



The Pentagon's culture wars

What began several years ago as an attempt to recruit social scientists to help the military has sparked a broader debate about militarizing academia. **Sharon Weinberger** reports.

It is a story that repeats with grim monotony: US forces in Iraq detain a suspected insurgent after they find in his home what they think is jihadist literature and an illegal weapon. These detentions — often based on mistaken assumptions or poor intelligence — can easily escalate into major conflicts with the local community.

But in one recent case, researchers helped defuse a potential conflict. Analysts working for a 'human-terrain team' informed a US commander that the 'jihadist' literature discovered in the village of Banat al Hassan, about 30 kilometres northwest of Baghdad, was ordinary religious teaching material, and the weapon — a riflescope — was for a pellet gun that beekeepers in the area use for shooting birds. The suspect was promptly released, and his family ended up helping US forces by revealing the location of a large improvised explosive device.

This upbeat anecdote is "a story about how a little respect, culture and compassion can save human life", says Montgomery McFate,

an anthropologist at the Institute for Defense Analyses in Alexandria, Virginia, and senior adviser to the Pentagon's human-terrain programme. But it also underscores some of the complexities and controversies surrounding the Pentagon's quest for 'cultural knowledge'. What if, for example, the literature had indeed been jihadist literature? Would the human-terrain teams, which include civilian social scientists, then be helping the military to target insurgents?

Last year, the Pentagon provided almost \$60 million for the Human Terrain System, a Department of Defense programme that represents the latest incarnation of the military's long, troubled relationship with social science (see 'Lessons from the past', overleaf). It includes deployed teams that directly advise military commanders in the field, specialized software for cultural 'mapping' plus personnel based in the United States conducting research. According to official figures provided by the army, there are now sixteen five-person Human Terrain Teams (HTTs) deployed in Iraq

and five in Afghanistan, along with about 40 people in 'research reachback cells' in the United States. The teams are supposed to provide deployed military forces with "direct social-science support in the form of ethnographic and social research, cultural information research, and social data analysis".

But the effort is not without its problems; two social scientists have been killed in the field, one in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. And critics fear that this sort of work poses ethical problems, particularly if it's telling the military who is, or isn't, a potential enemy. Last November, the executive board of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) condemned the effort, saying it "creates conditions which are likely to place anthropologists in positions in which their work will be in violation of the AAA code of ethics", as well as endanger other anthropologists by bringing suspicion on their activities. The association is also proposing changes to its rules of ethics that would tighten restrictions on secret research.

Beyond the AAA, a number of researchers

in 2007 founded the Network of Concerned Anthropologists, which asks colleagues to sign a pledge committing them to “refrain from directly assisting the US military in combat, be it through torture, interrogation, or tactical advice”. Though there hasn’t been any known case of that happening with the HTTs, historical precedents exist. During the Second World War, for instance, anthropologists helped raise guerilla armies, passed information used to plan bombing raids and theorized about race-specific bioweapons.

Critics say the current work flies in the face of everything anthropology represents, from transparency of research to informed consent (for example, the social scientists on the HTTs do not submit their research to an institutional review board, as would be normally required for human research). “I don’t think there’s a place for embedded anthropologists with combat missions,” says Roberto Gonzalez, an anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley, who is working on a book about the Human Terrain System. “It runs completely counter to anthropology’s ethical framework, something that’s come about over a long, bitter period that goes back to the First World War.”

Militarizing anthropology?

McFate has emerged as the most public face of the Pentagon’s military anthropology work. She got her PhD in anthropology from Yale University, focusing on the British counter-insurgency in Northern Ireland, and by 2005 she had co-authored an article in a military journal outlining a plan for deploying social science advisers with troops (M. McFate and A. Jackson *Military Rev.* July/Aug, 18–21; 2005). For her, the issue is unabashedly about moving anthropology toward an applied discipline that can aid the military. “Why should anthropology be some leftist religion?” she asks. “I mean, it’s supposed to be a science; it’s not supposed to be a political platform, a substitute for the Peace Corps, or a cult.”

The Pentagon, however, has had a hard time recruiting and keeping qualified anthropologists. Of 35 social scientists based in Iraq and Afghanistan, only about half have PhDs, and only seven of those deployed are anthropologists. One social scientist hired to work on a HTT was identified during screening as a convicted criminal (and dismissed prior



“Why should anthropology be some leftist religion? I mean, it’s supposed to be a science.”
— Montgomery McFate

to deployment), another was found medically unfit, two were let go because of security clearance issues, and two were fired for performance issues. The company responsible for hiring the researchers is BAE Systems, a major Pentagon contractor, and some have criticized its focus on recruiting through intelligence and military-focused websites, as opposed to academic venues.

One of those fired was Zenia Helbig, a PhD candidate in religious studies, who says she was let go by BAE after a joking comment she made over drinks with colleagues about switching sides if the United States attacked Iran. Helbig, who travelled to Iran as a graduate student, had even met Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Now back at the University of Virginia, in

Charlottesville, to complete her degree, Helbig describes a programme in disarray, in which social scientists — few of whom have regional or linguistic expertise — sat around for weeks at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas, with little in the way of region-specific training.

Matt Tompkins, Helbig’s fiancé and another human-terrain participant, describes other problems. As a PhD student in political science with a military background, he was assigned as a team leader in Baghdad; but the social scientist on his team had no relevant field-research experience, he says, and their de facto translator was a Moroccan who barely spoke English. As for the military commander they were supposed to be supporting, Tompkins says, “I didn’t get the inclination that he was particularly interested in what we were doing.”

McFate disputes the recruitment problems, although she says some academics have told her they fear being blackballed professionally if they work for the programme. Other supporters note that experiences of different teams have varied widely. Adam Silverman, a political scientist who works on a HTT outside of Baghdad, says he believes such work is valuable. “The programme is new, so it isn’t perfect,” he says. “It has growing pains.”

Working from what he describes as a mix of “unstructured interviews, casual dis-

cussions with members of the population, academic sources and the Internet”, Silverman has provided advice on everything from local funeral rites to agriculture. Although he is now working on oral histories, he acknowledges that his field research has been difficult to conduct. “We don’t interview anyone per se — we do try to talk with anyone who will talk with us,” he says. “I’ve had conversations with fish farmers, brickmakers, government officials and tribal leaders.”

However, it is not clear whether academic social scientists are even the key feature in successful human-terrain teams. McFate’s story about a team defusing the situation in Banat al Hassan was confirmed by Major Philip Carlson, who led the team in question. But the recommendation to let the man go wasn’t from a social scientist; it came from Carlson and an Iraqi-American analyst. There wasn’t even a social scientist on that team at the time.

McFate says that “smart, competent, well-trained people on a team” can be successful, as in this case, but that social scientists are needed to achieve the programme’s broader goals. But few, if any, definitive numbers exist by which to measure the programme’s effectiveness. Earlier this year, Colonel Martin Schweitzer, a military officer working in Afghanistan, testified before Congress that HTTs helped to reduce the number of operations involving military force in his region by 60–70%. Sceptical of those numbers, David Price, an anthropologist at Saint Martin’s University in Lacey, Washington, filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to look at the report. Price says that what he got back was merely a correspondence stating the numbers; there was no

actual report. “When I got my FOIA reply I learned that there was no study out there substantiating any of this,” he says.

Even with the doubts surrounding the Human Terrain System, the Pentagon made another foray into the social sciences this April when Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced a broader military initiative. Called Project Minerva, it would fund work at universities that do research ranging from looking at Chinese military technology to Islamic radicalism.

Anthropologists critical of the Human Terrain System didn’t welcome Minerva either. In a 28 May letter to the White House’s Office of Management and Budget, the president of the AAA outlined a number of concerns,



“Anthropology will thrive more as a discipline if the funding is not directly from the national security state.”
— Hugh Gusterson

Lessons from the past

In the 1960s, as the United States faced an array of potential regional conflicts from southeast Asia to Latin America, its army began what seemed to be a modest project to examine the roots and causes of insurgency. Project Camelot, as it was called, would look at “the feasibility of developing a general social-systems model that would make it possible to predict and influence politically significant aspects of social change in the developing nations of the world”.

The seemingly innocuous project sparked a firestorm of criticism after researchers associated with

Camelot visited Chile, triggering media stories that the work was a prelude to US military involvement in the region. Camelot eventually became the most well known of the Vietnam-era social-science programmes, and has now become synonymous with much of the work from that time.

The Pentagon launched a number of similar social-science projects, setting off a pointed debate among anthropologists, who criticized the military for attempting to subvert social research for its own means and manipulate foreign cultures. Seymour Deitchman, a Pentagon

official who spearheaded many of the efforts, describes the rise, fall and backlash against these military social-science programmes in his 1976 book, *The Best-Laid Schemes: A Tale of Social Research and Bureaucracy*.

In one typical case in the late 1960s, a research group contacted an anthropologist about work it wanted to do for the Pentagon in the Congo. “The anthropologist immediately raised a storm,” says Deitchman, “writing to the American Anthropological Association and the press that an attempt was being made to enlist him in intelligence activities for the

suppression of Congo tribes in the conflict that was then in its final stages there.” In fact, the Pentagon had never agreed to fund the work.

Deitchman, who is now retired, sees many of the same frictions echoed in today’s efforts by the military to enlist social scientists. Although he does note that Congress and the secretary of defence support the modern studies — unlike in the Vietnam era — the underlying dynamics haven’t changed. “The ticking time bomb in government support of social science research is there,” he says, “just under the surface, waiting for the trigger.” **S.W.**

including the notion that having the Pentagon run such research creates a “potential conflict of interest”. Partly in response, the Pentagon forged a relationship with the National Science Foundation (NSF), which culminated earlier this year in the signing of a formal agreement. That, however, created new confusion, as many presumed that the foundation was cooperating on Minerva. Mark Weiss, director of the NSF’s behavioural and cognitive sciences division, insists that is not the case. “It is a Memorandum of Understanding that would allow for a number of different interactions that . . . would help enhance the flow of information from the social and behavioural sciences to the Department of Defense,” he says.

Shopping for knowledge

One question concerns who would oversee the peer-review process for selecting grantees: the defence department or the NSF. Thomas Mahnken, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for policy planning, says that Minerva is budgeted for approximately \$100 million over five years, and that half that money would go through the NSF. The other half would go through the Pentagon, which he insists also has a well-tested peer-review process. “The two paths are complementary,” says Mahnken. “NSF certainly gives us access to a different pool of scholars.”

Critics of the programme, particularly anthropologists, point to a number of pitfalls associated with Minerva. One social scientist who works with the military warns of ‘ScamTechs’ — firms that are adept at getting defence department funding, regardless of the subject. And Hugh Gusterson, an anthropologist at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, notes that a government contractor



Soldiers of social science? US military meet tribal leaders in Ramadi to discuss Iraq’s reconstruction.

recently contacted several colleagues, “shopping” for an anthropologist so that they could bid on Minerva, which requires university participation.

Another concern is that the Pentagon’s largesse could ultimately shift anthropologists away from their traditional role as advocates for the people and cultures they study. “Anthropologists ought to be involved [in the national security debate], but my fear is what makes anthropology appealing will be undercut and deformed if anthropologists are directly

answerable to the Pentagon in that conversation,” Gusterson says. “Anthropology will thrive more as a discipline if the funding is not directly from the national security state.”

Both the Pentagon and the NSF downplay any concerns that the defence department could flood the field with military funding. Weiss notes that NSF’s total annual budget for the behavioural and cognitive division is already about \$220 million. The Pentagon money, he says, is “not going to put us into a stratospheric level of funding”.

Meanwhile, researchers in other countries are grappling with some of the same issues. Two years ago, Britain’s Economic and Social Research Council was criticized for circumventing normal open academic competition by funding counterterrorism studies. Jeremy Keenan, a UK-based anthropologist and North Africa expert, says that the UK Foreign Office gave itself a respectable academic veneer by rerouting money quietly through the council. By contrast, “if one looks at the US military programme, it’s been very overt,” he says.

Other militaries have not yet developed an exact equivalent to the Human Terrain System, but they do have, on a smaller scale, social scientists providing advice to armed forces — they work in psychological operations units and provide training and education. And McFate says that some NATO allies have also expressed interest in setting up human-terrain-like programmes.

Whether other countries will be engulfed in the same controversy remains to be seen. McFate, for her part, puts the criticism down to a small but vocal group. “It’s just a very small segment of the anthropology community,” she says of the critics. “We’re not going to draft them.” ■
Sharon Weinberger is a freelance writer.