CSBA
Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

ANALYSIS

The Military and the Academy: Overcoming the Divide

May 18, 2016 | *Foreign Affairs*

By: Thomas Mahnken

Related Expert: Thomas G. Mahnken

Christopher Sims' "Academics in Foxholes: The Life and Death of the Human Terrain System" contributes to the ongoing debate about the U.S. military's performance in Iraq and Afghanistan and, more specifically, the relationship between the U.S. government and the academy. As the authors point out, there is much that both scholars and practitioners can learn from the successes and failures of the Human Terrain System (HTS), which brought together civilian academics and military personnel. Even more broadly, however, the experience reveals much about the relationship between the U.S. armed forces (primarily the army) on the one hand and academic social scientists (primarily anthropologists and sociologists) on the other.

HTS was created in 2007 as a response to the U.S. military's need to better understand the cultural and ethnic geography of Iraq and Afghanistan. In part because of long-standing lack of institutional emphasis on cultural factors, U.S. forces had a poor understanding of the composition of Iraqi and Afghan society. At times they overlooked sources of support for insurgency; at other times they alienated potential allies. Addressing the shortcoming in the middle of a war inevitably came at a great expense and the process was less effective than diagnosing and remedying the problem in peacetime.

The effort to improve soldiers' social and cultural understanding was further hampered by the U.S. military's approach to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: even as the United States sought to fight a war "among the people"—that is, with and alongside them—it generally kept the local population at arm's length, a reflection of a military organizational culture built around avoiding casualties and penalizing risk-taking. But a failure to work with local populations made it all the more difficult to understand the dynamics that perpetuated the conflicts.

The attempt to solve this problem—HTS—came with its own difficulties. The program brought into Iraq and Afghanistan academic communities that held very different values from the military and were at best indifferent and at times hostile to cooperation with the U.S. government. The Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association went so far as to deem HTS "an unacceptable application of anthropological expertise."

HTS has received the most attention, but it was only one in a series of initiatives meant to improve the capability of the U.S. military to work with local forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Efforts that predated HTS included the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which consisted of military officers, diplomats, and development experts, who were meant to support reconstruction efforts first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq.

The U.S. armed forces also established various organizations to advise the Iraqi and Afghan armed forces from the tactical to the ministerial levels. In April 2008, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates inaugurated the Minerva Research Initiative, which established a program of grants to universities to encourage scholars to study topics—including jihadist ideology—where the Defense Department needed additional expertise. And in 2009, the Defense Department established the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) Hands Program, which was designed to create a cadre of experts with a deep understanding of Afghanistan and Pakistan, their languages, and their cultures.

The track record of these efforts is decidedly mixed. Although the military gave lip service to the need to advise local forces, too often officers viewed the mission as a burden that distracted from the "real" task of defeating insurgents. Frequently, they would assign advisory duties to Reserve and National Guard officers—a clear sign of the low importance that officers attached to the mission. The Af-Pak Hands Program was, like HTS, well intentioned, but it turned into a force-feeding of officers of a complex history after decades of malnourishment. The program was helpful in building expertise, but was yet another instance of making up for lost time. And the Minerva Initiative became captive of the Defense Department's own social scientists, who all too often reflected the worst instincts of their academic brethren. The program still exists, but it has fallen far short of its potential and is well on the way to irrelevance.

Personnel policies, in particular new rotational practices, played an important though underappreciated role as well. During the Vietnam War, social and cultural training for those selected to be advisers or to serve in the CORDS program, a 1967 initiative that brought together military and civilian personnel from the United States and South Vietnam and featured extensive language instruction and social and cultural training, was seen as a prerequisite to deployment. In Iraq, by contrast, such training generally counted against an individual's deployment, which gave the armed services every reason to keep linguistic, regional, and cultural orientation to a minimum.

The military needs to improve its ability to understand and work with foreign cultures. The United States will remain engaged in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations in the Middle East for the foreseeable future, and understanding the social and cultural contours of the region will continue to be important. Indeed, as attempts to beat back the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria and beyond show, this terrain may be more important than the region's political boundaries. Such skills will also be important in maintaining U.S. alliances and developing new relationships in Asia, Europe, Africa, and South America. Indeed, the Defense Department recently established the Asia-Pacific Hands Program in an effort to bolster the services' expertise in the region.

Much more can be done, though. First, the services should work to recruit more new immigrants and heritage foreign language speakers. The United States possesses a strong and nearly unique capacity to welcome immigrants and weave them into the fabric of its society within the span of a generation. The U.S. population includes citizens who were born in every country in the world and who speak every one of the world's languages. However, the U.S. government has not always performed as well as it could in enlisting such Americans into military service. There are barriers to doing so—some of these citizens fled their native countries due to military repression and have no interest in joining the armed services elsewhere. Others come from cultures where the military is a low-prestige profession. The Defense Department needs to think seriously and creatively about how to recruit more foreign-language speakers.

Second, the U.S. armed services should bolster social and cultural expertise by increasing the number of officers they commission who specialized in the humanities and social science. This runs counter to the current trend of emphasizing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics backgrounds. Although technological literacy is important, it must be balanced with other skills.

Third, although the Defense Department does an excellent job of teaching officers and enlisted members through its Defense Language Institute and other initiatives, it should consider mandating the study of foreign languages for midshipmen, cadets, and recipients of ROTC scholarships. Finally, the armed services should consider offering its members additional opportunities to study and work abroad.

The most valuable lesson from the experience of the HTS program is that it is difficult to quickly make up for deficiencies that accumulated over decades—especially during a time of war. Through efforts such as the Asia-Pacific Hands Program, the U.S. armed forces have an opportunity to improve their understanding of foreign societies and cultures before the next conflict. Time will tell whether they take it.