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# “Soft power” does not always mean “smart power”: an investigation of human terrain teams in Iraq and Afghanistan

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**ABSTRACT** This article reviews the promise and actual achievement of Human Terrain Teams (HTTs): the small groups of social scientists that were eventually embedded in every combat brigade in Iraq and Afghanistan. On the basis of interviews with both HTT personnel and their military commanders, this article explores the military’s need for sociocultural information, the ethical issues surrounding research carried out in combat zones, and the tensions between military and social science organizational cultures. The account provides a close, detailed account of HTT activities, offers a critical reflection on the possibilities of creating a “softer”, less violent counterinsurgency, as well as the difficulty of attempting to make war more “intelligent”, discriminating and effective. This article is published as part of a collection on soft power.

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The Human Terrain System (HTS) was a military programme that embedded small advisory teams in combat units during US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> The Human Terrain Team Handbook presents its goal of using social science to “support field commanders by filling their cultural knowledge gap in the current operating environment and providing cultural interpretations of events occurring within their area of operations”. The guide for HTS personnel goes on to call for “operationally-relevant information in support of the planning, preparation, execution, and assessment of operations” (Human Terrain Team Handbook, 2008: 2). The first human terrain teams (HTTs) were deployed in 2007; eventually all combat brigades received teams with peak of 30 reached in 2010. The very existence of the programme reflected a new appreciation on the part of the Department of Defence that current and future military operations will more likely take place, not on isolated battlefields, but among people whose reactions to those operations will significantly influence if not ultimately determine success or failure.

While HTS called for and provided non-kinetic elements, or actions other than the threat or application of lethal force, into military operations, the relationship of the programme to Nye’s (2004) concept of “soft power” is not straight-forward. The aim of the programme was to understand the social conditions, authority relations, and interactions among various ethnic, tribal, and religious groupings that prevailed in the combat brigade’s area of operations. This information carried the potential to make military operations more intelligent, discriminating, focused, and effective. While not a formal goal, HTS might also be able to accomplish all this with lower levels of violence as well. For example, then COL Schweitzer’s (2008: 4) congressional testimony claimed that the human terrain team assigned to his command produced “impacts [that] were exponentially powerful: they reduced our kinetic operations, assisted in developing more non-kinetic courses of action ... Without the HTT filter on courses of action and the alternative maneuver tools they identified to create the exact same effect, we would have lost double the lives”. While this claim is controversial and impossible to confirm across all operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is certainly clear that many did join HTS with the expectation that they would help lower prevailing levels of violence and increase the sensitivity of the military to avoidable second order effects.<sup>2</sup> In an interview with the author, a very experienced soldier who served in the programme, stated with considerable passion: “I came because I was tired of hurting people. I’ll do that if I have to save myself, my friends, and my comrades. But I don’t have an agenda to change Afghanistan to a democracy or a republic. I came here to save lives—on both sides”. In this respect, the hope was that HTS would make for a less violent military intervention.

“Information”, Nye (2004: 1) observes, “is power” in the sense that it can contribute to one’s ability to achieve the outcomes that one desires. He explores the possibilities of a “second face of power” in which a country can achieve what it wants not only through force and coercion but also by co-opting and persuasion. The resources required for this effort are its “culture (where it is attractive the others); its values (where they are attractive and not undercut by inconsistent practices) and its policies (where they are seen as inclusive and legitimate in the eyes of others” (in Parmar and Cox, 2010: 4). While related to “soft power,” HTS does not constitute a full test of the efficacy of the concept for two important reasons: First, the sociocultural information gathered by the programme was intended to influence the local population only in an indirect sense. Rather than developing and projecting Nye’s pillars of attraction, prosperity, openness, culture, and moral authority, HTS delivered information only to military commanders who might or might not alter their conventional

operations as a result. These military leaders were the key consumers of the information; there was no guarantee that HTS would inspire a deliberate and dedicated programme aimed at influencing the local population through the exercise of soft power.

Second, HTTs operated under hazardous battlefield conditions. Three social scientists were killed and many more wounded. Most information was gathered while team members were surrounded by military personnel protecting them against possible attack. HTS members wore camouflage, armour vests and helmets. Indeed, many carried weapons themselves. Research methodologies such as interviews, polling, questionnaires, review of documents, and participant observation were employed but only in an atmosphere charged with the potential—and the reality—of lethal force. If deployed over the long run, HTS might have contributed to US soft power capabilities in Iraq and Afghanistan but it cannot be understood without recognizing that it was embedded in a hard power platform. A better question would be to assess the connection of HTS to what Nye calls “smart power”, or “strategies that successfully combine hard and soft power resources” (2010: 9). Did HTS contribute to “contextual intelligence”, or the ability to align tactics with objectives in a more meaningful and consistent manner and thereby improve the effectiveness of US military operations?

### Background

This research rests on multiple sources and unusual access to the HTS training center located just outside Fort Leavenworth, in Leavenworth KS. At the core lies a series of in depth interviews with HTS personnel that were conducted in and near the training center, as well as a second round of interviews with former HTS personnel and with military commanders who had HTTs embedded on their staff. I conducted 30 interviews ranging from 45 minutes to three hours with those returning from the field, with programme officials, and, later, with brigade commanders who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. An additional 20 individuals contributed their views, at times vociferously, during less formal, group sessions during lunch, coffee and beer. These interactions were not taped since I thought this measure would be inhibiting and hence counterproductive. The sample is not fully representative or exhaustive but these interviews presented throughout are more substantive that can be found in any other public source. Interested readers are encouraged to consult my longer book (Joseph, 2014).

While this essay does not dwell on the topic, it is important to note that problematic competency was a key limitation on the programme. The original contractor recruiting for the programme favored numbers over quality, and there were multiple organizational difficulties as the size and budget of HTS grew quickly. I do not focus on performance issues, in part because my sample is certainly more “competent” than was typically the case within the HTS. I also felt that understanding the potential contribution of the programme on military operations, including the possibility of modifying the means of achieving influence, would be more instructive when situated within overall structures and policies rather than focusing only on individual and organizational attributes. Nye writes that smart power “is the ability to combine the hard power of coercion or payment with the soft power of attraction into a successful strategy” (2010: 9). What role did HTS play, sociologically rather than idiosyncratically, when measured by the goal of achieving a better informed, more effective, possibly less violent, but certainly “smarter” counterinsurgency strategy?

Human terrain teams were usually embedded in brigades consisting of approximately 3,500 soldiers, although they were

also at times temporarily assigned to smaller battalions or even still smaller companies. A few teams were placed with international forces including the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany and Poland, as well as with large division-sized units (where they were called Human Terrain Analysis Teams). Perhaps the most important observation about its internal dynamics is that despite increased institutionalization over time, each human terrain team functioned differently. Each team had an almost unique relationship with their military commanders, some of whom accepted this new resource and tried their best to figure out how to use it while others showed confusion, misunderstanding, or outright hostility.

HTTs contained four functional roles. The Team Leader, almost always a former military officer, was responsible for communication and coordination with commanders largely because their experience enabled them to present potential projects and distil results into a form more easily digested by the brigade's possibly sceptical and certainly time-pressured leader. The Research Manager coordinated activities within the team. Social Scientists conceived and organized the research, while Analysts or regional specialists were supposed to speak the local language and be familiar with the culture and history. Most of those trained and actually deployed did not speak Arabic, Dari, or Pashto. Even when Analysts were Iraqi- or Afghan-Americans, teams often found themselves dependent on interpreters. Their often poor quality, I was told by a previously deployed member, while other HTS personnel sat around a lunch table nodding their heads in assent, "is the elephant in the room".

The need for both a Social Scientist and an Analyst is significant. The usual expectation for social science research carried out in other countries is for the theory, methodology, knowledge of the local area and language skills to be vested in one individual. Generally, a minimum of a year, and possibly two, is considered necessary to become fluent, sufficiently aware to read the culture in at least a roughly accurate manner, and establish the networks required to win trust and gain access to the local population. Only then does the researcher feel sufficiently confident to carry out meaningful fieldwork. But the programme had difficulty recruiting Ph.D. level social scientists with relevant local knowledge (Lamb *et al.*, 2013: 55). As a result, the research/theory function and the knowledge of the local population were not what normally could be expected from a true area specialist.

HTS was also subject to several important ethical criticisms, most systematically by the American Anthropological Association's Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the U.S. Security and Intelligence Communities (CEAUSSIC) (AAA, 2009). The AAA review focused on the difficulty of distinguishing between cultural "information" and "intelligence", as well as on the possibility that HTS was used for targeting and thus violate the important research principle of "do no harm". In addition, the AAA called for measures that provided stronger confidentiality and protection for sources. The authors expressed concern that secret research would compromise the discipline's express commitment to enhance the welfare of communities and individuals who are studied. They also pointed out that the professional code of conduct for carrying out open source research normally includes passage through a full Internal Review Board process. Perhaps it would be unreasonable to expect the same measures to be applied in war zones. But HTS did not develop even a flexible, situational protocol that reflected the difficulties of gathering information from respondents in the midst of military operations. Discussion within the programme, particularly during the training programme where it might have been expected, was uneven at best.

The AAA report raised other concerns including the marginal quality of some recruited to the programme and the strong

possibility that HTS activities would almost certainly compromise normal fieldwork carried out by civilian anthropologists in the same region. The AAA concluded that it is impossible to conduct in-depth "anthropology" in the midst of combat operations. "You can't really do anthropology in a group of people with guns", said Sally Engle Merry, an anthropologist who participated in the drafting of the AAA report (Stockman, 2009: A1).

HTS did not completely ignore ethics (King, 2009: 16). However, it was very disturbing to hear of an incident that followed an interview project aimed at establishing a better picture of social networks operating among Shias in Iraq (US colonels had been mismatched by conducting meetings with lower level figures, a process that was counter-productive for both sides). The HTT interviews were carried out near one of the most dangerous parts of Iraq. An analyst told me:

We spoke to this one sheik and we figured out that he was an actual power broker. But then he was kidnapped and held for 10–14 days. He was tortured, beaten, and told, "Hey, you are not going to the Americans anymore". After that, basically everyone stopped talking to us. So while it was a bad thing, in my eyes it also made me think that we were on the right path in figuring out the real power system. It backfired a bit, but we were on the right path.

The HTT member stressed that the kidnapping was "obviously not a result that we were looking for". But the incident, volunteered in response to a question asking for confirmation that HTS was making a difference, was used to support the claim that the information gathered by the interview programme was hurting the insurgency. The sheik, the HTT member said, "was actually helping us negotiate a better way of ending what was going on and that they didn't like that. If it were the wrong guy they would have either ignored him or killed him. The sheik we had identified was of at least moderate importance so they wanted to scare him". On the other hand, any research programme that leaves respondents so vulnerable surely raises deep ethical questions.

### **Soft and smart power; cultural awareness and cultural intelligence**

Advocates for the Human Terrain System argued that socio-cultural knowledge would not only inform operations; it would even transform them. In Nye's terms, the programme could be understood, not as an example of "soft power" *per se*, but as potentially contributing to an effective mix of the "hard" and the "soft" thereby making the exercise of force more "smart". For this to occur, access to cultural information was crucial. The two original leaders of the programme argued that "detailed knowledge of host populations is critical in areas where U.S. forces are being increased to conduct counterinsurgency and stability operations in Iraq. U.S. forces continue to operate in Iraq without real-time knowledge of the drivers of the behaviour within the host population. This greatly limits commanders' situational awareness and creates greater risks for forces" (McFate and Fondacaro, 2011: 67). Some military leaders, especially those affiliated with the move toward counter-insurgency that received considerable interest at the time, echoed the theme. Arguing against the claim that war success is best achieved through technological supremacy and attrition, Major General Robert Scales insisted that Iraq required "an exceptional ability to understand people, their culture, and their motivations" (in McFate, 2005: 24).

In their comprehensive study of HTS, Christopher Lamb and his colleagues offer important distinction between *cultural*

*awareness*, or basic familiarity with local languages, customs, norms, inclinations and taboos, and *cultural understanding*, or a sufficient understanding of the key tendencies in the society so that key outcomes can be anticipated (2013: 8, 176). Cultural awareness describes features of the local society. The distribution of “culture cards” which contained basic information about *mullahs*, mosques, profiles, tribal affiliations of key leaders and other important information such as the location of bazaars, basic health care, education, agricultural conditions and a list of key crops is an example of cultural awareness. Cultural intelligence reflects a deeper appreciation of how that society works, its continuities, fault lines, the elements that motivate its members, the weight of traditions, and the possibilities for change. It not only describes but also allows for the possibility of a more proactive stance that anticipates the synergy between one’s own actions and the dynamics of the larger society. In the case of military operations, cultural intelligence does not preclude the use of force but its specific application would be shaped by an appreciation of how the population’s loyalties could be moved in a preferred direction. A commander so informed thinks not only of weapons, soldiers, and position but also of the second order effects of those manoeuvres. The US presence is not just in a battle space filled with fighting units but also people, their wants and needs, grievances, hopes, and understandings. The social space and the battle space need to do more than just talk to each other. A programme to fundamentally change the allegiance of the population and thereby advance “smart power” would have to demonstrate cultural intelligence and not merely cultural awareness. Sociocultural information would not only have to be “present” but also understood, appreciated, and acted upon in ways that gained legitimacy from a population even in circumstances where the baseline inclination is to distrust foreigners.

Did the HTS programme acquire this needed cultural intelligence and communicate it to military commanders, who in turn used the new perspectives to alter and perhaps even transform their operations? Did HTS help bridge “hard” and “soft” power, thereby making military operations more “smart?” There is little evidence that the sociocultural information provided by human terrain teams altered the fundamental approach of brigade commanders. HTS did produce hundreds of “products”, and modest changes did take place, in some areas, with some commanders, and at some time periods. But these were rather limited, and tended to be examples of improved “cultural awareness” rather than the more robust “cultural intelligence”. Instead of significant influence, in which a population-centric appreciation of the balance of forces shifted in a meaningful way, change came only at the margin. New information was created and shared, and this could contribute to a sense of accomplishment. Even where particularly astute members of an HTT drafted a report that pointed in the direction of a needed and different approach, the very strong tendency was for military operations, its supporting premises, main policies, and principal priorities, to remain unaltered.

The remainder of this essay chronicles examples of commanders who needed information that could have deepened their cultural intelligence. These opportunities, for a variety of reasons, were passed over by the military leadership. Even instances where HTS personnel felt that their efforts were “successful” operated largely at the level of cultural awareness. Soldiers and officers became somewhat better at avoiding cultural mistakes, participating in local rituals, and exhibiting respect. But military leadership did not become better at easing corruption, controlling drug trafficking, or sorting out good from bad governance. There is nothing particularly “wrong” about the contribution of added cultural awareness. But this knowledge did not significantly influence the population so that they became more supportive and trusting of US policy.

### Smart people, not a smart system

U.S. military operations created a large footprint. Their physical presence—bases, people, equipment, transport vehicles, and noise—was significant. There were other less tangible influences as well. These included contacts with national and local governments, the army and police, businesses, relationships with the immediate population, and financial impacts. Some of these consequences were recognized, others were not. Many were well-intentioned: schools were built, wells dug, irrigation projects started. Intentions aside, these efforts often influenced the local population in ways that were not anticipated or appreciated. Calling attention to the varied social effects of this military presence was one potential contribution of HTS. In theory, a reflexive stance on the part of the programme, coupled with political will to make changes, could have created a feedback loop and altered at least some of the negative consequences of poorly informed decisions. In general, that did not occur.

Consider the example of road construction, a project that on the face improved military transport and civilian commerce, but could backfire in ways that undermined the stated goals of the US mission. HTS personnel were often aware of the double-sided nature of efforts to do good but calling attention to the problem rarely produced results. As one HTT social scientist observed about the process that has been called “threat-financing”:

A lot of resources went into large structural projects, especially roads. Millions of dollars spent on roads. In some ways it made sense. At first the people are excited. The new roads will make travel easier and won’t be dusty; the children will not cough as much.

But the subcontractors! Terrible. The subcontractors and the sub-subcontractors obviously want to get the job done, want to get paid, and have their workers safe so what happens again and again is that you pay off the bad guys so that they don’t attack. We are funding the bad guys with these projects. No one really talks about it. Then the quality goes down; the road is disintegrating within a year. The people think that if the government cared about us they would make sure we would get good projects. The people are frustrated.

On occasion, a human terrain team would call attention to the unintended influences that brigade operations had in their social world. As a member of one of the first teams deployed to Afghanistan later recounted:

We were in an area with lots of corruption, and people whose needs were not getting met. Our unit would patrol and often distribute medical aid, food, blankets, humanitarian aid, and the like. OK, fine. But our team found people in a neighbourhood village who said, “Hey, when are you guys going to come and see us”. And we had to tell them that we’re not. They were in the same area but not along our planned route. So our aid created a tension between the two villages with one asking the other, “What did you guys do to create this favoritism from the Americans?”

Military commanders did not need HTS to let them know that their areas of operation often contained significant if not overwhelming levels of corruption. They saw its depth and were sceptical about the chances of overcoming its adverse effects. As one noted:

I had to keep reminding myself, Okay, there is no tax system, so these guys have to make a living in some kind of way, and being in these prominent positions they’re exposed to risk. Are they setting up checkpoints and charging people? I don’t

know. But I know they're getting kickbacks and I know they're on the take in some form or another. There's no way they live the way they do on their salary. I mean the governor is wearing a \$25,000 Rolex watch and a huge diamond ring. He doesn't get that from income.

Corruption was an institutionalized problem to which there was no easy answer. [I cut an informal reference to US corruption] HTS personnel might point a figure at the depth of the problem, and the unintended ways that the military presence actually added additional layers to the problem. But these insights did not contribute to a concerted strategy of how to proceed.

Drug trafficking formed a substantial part of the Afghan economy and the U.S. invested considerable resources in attempting to control it. The leading edge of this effort was eradication programs in which poppy fields were burned or otherwise destroyed. These efforts were controversial. They failed to stem overall production and trade. They usually harmed small-scale farmers at the local level rather than the warlords who controlled the overall distribution networks (Peters, 2009). HTS personnel who worked in areas where poppy was grown produced reports about the stubborn persistence of the drug economy but this information was not used to revise what clearly was a failed policy. Here is an example:

We had a shura [meeting] in this village on the border, and the village elder and the military commander are hashing it out. There was also a new local politician, his predecessor had been assassinated three months prior and it's his first time in this district. He ordered the ANP [Afghan National Police] to knock down the poppies. This pissed off the village. They were like, "Who are you, coming in asking us to respect you and you have never been here." This does not look good.

I pulled one of the local guys aside and talked with him, and he told me what is going to happen: Pakistan is close, one mile away. The villages in Pakistan are connected with the villages in Afghanistan. In a couple of days, all of his cousins will come from Pakistan and they will say "What happened to your poppies?" We'll say, "The Americans and the new district governor came and wacked them down." They'll say, "Let us know when they come the next time and we'll help you fight them." Not asking if they would fight them, or if you want help in fighting them. We *will* help you, forgone conclusion.

Sure enough, next time I talked to that military unit, they had gone on a mission to that area with the ANA [Afghan National Army] and they had hit an IED just outside the village. Two ANA were killed. I informed my unit of the conversation. They went, "Ah ha, okay."

Consider the following remarkable account of an attempt to strengthen the national police which normally would serve as the bulwark of any programme aimed at producing greater stability and security for the population:

**Analyst:** Here's one that sort of got buried. I can't give too many details, because it's very sensitive. I have to be careful about how I talk about it.

We wanted to develop Afghan local police in one of the districts. Initially the Poles had tried doing it but for some unforeseeable reason it got defunded. Eventually a lot of the supporters of this local defence force got assassinated by the Taliban. So fast-forward three years later. The Special Forces come in and say, "Hey, we want to develop local police". The elders are like, "No fucking way! You guys came in here a couple of years ago and asked us to put our necks on the line. Now you're asking us to do it again?" There was no kind of

institutional memory. So they have big problems trying to establish this local police force.

So then they decide they're going to use a guy from the next province over, named Commander Azizullah. Do a Google search on Azizullah, you'll find some very colourful things about this guy. He's like the mafia. So they bring in Azizullah and get him to do his stuff, and get some recruits. Well, he goes back to his typical ways of pulling people in. He basically romps around some of the local villages; calls people out, and in many respects force them to join. There are all sorts of stories: I was talking to different elders. I can remember two incidences. One is where he would go to a high school and line up all the students who were just hanging out after school. And he puts a mark on a couple of their hands and tells them, "If your hand's been marked, you've just been volunteered for the Afghan local police". And they are under 18, these are young kids! And the other incident, he sets up a check point and grabs a couple of youth and holds them for 3 or 4 days, basically imprisoned, until they decide to volunteer for Afghan local police.

He caused a big stink. The local director of education went to the forward operating base, and then went up and complained at the provincial level. I ended up writing a small report on what impact this might have.

Many HTT had stories of how they struggled with their brigade commanders. This was especially true in trying to alter their overly aggressive operating styles and a tendency to favour Western concepts of efficiency over local cultural norms. A research manager complained bitterly about the cultural disrespect that he found on his FOB [Forward Operating Base]: "I was completely aggravated when I was over there. The mosque that the command had renovated was 100 feet from the center of operations. They had Port-a-Potties in front of the mosque—10 feet in front of the mosque! What does that say to the local population?"

A Social Scientist told the following story of modifying the behaviour of a colonel who had been aggressive to a fault:

We get down there and start to hear rumours about this commander who was in love with his own reputation and image. He was a guy's guy, most of his soldiers loved him. Shortly after we arrived, we saw one of the soldiers playing a laptop which had a video of the colonel speaking to a group of sheiks. Their FOB had been rocketed every 6 or 7 days. There were no casualties but the situation could not be accepted. We saw this clip of the commander talking to the tribal leaders and he was very aggressive with them. He is standing at a podium, and they are seated in front of him. Excuse my language, but he's like, "I know you motherfuckers are shooting rockets at our FOB. If I lose one soldier I'm going to mop the desert floor with your asses". He's just crazy and our Analyst is extremely disturbed.

An hour later, the colonel arrives at this site. We haven't met him yet. So we walk up to the convoy, introduce ourselves, and chat for a few minutes. Then the Analyst says "Sir, can I speak to you for a second?" The Analyst pulls him aside and says, "Sir, I saw this video. I'd like to offer you some suggestions if you don't mind. I know you're upset because you are getting rocketed. But I would like to stress something. You cannot win this fight by being this aggressive. You need to make the sheiks your friends; you are not going to stop them from rocketing unless they see you as a human being."

A year later, one night in dinner at the mess hall, I go to a table and there is the same colonel. He says, "Let's go outside for a talk." He says, "I remember what your Analyst said to

me.” And he does, he remembers the entire conversation word for word. Then the colonel says, “Tell him that what he said changed the entire way I prosecuted the war.” He was still aggressive but found a way to know the sheiks on a personal level and thought that it limited the amount of kinetic operations.

Ordinary soldiers also exhibit behaviour that can alienate the local population. HTT respondents were very aware of this possibility but also argued that even small, modest alterations in the way a unit patrolled could make a huge difference in perceptions. This, many claimed, would be true even if the previous military unit had been heavy handed and overall strategy had not changed in any significant way. In this respect, HTTs often felt that the central dynamics of the two wars were local. Here is an example from Iraq:

Without question this is a company level fight. The guy on the ground, your 27–30 year old captain, has a lot of flexibility to make decisions. When embedded in any unit, HTS can help develop a framework and shape the way they look at their environment. It’s not just about our deliverables that we send back here [Leavenworth]. It’s what we are doing with those soldiers on the ground, how they look at their area, especially how they engage the population on a daily basis.

You have guys just walking down the street, not talking with anyone, doing a patrol. They need to be situationally aware but it makes a huge difference if you just stop walking and talk for a moment. They don’t realize that people view us as confrontational and aggressive. Our soldiers are just operating on the basis of “We don’t want to get blown up”. But in the wider context, what we do, every step we take, every handshake we don’t make, every glance, every question we don’t ask, has a long tremor effect. People think that it takes a long time to build these relationships, and we don’t have time or resources to go back every Tuesday to have *chai*. But you can build real relationships in a very short time.

How much difference does “soft face” patrolling actually make? One Social Scientist deployed to Afghanistan said that after a change in the way soldiers moved through a village, he had been “driving around trying to find this clinic, so I stopped the truck to ask this guy. He is walking his son, eight years old. ‘Oh, it’s right over there,’ he says. ‘Do you want my son to go with you?’ When I first arrived, nobody would have given us that kind of help”.

The scale of this example needs to be compared to more significant, structural changes. The same HTT member learned that the salaries paid to Afghans who worked on his military base, people who in his words, “risk their lives every day just by going through the main gate”, fell significantly short of a living wage. Families could not be supported on what the military was paying. “The brigade at the time”, he said, “were wondering why people are against us, why they were taking money to lay mines. But the people working for us were going into the hole. You can’t have any morals when you are hungry”. I asked if the remuneration policy changed once this was discovered. “They tried to address it”, he said, “but it was difficult because it was a contractor issue. It didn’t change immediately”.

Mistakes often accompany military operations. These errors are significant in their own right; they can also affect the way the local population views the U.S. for years to come. HTS personnel were very aware of the implications of military mistakes, and sometimes saw their role as helping to reduce their occurrence. As one HTT member acknowledged, “We have made errors in who we have arrested and conducted operations against. People have been killed due to our mistakes. Having a clear

understanding of context will help us avoid prosecuting targets that shouldn’t be prosecuted”. Where mistakes were made, success was also seen as redressing the resulting grievances and setting the military and the population along a reconciliatory path.

In Afghanistan, another HTT member recognized that the population in their area connected their military unit with events that occurred long before they ever arrived. “That history had to be learned,” he said, “both good and bad. It had created strong memories that governed current perceptions”. In response to a question asking for an example of each he replied, “A bad memory in this village concerned this young girl who had been run over by a Humvee as these guys [the earlier brigade] were going through the village. It was tragic that the girl was killed but what really disturbed the villagers was that we didn’t take care of the situation. Nothing had been done about it. There was unfinished business and we had been careless. Amends were made but we were late. As for a good thing, the villagers remembered that a landmine victim had received excellent medical care, exactly the same as would have been received by one of our soldiers”.

There is little evidence that these narratives and similar information provided by human terrain teams altered the fundamental approach of brigade commanders. Most were committed to “hard power,” winning through attrition by applying lethal force. Information did carry the potential to modify and possibly even identify the need for a substantially different approach, one that would have ended up integrating some form of “soft power”, but the significance of the problems were largely ignored. HTTs did begin to establish a consistent organizational presence, and did modify the behaviour of at least some commanders who carried themselves in a self-defeating manner. The impact on how soldiers patrol is less clear, and correcting mistakes, while significant in some cases, was also unevenly applied or entirely missing in others.

### Obstacles to converting soft power as smart power

How can we explain the failure of HTS to provide for a more effective form of soft counterinsurgency, one that could be considered “smarter” as well as less lethal? One answer points toward internal factors: the startup costs than accompany any new programme, especially one that run against the grain, the decidedly uneven quality of the individuals that were recruited, and the difficulties that accompanied rapid expansion following the initial claims of success. HTS officials feuded with their supervisors in the Army’s chain of command and with each other on many issues.

Two other explanations are important. I consider each more telling than the bureaucratic challenges faced by HTS. First, the programme embodied a tension between the organizational cultures of the military and that of the social sciences. HTS was never able to articulate a clear, precise sense of how sociocultural information was to be used, in part because conventional military thinking both surrounded it and was replicated within its ranks. The programme harboured a tension between the organizational culture of the military and that of the social sciences. HTS products did provide some intriguing population-centric facts but did not change the ability of commanders to rethink how they could use force differently. Most military leaders, despite the claims of some to have absorbed counterinsurgency thinking, were largely hostile or indifferent to necessity of integrating sociocultural information into the planning process. What C. Wright Mills called “the military definition of reality” continued to make the acceptance of the reference points offered by HTS more difficult (1956). Furthermore, while HTS was designed to

study culture and society, there remained a significant divide within HTS itself. Those with a military background defended HTS for its ability to produce a study of immediate value to the commander. The “product” was supposed to improve the tactical position of the brigade, results that the military could appreciate. HTS, as some of its promotional material claimed, was presented as a “force multiplier”. Here, the programme is defended as simply contributing to the exercise of “hard power”.

Military culture is not uniform. In its specifics, there are differences such as between the branches of the armed services, within the Army between armored and infantry units and between those inclined toward counterinsurgency strategies. Fighter pilots find themselves in a very different organizational setting than logistical supply officers. Nonetheless, the ideal-typical comparison of military and social science organization cultures that is presented below can be justified particularly because HTS teams were embedded specifically in *combat* brigades, i.e. in the units most devoted to traditional values and practices. And despite its mandate, HTS was by no means singularly devoted to social science practices. The participation of substantial numbers of current and retired military within HTS itself made for recurring collisions within the programme as well as between the programme and the brigade. Many former military personnel continued to identify with their former roles and all personnel had to carry themselves in ways that meshed with the military patrols that protected them. Even where there was good will to incorporate social science information, an uneasy if not contradictory relationship ran through the training programme in Kansas, between military commanders and the HTTs embedded on their staff, and, crucially, within the individual HTTs themselves. The cultural divide between military and social science norms complicated the collection of culturally-relevant information, the transmission of that information to their brigades, and the actual use of that information by command staff. This division is expressed in the comparisons between military and social science norms found in Table 1.

The other major problem faced by HTS was the impact of military occupation, a reality that in many ways, both large and small, blocked the potential role of sociocultural information to appraise and redirect policy. Occupation helped produce a form of conceptual membrane that severely limited out meaningful

consideration of the US impact on the local population. Without the ability to recognize, and act to remedy, those the negative consequences of those influences, policy had a difficult time approaching “smart.”

The US intervened with military force in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. In Iraq, formal authority was passed to a transitional government in Baghdad a little more than a year later. Through a “status of forces” agreement, that government gave formal approval to the presence of foreign troops. A similar process was followed in Afghanistan where the United States had helped overthrow the Taliban and eventually signed an agreement with the newly-installed Karzai government that allowed for the presence of coalition military forces. In narrow legal terms, the United States was no considered an “occupying force.” Yet the long-term commitment of troops, numbering at points at more than 100,000 in each country, the substantial administrative apparatus, significant political influence, and enormous economic impact made for an occupation in another, more substantive sense. While those troops were present, numerically and in the accompanying rules, finances, culture, and governance, the functional autonomy of the Baghdad and Kabul governments from Washington was problematic. The two occupations required quasi-governing structures even if these operated alongside those exercising formal authority. Occupation required policies, standard operating procedures, a military strategy, rules of engagement, civil as well as military affairs, offices, organizations, bases, and logistical supply chains. Their cumulative weight conveyed a type of authority and social significance that lay alongside and possibly surpassed the official policies of the respective national governments. Importantly, international humanitarian law required Washington to maintain responsibility for the well-being of the population of the territory where it maintained such a substantial presence.

Military occupation, legal or otherwise, signifies power and control. Yet in both Iraq and Afghanistan, Washington faced increasing difficulties in maintaining leverage. As the problems mounted, and the number of challenging groups proliferated, more astute political and military leaders sought modifications of the policies that governed those occupations. The promise of the HTS was to bring sociocultural information that could assist in that effort. But the change could only be of a certain type.

**Table 1 | Comparing military and social science norms**

	Military	Social science
<i>Fundamental mission</i>	Exert will over others, to “fight and win America’s wars”	Discover patterns of human behaviour
<i>Means to achieve mission</i>	Force or the threat of force (ultimately “kinetics” even if exclusive reliance is modified)	Gather data, apply theories, produce knowledge; seeing the world through other people’s eyes
<i>Organizational structure</i>	Vertical chain of command, communication of orders, focus on completion of mission, emphasis on being a team player. Dress code: uniforms	Horizontal peer collaboration, constant reflexive judgment (individuals do not have to “fall into line”). Dress code: idiosyncratic
<i>Access to knowledge</i>	Need to know; system of classification; findings are presented in a “briefing”	Shared; open source, aversion to secrecy; findings are discussed in variety of settings
<i>Credibility</i>	Combat experience (at least overseas deployment); physical conditioning, functional competencies	Publishing record, oral communication skills; “quality of mind”
<i>Working atmosphere</i>	Under threat, security is a constant issue; guarded and sometimes hostile relationship with local population	Presence of researchers generally acknowledged and accepted; trust can be established, listening is crucial, physical security usually taken for granted
<i>Sense of time and space</i>	<i>Time:</i> Urgent, operational decisions must often be made without complete knowledge; deployment period about one year <i>Space:</i> forces deployed “downrange” in an “area of operation” and are protected by the perimeter of a “base”	<i>Time:</i> Expansive; in field work, time needed to gain acceptance; two year time frame for learning language and culture and establishing necessary relationships <i>Space:</i> a “field setting” with the goal of lowering cultural walls and other barriers
<i>Ethical guide</i>	Rule of military law, specific rules of engagement	“Do no harm”; other Internal Review Board criteria

Adjusting the management of the occupation could be entertained, but calling it into question or asking if it was even possible to find a managerial “magic bullet,” could not. Critical insights rose from some HTS teams and some individuals. Examples involving corruption, indirect effects of the US presence, threat financing, drug trafficking, abusive authority, and the dire circumstances of much of the population were cited by many HTS respondents and illustrated in the interviews found earlier in this article. But occupation carried conceptual boundary lines that made it extremely difficult to engage in meaningful self-reflection. Smaller understandings that could serve as useful starting-points were sometimes generated by HTS. These failed to gain traction in the decision-making system, especially at the strategic level, and were generally ignored.

In their assessment of the HTS programme that they initially led, Montgomery McFate and Steven Fondacaro ask themselves a rhetoric question: “Would have detailed, empirical knowledge of the political objectives of Ho Chi Minh during the Vietnam War [such as could have been provided by a functional precursor of HTS], have enabled us to better shape the environment or deter conflict” (2010: 79)? The question is laden with counter-insurgency assumptions including a presumed leading role for “us”, and the determination to “shape the environment.” For antiwar critics of the Vietnam intervention and the long military occupation that followed, the answer to their question is relatively simple. If Washington wanted to avoid the destructive impact of the Indochina War, foster democracy, and promote a more cooperative global environment in which the United States and Vietnam could continue to engage each other in mutually beneficial ways, all that needed to be done was accept the outcome of elections that were mandated by the Geneva Accords in 1954 and which could have also been carried out in 1963. The problem that led to war was not the absence of good information but the determination of the US to control the direction of Vietnam with military force if favourable outcomes could not be secured by political processes. Poor information, which tended to uphold the rationale for military force no matter how self-defeating, did enter the decision-making system. But the intelligence community understood that free elections would have resulted in an outcome that Washington felt it could not accept. Other measures were necessary. A war of attrition followed and failed. Late in the war, a poorly designed and heavy-handed counterinsurgency strategy known as the Phoenix Programme was also introduced. It too failed. McFate and Fondacaro ask what would have been the results of a better designed counterinsurgency effort. To be effective, the managers of such a system would have encountered not just the need for better information but the reality that it faced a popular movement that most Vietnamese regarded as the best chance to achieve justice. Any US counterinsurgency programme, no matter how smart, would have backed the wrong people and been profoundly undemocratic. Washington would have had to impose its own definition of “stability,” a “normal” that met its interests rather than respect the needs and desires of the local population. The friction between Vietnamese self-determination and Washington’s understanding of its geopolitical interests would have remained and worked against the formulation and prosecution of a fair, just military presence. The fundamental problem that afflicted HTS was not the need to create and fine tune the flow of sociocultural information, even though that goal was necessary. Some data moved up the chain of command; other key facts were ignored. More useful meetings were conducted, and brigade commanders became better informed about local conditions. But an appreciation of the depth of needed change was lacking. The ultimate challenge for HTS, at least where it was able to field competent teams, is that knowledge was

constructed that questioned the continued determination to control outcomes by military means. That knowledge was ignored because it could not be accepted by the occupation regime.

By way of conclusion of the overall influence of the Human Terrain System on the exercise of “soft” and “smart” power, consider the opinion of a former brigade commander, one with a social science advanced degree and who was well-versed with population-centric counter-insurgency doctrine. Though not a supporter of the programme, he clearly understood the potential contributions that social science could make to military operations. The commander was also a strong advocate of night raids, a controversial programme in which Special Forces and other specialized combat units entered Afghan villages to capture or kill Taliban or other anti-government forces.

“We did hundreds of night raids in that area”, he said tapping his finger on the map that lay between us. “We tried to take out the people that were repressing the population”.

“I’ve seen polling results,” I said, “that indicate than Afghans don’t like night raids.”

“That’s just what [former CENTCOM] General Petraeus asked me. ‘Afghans don’t like night raids, why are you doing them?’

“Sir, no one likes night raids,’ I replied. ‘But they like the Taliban even less’. The population will say different things to different people but I know that they want us to protect them. I have evidence to back it up”.

“What would a human terrain team think about the night raids?”

“They would not like them.”

“Why not?”

“They might say, ‘Afghans don’t like people coming into their houses. It is a cultural affront’. Well, I don’t like people coming into my house either. But this person here is plotting against the government, and is causing chaos and misery in your community. We’re going to take them out.”

“You say that you appreciate social science informed advice. But in this case, you would ignore them?”

“Well, not quite ignore. They could give useful advice on how to mitigate some of the adverse effects. They might say ‘Here is how you follow up. Here is how you make them less contentious. Stay on the ground so when the sun comes up, you’ll be with the elders. Show respect to the elders. If you did damage, pay restitution. If the gate is broken, fix the gate. The wife and family, who are not bad people, are now living in a house without a gate’.

“But you have to remember this: due to our raids, we dropped the average age of insurgent leaders from 34 to 26. That’s an average loss of eight years of fighting experience. That’s a real plus for our side. And I think the population appreciates the increased security that is provided”.

“So, at least in this case, there is no significant role for HTS?”

“Only if they accept that we are going to do night raids”.

## Notes

- 1 This article is adapted from “Soft” Counterinsurgency: *Human Terrain Teams and US Military Strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan Pivot. 2014.
- 2 Second order effects are unintended consequences that follow initial and intended decisions. For example, a drone attack might kill insurgents (first order) but increase the vulnerability of the villagers to hostile insurgents who now suspect them of providing intelligence to US forces (second order).

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### Data availability

Data availability is not applicable as no datasets were generated or analysed in this study.

### Additional information

**Competing interests:** The Authors declare no competing financial interests.

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