ready nearby. To an outsider, then, there seems nothing to suggest, upon initial contact, that there is a distinct difference between military and non-military members of the HTTs.

Moreover, any biases or beliefs that an outsider may hold about the U.S. military would naturally manifest to coincide with the visible presentation of the person in uniform.

Roberto Gonzalez and a consortium of other professors, known as the Network of Concerned Anthropologists, authored a book titled *The Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual* as an effort, in part, to warn of the blurring between military and social science activities. Gonzalez contends that social scientists working within the military establishment are actually endangering the future of field-based social research because their affiliation “makes it impossible for future investigators to establish the trust necessary for establishing rapport with research participants.”

He justifies this assertion by noting how easily data collected by social scientists can be used by the military as propaganda or for targeting purposes, becoming a “weapon for information warfare.”

Ironically enough, the HTS public website does little to dissuade the reader from believing Gonzalez’ claim. In its frequently asked questions link, the website readily admits to the HTS program receiving intelligence funding as an Intelligence Support Activity, serving as
an “information program…at all levels of operation.” To carry the point even further, the program’s founders, Fondacaro and McFate, retrospectively acknowledged the HTT’s proximity to intelligence even threatened to draw it into kinetic targeting. Thus, given the military appearance and affiliation of HTT members, combined with a fear that any data gathered may be used punitively, how can there be a reasonable expectation that the subjects of HTT inquiries will respond honestly and openly to prompts for information?

The short answer is that there cannot be any such expectation. George Lucas, Jr., in *Anthropologists in Arms,* establishes the concept of “structural bad faith.” In this concept, Lucas argues that the subjects of inquiry, cognizant of risks involved with providing information to the researcher, may seek to perform unnaturally; that is, to present information differently than they would have in a normal situation. Likewise, the researcher is himself at risk of misinterpreting the motivations or public impact of the information received. Thus, herein presents one of the barriers to effectiveness that the military imposes over the socio-cultural research duties of HTS. Researchers on HTTs, by virtue of their affiliation with the military, cannot purport to receive any information from subjects without the expectation that the subjects have altered their presentation to account for any risks, perceived or real, that would likewise accompany a dialog conducted directly with a uniformed U.S. military member.

Just as affiliation with the military presents HTS researchers with the problem of validating external sources, it also heightens the potential for cultural conflict internal to the organization. As Gonzalez contends, there is always the potential for researchers to go “native,” which accounts for when one seemingly becomes more infatuated with learning about, and potentially becoming part of, the military culture than studying the originally intended target
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populace with unbiased eye. Although seemingly trivial, it does raise a concern about whether the information gathered by researchers that have “gone native” can be considered untainted, insomuch as it can be given the preceding discussion, and looked at with legitimacy. More importantly, however, is the potentially disastrous consequences that can result when the academic and military cultures are forced into cohabitation. For the purpose of this discussion, the following examination will focus on two distinct incidents of breakdowns in morale and discipline, namely the events surrounding the dismissal of Dr. Dudley-Flores from an HTT in Afghanistan and the murder of an Afghan national by HTT member Don Ayala. While important to note up front that these particular breakdowns were specific and isolated when considering the whole community of contributions made by HTS members; it is equally worth investigating if the effort to pair academics with the military in full-time combat environments is worth the risk of future incidents, however limited.

As stated previously, Dr. Dudley-Flores was deployed to an HTT at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, falling under the command of the 101st Airborne. National security analyst John Stanton wrote an article for Zero Anthropology which examined how her heavyset body weight and appearance seemed the focus of derision from members of the 101st and her team. In short, she did not fit the mold of a person who had bought into the military culture. As Schein points out, organizations seek out those “who resemble present members in style, assumptions, values, and beliefs.” Thus, Dudley-Flores’ inability to buckle body armor or navigate entry into a Humvee was clearly a source of distain amongst her military counterparts, prompting some to give her the nickname “Chief Cow.” Though certainly not an excuse for the aberrant behavior by military personnel, which included implied and explicit threats and actions, it is important to
realize that military culture promotes an environment of fitness, linking it directly to survivability in the combat environment. If one cannot perform activities common to self-preservation, like wearing body armor or climbing into a vehicle, then the person risks becoming viewed as a limiting factor in whole-of-unit performance and survivability. Military members get dismissed from service for such offenses. Unfortunately, this view taken to the extreme can result in dramatic breakdowns of discipline. In the case of Dudley-Flores, such a breakdown occurred when she came under enemy fire and the lieutenant charged with her protection refused to engage, prompting an after action report with an alleged attempt to cover up the incident.17 Ultimately, Dudley-Flores was removed from Afghanistan, due to concerns over her safety, and the HTT leader was dismissed, in part due to falsification of the after action report.

In contrast, the Ayala case study approaches the near opposite extreme. It provides an example of how the military culture may have become too permissive of those brought in from the outside. Lucas provides the context for this case study, recounting that Ayala was responsible for the capture of an Afghan man who had set one of Ayala’s fellow researchers, Paula Loyd, on fire. Upon hearing of the severity of Loyd’s injuries ten minutes after the assailant’s capture, Ayala, having remained in direct contact with the now fully subdued man, shot him in the head.18 The issue pertinent to the discussion here is not that Ayala shot the man, which was wrong in and of its own, but that the system didn’t recognize the potential danger of allowing Ayala continued access to the man, thus resulting in opportunity to commit the act. Lucas is quick to point out that Ayala was not a soldier, nor was he a social scientist. He was a private security contractor charged with Loyd’s protection.19 How was it, then, that Ayala was permitted to retain access to the detainee ten minutes after the attack occurred? Indications
would seemingly point to HTS and its assimilation into military culture. Touching back to the discussion on cultural artifacts, it seems prudent to suggest that as HTT members dress as military, by default, they also begin to act similarly to the military members of their surroundings. In return, the surrounding military members begin to form bonds of acceptance and trust with HTT members. As Schein would point out, this is the process of socialization and acculturation, whereby new members are gradually allowed into the inner circles of the cultural group. Using this line of logic, the inference can be drawn that military members guarding Loyd’s assailant did not anticipate that Ayala would commit murder. Therein resides the danger. Despite the best of intentions, non-military personnel do not have the same level of training or preparedness for violence as that of the military member, increasing the risk that they may act irrationally in stressful situations. Likewise, the bond the military members form with embedded non-military may blind them to recognizing when an act prejudicial to good order and discipline may be about to occur.

Nathan Hodge, staff reporter for the Wall Street Journal and author of Armed Humanitarians: The Rise of the Nation Builders, notes that the Ayala incident, among other controversies surrounding HTS in 2008, further served to tarnish the reputation of the program. And, as the preceding discussion has shown, portions of the blame for the shortcomings has to be attributed to the realization that some of the program’s promises are incompatible with, and at times undermined by, its alignment under the military. This does not mean the program should be disbanded. Quite the contrary, as the USG has ample need for the capability within USAID, whose professed mission is to work alongside policy and defense agencies to promote peace and stability by “fostering economic growth, protecting human health, providing emergency
humanitarian assistance, and enhancing democracy in developing countries.”22 In fact, HTS could actually thrive under an organization that is more culturally aligned with such humanitarian pursuits and often has longer term involvement with troubled societies across the globe. In addition, movement to USAID would enhance the ability for HTS to share information readily across USG and non-governmental agencies while retaining an ability to nest with military units where it makes sense based upon examination of the objectives.

In his accepted thesis to the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies covering USG counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan, author Henry Nuzum relates that “although the military had expected to cede reconstruction to civilian agencies, it has assumed much of this burden out of necessity…the State Department, USDA, USAID, Department of Justice, and other civilian agencies lack the capability to deploy.”23 But, a realization that this paradigm must change is setting in. As Hodge points out, “What began in late 2001 as a global war on terror was quietly recast as a campaign of armed social work. And in the process, American foreign policy underwent a tectonic shift.”24 For a demonstration of this shift, one need not look much further than the government’s willingness to fund activities involved with social work. Between 2002 and 2009, USAID spent approximately $7 billion in Afghanistan alone, roughly equaling USAID’s entire global budget in 2001.25 However, just like the military experience, USAID suffered from a lack of cultural knowledge about the regions in which it operated. In his April 2011 testimony to the Congressional Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan, Administrator Rajiv Shah admitted that USAID had been involved in projects that weren’t “culturally, politically and economically sensitive to the society.”26 In addition, and despite the dramatically increased budgets, the administration still fell short on
deployable human capital. In a continuance of his April testimony, Administrator Shah also acknowledged that for USAID to be a truly effective partner to the military, efforts must still be made in “populating our missions and our programs in these environments.”27 Does it not make sense, then, that an already existing program focused on building a deployable sociocultural awareness capacity, namely HTS, would be a perfect fit to close this USAID capability gap?

To further advance the sensibility argument, one can also look at the internal composition of USAID and see that it would offer a culture more welcoming of the social sciences. Shirley Fiske, Adjunct Professor at the University of Maryland, conducted a survey of anthropology careers in the federal government. In 2008, she found that USAID employed roughly 30 anthropologists, possessing advanced degrees, as direct government employees and up to another 200 as contractors. In comparison, the military employed only 40 anthropologists.28 She goes on to point out that USAID anthropologists work across a broad range of programs, such as helping to study agricultural development to examining governmental reform at all political levels. Some even ascend to mission director positions, which provide “a lot of decision-making authority and they can inject an anthropological perspective into anything they do.”29 Accordingly, moving HTS under USAID would free up the HTTs to conduct studies for an audience that is not solely focused on the information’s applicability to stove-piped military priorities. Also worthy of mention, the anthropological expertise available across the whole of USAID would offer greater opportunity for peer review of data collected, thereby providing for a more thorough examination of any conclusions reached during the research effort. There’s yet an additional benefit to freeing HTS of military oversight, that being freedom from secrecy requirements. As Hodge relates, HTS research was “supposed to draw from open source rather
than classified information, but the teams worked inside military headquarters, a sensitive environment filled with classified maps, monitors, and equipment.” This construct ultimately placed limitations on what HTS researchers could publish in the public sphere and created problems in hiring personnel who would be highly qualified for positions if not for their difficulty in obtaining a security clearance. If placed outside of the military, many of these limitations would disappear.

The argument presented in the previous paragraph is not intended to assert that the HTS relationship with the military should be completely severed. In fact, HTS interaction with the military should be continually sought out, especially in light of the USAID Administrator’s focus on partnerships. In his statement, Shah went out of his way to assert that his agency “should be an accountable civilian partner to the United States military,” seeking to “embrace interagency processes, to engage deeply in interagency planning and implementation,” and by placing “our workers side by side with the military.” Such realignment may actually be of more value to the military in the long run than if HTS were to remain a purely military endeavor. As Nuzum contends, there is much benefit to be realized when team members have quick access and linkages to the authority and expertise in the separate government agencies. Case in point, USAID is active in over 100 nations, often possessing long term experience in countries that extends beyond 5 years. Should the military find itself potentially becoming involved in another conflict, wouldn’t it be useful to have immediate linkages through HTS to knowledge held at USAID?

And, there would be no need to develop new mechanisms to retain a link between HTS and the military, as there are already existing processes in place to foster a continued
relationship. In 2010, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report covering development activities intended to improve interagency collaboration concluded there to be a “broad spectrum” of programs available and that the programs did indeed help to “improve participants’ abilities to collaborate in an increasingly complex national security arena.” Included within the GAO report were highlights of courses that focused interagency personnel on integration with military activities, such as Provincial Reconstruction Teams. With minor modification to some courses, it seems reasonable that the same could be accomplished to maintain HTT familiarity with the operations of brigades to which they may provide support in the deployed environment. And, when deployed, the HTTs could plug into military operations via doctrinally established coordination activities, such as the civil-military operations centers established at the operational level of military activity.

In addition to empowering HTS to support broader USG objectives, removing the program from military oversight would also serve to diminish the validity of arguments that opponents, both within the military establishment and those in academia, currently use in their attacks. Major Ben Connable, in his article *All Our Eggs in a Broken Basket: How the Human Terrain System is Undermining Sustainable Military Cultural Competence*, provides a succinct examination of the resistance to HTS from within the military. He notes there is a fundamental flaw behind the logic in favor of the HTS, being that the military, “by doctrine, mission, and organization is mandated to train and maintain organic cultural expertise.” He goes on to point out the military has a number of career fields, including civil affairs, foreign area officers, and intelligence officers that are charged with doing essentially the same kinds of work as the HTTs, and that any capability shortfall should have been addressed through an increased application of
resources to train additional military experts. Instead, the movement to HTS “has sapped the attention or financing from nearly every cultural program in the military and from many within the military intelligence community,” providing an excuse for staff officers to “ignore a complex and challenging training requirement.” Indeed, it is hard to argue against Connable’s warning when observing that a trend may be developing within the military to further the outsourcing of sociocultural competency. Hodge indicates that U.S. Africa Command pursued an arrangement with a firm called Archimedes Global, Inc., in which the firm would recruit contractor teams to fill requirements at the headquarters’ sociocultural cell. Thus, it appears the military may be at a crossroads in choosing how it wants to develop its future sociocultural competency. Seeing the merit of Connable’s argument in association with the arguments presented earlier in this discussion, it seems evident the best path for the military to follow is the one that grows capability from within, thereby freeing resources from redundancy and encouraging internal development of sustainable and reliable competencies specifically tailored to the military need.

Connable not only explored the military’s internal struggle with the HTS concept, but he also recognized the criticism being brought forth from the outside. He states, “The practice of deploying academics to a combat zone may undermine the very relationships the military is trying to build, or more accurately rebuild, with a social science community that has generally been suspicious of the U.S. military since the Viet Nam era.” In actuality, Connable may have underestimated the fervor with which academics would demonize the HTS program. Andrew Bickford, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at George Mason University, wrote “HTS is the knowing, intentional use of skills and insights for combat, to trade in hurt and injury, wounding and death, fragmentation and destruction…this strikes me as mercenary anthropology, and...
contributes to the overall militarization of anthropology.”40 So, would relocating HTS to USAID serve to quiet some of the critics? Although he doesn’t specifically cite USAID, Connable certainly believes a HTS move to any setting apart from the military will be of benefit.41 In his corner is a contributor to the Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual, David Vine. In Chapter 9 of the manual, Vine specifically advocates for the empowerment of USAID, purporting that it should be “the main arm of U.S. development efforts” and not the counterinsurgency posture or plans for AFICOM directed through the Pentagon.42

Why, then, would Vine profess affinity for USAID, an agency housed within the same government as the Department of Defense? Lucas presents us with a framework upon which to explore the possible answer. He states, “The scientist ought never to use, or to subordinate, his or her role as a scientist in order to carry out other activities of any sort…that the scientist as moral agent might determine to be morally objectionable.43 One of the moral imperatives of being a scientist is to establish a relationship of trust and openness with those the science is intended to serve. As Gonzalez points out in the same Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual to which Vine contributed, this moral imperative cannot be met by social scientists working in the military because results of their work often cannot be shared publically, thus;

“Counterinsurgency support stands to violate relationships of trust and openness with the people with whom social scientists work…such work threatens the well-being and integrity of all field-based social research, and more importantly, the safety of Iraqi and Afghan civilians.”44 However, the types of work performed by USAID are humanitarian in nature and not bound by the same requirements for secrecy as that of the military, thus providing a more morally acceptable avenue for social scientists to contribute and share, at least through the eyes of the
Network of Concerned Anthropologists. And, if this healthier relationship to the academic community can be fostered, the potential for recruiting more willing and qualified candidates to fill HTS requirements would hopefully improve.

“Programs such as HTS are unusual and experimental, but this also makes them vulnerable to the plate tectonics of the Pentagon,” write HTS founders Steve Fondacaro and Montgomery McFate. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan come to a close and budgets tighten, will these tectonics result in dropping HTS off the surface or shifting the program toward another government agency? The preceding discussion advocated for the shifting of HTS to another government agency, specifically that of the United States Agency for International Development. Since its birth in 2006, the successes and failures of HTS have provided substantial documentation through which to evaluate the merit of the program and justify why a move to USAID would be beneficial. In the primary argument, a move would allow HTS freedom from certain aspects of the military culture that have served to hold the program back. The outsider’s perception of military culture naturally imposes correlated biases onto the HTS, reinforced by the way HTT members present themselves in military uniforms and in close proximity to actual uniformed soldiers. Given such circumstances, it becomes nearly impossible for HTT members to ensure that the information received from research subjects contains any more validity than if it had been collected by a regular military member. Additionally, the HTTs’ embedded nature can, on occasion, serve to exaggerate cracks in military discipline. Examples cited a situation where the military culture went awry in trying to reject someone not fitting its inherent norms and, in the other case, became too comfortable with the outsider, leading to a lapse in awareness that resulted in a large black eye for the program. The second
argument explored how USAID has a need for the deployable cultural research capability resident in HTS and how the organization’s construct would support a more broad-based dissemination of HTS research. It also recognized that there is no need to cut HTS ties with the military, but instead transition the relationship to that of a closely knitted interagency partner in line with the vision expressed by the USAID Administrator. And, finally, the third argument for moving HTS under USAID focused on diminishing the criticisms of the program, some stemming internally from concerned military quarters and others from externally concerned academics. Moving the program would force the military to refocus resources on developing sociocultural expertise within the career fields charged with duties similar to those included in HTS, thereby fostering a sustained capability pertinent to specific military objectives. For the academics, removing the program from the military would serve to remove one of their largest concerns, that the moral nature of their profession could no longer be compromised by rogue social scientists naively participating in a military endeavor that, by its very nature, is responsible for inflicting harm upon mankind.

4 Ibid., 69.
6 Ibid., 23.
9 Ibid., 110-113.
19 Ibid., vii.
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25 Ibid., 10-11.
27 Ibid., 4.
29 Ibid., 115-117.
37 Ibid., 64.
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