

Case 5: Human Terrain Systems

US political leaders claim that US conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq cannot be won through military means alone. Military leaders seem to agree and urge that long-term success requires a political solution. In 2003, cultural anthropologist Montgomery McFate was recruited to develop a database of information for use by officers in the field. In 2004 the Pentagon took this program further and developed a socio-political engagement wing for the US military dubbed Human Terrain Systems (HTS).¹

Where traditional mapping involves describing the geographic terrain, HTS attempts to map cultural trends across a geographic region. According to the US military, “HTS is a new proof-of-concept program . . . The near-term focus of the HTS program is to improve the military’s ability to understand the highly complex local socio-cultural environment in the areas where they are deployed; however, in the long-term, HTS hopes to assist the US government in understanding foreign countries and regions prior to an engagement within that region.”²

HTS operates in part by embedding social scientists, usually anthropologists and linguists acting as contractors, with deployed military groups. Advocates of HTS point out that those units with embedded HTS teams have seen reductions in fighting by as much as 60%. Military officials attribute these reductions in violence to superior intelligence and an increased capacity to successfully accomplish “hearts and minds” programs such as education and infrastructure development.³ Detractors worry that HTS represents a “weaponized” form of anthropology which compromises the objectivity and professional responsibilities of social scientists.⁴

The American Anthropological Association has issued several statements on members participating in HTS. While the AAA has not explicitly prohibited participation, it has warned that participation in HTS threatens to compromise standards of voluntary informed consent and may violate the professional responsibility to do no harm. Additionally, the AAA worries that member participation in HTS may have negative consequences for other non-HTS affiliated anthropologists.⁵ These and other factors lead the AAA to conclude that participation with HTS is inappropriate for professional anthropologists, though it stresses that anthropological cooperation with the military is possible under other conditions.

The AAA report is not without detractors. Advocates of HTS, both internal and external to anthropology, argue that serious research can be conducted by embedded scientists. These advocates argue that anthropological research has often been conducted within the context of colonial and military

¹ Montgomery McFate, J.D., Ph.D., “Anthropology and Counterinsurgency: The Strange Story of their Curious Relationship,” *Military Review*, March-April 2005, http://www.army.mil/professionalwriting/volumes/volume3/august_2005/7_05_2.html.

² Human Terrain System, US Military, last updated May 14, 2010, <http://hts.army.mil/> (homepage), <http://hts.army.mil/reading.html> (Recommended Readings and Films).

³ David Rohde, “Army Enlists Anthropologists in War Zones,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 5, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/05/world/asia/05afghan.html?_r=1&incamp=article_popular_4&pagewanted=all.

⁴ Kambiz Fattahi, “US Army Enlists Anthropologists,” *BBC News*, Oct. 16, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7042090.stm>.

⁵ American Anthropological Association, “Executive Board Statement on the Human Terrain System Project,” Oct. 31, 2007, <http://dev.aaanet.org/issues/policy-advocacy/Statement-on-HTS.cfm>.

operations. Advocates claim that, so long as anthropologists merely collect data and do not engage in military analysis, anthropology has not been “weaponized.” Further, many insist that professional participation in HTS is to the advantage of local populations and thus advisable.

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