
Chapter 5

When US-led coalition forces invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003, most Americans received battlefield reports from an unusual source: “embedded” journalists attached to military units. The reporters relied upon American troops and officers as primary sources, often interviewing them in armored personnel carriers, tanks, aircraft carriers, or on military bases. US Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Rick Long candidly described the rationale for the embedded journalism program: "Frankly, our job is to win the war. Part of that is information warfare. So we are going to attempt to dominate the information environment."

Within hours after US bombs began dropping over Baghdad as part of a "shock and awe" campaign, the American public was barraged with gripping images of exploding missiles, rumbling Humvees, and menacing fighter planes. Retired generals commented on TV news programs as if they were providing play-by-play coverage of a football game. Images portraying the violence enacted on humans were invisible— the war had been effectively sanitized by TV editors worried about losing access if military officers (or advertisers) didn't like the reports. All the while, viewers were treated to the likes of Fox News reporter Greg Kelly gleefully rolling into Baghdad in an armored vehicle with the US Army's 3rd Infantry Division, CNN's Kyra Phillips reporting from aboard the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, and dozens of others clad in Kevlar helmets, flak jackets, and camouflage uniforms.

The rise of embedded journalism marked an extraordinary shift in American war correspondence. Rarely had the boundaries between war fighter and reporter been so blurred. Beginning in November 2002—four months before the Iraq invasion—prospective embedded journalists were encouraged to undergo "basic training" in which they were subjected to simulated battlefield conditions. Upon arriving in Iraq, many slept in the same facilities, used the same vehicles, and ate in the same mess halls as the members of their military units. More often than not, the reporters relied upon the troops for their very survival.

A handful of critics critiqued embedded journalism, noting that such reporting amounted to little more than propaganda. By embedding with the US military, they argued, journalists had sacrificed the objectivity necessary to conduct responsible journalism. Veteran journalist and former New York Times reporter Gay Talese referred to them as "those correspondents who drive around in tanks and armored personnel carriers, who are spoon-fed what the military gives them... they become mascots for the military."

The few journalists who refused to embed were exposed to severe danger. In several cases, independent (non-embedded) journalists were killed by US troops: ITN reporter Terry Lloyd, cameraman Fred Nerac, and translator Hussein Osman; Reuters cameraman Taras Protsyuk and Telecinco cameraman Jose Couso; and al-Jazeera reporter Tariq Ayoub were but a few. Many others were killed by Iraqi soldiers and guerrilla fighters. Given the perils facing non-embedded journalists, it was perhaps understandable that so many would choose to attach themselves with military units.

But being an embedded journalist often meant making professional compromises. The very condition of being embedded had a tendency of keeping reporters far away from Iraqi civilians (including killed or injured civilians) and very close to (and empathetic with) US troops. In such an environment, military officials rarely saw the need to censor reports—journalists effectively censored themselves.

Sociologist Andrew Lindner recently completed an analysis of the embedded journalism program. He noted that
the embedded program proved to be a Pentagon victory because it kept reporters focused on the horrors facing the troops, not the horrors of the civilian war experience... The end result: a communications victory for an administration that hoped to build support for the war by depicting it as a successful mission with limited cost.

By taking sides, journalists had (wittingly or unwittingly) been used as pawns for waging "information warfare."

**Embedding Social Science**

Nearly five years later, the Pentagon began a new embedded program: the Human Terrain System, a $190 million initiative designed to embed social scientists with US Army combat brigades. The program consisted of five-person Human Terrain Teams (HTTs) featuring anthropologists and other social scientists attached to combat brigades. Some of the social scientists wore combat fatigues and carried weapons.

HTS began as a relatively small-scale experiment. But in September 2007, Defense Secretary Robert Gates authorized a dramatic expansion of the program. Approximately 25 additional teams were deployed in 2008, with social scientists reportedly earning up to $300,000 for a year-long deployment. According to a former HTS employee, many military commanders don't take the program seriously, but are reluctant to speak out against it because it is "General Petraeus' baby."

Uncritical reports in the corporate media have portrayed HTS as a life-saving initiative that is establishing a kinder, gentler US military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, although this is completely unsupported by evidence. There is no verifiable data that human terrain teams have saved a single life— American, Afghan, Iraqi, or otherwise. Such reports have all the trappings of a no-holds-barred Pentagon public relations campaign.

The international press has been far less sympathetic. For example, a November 2007 editorial in Mexico's daily newspaper La Jornada responded to HTS by noting that "the grotesque cultural mask of counterinsurgent anthropology does not change the brutal nature of an imperialist occupation." Such reactions are perhaps not surprising, given the history of American social scientists' participation in Project Camelot, an ill-fated Pentagon research program designed to employ social scientists for counterinsurgency research (more accurately called counter-revolutionary work) in Latin America.

Even more disturbing is the fact that some military analysts (notably Jacob Kipp, a historian at the US Army's Foreign Military Studies Office [or FMSO] at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas) have openly described FITS as a "CORDS for the 21st century"—a reference to Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, a Vietnam War-era counter-guerrilla initiative. CORDS gave birth to the infamous Phoenix Program, in which South Vietnamese and US agents used intelligence data to target some 26,000 suspected communists for assassination, including many civilians. At the time, CORDS was publicly heralded as a humanitarian effort to win "hearts and minds," while Phoenix simultaneously (and secretly) functioned as its paramilitary arm. This dubious history provides a critical reference point for understanding the potential uses of HTS, even as proponents of the new program use it to whitewash General David Petraeus' counterinsurgency efforts.

Many aspects of HTS raise troubling concerns about the potential abuse of social science by the Pentagon, its subcontractors, and the broader military-industrial complex. These concerns range from the possibility that social science data could be used to target suspected enemies for assassination, to the lack of transparency about the program, to the ethical problems posed by battlefield anthropology. Many are wondering whether wartime collaboration in secretive military projects "prostitutes science in an unpardonable way," as Franz Boas (a founding father of American anthropology) wrote in 1919 in response to anthropologists doing spy work during World War I.

Like the embedded journalism program, the Human Terrain System operates under a peculiar logic: it provides a public relations boost to a failing military occupation. At the same time, it can
provide battlefield intelligence directly to military commanders for combat operations. In short, HTS—like the embedded journalism program—functions as a tool for waging "information warfare."

Origins of "Human Terrain"

Human terrain reveals much about the Pentagon world view. The term portrays people as territory to be conquered, as if flesh and blood human beings were a geophysical landscape. Consider the recent words of US Army Lieutenant Colonel Edward Villacres, who leads a human terrain team in Iraq. According to Villacres, his team's goal is to "help the brigade leadership understand the human dimension of the environment that they are working in, just like a map analyst would try to help them understand the bridges, and the rivers, and things like that." This is the language of conquest: it objectifies, dehumanizes, transforms people into things. Like "collateral damage," the phrase vividly illustrates George Orwell's notion of "political language... designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable."

Human terrain's reactionary roots can be dated to at least 40 years ago, when the infamous US House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) issued a 1968 report singling out the Black Panthers and other militant groups as enemies of the state. The report, entitled Guerrilla Warfare Advocates in the United States, included an appendix that stated,

>...[is] carried out by irregular forces, which just about always dispose of inferior weapons and logistical support in general, but which possess the ability to seize and retain the initiative through a superior control of the human terrain.

The implication was clear: defusing "guerrilla warfare advocates" such as the Black Panthers would require the US government to wrest control of urban populations.

In the same report, HUAC suggested that urban unrest might require that the President declare an "internal security emergency" which would enable the 1950 Internal Security Act authorizing detention of suspected spies or saboteurs. (Much of the law was repealed in the 1970s, but some elements were restored in the PATRIOT Act.)

After a hiatus, human terrain resurfaced in 2000, when retired US Army Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters wrote an influential article entitled "The Human Terrain of Urban Operations." In it, he argued that it is the "human architecture" of a city, its "human terrain. . .the people, armed and dangerous, watching for exploitable opportunities, or begging to be protected, who will determine the success or failure of the intervention." He described a typology of cities ("hierarchical," "multicultural," and "tribal") and the challenges that each present to military forces operating there: "the center of gravity in urban operations is never a presidential palace or a television studio or a bridge or a barracks. It is always human."

For years, Peters has espoused a bloody version of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis. In 1997, he predicted that across the world, the US military would need to inflict "a fair amount of killing" for successful conquest:

>There will be no peace... The de facto role of the US armed forces will be to keep the world safe for our economy and open to our cultural assault. To those ends, we will do a fair amount of killing. We are building an information-based military to do that killing... much of our military art will consist in knowing more about the enemy than he knows about himself, manipulating data for effectiveness and efficiency, and denying similar advantages to our opponents.

Since the publication of Peters' human terrain article, literally dozens of intelligence agents, military analysts, Pentagon officials, pundits, and reporters have adopted the term.

In 2006, Jacob Kipp and colleagues from FMSO took the idea a step further by outlining a plan for HTS in the journal Military Review. According to Kipp, US Army Captain Don Smith led its implementation from July 2005 to August 2006 in order to better "understand the people among
whom our forces operate as well as the cultural characteristics and propensities of the enemies we now fight.”

A $190 Million Corporate Boondoggle

In early 2007, the US Army's Foreign Military Studies Office contracted the British company BAE Systems to begin recruiting social scientists for HTT positions. (Later, MTC Technologies and Wexford Group, a division of CACI, would also recruit team members.) Proponents of HTS, such as Colonel John Agoglia, insist that the teams "are extremely helpful in terms of giving commanders on the ground an understanding of the cultural patterns of interaction, the nuances of how to interact with those cultural groups." However, Kipp's description of HTS reveals that the program is designed to improve the "gathering" and "operational application" of "local population knowledge."

Kipp and his colleagues describe a process by which this information will be sent to a central database accessible by other US government agencies, including presumably the CIA. Furthermore, "databases will eventually be turned over to the new governments of Iraq and Afghanistan to enable them to more fully exercise sovereignty over their territory." The human terrain teams will supply brigade commanders with "deliverables" including a "user-friendly ethnographic and sociocultural database of the area of operations that can provide the commander data maps showing specific ethnographic or cultural features."

Teams use software developed by the MITRE Corporation called Mapping Human Terrain (MAP-HT). Kipp and his colleagues described MAP-HT as "an automated database and presentation tool that allows teams to gather, store, manipulate, and provide cultural data from hundreds of categories." The Secretary of Defense's 2007 budget justification describes MAP-HT as "a means for commanders and their supporting operations sections to collect data on human terrain, create, store, and disseminate information from this data, and use the resulting information as an element of combat power." It also allocates $4.5 million for MAP-HT between 2007 and 2009.

HTS supporters have unconvincingly argued that such a database would not be used to target Iraqis or Afghans. In a radio interview conducted in the fall of 2007, Montgomery McFate (an HTS architect) stated:

The intent of the program is not to identify who the bad actors are out there. The military has an entire intelligence apparatus geared and designed to provide that information to them. That is not the information that they need from social scientists.

She claimed that HIT social scientists have "a certain amount of discretion" with data, while providing no evidence that safeguards exist to prevent others from using it against informants. When asked about lack of independent oversight, she answered: "We would like to set up a board of advisors. At the moment, however, this program is proof of concept... [I]t's not a permanent program. It's an experiment."

An experiment without basic ethical safeguards, it might be added, for Kipp notes that

[to] ensure that any data obtained through the HTS does not become unnecessarily fettered or made inaccessible to the large numbers of Soldiers and, civilians routinely involved in stability operations, the information and databases assembled by the HTS will be unclassified.

Theoretically, this data is available for use by the CIA, Special Operations teams, Iraqi police, the Afghan government or military contractors—any of whom might use it for nefarious ends. Credible accounts have emerged about difficulties plaguing HTS, including ineffective training and gross mismanagement. Former HTT member Zenia Helbig has publicly criticized the program, claiming that during four months of training, there were no discussions about ethical issues such as the potential harm that might befall Iraqis or Afghans. Furthermore, she claims that 'HTS' greatest
problem is its own desperation. The program is desperate to hire anyone or anything that remotely falls into the category of 'academic,' 'social science,' 'regional expert,' or 'PhD,'" which has led to incompetence. According to Helbig, BAE Systems is more concerned with profits, rather than adequate training for team members. Her description of ineptitude and waste characterizing BAE Systems' operations near Fort Leavenworth, Kansas suggests that the company is engaged in war profiteering.

In Their Own Words

On May 7, 2008, Michael Bhatia—a PhD student in political science and HTS member—was tragically killed in a roadside bomb attack in Afghanistan, making him the program's first casualty of war. On June 24, another HT member and political science graduate student, Nicole Suveges, was killed in a bomb attack in Sadr City, Baghdad. Their deaths underscored the high cost of the program—not only its financial cost, but more importantly its human cost.

Scholars participating in the program are motivated by a wide range of factors. Marcus Griffin, a cultural anthropologist who blogged about his HTS work for nearly a year before suddenly removing all his past posts from the web without any explanation, was driven partly by a sense of patriotism, occasionally signing off with such catchphrases as "freedom is never free." He clearly perceived himself to be a military man—an anthropologist who was "going native" by embedding:

Going "native" in anthropology is a fairly common strategy to gain a better understanding of the people with whom one is working. I am about a month away from deploying to Baghdad as part of the US Army's new Human Terrain System and have almost gone completely native. How am I doing this? First, I am working out regularly with Lt. Gato. He is showing me how to develop greater strength and endurance... Second, I cut my hair in a high and tight style and look like a drill sergeant... Third, I shot very well with the M9 and M4 last week at the range... Shooting well is important if you are a soldier regardless of whether or not your job requires you to carry a weapon. Fourth, I am trying to learn military language with all the acronyms and idioms otherwise alien to university professor such as myself. I actually know what people are saying now half the time... Today among soldiers, I am looking and more often acting just like them... That is what going native is all about: walking in someone else's shoes in order to know what their life is like and therefore why they do what they do.

It is striking that Griffin omits any mention of Iraqis in his description of cultural understanding. For Griffin, "going native" has nothing to do with Iraqis. It means looking, speaking, and acting just like a US soldier.

Others have demonstrated a much greater level of empathy for those living under the yoke of occupation. As the result of my investigations into HTS, I was approached by "Terry" (pseudonym), a former employee of the program. For more than a year, we have maintained email and telephone communication. Terry's warmth, intelligence, and sincerity made a lasting impression. At times, Terry's words reflected an ambivalent and even contradictory position:

One of the main reasons I was able to build strong rapport and gain more trust from the Iraqis than anyone around me is because I listened to them, learned from them, and at a very deep level respected and admired them. Their lives were as important to me as anyone else's, including my own... More often than not, I was told by Iraqis that I "have a very good heart." They were human to me, and I looked out for their interests as much as I was obligated to work with the military through this program.

Terry later implied that a conflict of interest between the "ethnographic mission" of embedded social scientists and the intelligence needs of military units can create ethical dilemmas:

One of the issues I would like to address is how important it is for field researchers, or anthropologists, working with the military in a combat environment to maintain integrity to the
"ethnographic" mission. HI Is have pressure to prove credibility to the units they serve since we are in the "proof of concept phase," and there may be a tendency for some to respond to anyone who requests information, including intelligence...

Apart from the pressure that some social scientists might feel to respond to such requests, under these circumstances they could easily become unwitting intelligence agents.

**What's Human About Human Terrain?**

HTS—and HTS data—may perform various functions simultaneously. Images of a "gentler" counterinsurgency might serve as propaganda for US audiences opposed to military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, propaganda that allows us to fight wars and still feel good about ourselves. Intelligence collected by HTTs will apparently be fed into a database accessible by the CIA, the Iraq police, or the Afghan military for use in targeting suspected insurgents. Agents might employ HTS data to design propaganda campaigns that exploit Iraqi or Afghan fears and vulnerabilities. Each of these examples highlights how HTS can serve as a weapon for "information warfare" and raises grave questions about the appropriateness of embedded social scientists.

If history is any guide, it seems particularly likely that ethnographic intelligence will be used for social control methods reminiscent of those employed by the colonial powers of yesteryear: divide-and-conquer and indirect rule. Consider the words of French commander and colonial administrator Joseph Gallieni (1849-1916), who was an early architect of "pacification" policies in Indochina, French Sudan, and Madagascar in the late 1800s. In a classic statement, he emphasized how ethnographic intelligence could facilitate a divide-and-conquer strategy:

> It is the study of the races who inhabit a region which determines the political organization to be imposed and the means to be employed for its pacification. An officer who succeeds in drawing a sufficiently exact ethnographic map of the territory he commands, has almost reached its complete pacification, soon followed by the organization which suits him best... If there are habits and customs to respect, there are also rivalries which we have to untangle and utilize to our profit, by opposing the ones to the others, and by basing ourselves on the ones in order to defeat the others.

Ethnography can quickly become a "martial art" under these conditions, as noted by anthropologist Oscar Salemink. French colonial officials in Indochina ultimately used ethnographic intelligence to forge counterinsurgency tactics that were "both politically untenable and riddled with contradictions that doomed it to political failures." Despite these failures, HTS seeks to employ similar tactics today.

Given this history, perhaps it is not surprising that in October 2007 the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association—the largest professional anthropology organization in the US—issued a statement calling HTS "an unacceptable application of anthropological expertise." Five months later, the Society for Applied Anthropology approved a motion expressing "grave concerns about the potential harmful use of social science knowledge and skills in the HTS project."

In the future, historians may question why some social scientists—who over the past century developed the modern culture concept, critiqued Western ethnocentrism in its various guises, and invented the teach-in—enlisted as embedded specialists in an open-ended war of dubious legality. They might wonder why some began harvesting data on Iraqis and Afghans as a preferred method of practical "real-world" engagement. They might ask why, at a time when majorities in the US, Iraq, and Afghanistan wanted a withdrawal of US troops, social scientists supported an occupation resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians.

Counterinsurgency support stands to violate relationships of trust and openness with the people with whom social scientists work. If embedded social scientists are bound by "operations security" or other forms of secrecy, they are not free to share the results of their work with local people. Such work threatens the well being and integrity of all field-based social research—and
more importantly, the safety of Iraqi and Afghan civilians. Serving the short-term interests of military and intelligence agencies and contractors is a reckless approach for social scientists to take, for scorched earth research makes it impossible for future investigators to establish the trust necessary for establishing rapport with research participants.

At the height of the Cold War, C. Wright Mills cautioned social scientists about the perils of succumbing to "the bureaucratic ethos. Its use has been mainly in and for non-democratic areas of society—a military establishment, a corporation." He was concerned about the rapid transformation of scientists into mere technicians, lacking any sense of social responsibility for their actions. As those prosecuting the "war on terror" attempt to draw social scientists into ill-conceived operations like HTS, we should reaffirm our democratic values, our professional autonomy, and our social responsibility by refusing to participate.