

The Truth About Human Terrain Teams: An Evidence-Based Response to Gian Gentile

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MICHAEL DAVIES, SEP 21 2013

Colonel Gian P. Gentile recently trained his sights on Human Terrain Teams (HTTs) with his post, “Counterinsurgency: The Graduate Level of War or Pure Hokum?” In his piece, he made a number of claims about HTTs regarding their effectiveness, while simultaneously declaring that the entire program was just another wrong-headed example of the idea that “militarized civilian action intellectuals” can help win wars. The first accusation is entirely devoid of scholarly rigor, while the second is an obtuse straw man argument when introspection and consideration is necessary.

Gentile’s error is built around his breezy assertion that HTTs were ineffective. Based on the most comprehensive review of commander interviews and commentary yet compiled, a research team at the National Defense University (NDU) concluded that the large majority of commanders interviewed saw their teams as effective and valued. These commanders saw the information and advice provided by HTTs as leading to greater operational effectiveness (See Figure 1). This effectiveness was demonstrated across a range of actions such as helping to train soldiers on the “do’s and don’t’s” of Afghan culture and the collection of village profiles, to engaging in research that initiated a complete “reassessment of ongoing operations.” Numerous commanders even believed the teams could have been even more effective if they had been multiplied and placed with every company.[i]

Earlier scholarly studies on HTT effectiveness have come to this same conclusion. These studies explicitly asked commanders[ii] about the relative contributions made by HTTs to their mission. Research by faculty members of West Point in 2008, by the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) in 2009-10, and by the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) in 2011-12 all concluded that a majority of commanders valued their HTTs.[iii]

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Figure 1

	Successful	Partial Success	No impact/Ineffective
West Point Study	Highly Valued		
	4		
CNA Study	Very Useful	Varied Usefulness	Not Useful
	5	8	3
IDA Study	Successful	Partial Success	No Impact
	26	9	1
NDU Study	Effective	Mixed Effectiveness	Not Effective
	8	4	1

This same research also disproves Gentile assertion that the teams were ineffective because, “often times, an HTT would be made up of anthropologists with graduate degrees, but not necessarily with an emphasis on Middle Eastern culture let alone details knowledge of Iraq or Afghanistan.” Most importantly, this claim is specious as it uses a solitary reference: the website biography of a single former HTT member, when many hundreds of individuals have deployed with the program.[iv] But it is also inaccurate as the CNA report analyzed and categorized the academic disciplines of those in the Human Terrain System (HTS) in 2010, and found very few anthropologists in the program.[v] Instead, team members came from a wide variety of disciplines and experiences.

Moreover, Gentile does not offer any evidence to suggest a lack of in-country experience and knowledge led to ineffectiveness. The NDU research team discovered numerous examples of effective individuals without in-depth Iraq or Afghan experience positively impacting operations. One member traced a network of irrigation workers, who proved to be the economic lifeblood of a district, and convinced the unit to stop meddling with the irrigation processes. Another member discovered how the purchasing of material for a Forward Operating Base was distorting the local economy through inflation to the point the locals’ thought the unit was intentionally trying to starve them.[vi] In both cases, the team member was not an Afghan expert, and the research led to command-wide changes in operating procedures, leading to greater operational effectiveness.

This is not to deny the significant problems suffered by the teams and the program in both theaters. Fundamentally, these problems were caused by the fact the program was built on the fly, in the middle of two wars, with minimal institutional capability, and a wide variety of hindrances. For those teams defined as partially effective and ineffective, they were often marked by an ill-defined purpose, a lack of resources, unqualified individuals, and toxic leadership. Examples include a team leader who would ensure only he would receive credit for good work, not his team members, a social scientist who treated the other team members as their personal assistant, or military commanders who demanded that their HTT help with kinetic targeting (which was refused). In other cases, members were grossly unqualified for the rigors of the austere environment, as well as the cognitive demands of the job. The effectiveness of a team could also vary across time, as individuals moved in and out of theater, previously highly effective teams could collapse down to a single individual.[vii] The context of these problems should never be dismissed without

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careful study.

It was through analysis and study of these issues that the larger picture on HTT effectiveness was also exposed. HTTs were too often used as primary data collectors at the tactical level, creating village census profiles and asking basic questions about the makeup of the area. One commander equated this to “using a squirt gun to fight a forest fire.”^[viii] Thus, HTTs were rarely able to provide the in-depth analysis to brigade-level commanders and staff as originally intended and expected, further explaining the variability in their performance. Following the *Fixing Intel* critique of the intelligence architecture in Afghanistan by then-Major General Michael T. Flynn, Captain Matt Pottinger, and Paul D. Batchelor, by having soldiers become the initial ground sensors, HTTs could aggregate that knowledge into more in-depth cultural assessments, helping to ensure better decisionmaking.^[ix] When this new cultural intelligence architecture was implemented in Afghanistan through a Company Intelligence Support Team, with the help of an HTT, it was proven to be successful.^[x]

Gentile is also not the first to mischaracterize HTTs. Professor Dough Porch’s recent book, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* says that HTTs were used “with a view to meddle in local politics and ‘find, fix, and finish the enemy’ rather than understand indigenous culture and values, minimize collateral damage, and so win over popular support.”^[xi] While there were a small number of commanders who valued sociocultural knowledge solely because they thought it would improve their ability to target insurgents, they were a tiny minority. Porch’s mischaracterization of HTTs says a lot about those commanders and their poor understanding of counterinsurgency doctrine and insurgent networks, and nothing about the actual purpose and performance of HTTs. Tom Vanden Brook, a *USA Today* reporter, makes an uninformed assessment of HTT performance when he asserts commanders were disdainful of HTTs because of they were “worthless.”^[xii] To support this observation he cites a single brigade commander.^[xiii] Such errors do a disservice to public debate over the program.

The conclusions reached by the NDU research team led to a recommendation that the program be moved to the U.S. Army’s Special Operations Command (USASOC). There the program can be adjusted according to best practices and the demands of the post-Afghanistan environment. Such a move would likely changes HTS’s current structure, but it would further institutionalize the undeniable necessity of sociocultural knowledge to further operational effectiveness; the original purpose of HTS. As noted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the lack of this type of capability and understanding is a primary lesson to be learnt from the Decade of War.^[xiv] To ignore this lesson is to invite perpetual defeat.

This move would also raise the question as to whether civilians should have be a part of the program. This is a very valid question, and is something Gentile believes is unnecessary. Yet he adds nothing to the conversation beyond a blanket declaration against the use of “militarized civilian action intellectuals” such as on HTTs. Such a statement ignores the obvious fact the organic military capability for HTT-equivalent functions did not exist at the time, but was required. Arguments can be made for a variety of other options within the Department of Defense itself to institutionalize this skill. For example, military personnel, active, reserve, and Guard, can be used, and the program can become codified into doctrine. Civil Affairs units can be expanded for a similar capability. As noted, improving intelligence and information collecting and analysis also provide better outcomes. As would more targeted changes to the Professional Military Education curriculum. All these are valid and deserve consideration.

In reality, however, HTTs question the current structure of the All-Volunteer Force. Simply put, why not send these individuals through boot camp, or even a modified one, provide them with an operational rank, train them according to their position, and integrate them as a team with a unit prior to deployment for a full tour? This would have turned their civilian expertise into direct military expertise. If all elements of national power, including civilian and academic, are necessary for effective warfighting, why leave civilians operating in direct support with the military, armed and in uniform, as civilians?^[xv]

Fundamentally, Gentile’s argument against HTTs is lacking in genuine research. Multiple studies have shown their value and effectiveness, and never denied their failings. But these failings occur precisely the United States has lacked the institutional capability to value sociocultural knowledge and fight wars in a variety of forms. The lessons to be learnt from HTTs are important and should be studied because the past decade of war demands nothing less than

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our best to ensure the same mistakes are not repeated, but caricatured arguments, devoid of solid research help no one.

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[i] Christopher J. Lamb, James Douglas Orton, Michael C. Davies, Theodore T. Pikulsky, *Human Terrain Teams: An Organizational Innovation for Sociocultural Knowledge in Irregular Warfare* (Washington, DC: The Institute for World Politics Press, 2013), 175-180; 184-85.

[ii] “Commanders” has primarily been described across all studies as brigade-level commanders, as that is the primary commander HTTs report to. However, some task forces with HTTs in Iraq and Afghanistan have been commanded by Generals, while lower level commanders down to company-level, as well as staff officers have also been interviewed.

[iii] Yvette Clinton et. al, *Congressionally Directed Assessment of the Human Terrain System* (Washington, DC: Center for Naval Analyses, November 2010); Jack A. Jackson et. al. *Contingency Capabilities: Analysis of Human Terrain Teams in Afghanistan*, Draft Final Report, IDA Paper P-4-4809; Log H11-001954/1 (Washington, DC: The Institute for Defense Analyses, December 2011); Cindy R. Jebb et al, *Human Terrain Team Trip Report: A “Team of Teams,”* Prepared for TRADOC G2 by the USMA’s Interdisciplinary Team in Iraq, unpublished, 2008. All reports are in author’s possession.

[iv] The same individual recently published a book on her experiences with a team. AnnaMaria Cardinalli, *Crossing the Wire: One Woman’s Journey into the Hidden Dangers of the Afghan War* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, July 2013).

[v] The CNA report did outline the various skills and degrees of team members at the time of their assessment, and noted very few had anthropology degrees, or area/regionally-focused degrees and experience. See Yvette Clinton et. al, *Congressionally Directed Assessment of the Human Terrain System*, 94-98.

[vi] *Human Terrain Teams*, 18-19.

[vii] *Human Terrain Teams*, 107-168.

[viii] *Human Terrain Teams*, 185.

[ix] Michael T. Flynn, Matt Pottinger, Paul D. Batchelor, *Fixing Intel* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, January 2010).

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[x] Scott R. Mitchell, "Observations of a Strategic Corporal," *Military Review* (July-August 2012), 58-64.

[xi] Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 330. Porch incorrectly cites an early draft of the NDU research to substantiate this assertion, which is an unfortunate mischaracterization of our findings.

[xii] Tom Vanden Brook, "System Failure: Anthropologists on the Battlefield," *USA Today*, August 11, 2013.

[xiii] Tom Vanden Brook, "Army Plows Ahead with Troubled War-Zone Program," *USA Today*, February 28, 2013.

[xiv] Lieutenant General George Flynn, *A Decade of War: Enduring Lessons from the Past Decade of Operations* (Suffolk, VA: Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 15, 2012).

[xv] This suggestion does not form a part of *Human Terrain Teams*. It is the personal view of this author.

About the author:

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