

## **WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON BOYS?**

### **The problem for embedded anthropologists in the US Human Terrain System teams**

The information which follows is drawn from the notes of a participant in the November 2009 entry training programme for the Human Terrain System Project (HTS). None of this material is classified. All names have been removed.

The traditional purpose of military tactics and strategy in a kinetic battlefield is to deny landscape to the enemy, to seize high ground, to dominate transport routes. Human Terrain Teams (HTTs) are there to deny cognitive terrain to the opponent. The public representation of HTS is that it aims to move the population's centre of gravity from favouring the insurgent's agenda to favouring the occupying 'Coalition' forces and their agenda. From this perspective the role of anthropologists would seem to be to provide intel which enables new strategies of action to be drawn up. This is not proving to be the case.

HTTS are provided by embedded mercenary contractors operating at Brigade or Division level. The HTS project is being evaluated to change its status from Project to Program, from competing for annual funding to getting guaranteed recurring funding. To do this it must be seen as Mission critical.

There is resentment in some quarters that emphasis on kinetic warfare and older styles of Special Forces warfare might lose out to intelligence driven decision making. There is free enterprise competition between different Intelligence groups offering their products to those who can pay. This is the philosophical area in which HTS operates.

The US is good at kinetic high tech operations. A-symmetrical, or low intensity operations against groups deemed to be insurgent is intelligence based. The US is not good at this.

"Because the enemy can't win in conventional warfare they have wrapped themselves in the population (the People). They (the Bad Guys) are ethnic; they are tribal.

Counterinsurgency is waged on cognitive terrain. Can we turn one local group against another? There are some people and some groups that must be killed or captured to get the result that we want. It is important that The State has a monopoly on violence."

All HTT team leaders are or have been officers holding at least the rank of Major, but it is also clear that HTTs are largely composed of people with a particular political view. The training is designed to bring the others round to that view. It is not simply a question of getting used to military culture, but to ensure adoption of particular political paradigms.

"You are taking the seat of a soldier so you need to carry a weapon."

"The enemy doesn't obsess over whether what they say is true or correct. We shouldn't either."

"The slogan, winning the hearts and minds of the people is just a slogan. That objective is not realistic. We save American lives."

"A mullah who is preaching or whatever they do against the US, we need to target him; get rid of him, capture him, blow him up."

"I don't want to have to take the US flag to the door of a US mother and tell her that her son was killed. And Afghan mothers whose sons are killed as collateral damage. I don't give a fuck about those people. I would just drive through their village in my Humvee and throw money at those mothers."

Trainees are told HTTs work with F-9 (Civil Affairs) or F-7 (PsyOps), but Civil Affairs personnel canvassed were not aware that this was actually the case.

"HTTs do not collect info that will be used in kinetic operations. When kinetically relevant information begins to be volunteered in an interview, you should pass the informant on to the Intel people. About 30% of the HTTs become tools for the kinetic intelligence needs of the Brigade."

It was made clear that informants might well be killed as a result of their participation with HTTs. It is presumed that many will be collateral deaths.

"If you withhold information that might save the life of a US soldier, even if it will cause the death of your informant, you are shit."

This description of the HTT training should be viewed in the context of a re-evaluation of the intelligence position within the US military. On January 5th 2010 Maj. Gen. Michael Flynn, the top intelligence aide to International Security Assistance Force Commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal was quoted as saying that "American

intelligence in Afghanistan is broken. That's because it focuses too much on whacking Taliban, and not enough on figuring out Afghanistan's social and cultural landscapes".

So the problem for the anthropologists in the HTTs is that their role is presented to the public as being a Hearts and Minds operation. But it is compromised by being a competing vendor of intel, in a market where intel is only valued if it will directly assist kinetic warfare tactics or strategy. Intel should shape decision-making, however HTTs appear to be operating within a specific political discourse which sees no value in the culture of the people who form the Human Terrain. There is no opportunity for the intel to shape the cognitive strategy. When anthropologists are employed to deliver this type of political programme whilst embedded in the military there is a very clear danger. So far three HTT anthropologists have died as a result of enemy action in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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