

Fighting Bad Wars Better: Reconsidering the Human Terrain System

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“The nation that will insist on drawing a broad line of demarcation between the fighting man and the thinking man is liable to find its fighting done by fools and its thinking done by cowards.”¹

“[Rommel] fought a bad war well, not only militarily, but also morally.”²

In 2005-6, largely as a response to the persistent threat of improvised explosive devices in Iraq, the Department of Defense (DoD) launched a new initiative to get to the root of the human networks that perpetuated this weapon. The Human Terrain System (HTS) thus emerged, aiming to integrate a particular set of academics into the military decision cycle so that military actions could better account for the society entangled with conflict. In teams of five to nine, anthropologists, social scientists, and regional experts were embedded with Brigade Combat Teams (BCT) and tasked with mapping the so-called human terrain, then advising commanders as they navigated it. Reports on the efficacy of the program ranged from life-saving to unethical; proponents argued that kinetic actions decreased as a result of improved cultural understanding, while critics questioned the sheer nature of the endeavor. Perhaps the loudest critique came from the Society for Applied Anthropology citing a lack of Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures despite the use of human subjects for research purposes. The anthropology community, including some anthropologists who themselves served on Human Terrain Teams (HTT), largely condemned the program, arguably leading to its dissolution in 2014.

The program’s adversaries produced strong arguments, though. A similar initiative launched during the Vietnam War. Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) addressed the idea that the war would be won or lost as a result of the people. However, much of the data produced through CORDS was subsumed by the CIA-led Phoenix Program, which tactically exploited otherwise neutral data points. Unsurprisingly, contemporary observers drew parallels between the Human Terrain System and its predecessor. Inconsistent positions on classification of the program and its information furthered the shroud as well as the divide with academic anthropology. By the time the Human Terrain System came to a close, the very scholars who could have comprised the teams denounced them. Meanwhile, the DoD described the program’s closure by explaining that commanders no longer needed civilian anthropologists to provide human terrain guidance.

By addressing one ethical quandary, the DoD is left with another. Scholarly research protocol demands ethical treatment and consent of anyone affected by the research; this is undebatable. However, wars begin and end with no such obligations, despite the irreparable impact on the societies interwoven with the conflict. War, by its nature, brings brute force directly into contact with fragile communities, yet efforts to understand the impact of this collision are deemed unethical. I argue that the Human Terrain System may have been imperfect, but the concept deserves reconsideration. We have an ethical obligation to our own soldiers as well as the populations affected by war to academically and practically explore the consequences of our actions. Letting the Human Terrain System’s unfavorable legacy skew new approaches, like the Phoenix Program skewed it, would only deepen the challenge of developing cultural understanding.

The aim of this paper is to reframe the discussion of how to best account for human terrain within a broader discussion of culture, expertise, and statecraft. I begin with an overview of the Human Terrain System program, followed by a synopsis of the debate over its ethical soundness. Admittedly, my treatment of the debate emphasizes the black-and-white nature it has assumed. However, this apparent dichotomy illustrates the necessity for a reconsideration of the Human Terrain System, which I offer in the following sections. I propose three alternative lenses through which to view the debate and the system itself: *jus ad bellum* versus *jus in bello*, professors at war, and the administrative integration of HTTs. I will explore each in turn and conclude with suggestions for future programs. While the HTS initiative may have been relatively trivial in funding and duration, its lack of success raises broader questions on the integration of civilians into warfare as well as the intersection between war and academia. It illustrates incongruencies between the ethics of war and the ethics of research, and perhaps most importantly, it highlights how these differences within our own culture undermine our collective ability to engage cultures foreign to us.

Program Overview

Even before the Human Terrain System galvanized into a program of record, dialogue on the military's pervasive cultural and social ignorance was well underway. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan revealed that "commanders lacked means by which to gain cultural and social understanding of the local people and their perspectives" and "no system was in place to provide continuity of situational awareness/cultural knowledge to successive iterations of units in the same operational areas."³ The HTS aimed to address these gaps through the following tasks:

1. Collect and analyze operationally relevant socio-cultural information to support Brigade understanding of security environment;
2. Provide focused socio-cultural research to fill knowledge gaps;
3. Contribute to development of operational courses of action planning with special focus on non-lethal alternatives;
4. Archive and preserve it and provide socio-cultural knowledge base continuity at unit Relief in Place/Transfer of Authority.⁴

Notably, these were not tasks to simply assign to existing staff; instead, they demanded a specific form of expertise. As Chris Sims explains, Civil Affairs units were focused on projects rather than people. "They were therefore an evaluation and monitoring asset that, while in theory was grounded in sociocultural analysis of the area of operations to prioritize requirements and efficacy, in practice was largely assessment conducted at a more abstract level."⁵ Psychological operations, on the other hand, focused on messaging the population, but did not conduct any concerted information collection that could influence or shape thinking and planning within the BCT.⁶ Finally, the intelligence cell focused on threats via threat identification, personality focus, and targeting data.⁷ This matrix of information, intelligence, and interaction with the population still left a gap; the HTS was designed to fill it by focusing on the population, conducting social science field research, and providing cultural and societal perspectives. In sum, the HTS aimed at a population perceptions-based approach to complement the work of other staff sections.

To build these teams, the DoD (through contractor BAE Systems) recruited social scientists, casting a wide net in search of anthropologists, sociologists, social psychologists, cultural geographers, political scientists, and a special focus on expertise related to the Middle East or Central Asia.⁸ Neither BAE Systems nor the DoD knew exactly what they needed; "HTS managers were working from a 'best guess' about what might work in Iraq and Afghanistan."⁹ The effects of this ambiguous recruiting process manifested in theater. Former Human Terrain Team leader Bill Darley explained that his team of eight was a true anomaly in Iraq, boasting seven Arabic speakers (three of whom were native speakers), a robust academic and experiential base, and a collective desire for meaningful engagement with the province; most teams instead relied

on interpreters, often had at least one member who rarely left the security of the base, and accordingly produced little of value to the command.¹⁰

The recruiting issue undeniably affected the efficacy of the teams downrange, but an important backstop to any academic or linguistic shortcomings was the Research Reachback Center (RRC) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The RRC “provides comprehensive, multidisciplinary, and timely social science-based research and analysis, accessible across multiple domains to support requests for research by commanders, staffs, and their human terrain teams.”¹¹ Accordingly, any questions the HTT felt unable to answer independently could be sent back to Kansas for more detailed analysis. Notably, the RRC capitalized on a vast network of academic institutions to maximize insight into the situation under review.

In theory, the HTS presented a powerful tool to inform the conduct of counterinsurgency operations by intersecting scholars and practitioners and drawing from a diverse pool of knowledge. In practice, the program quickly fell subject to scrutiny that would lead to its premature demise. This scrutiny forms the foundation of a consequential debate that continues to present.

The Debate

At the most superficial level, literature and commentary on the topic fall into two main categories—advocates and opponents. Perhaps unsurprisingly, military members generally fall into the former category while social scientists generally fall into the latter. Proponents include Colonel Martin Schweitzer, whose brigade combat team hosted one of the first Human Terrain Teams as a proof of concept in northern Afghanistan. Testifying before Congress, Schweitzer articulated the life-saving impact of the team:

Prior to using the human terrain teams in Afghanistan, the previous five combined operations with the Afghan national army resulted with about 30 or 40 enemy killed, and...about 15 to 20 civilians were also killed...The five operations we did with the human terrain teams, that we spent just under 6 months, had a total of zero civilian casualties, zero enemy casualties, over 100 Taliban detained, over about 50 cumulative foreign fighters during those five operations.¹²

Coupled with conceptual support proffered by the program’s architects, Schweitzer’s statistics seemed to validate the program’s optimistic launch. Yet, within the same Congressional forum where Schweitzer touted the tangible (yet arguably counterfactual) benefits of social scientists in war, points of confusion, if not contention, were already apparent. For instance, Dr. Andre van Tilborg, then-Deputy Undersecretary of Defense, Science and Technology, Department of Defense, opens with a Sun Tzu reference—“know your enemy”—and then discusses the initiatives that go toward learning “as much as possible about the behavioral, social and cultural aspects of our adversaries and of the indigenous populations in which U.S. and coalition forces operate.”¹³ While framing culture as a means to understand the operational environment, his phrasing is problematic, because it implies that the only foreigners we want or need to study are adversaries and their population-based support networks.

Adding to the vast space for misinterpretation, Assistant Deputy Undersecretary of Defense John Wilcox stated that “human terrain mapping enables the entire kill-chain.”¹⁴ Skeptics of the neutrality of the program immediately used this statement to substantiate their concerns. As David Price describes in his book *Weaponizing Anthropology*, “the Pentagon, White House, and military contractors painted pictures of Human Terrain Teams as armed social workers” whose misapplication toward counterinsurgency “perverts the discipline’s potential.”¹⁵ Drawing parallels with CORDS did little to help the program’s image, even as advocates aimed to highlight the benevolent intent: “A key feature leading to the success of CORDS was an effective information collection and reporting system that focused on factors essential for the promotion of security, economic development, governance, and the provision of needed government services down to the hamlet level.”¹⁶ This expression aligns well with Schweitzer’s more contemporary analysis: “Not only did

we reduce the risk to our soldiers, but we reduced the risk significantly to the communities that we operated within. Subsequently, we were able to assist linking the people of Afghanistan to their government at an incredibly accelerated rate.”¹⁷

All this being said, reducing the dialogue to “advocates” and “opponents” creates a false dichotomy; rather, there are at least three overlapping lenses through which to view this debate and meaningfully examine its components. The following effort to reframe the debate is designed to provoke a new avenue of discussion so that military, social science, and political decision-makers can find better success with needed human terrain navigation in future international conflicts.

Lens I—*Jus ad bellum* and/or *Jus in bello*

Any discussion on ethics and war benefits from a foundation in just war theory, and more specifically, a clear delineation between *jus ad bellum* (the justice of war or the decision to go to war) and *jus in bello* (justice in the practice of war). In other words, the ethical demands before and during war are distinct, even if equal in necessity. This is a critical consideration for the HTS debate. In the words of anthropologist Hugh Gusterson, “anthropology is, by many measures, the academy’s most left-leaning discipline, and many people become anthropologists out of a visceral sympathy for the kinds of people who all too often show up as war’s collateral damage.”¹⁸ This frames the debate well; if anthropologists find war inherently loathsome, it stands to reason that they would similarly see it as unethical.

However, this line of thinking dangerously conflates *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. As Dan Cox explains, “the U.S. military does not have the ability to veto a political decision to go to war or abscond from any order to engage overseas. Having said this, the U.S. military does have a great say in how a campaign will be conducted and HTS was designed to play an integral role in ensuring that a campaign is conducted as morally and unobtrusively as possible.”¹⁹ Arguing against the HTS on the grounds that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were “bad” does nothing to inform or guide the conduct of those left to fight them. Instead, it deters qualified social scientists from participating, thereby undermining the feasibility of initiatives such as the HTS; this ultimately deprives soldiers of insightful analysis that could make the difference between life and death.²⁰

Through his critique of the HTS, anthropologist David Vine offers what may be the right solution.

Anthropologists... should not now throw their skills and support behind failed strategies searching for a military solution that will only guarantee continued warfare and keep troops and civilians in harm’s way; they should throw their skills and support behind work to find the political, diplomatic, and economic solutions that are the only way to bring peace to Iraq, Afghanistan, and the world.²¹

Vine’s commentary draws out the fact that anthropological, and really all social science, expertise can positively influence the entire spectrum of statecraft; that is, diplomatic, informational, and economic means *as well* as military means. Although most anthropologists and surely Vine himself may disagree that the military must always remain a viable option, the point is that social science belongs in all instruments of national power, and across the continuum of conflict, not just during international militarized crises. The ethical conduct of statecraft would surely benefit from social science expertise, but isolating the conversation to anthropologists in war cuts off this conversation. The HTS debate lends to such isolation, focusing in on the role of social scientists in a specific program that supported particular conflicts; however, considering HTS through the lens of just war theory, we can visualize the potential for more suitable application of this type of expertise both *ad bellum* and *in bello*. Perhaps with such broad and consistent expertise, the prevalence of so-called “bad wars” (and wars in general) would decrease, as would misconduct in those we ultimately fight.

Lens II—Professors at War

The concept of sending academics to war proved perplexing to many. Three attributes of the program seemed to illustrate the incongruous nature of professors and war. First, academics by nature strive to remain neutral to their subjects; by committing to the scientific method and diligently mitigating biases, readers can expect reliable—scholarly—analysis. Without this neutrality, even rigorous research becomes suspect. Second, research involving human subjects demands special ethical protocols, which the nature of combat confounds if not precludes. Finally, somewhat merging the first two points, some members of HTTs were armed (by choice). However, any efforts to remain neutral and/or to obtain consent to research were arguably skewed by the presence of a weapon.

The neutrality of social scientists in (or even related to) war has a long history dating back to the First World War. However, the most prominent examples include Project Camelot, CORDS, and the Phoenix Program, all from the Vietnam-era. Although detailed discussion of these programs exceeds the scope of this paper, their legacy deserves consideration. Each program aimed to capitalize on social science expertise to facilitate understanding of other countries and operative groups therein. Although not all data was collected for the purpose of exploitation, enough was exploited to effectively sever any benign ties between social science and the military. That critics of HTS would draw parallels with the earlier programs comes as no surprise, but assuredly undermined any hope that the contemporary crew would enjoy assumed neutrality.

Adding to the perception of non-neutrality, one of the strongest critiques of the HTS was a general disregard for the professional ethics of social science as a discipline. The anthropological community's particular code of ethics has unpleasant history of intersecting with the military, specifically regarding Project Camelot in 1964. The idea to “use anthropologists and sociologists’ research to develop counterinsurgency tactics to quell uprisings (democratic or otherwise) in Latin America” met with harsh rebuke from leaders in the field.²² Arguably, this effort violated the primary commitment to “first do no harm.”²³ Despite evolving verbiage, the foundation of social science ethics remains keeping the welfare of the subjects first.

The typical mechanism for ensuring ethical treatment of human subjects (which, to be clear, includes populations studied by HTTs) is an institutional review board (IRB). This process validates that research protocols include sufficient consent from the subjects and mitigates research bias. HTTs almost categorically did not conduct IRBs; in some cases, their work seemed exempt to it, and in others, the process would have been too cumbersome for the setting and timelines. Whether the Human Terrain Teams were legally required to carry out IRB protocols prior to engaging remains debated.²⁴ However, even if a legal loophole existed, the anthropology community fundamentally disagreed with it.

Finally, the decision by some HTT members to carry weapons cast yet another shadow on the program's neutrality and ethical interaction with their research subjects. As an example, these excerpts from the HTS frequently asked questions site drew sharp critique from anthropologists:

Will I have to carry a weapon?

Military personnel assigned to an HTT are required to carry weapons at all times. No civilian member of an HTT is required, by the U.S. Army, the Training and Doctrine Command, or HTS to carry a weapon. Carrying a weapon is a personal decision, made by the individual HTT member. Weapons issued to civilians are for self-defense only, and are issued at the discretion of the BCT commander depending on the security situation. As part of their pre-deployment training, all civilian members of the HTT must zero, qualify, and be proficient in the use of weapons in order to guarantee their own security in the hazardous environment in which they operate.

If an HTS researcher carries a weapon, doesn't that imply voluntary informed consent is not possible?

In an environment where most of the population is armed, an assumption that the presence of weapons automatically carries with it the threat of coercive force is simply incorrect. Local Iraqi and Afghan nationals who live in a war zone are smart enough to differentiate between combat forces and personnel who conduct non-combat functions.²⁵

While these issues undeniably undermined the reputation of the HTS, they are arguably issues with execution of the program, rather than indicators of a flawed concept.

Lens III—Administrative Expedience or Espionage?

A final lens that deserves special consideration ties into the idea of poor execution. HTTs were typically assigned to intelligence cells within brigade combat teams. Adding to the perception that HTTs were exploitative intelligence collectors rather than neutral social scientists, this assignment seemed to reinforce the idea. Anthropologist Roberto J. González argued, “it appears HTS has two faces: one designed to rally public support for an increasingly unpopular war, and the other to collect intelligence to help salvage a failing occupation. It is far more likely that HTS was created as an espionage programme.”²⁶ Schweitzer’s testimony tells a different story; he writes, “let me tell you what an HTT is not. The team is not an intelligence-gathering tool which is used to target individuals. My staff is uniquely organized to run the targeting process and link intelligence systems to time-sensitive targeting. The HTT is sourced to its social scientist and is not qualified or trained to provide targeting support.”²⁷

This is an appropriate point to interject archival evidence of the work HTTs actually conducted; analysis of this material helps to illustrate how teams and their expertise were employed in practice. As a case study, consider the work of Human Terrain Team IZ13, the anomaly example mentioned earlier. Team IZ13 served under the 1-82 Advise and Assist Brigade in Anbar Province, Iraq; the material under analysis was largely produced in 2010. The scope of this project does not afford comprehensive examination of their work, so I will focus on three key contributions.

First and foremost, the HTT integrated with the surrounding population quickly and easily. As previously discussed, seven of eight team members were fluent in Arabic and could thus interact directly with locals (ranging from citizens in the marketplace to provincial leadership). Removing the requirement for an interpreter immeasurably enhances interactions, which in this case, enabled one HTT member to enjoy a consistent audience with the Provincial Governor. This relationship ultimately enabled a direct line of communication between the Governor and the Division Commander. Moreover, these types of relationships and interactions enabled the team to intimately understand so-called atmospherics. In other words, they “knew normal.” They could insightfully guide command teams on meaningful changes in the collective attitudes in the province. Unfortunately this type of intimate interaction breeds suspicion. In fact, senior leaders initially balked at learning of the close relationships between HTT civilians and key Iraqi leaders; this stands in contravention to the Army’s methodology for key leader engagements, which almost categorically exclude any civilian staff. This particular team mitigated the friction, yet again, they seemed to be the exception rather than the norm.²⁸

Second, and as a result of the well-established understanding of the local operational environment, the HTT was able to inform recurring staff processes. Notably, as part of 1-82 AAB’s ongoing mission analysis, the staff conducted bi-weekly updates using the PMESII framework (Political, Military, Economic, Social, Infrastructure, and Information). The HTT was responsible for the Social working group, and produced reports capturing such concepts as overall social cohesion, perceptions toward U.S. forces, second and third order effects of humanitarian aid, the impact of tribalism, and the status of women, to name a few.²⁹ In addition to recurring reports, the team conducted specific research on the request of the Brigade

Commander. Topics included the Sunni religious structure,³⁰ corruption,³¹ public notaries,³² friction between the Iraqi Army and Iraqi Police,³³ and even perceptions on U.S. training courses.³⁴ In keeping with the program's original framework, this process seemed to validate that HTTs supported the collective staff, rather than augmenting intelligence operations.

Finally, the HTT facilitated socio-cultural continuity as 1-82 AAB transitioned out of Iraq. A 90-page handbook of social and cultural dynamics in Anbar awaited the 1-82's replacement, replete with leadership structures, key figures, and advice for interaction.³⁵ Of course, no handbook can recreate interpersonal relationships, which may well have been the crux of HTT IZ13's success during their tour.

The examples serve to illustrate that the HTT offered a unique form of information; they were not merely an extension of the brigade's intelligence cell. In fact, in certain cases, the teams were assigned to the S7/information operations. However, the cases of intelligence-HTT intersection, coupled with a general suspicion of social scientists in war apparently offered enough ammunition for critics like Roberto Gonzáles, who promulgated the idea that the HTS was an espionage program. Any U.S. government efforts to refute that idea were taken as a cover up, and surely contributed to the program's closure.

Reconsidering our Approach to Human Terrain

What should we make of this debate? Reframing the initiative and its implementation helps to isolate its components and better articulate strengths and weaknesses, but does it offer a way ahead? In my view, a looming question remains. What (and whom) is it that we need to understand? Much of the criticism of the program stems from the fact that the HTS appeared to be a mechanism for targeting adversaries; accordingly, their practical focus on non-combatants led to dissonance in word and deed. Unfortunately, some of the strongest testimony in favor of the program perpetuates that incongruence. Perhaps the real issue is a perceived divergence between ethics in war and ethics in research; are there, and should there be, two separate standards?

In reconsidering the integration of social scientists into military affairs, I offer two points. First, war is but one outcome of international relations, just as the military is but one instrument of national power. To capitalize on the full—and appropriate—potential of the social sciences, we need better integration throughout the spectrum of statecraft. Isolating social science, whether by drawing a line between scholars and practitioners, or by integrating academia only after war has begun, we lose the opportunity for expertise in the period *ex ante*. Effective integration of cultural expertise can facilitate better understanding and anticipation of adversaries' behaviors, but equally important is our nuanced understanding of partners and allies. Academically informed international relations help to identify areas of common interest and even mitigate ostensibly conflicting interests; ideally, better information avoids war altogether.

My second point, however, assumes that despite its awful cost, war will still occur. In that case, it remains incumbent upon the military not only to follow the laws of war, but to prosecute war in the most efficacious and ethical manner feasible. This demands cultural empathy, if not expertise. Aldous Huxley warns us of vincible ignorance—that which one does not know and realizes it, but does not regard as necessary to know. Accepting that war is both chaotic and catastrophic should be a motive to gain greater control over its implications, rather than a motive for academics to recuse themselves of the affair altogether. Inarguably, the U.S. will continue to fight wars that the public (and perhaps even administrations) view as bad. However, we can still fight them better, but only with the careful collaboration between scholars and practitioners.

In sum, the Human Terrain System succumbed to its wounds because of an overly narrow focus on *jus in bello* and an under-emphasis on *jus ad bellum*; it failed to account for the ethical norms of social science, thereby preventing the social science community (namely anthropology) from endorsing the program; and it deliberately obscured any hope of academic neutrality by placing the program under the umbrella of

intelligence. These are fair critiques that must be addressed in future programs. However, future programs there must be. The answer to the culture question is not to further divide scholars and practitioners, but to facilitate their seamless exchange of knowledge toward the ethical conduct of statecraft, whether it includes war or not.

End Notes

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