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Personal Perspective on the Human Terrain Systems Program
Delivered at the AAA's Annual Conference
November 29, 2007

I asked to address you tonight mostly because, having dealt with HTS first hand for the past seven months, I can't seem to reconcile the reality of the HTS program with the fact that a crowded roomful of academics is taking the time to heatedly debate it. Possessing the benefit of insider experience in the program, both my own and that of my fiancée currently in Baghdad, I have to be honest and tell you that I fear many of your concerns to be either exaggerated or misplaced. HTS in its current apparition is not capable of many of the things you are worried about; simultaneously, its current failings raise a number of issues that should arguably concern you even more.

Having spent four months with the Army, I can't stress to you the tremendous need for both social science and academic rigor in the military. More particularly – and this remains one of my bigger criticisms of the HTS effort in Iraq – the Army is in need of regional experts, who possess a knowledge of the history, culture and languages of both Iraq and Afghanistan. Time and again during my four months in Kansas, I was amazed that what in my graduate-student head seemed like common sense was nowhere near common sense for the military. It is this civilian and academic “common sense” – namely the ability to think outside the military box of “I take orders, and I do what my chain of command tells me, and nothing else concerns me” – that is so desperately needed in the Army. This ability to be creative and function without official approval is the greatest asset that a program such as HTS has to offer the military. Yet even HTS, despite its millions of dollars of funding, is proving incapable of delivering those much needed skills to the military in Iraq. HTS has proven unable to deliver because of its own internal tensions, and due to a lack of professionalism, organization, and general competence on the part of its staff, contractors and administrators.

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”. As such, the program has made numerous regrettable decisions regarding both its civilian and military personnel. HTS currently has 18 individuals serving down range – 8 in uniform and 10 civilians in Iraq, working as social scientists, linguists and analysts. The 10 civilians include:

- 3 PhDs in Anthropology, none of whom have prior regional knowledge
- 1 civilian with “Arabic proficiency” and an MA in something IR-related, currently serving as a Social Scientist
- 2 native Arabs working as analysts, one of which has relatively poor English, and neither of which seems to have prior work experience as a linguist or analyst
- and 2 prior-service individuals working as team leaders, both of which seem to have served in the Middle East, but neither of which has studied the Middle East

The true assets to the program among the civilians in Iraq include two individuals:

- 1 PhD in Sociology, who is an Arabic-speaking Middle East specialist with prior advisory experience in Iraq and
- 1 prior-service analyst with an extensive knowledge of Iraq and proficiency in Arabic

The pickings are just as slim on the military side.

As evidenced by the above smattering of skills, the present reality of HTS is neither glorious nor mighty nor pretty. HTS has repeatedly erred in hiring the wrong people and in not firing them once their level of incompetence or inappropriateness becomes apparent. HTS' equally unprofessional and incompetent administrative and support staff have ensured that the few high-quality personnel on the program are so poorly treated that they will sooner or later leave out of frustration. HTS' promoters have tried to sell this program as something to help the military fight wars more effectively, as if the military can turn anthropology into useable intelligence. As a result, you and most of your colleagues have been understandably hesitant to participate and have become critical of the very idea of HTS. This is unfortunate, since HTS' true interest lies in helping the military engage with locals, build relationships with them, and understand their culture well enough to help rebuild everything that has been physically and socially destroyed.

By driving away some of its most qualified participants, HTS has risked discrediting the notion that academics and specialists might have useful knowledge to impart. When this body released its resolution on HTS last month, it concluded that "anthropology can and in fact is obliged to help improve U.S. government policies through the widest possible circulation of anthropological understanding in the public sphere". Whether or not AAA has sanctioned it, HTS is claiming to do just that to the audience that spends more time representing America abroad than any diplomat or businessman. That they do so with sub-par personnel claiming expertise they don't possess will end up frustrating any other attempts you may make to encourage better informed policy decisions.

If AAA nonetheless remains concerned with the military's use or misuse of anthropologists and other social scientists, the best that you can do is to ignore them. Fighting programs such as HTS so publicly gives them far more credibility than they deserve. Please don't mistake effective PR for a viable program – HTS's inept management and execution at every level will ensure its rapid demise unless people become so strongly mobilized in defending it that they end up allowing it to hobble along. I have met and been recruited by a number of the contractors responsible for staffing HTS, and believe me when I tell you that they have no idea what they're trying to do and how to begin trying to do it. In over a year, they have produced at most six PhDs, one of which was personally recruited by myself and another of which has a PhD in International Relations. Their efforts are primarily restricted to web sites such as Monster and IntelligenceCareers.com, neither of which is frequented regularly by either your graduate students or your colleagues. In engaging individuals such as Col Steve Fondacaro and Dr. Montgomery McFate, you are putting HTS on the map, whether or not it is your intent to do so. I would venture to guess that if all of you collectively walk away from this debate, and if the media subsequently stops following it, HTS will get washed by the wayside sooner rather than later.

As someone who, despite HTS' shortcomings, firmly believes that the military stands to gain something from outside expertise and civilian involvement, I ask you to consider the following. If AAA is concerned with the welfare of the civilian populations in question, please consider whether these populations are better served by anthropologists primarily concerned with maintaining their ethical purity or by anthropologists teaching the military to engage populations more effectively. Your collective ethical concerns would be relevant if the military were only "fighting the enemy" and nothing more. In a situation where the military has been ordered to create governments, restore public services, rebuild economies and foster social ties within stratified societies, anthropologists should ask themselves if they want to leave such complex tasks in the hands of people who almost universally have little training and no pre-existing interest in either these tasks or the population.

The military has so far to go in understanding the local population that it is incapable of either formulating or addressing questions advanced enough to be relevant to the concerns AAA has raised. AAA's concerns and questions are graduate level questions, when the military is, at best, still stuck in a high-school level class on world civilizations. By raising the series of questions that you have collectively raised, AAA has inadvertently given the bungling and bureaucratic military far more credit than it deserves. The Army couldn't use anthropologists that way even if it tried.