CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AND COMMON SENSE
A response to González in this issue

The Human Terrain System (HTS) was created to provide commanders with relevant knowledge about local societies in a brigade’s area of operations and assist brigade staffs in developing courses of action that emphasize the use of non-lethal tactics (e.g., negotiation, infrastructure development and provision of medical care) in order to achieve desired effects (i.e., increased support for host nation governments and decreased support for insurgent groups). The Human Terrain Team (HTT) represents the voice of local people on the brigade staff – a perspective the military doesn’t often take into account.

HTS was developed in response to calls from the military for more cultural knowledge. Recognizing that a lack of cultural understanding had resulted in strategic, operational and tactical errors in Haiti, Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan, members of the US military hoped that by increasing their understanding of those societies, future mistakes might be alleviated or avoided.1 As one Marine Corps officer wrote in a plea to anthropologists:

What we have now is a grass roots movement of thousands of officers and enlisted men and women who saw what a lack of cultural knowledge results in when we let slip the dogs of war: more non-military deaths, less stability, less security, and an exponential increase in the time required to accomplish our mission […] If we knew in 2003 what we know now, thousands of lives could have been spared on both sides. The Iraqقه Merrymen studied for so many years no longer exists in great part due to our strategic and tactical missteps. We need your help to reduce the necessity for the use of violence. That’s our party line, but it’s accurate and honest. I don’t know of any military program designed to trick anthropologists into helping us kill people.2

The purpose of HTS is to see whether socio-cultural knowledge applied to military decision-making results in fewer operational and tactical mishaps. Preliminary evidence from Afghanistan suggests that such knowledge translates to fewer lethal operations to achieve the unit’s objectives. In the words of one Brigade Commander, “we estimate that, as a result of the HTT, we have reduced our kinetic operations by 60-70.” Similar reports are trickling in from Iraq.

Despite the laudable goals of HTS and the impressive results, critics have raised concerns on a number of fronts, including: verification of results, whether HTS is an intelligence programme, concerns about ‘classified’ material etc. Owing to space limitations, we address only a few of these concerns here.

Intelligence/espionage: Professor González believes HTS is an ‘espionage programme’. On the contrary, HTT members are legally prohibited from performing active intelligence collection. Only Military Intelligence (MI) Human Intelligence (HUMINT) Collectors are empowered to answer specific questions from the brigade’s intelligence unit. Professor González and many of his colleagues confuse socio-cultural knowledge with intelligence. If there really were no distinction, anthropologists everywhere (whose business is socio-cultural knowledge) would be de facto intelligence collectors.

Terminology: ‘Human terrain’, a term widely used inside the Department of Defense (DoD), is not meant to dehumanize, but is used because such phrasing is familiar to the military, who are accustomed to thinking of geographical terrain. Between the end of the Vietnam War and the conflict in Somalia, the US military was primarily focused on weapons and platforms, not people. The focus on people – not as something to be controlled, but as part of the environment that must be understood if we are to succeed – is a new and positive development inside the DoD.

Independent verification of results: Professor González laments the lack of independent data to support the claim that HTS assisted in reducing lethal operations. This claim is based on statements from the first US Army brigade to receive an HTT. The qualitative and quantitative data from both Iraq and Afghanistan substantiating this claim will be included in the HTS Assessment Report. Given that HTS is a new project, it is not possible to have mature outcome evaluation data at this stage. Professor González will have to wait until next summer for the completed assessment, just like the DoD.

Public relations: Professor González alludes to an ‘orchestrated’ public relations campaign. In fact, there was no such ‘orchestrated’ campaign. HTS has never reached out to a single journalist – we have simply responded to queries as we received them.

Identification of HTT members: One HTT social scientist in Afghanistan chose not to reveal her name out of concerns for her safety. Aside from this unique situation, HTT members can be identified by both name and unit patches on their uniform.

Classification: Professor González doubts whether the data collected by HTTS is ‘open and unclassified’ given that a brigade’s operational planning and execution is classified. No military command publicizes its battle plan or location of forces prior to an operation. The US military forced Geraldo Rivera to stop disclosing troop locations on television for a very good reason: security of US forces. Information that HTTs research and analyse, however, is generally not classified – witness the multiple blogs team members are producing from the field.

Kill chain: Deputy Assistant Undersecretary of Defense John Wilcox’s, whose briefing referring to mapping ‘the human terrain across the kill chain’, is in no way connected with HTS.

Relevance on statements of former employees: Professor González relies heavily on statements of a former HTS employee who was released before deploying. Ms Helbig was never on a team, did not complete her training and cannot be considered a reliable source regarding HTS. Ms Helbig’s information was more than four months old at the time of her comments. The current training programme includes sections on research methods, social science theory, ethical considerations etc. In addition, HTS now has a surfeit of CVs on file as a result of the recent publicity, much of it generated by the programme’s critics.

Conclusion

While Professor González raises legitimate concerns, he fails to address the reason HTS came into existence in the first place: the military’s need to understand local people in the area where it conducts operations. Without understanding of the population, the military is more likely to make grave errors resulting in the destruction of property and loss of human life. The military does not make foreign policy, but is constitutionally required to execute that policy. Providing them with the requisite knowledge to do so efficiently, carefully and with minimal loss of life is simple common sense. If Professor González or others have concrete, practical suggestions for other means to achieve this goal – bearing in mind that the military has no control over US foreign policy – we would certainly welcome this input.

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2. Email 301/2007, in possession of the authors.