

Human Terrain System is Dead, Long Live ... What?
Building and Sustaining
Military Cultural Competence
in the Aftermath of the Human
Terrain System

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Response to Maj. Ben Connable's "Human Terrain System is Dead, Long Live ... What"

(Military Review, January-February 2018)

As a veteran of both the Human Terrain System (Forward Operating Base Salerno, AF 2008) and the Army's now also defunct Culture and Foreign Language Program (Maneuver Center of Excellence, Fort Benning 2010–12), I was glad to see Dr. Connable's conclusions concerning the need for organic cultural competence within the Army.

Current serving officers and enlisted men have a wealth of cultural knowledge, but the Army lacks a coherent structure and strategy to build cultural competence in new soldiers and a structure in which culturally competent operators can enhance our efforts around the world.

Culture is not only useful at the asymmetric warfare level and the conventional level but throughout the range of military operations and at the national strategic level also. To quote the demigod Clausewitz,

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and Commander have to make is to establish ... the kind of war on which they are embarking: neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.

Without a serious holistic understanding of a particular situation including cultural considerations, decision-makers will commit disastrous errors on a strategic

scale, just as a squad leader can make everyone's situation worse by insulting indigenous peoples. I would suggest that had we understood the cultural dynamics between the Shia and Sunni, we would never have invaded Iraq, and Iran would never have been as influential as it is today.

Fine, but what do we do now? We should not try to rebuild another program "in flight" or managed by a private company like BAE. The Army War College, along with a small cadre of experts, should be tasked with conducting a series of workshops starting with Maj. Connable's dyads, with the goal of creating an organic Army Cultural Team, probably with a cadre of military and civilian experts and housed in Army Special Operations. This series of workshops might be modeled on the "Human Elements of Military Operations" workshop held in January 2015 at the War College. These workshops would be limited to fifteen participants including a representative of the Marine Corps. This effort will need to have a sponsor at the highest levels of the Army.

Ultimately, a model for a new socio-cultural-political-intelligence entity that can truly influence the military decision-making process at all levels could emerge, and the Army's culture gap problem be mitigated. ■

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