

Counter Insurgency and the Human Terrain Col. Mike Williams USMC (Ret)

The oldest, but most oft forgotten maxim of counterinsurgency is the necessity of separating the population from the insurgents, winning the “hearts and minds.” A cursory survey of the United States’ counterinsurgency efforts since the Spanish/American War will reveal a lingering neglect of this fundamental principle. Why this is true is open to speculation and argument and would be an interesting topic for further discourse. There is, however, an initiative that, if properly pursued has the potential to change this c paradigm. This is the Human Terrain System.

The military’s new counterinsurgency doctrine, FM 3-24, succinctly states "The civilian population is the center of gravity--the deciding factor in the struggle. Therefore civilians must be separated from insurgents to insulate them from insurgent pressure and to deny the insurgent 'fish' the cover of the civilian 'sea.' {US Army US 2007:PGxxv} In order to separate the insurgents from the populace one *must* understand the encompassing culture. Again, FM 3-24 correctly states:

Cultural knowledge is essential to waging a successful counterinsurgency. American ideas of what is 'normal' or 'rational' are not universal. To the contrary, members of other societies often have different notions of rationality, appropriate behavior, level of religious devotion, and norms concerning gender. Thus, what might appear abnormal or strange to an external observer may appear as self-evidently normal to a group member. For this reason, counterinsurgents--especially commanders, planners, and small-unit leaders--should strive to avoid imposing their ideals of normalcy on a foreign cultural problem. {US Army US 2007:PG27}

That is all well and good, but how do we do this? How do we, as Americans who generally have a pathologic inability to view the world from other than our own frame of reference step out of that frame and into that of the host nation? The answer to the broader context is complex. However, through the use of the US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC)-developed and managed Human Terrain System Teams we have begun to address the culture issue.

Human Terrain Teams (HTTs) are five-to-nine person teams deployed by the Human Terrain System* (HTS) 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 team is composed of individuals with social science and operational backgrounds that are deployed with tactical and operational military units to assist in bringing knowledge about the local population into a coherent analytical framework and build relationships with the local power-brokers in order to provide advice and opportunities to Commanders and staffs in the field. {Finney 2008:PG 8}

These teams reside with their supported units and go into the field, “outside the wire” with patrols to develop their in-depth knowledge base. They use “...classic anthropological and sociological methods such as semi-structured and open-ended interviews, polling and surveys...and participant observation. Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are used, based on the research required.” {Finney 2008:PG 9} This information is then translated from “science-speak” to “military-speech” creating an “...analytic cultural framework for operational planning, decision making and assessment.” {Finney 2008:PG 9}

Human Terrain Teams have the following key tasks:

Conduct a Cultural Preparation of the Environment (CPE). This continuous process is similar to the traditional Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB) but instead of focusing on threats, the CPE is focused on the socio-cultural information of the area of operations. From this CPE, fusing it with the Commander's Priority Information Requirements as well as HTT-identified cultural knowledge gaps in the unit's campaign plan, the team creates a research plan. This plan will address those knowledge requirements and help the coordinate their cultural research activities across the unit staff and maneuver units.

Integrate Human Terrain information into the unit planning process. Once the team has developed a research plan they formulate a collection plan that will meet the information requirements identified during the research plan development. This task supports the unit's mission analysis, proposing non-lethal courses of action, identifying second and third order effects of possible courses of action, and taking part in war-gaming from the population perspective.

Provide support for current operations. The Human Terrain Team takes part in operations by both monitoring events and on the ground assessments which then provide the Commander and staff with cultural decision/adjustment points and the outcomes of possible responses.

These quick adjustments and mitigating strategies could be the key to swaying the population away from local threats.

Evaluate the human terrain effects of the area of operations. During continuous full-spectrum operation the HTT is continually assessing what effect our operations, as well as threat operations. Every effect we try to attain against our threats, and every effort they in turn take against us, affects the local population. The HTT's job is to not only assess what effect is occurring, but also to predict the second and third order effects of future operations.

Socio-cultural training. This is effective on the Brigade Combat Team (BCT)/Division staff, but is most effective at battalion-level and below, since they have primary responsibility for the operational area and have the most contact with the local population.

Bottom line: the Human Terrain Team provides information as to why the local population is doing what it is doing therefore allowing a commander non-lethal alternatives upon which to base action. But don't we already have this capability already available in our Civil Affairs and PSYOPS units? Yes we do, however they have a different focus.

Intelligence, Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs all have a piece of the "Human Terrain" pie. What distinguishes them from the Human Terrain Systems approach is HTS's use of social scientist-derived data. Intel, PSYOPS and CA all have a military point of origin therefore they generally follow the line of "military-think." (We can argue this point, especially with the heavy reliance on National Guard and Reserve personnel; this author, however, argues that even though the NG and Reserve components do bring a different perspective to the fight, they still have a military frame of reference.) Civilian social scientists, however, do not necessarily follow along the same thought tracks. Visualize a weave pattern. Let's say the military lines of thought constitute the vertical part of the weave. There are seams in these lines of parallel thinking. The civilian lines, then, come in horizontally at a ninety-degree angle, to the vertical lines of military think and are woven into these seams to close them, thus giving the commander a more complete picture of his/her area of operation/environment.

Human Terrain Teams are being used effectively in both Iraq and Afghanistan. After-action reports from the field have been positive. Commanders have attributed significant reductions in kinetic activity with a resulting drop in both civilian and military casualties to the increased awareness and understanding provided by these teams. The efficacy of this concept is highlighted by the rapid development of other home-grown Human Terrain Systems-hybrid programs. Indeed, the Human Terrain Team and Human Terrain Analysis Team seem to be the flavor of the month.

The Human Terrain System developed and being managed by TRADOC is still in its infancy and is experiencing considerable growing pains. Whether it will survive as its own entity remains to be seen (a further discussion of this will be the topic for another time). However, the idea that we must know and understand the human terrain upon and within which a counterinsurgency campaign is being waged is the key to success. Not considering it is a guarantee of disaster.

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