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## Counterinsurgency as a Cultural System

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Beginning in 2008, when news of the development of the Human Terrain Systems (HTS) program first came to public attention, a number of anthropologists began a systematic campaign to dismantle the program or at least ensure that it would never receive the imprimatur of legitimacy from professional organizations.<sup>1</sup> Since the premise of HTS was that it would bring the insights of academic anthropology to the practice of military counterinsurgency, what might normally have constituted an irrelevant gesture (like the shy 9<sup>th</sup> grader deciding that she simply would not go to the prom with the football captain, even if he asked) had some clout, in that many anthropology graduate students and unemployed PhDs who might otherwise have considered joining the program chose not to join for fear of being black listed and never landing a job in academia.

My own immediate response on hearing of the program was more ambivalent than that of most anthropologists, or at least than that of the ones who spoke out on the topic. As someone who has been studying Afghanistan for three decades, I was not ready to condemn the program out-of-hand. I am friends with many Afghans who would have to flee from their country – once again – if the Taliban came back to power, and I also knew that the US-led military efforts in that country were not only failing to dislodge the Taliban, but were also alienating the civilian population whose support was critical if the Afghan government was to consolidate its authority. Despite vastly superior training, leadership, and weaponry, the American military was gradually losing its grip, and one of the weaknesses of American efforts has been their lack of knowledge of the social context in which they were fighting. The social organization of tribal and non-tribal Afghans, the role of Islam, gender segregation, the protocols of respect and hospitality – these were all matters of central importance to Afghans, and matters of which American soldiers have been largely ignorant.

While recognizing the uncomfortable ethical dilemmas that working with the military would inevitably produce, I have also felt a strong desire both to see the Taliban defeated and to have anthropologists make a difference. On the sidelines of public debates since the days when Margaret Mead spoke out on matters sexual, generational, and domestic, anthropology is – or should be – more relevant than ever, and this was especially true after the attacks of September 11 threatened to make Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” rhetoric a reality by turning the isolated actions of a small number of political extremists into the first salvo of a war of all Muslims against all Christians and Jews. In this context, anthropologists had the opportunity to

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Roberto González, *American Counterinsurgency: Human Science and the Human Terrain* (Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press) and “Embedded: Information Warfare and the ‘Human Terrain’” In *The Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual*. Network of Concerned Anthropologists, eds. Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press.. See also, AAA Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the US Security and Intelligence Communities (CEAUSSIC), “Final Report on The Army’s Human Terrain System Proof of Concept Program,” submitted to the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association, October 14, 2009.

modify the terms of engagement, if they themselves were prepared to leave the soundproof room in which they normally conducted their disciplinary debates and engage the wider world of public affairs, including the world of the military.<sup>2</sup>

After early setbacks in Iraq and the failure to close the deal in Afghanistan, military strategists began to consider alternatives to the conventional ‘kill-the-enemy-first’ tactics they were employing to target terrorists. Through the efforts of General Petraeus and others, “kinetic” counter-terrorism had ceded pride of place to ‘secure-the-population first’ counterinsurgency (COIN): effective COIN depended on protecting local populations and gaining their support; this, in turn, required that the military be sufficiently knowledgeable about local cultural concerns and values and attentive to the needs of the people in the areas where they were operating. The category of people who specialize in acquiring this knowledge, more than any other, is that of anthropologist, and this seemed to be an area where anthropologists could not only assist the military avoid situations where force was required, but – just possibly – provide crucial assistance in changing the way the military conceived of its mission and how they went about doing their job.

HTS might or might not be the venue for such an anthropological intervention and the ideal of anthropologists playing a role in redefining the military might be little more than a self-deluding fantasy, but the critics of the program, from the outset, were determined that the plan would never even receive a hearing. Most disappointing was that those who quickly condemned the Human Terrain System program did so on the basis of little or no empirical evidence. The program had no more than been announced than it was being attacked, and for that reason, I determined to do my own investigation of the program, an investigation that took me to Ft. Leavenworth, Washington, DC, and Quantico, Virginia to observe the HTS training program and interview HTS veterans and military officers who had worked with Human Terrain Teams (HTTs) in the field or who were involved in implementing COIN in other ways.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, while I was not permitted to accompany an HTT in the field, as I had originally been promised, the training I observed, the interviews I conducted, and my background as an anthropologist who has conducted extensive ethnographic research in Afghanistan and Pakistan allow me to draw some tentative conclusions, or at least to posit a set of concerns, about HTS and some of the factors that might influence the potential effectiveness of the program and of COIN more generally.<sup>4</sup>

These concerns are separate and distinct from the criticisms of the program made to date and stem less from HTS itself and more from the military culture in which the program is embedded. While my observations of the Ft. Leavenworth training program and the information I gathered about recruitment, pay, administrative oversight and a host of other issues have ultimately made me dubious about the success of the HTS program to date, I also recognize that

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<sup>2</sup> In addressing anthropology’s engagement with “the world of the military,” I recognize that the military is not a monolith, that there are differences among the branches and other cleavages that must be taken into account in considering an issue like counterinsurgency. For the purposes of this essay, however, I make use of such short-hand formulations as “military culture,” while keeping in mind that they are as limited and limiting as the term, “Afghan culture.”

<sup>3</sup> Among those interviewed were anthropologists employed by different branches of the military who are charged with instituting and expanding the role of culture in the training curricula of military personnel.

<sup>4</sup> After teaching English in Afghanistan from 1975 to 1977, I conducted PhD research on Afghan refugees and political parties in Peshawar, Pakistan for from 1982 through 1986. I carried out additional research on Afghan refugees in the U.S. in the early 1990s and have made return trips to Afghanistan in 1995, 2003, and 2004.

at least some of the problems I witnessed and heard about are attributable to the speed with which HTS was pushed into service and are, at least in theory, problems that can be corrected, given proper administrative attention and oversight. The issues I identify in this paper, however, appear to me to be less fixable, because they derive from features of military culture itself. At the end of my research, the question I asked myself is *not* whether anthropology could or should accommodate itself to the military; it is whether the military could or should accommodate itself to anthropology.

### ***The Human Terrain***

In August, 2009, roughly a year before “the Runaway General,” Stanley McChrystal, was forced from his job as head of the coalition force in Afghanistan for indiscreet comments made to a reporter for *Rolling Stone* magazine, he submitted a report to Secretary of Defense Gates detailing what he took to be the major challenges to winning the war in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> One of the central foci of McChrystal’s report is the ineffectiveness of the military itself – in his words, “our conventional warfare culture is part of the problem” and success will therefore require changing “the operational culture to connect with people.” The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) established under US leadership to direct the counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign in Afghanistan was, in McChrystal’s words, “a conventional force that is poorly configured for COIN.”<sup>6</sup>

McChrystal pointed to two particular problems that inhibit the Coalition’s effectiveness. First, ISAF demonstrates an excessive focus on “kinetic targeting and a failure to bring together what is known about the political and social realm” of the social environment within which they are operating (i.e., they target the wrong people because of faulty intelligence); and, second, ISAF is so “preoccupied with protection of our forces” that it “distances us – physically and psychologically – from the people we seek to protect.” The result of the excessive focus on kinetic operations was that it risked “strategic defeat” for the sake of “tactical wins that cause civilian casualties or unnecessary collateral damage.” The result of excessive concern for force protection was that it risked alienating the Afghan population by demonstrating “a perceived lack of respect for Afghan culture.”

In these statements, McChrystal was loyally applying to the Afghan war the lessons of COIN that General Petraeus and his team had famously encoded in the Joint Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM 3-24). The manual, which has gained fame far beyond military circles, was put together while Petraeus was serving as the commander of the Combined Arms Center in Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. This is also where the HTS training center was established, though in a location that is half-on and half-off the base itself, as befits its quasi-military, quasi-civilian status. Founded in 2007, the HTS program came along at precisely the time when the military was looking for programs that could put COIN doctrine into practice. Perhaps acknowledging the unlikelihood of ISAF personnel transforming themselves into amateur anthropologists, the Army was searching for ways to bring to the military the kind of cultural knowledge they would need to carry out COIN, and the Human Terrain Systems program was conceived precisely for this

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Hastings, The Runaway General, *The Rolling Stone* 1108-1109, July 8-22, 2010. General Stanley McChrystal, Commander’s Initial Assessment (30 August 2009), a report submitted to the Secretary of Defense. (McChrystal Report).

<sup>6</sup> McChrystal Report, p. 1-2.

purpose.<sup>7</sup> The kernel of the HTS program is the development of five-person support teams within which to embed social scientists with extensive ethnographic experience – ideally, in Afghanistan or similar countries – to enable them to conduct socio-cultural research among civilian populations in contested areas. This research, augmented by information supplied by “Reachback Cells” located in the U.S., would be made available to unit commanders in the field to give them a better sense of the social environment – or human terrain – in which they were operating.

According to HTS guidelines, HTT's would not be involved in intelligence research, and the information and insights they came up with would not be employed to target potential enemies. To the contrary, social scientists employed by HTS would consciously and conscientiously eschew intelligence assignments and objectives and, to the extent possible, would focus on the situation, value and needs of the civilian population rather than that of the military under whose command they would operate. The information they would collect would thus help the military accomplish its goals not directly by eliminating its enemies, but indirectly by improving communications, relations, and understanding between the military command and local villagers. In the process they would improve the reputation of the military, make it easier for military personnel to become constructively involved in community affairs, increase the likelihood of villagers cooperating with the military and providing intelligence on their own to help push insurgents out of their villages, and indirectly at least help to reduce civilian casualties resulting from poor understanding of the social environment within which they were operating.

The degree to which research guidelines have, in fact, been followed is an important matter, but it is beyond the scope and competency of this article. What I want to consider is something more basic, namely whether – even if the guidelines are followed – the objectives of the HTS are realizable and what it would mean for HTS or any other military program to “do anthropology.” More specifically, I consider whether or not anthropologists working with combat units and/or military personnel trained to conduct anthropological research are likely to produce the kind of cultural insights that COIN calls for. While military personnel already conduct what is known as “windshield ethnography,” which is to say, quick and dirty observations of local conditions, the larger question is how the military will uncover deeper levels of culture that would help reduce the distance between U.S. military personnel and locals (Afghans and Iraqis now, other peoples later) and offset native perceptions of the United States as an occupying power, which ultimately is a central goal of COIN doctrine.

In conducting research on HTS, much of my time was spent with members of the first HTT to operate in Afghanistan, as well as with military officers who worked in conjunction with this team. While it might be thought unfair to judge HTS based on the experiences of the first team sent out to undertake operations under the program, AF1, as it is known, gained the reputation for being a successful HTT, in large part because Col. Martin Schweitzer, the commander to whom AF1 reported, became a fierce advocate for the program and testified in congressional hearings and in press interviews on the role his HTT played in reducing kinetic operations in his area of operations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> While the Marines have utilized a number of HTT's, they are also attempting to develop the notion of cultural competency as something that can be developed within the service and not handed over to civilian contractors.

<sup>8</sup> One major difference was that the personnel of AF1 included, as the social scientist, a female West Point graduate with anthropological training who had served with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne and, as Team Leader, a former Special Forces officer who had experience both as a battalion commander and a rancher, an especially valuable area of expertise

While the interviews I conducted brought out some of AF1's successes, they also confirmed what is contained in the McChrystal Report as to the general failure of ISAF personnel in showing respect for local cultures and languages and the difficulty in establishing relationships of trust with Afghans. Beyond that, my research uncovers points of conflict related less to the behavior of military personnel as individuals and more to the military culture of which they are a part. Which is to say that, irrespective of the intention of individuals to change their mode of interaction, based on the knowledge that their behavior might be adversely affecting the performance of their duties, the ability of those individuals to sufficiently change their behavior to positively alter their interactions with locals might be limited. In this sense, the notion that COIN doctrine can be instituted by decree, without fundamental changes in the institutional culture of the military itself seems naïve or perhaps reflective of patterns so characteristic of the military way of doing things ('top-down,' 'by the book,' etc.) that they are difficult for military personnel themselves to recognize as potential problems or even to perceive. In the sections that follow, I consider some points of conflict between the research model proposed by anthropology that would be crucial to implement if COIN is to be successful and the reality of conducting anthropological research with military units in contemporary Afghanistan.

### ***Fieldwork "Down Range"***

While the classic image of anthropological fieldwork is of the lone (white skinned) figure, notebook in hand, calmly observing a mass of (dark skinned) natives performing timeless and bizarre rites, anthropologists in recent years have become more diverse in background and have carried out their research projects in a variety of non-traditional settings, from financial service firms to homeless shelters.<sup>9</sup> A number of anthropologists have also conducted research in war zones, and in some cases have produced ethnographic studies of considerable originality and importance.<sup>10</sup> In my own case, I had the opportunity to conduct research among mujahidin in training and refugee camps and party offices over a four-year period in the mid-1980s. Most of that time, I was far from the fighting, if constantly surrounded by Kalashnikovs, but in May 1984, I joined a group of mujahidin belonging to the Hizb- Islami party of Yunus Khaless who were traveling from Pakistan to their home area south of Khost for the start of that year's fighting season.<sup>11</sup> Once over the border, we moved freely on the roads, either walking or

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and point of connection in rural Afghanistan. In the opinion of one anthropologist who served with HTS in Khost at a later point, the single most effective social scientist to date has been Michael Bhatia who unfortunately was killed in an IED blast in May 2008. Subsequent teams, with a few exceptions, have not been staffed by experienced social scientists.

<sup>9</sup> Two recent examples of anthropology in unconventional settings are Karen Ho, *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*, Duke University Press (2009) and Philippe Bourgois, *Righteous Dopefiend*. University of California Press, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> See Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C.G.M. Robbins (eds), *Fieldwork under Fire*. University of California Press (1995) for examples of fieldwork in war zones. Among the ethnographies that have been produced, two worth noting are Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*. University of Chicago Press (1991) and C. Nordstrom, *Shadows of War: Violence, Power and International Profiteering in the Twentieth-First Century*. University of California Press (2004).

<sup>11</sup> The night before we crossed the border, I spent the night at the home of Jalaluddin Haqqani in Miram Shah in North Waziristan, and among the little boys playing in the guesthouse where I slept was one named Sirajuddin, who is now the amir of the so-called Haqqani Network, with a \$5 million bounty on his head, courtesy of the United States government.

catching rides with passing lorries, and sometimes passing within a few hundred meters of Soviet bases.

For all the apparent danger of traveling close to Soviet bases in an active war zone, what I was doing seemed to me a lot like the fieldwork I had read about as a graduate student and involved the usual routine of observing, asking questions, walking around, observing, asking more questions, waiting for something to happen, so I could ask about it, and writing it all down in a notebook. In a famous article, Clifford Geertz notes that the Balinese village in which he and his wife were living became “a completely different world for us” after he and his wife had joined a gaggle of their neighbors in fleeing from machine gun-wielding police who had arrived out of the blue to break up an illegal cockfight, and something of the same thing happened to me after the group I was traveling with stumbled onto a ridge near a mujahidin base at the precise moment that a Soviet MiGs began a strafing run.<sup>12</sup> After the danger had passed, and the initial knock-kneed fear had given way to a giddy recounting of what had happened, I felt the sense of fellow feeling that one hopes to experience when doing fieldwork, and later that day and in the days that followed, every conversation was prefaced with an enthusiastic retelling of “the MiG story,” and the mujahidin I met were thereafter always more friendly and happier to talk with me than they had been before.

Fieldwork is always and inevitably an exercise in hope over experience, the hope being that you can pass through the barrier of culture and language to feel and understand what the world looks like for someone from some place else, which experience tells you rarely if ever happens. What the anthropologist tries to do is wait for those moments when preparedness and circumstances align sufficiently to allow him a momentary glimpse of another person’s reality. For those attached to HTTs, the job of conducting fieldwork among the Afghan people and putting intellectual curiosity into practice has proved exceedingly difficult, less because of the hostility of Afghans than the restrictions placed on them by their association with military units whose goals and methods, not to mention worldview and ethos, are radically different than those of anthropology.

### ***“Outside the Wire”***

The first HTT assigned to Afghanistan, designated AF1, discovered that their biggest hurdle was simply getting out of the Forward Operating Base (FOB) in Khost where they were assigned (which, coincidentally, was only a few miles from where I had had my close encounter with a Soviet MiG). To fulfill their assignment, HTTs, first of all, have to “get outside the wire,” and getting outside the wire required getting seats on a humvee, which presented them with a Catch-22. The command did not allow many trips off the base, and those they did allow had to be somehow connected to the accomplishment of the then current mission plan. AF1 had yet to prove that it could contribute to any of the goals established by the command.

The solution to the problem of getting outside the wire came to them – literally – for while they were not allowed to go outside the wire to meet locals, locals regularly appeared at the FOB gate. Some were looking for jobs, but others wanted audiences with the commander for various reasons. Soldiers manning the gates invariably treated these locals as an undifferentiated mass of likely terrorists who were, at best, a nuisance. Since they were the only Afghans, other

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<sup>12</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight.” In C. Geertz, *The Interpretations of Cultures*. Basic Books (1973). P. 416.

than translators, that AF1 members could interact with, the social scientist on the team availed herself of the opportunity to interview some of the people who were at the gate and discovered that one of those with whom she was speaking was the director of religious affairs for Khost. Information provided by this individual about conditions in the community demonstrated to the commander that the HTT might be able to provide useful information, and he thereafter allocated the resources they needed to conduct research outside the base.<sup>13</sup> This provided them the opportunity at least to interact with local people outside the confines of the FOB, but the extent to which they were allowed free movement was still heavily restricted, and for the most part their research activities continued within the secured perimeter of army-run medical clinics and similar venues.

The success of anthropological research depends on establishing trust with the people who are the object of that research, a task that is difficult in any situation but especially so in Afghanistan. On the face of it, there is actually little reason for the people with whom anthropologists deal to tell them anything. The anthropologist after all is trying to elicit information from them to be used for purposes they do not fully understand and that the anthropologist himself might not be fully cognizant of at the time he is doing the research. For the informant, there is little to gain and a great deal more to lose. The remarkable thing is that people trust anthropologists at all, and in Afghanistan, they do so to the extent that the anthropologist in question manages to comport himself in a way that is respectful of the people with whom he is dealing.

The greatest aid that an anthropologist working in Afghanistan has in establishing a relationship that can develop into trust is the institution of hospitality (*melmastia*). People unfamiliar with Afghanistan often refer to it as a tenet of *pushtunwali* – the so-called “Code of the Pushtun,” but framing it in these codified terms fundamentally distorts the dynamics of the institution and how and why it functions in Afghan society. Pushtunwali is not Emily Post or Ms. Manners for Pushtuns, and the injunction to provide hospitality is not something Pushtuns profess and adhere to out of some abstract devotion to politeness or an altruistic commitment to offering kindness to strangers. Above all else, the provision of hospitality is a way of managing social relations in an uncertain environment that is largely devoid of local government institutions (most importantly, police) and – at the village level at least – institutions such as restaurants and hotels which can accommodate the potentially disruptive presence of outsiders in a small, face-to-face community setting. The place where hospitality is traditionally offered is the guesthouse (*hujra* or *memankhana*), which is the place where ‘the stranger’ becomes ‘the guest,’ and this transition brings with it opportunities and obligations on the part of both host and guest. Significantly, in becoming a guest, actual differences of wealth and power are re-imagined in relation to the immediate context of the guesthouse in which the host nominally controls the relationship (even if that control is offset by the social obligations he must fulfill as a host).

Besides managing the uncertainty of strangers, hospitality also provides a framework within which Afghans manage relations among themselves. The underlying principle at work here is the dynamic of reciprocity (*badal*). No act of giving or receiving hospitality is isolated; rather, all such acts are part of an ongoing series of exchanges. Should one individual continually avail himself of the hospitality of another without reciprocating that hospitality, then he would implicitly be placing himself in a position of indebtedness to his host and affirming his

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Rick Swisher (AF1 Team Leader), September 30, 2008.

subordinate status in relation to his host, who can – if he so chooses – ask for services from his perennial guest. Within the moral economy of the community, hospitality serves to distribute goods and services and to provide a peaceful means by which the dynamics of gaining and losing status are played out and the equation of that status publicly, if quietly, calculated.<sup>14</sup>

### **“Force Protection”**

In shifting to the present and the possibility of foreign anthropologists gaining the kind of trust called for by COIN doctrine, an appropriate place to begin is with the imperative of “force protection.” As the McChrystal Report noted, excessive concern for protecting ISAF forces “distances us – physically and psychologically – from the people we seek to protect” and risks alienating the Afghan population by demonstrating “a perceived lack of respect for Afghan culture.” Though examples are not given, the Report is targeting the manner in which troops comport themselves on highways and in other public spaces – for example, ramming convoys through traffic, aiming weapons at people on the street, intimidating drivers and pedestrians as they pass, and generally demonstrating disrespect for the people with whom they come into contact.

These are the everyday forms of disrespect that do no *explicit* harm (unlike more egregious examples involving wayward air support operations that lead to civilian casualties, search operations that violate the sanctity of Afghan homes and the violent interrogation of suspects based on faulty intelligence), but as the Report recognizes the *implicit* harm done is substantial, as is the larger calculation that “force protection” represents – namely that foreign bodies are more valuable and deserving of protection than Afghan bodies. This is a calculation impossible to ignore when one is in the presence of ISAF soldiers whose bodies are completely covered in body armor surrounded, as they often are, by a swarm of children wearing their light cotton *shalwar-kameez*. In a society that is so attentive to the dynamics of reciprocity and respect, the implicit calculation of relative worth that is readily apparent to all virtually precludes the possibility that relations of trust can be forged across the lines of inclusion and exclusion dividing those more and less deserving of protection. In such an environment, in which the asymmetries of relative power are so dramatically and unavoidably present and apparent, the dynamics of hospitality cannot be anything other than a formality.

Given this general and contextual problem that confronts all military personnel, it is worth considering how the imperative of force protection might affect HTTs, whose

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<sup>14</sup> For those coming from outside the society, hospitality provides a framework within which relations of trust can potentially be developed, but one must constantly be mindful of the implications of seemingly small gestures on how the relationship is perceived by the person with whom one is interacting. A few months after I had begun my doctoral research in Peshawar, I almost destroyed my relationship with the young Afghan man who was working as my research assistant and who would eventually become one of my closest friends; I did so by teasing him that he always seemed to show up at my house right around lunchtime. That offhanded comment, intended simply as a joke and evidence of our closeness, backfired. For him, it was not a joke at all but a sign of disrespect. On the one hand, I paid him a salary for the work he did for me, but that was a separate business matter and distinct from our social relationship. In making my misconceived joke, I was implicitly lumping him with a category of people I have heard Afghans refer to as “dish lickers,” which is to say, someone who has no sense of self-respect and who will do anything to satisfy his petty appetites. Over time, I managed with difficulty to repair the breach, but the incident taught me a valuable lesson and led to further insights – about the role of reciprocity in the development and maintenance of trust; about the way in which seemingly isolated acts are interpreted in relation to each other; about the endurance of memory and the way in which slights can be offset but never fully erased.

effectiveness is directly dependent on being able to establish enduring relations of trust. Even if their own units are careful not to replicate the everyday forms of disrespect shown by other units, the general concern for force protection still presents a direct impediment to carrying out research. In order to do his job, an ethnographer needs unstructured time with local people in which to discover the topics they bring up and the matters of most concern to them. This kind of research resides uneasily within the time frame determined by the specific constraints of a foray outside the base, undertaken by an HTT in the company of a fleet of armored vehicles. Such forays are necessarily of short duration, made shorter by the inevitable delays that a convoy is likely to encounter in the process of getting out of the base, traversing potentially hostile terrain and entering a village. Sometimes the timing works, and the team arrives at their destination to find the people they want to meet present; but just as often, it doesn't work out, or the time available before the return trip is too short for any effective conversations to take place.

In a larger sense as well, time is not on the side of HTTs. In Afghanistan, all relations are personal, and relations of trust develop incrementally. Afghans look for signs that what they offer is appreciated and reciprocated; at that point, new and potentially more significant transactions can take place, until step-by-step, some degree of trust can be established. What this means in practical terms is that one cannot barge in with a set of questions and expect significant answers. The relationship itself must be the first priority, because only with a relationship in place will a researcher be able not just to ask questions but, more fundamentally, to know *how* to ask questions and know *which* questions to ask. These steps take time, and there is no way to hurry them, which is another way in which time is not on the researcher's side. Since deployments rarely last longer than a year, there is an exceedingly small window of opportunity for a researcher to identify thoughtful individuals capable of providing insights into their communities and then build the kind of relationships with those individuals that would be needed for them to trust the researcher sufficiently to be willing to impart that insight.

Beyond the issue of time, there is the problem of bodies. The social scientist tasked with conducting the research must contend with the presence of a number of people, some of whom are HTT members not directly connected to the research, and the rest soldiers assigned to protect the team. Relations of trust are relations between individuals, and the presence of so many foreign bodies in the confined space of the village can only present complications and delay, as well as impose substantial costs of villagers in situations when it might be expected that food or at least tea would be offered to the visitors. It is also likely that many of those tasked with providing protection to the HTTs will wish that they were someplace other than this particular village with civilians asking vague questions that might seem from their perspective to be of doubtful utility. The presence of such impatient bodies likewise can only impede the process of relationship and make it more likely that the researcher will rush to the stage of asking relevant questions prematurely in order to have something to show for the effort and risk undertaken in dispatching a convoy to this village.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> One issue that is not taken up in this essay is the role of the interpreter. Few, if any HTT social scientists have competence in Afghan languages, which means that teams are dependent on the mediation of translators. The quality of translators varies widely, but often HTTs, as well as Coalition forces generally, have little ability to judge the quality of interpretation and consequently are in a position of trusting that the person delivering their words to their Afghan interlocutors are doing so accurately and without the imposition of their own agenda onto the proceedings.

## ***“The Mission”***

Anthropology is arguably least effective when it is most directed. What is required is an ability to suspend what one assumed about a particular group or situation and open oneself up to the possibility that what is actually going on is entirely different from what one thought was going on. Consequently, the utility of the information and insights one obtains is often apparent only after one has talked with people not before. Prior to leaving the U.S. for Pakistan to begin my dissertation fieldwork, I had to come up with a research plan that was sufficiently convincing to gain the support of my faculty advisors and obtain funding from agencies willing to sponsor such projects. I had to do so, despite the fact that I had never set foot in a refugee camp or met an Afghan mujahidin fighter, and given that very few other anthropologists at that point had either, I was required to make up a lot of what I wrote down on paper. Once I got to Peshawar and was carrying out research among Afghan mujahidin and civilians, I had to scrap what I had written and figure out what was realistic and interesting to work on, regardless of what I had promised to do when I set out a few months earlier.

Experimental science, we know, is dependent upon being able to isolate variables that one is sure about from those one wants to find out more about. Doing so requires both adequate prior knowledge to know what the relevant variables are and the ability to make them separate and discrete. Anthropologists do not have this luxury. Every fieldwork situation is different, and the skill of the anthropologist lies in responding to the situation. While one certainly has an idea of what one is looking for and the questions that need to be asked, an anthropologist has to constantly revise his sense of what matters and ultimately how it all fits together, knowing that any judgment made today might have to be adjusted tomorrow. In theory at least, part of the HTT's assignment is *not* to decide beforehand what their contribution might be; it is to go out among the people and find out what is on their minds and what they can discover through the traditional ethnographic tools of participant-observation and non-directive interviewing. This approach however contrasts sharply with the general military mindset, which is preoccupied with and oriented towards the step that need to be taken in the course of fulfilling “The Mission.”

According to former HTS members I interviewed, what matters above all else in a Forward Operating Base (FOB) is if a planned course of action is “operationally relevant.” In the hierarchical world of the military, the job of accomplishing the assigned mission ultimately belongs to the commander, and it is his responsibility to ensure that the necessary manpower and resources are allocated to the mission in the most efficient way possible. To do so, the commander needs information, and the more perceived threats there are in an area, the sooner he needs it. Combat affords little time for contemplation. Time horizons are short, and the entire staff gears its efforts towards anticipating the commander's directions and responding to them, once they have been articulated. The needs of the moment are paramount, and there is little planning for what will happen a week out, much less a month or two.

The continual dilemma for HTTs therefore is figuring out how to cast their research in ways that highlight the relevance of what they are doing to the larger mission of their unit. According to members of AF1, their brigade commander came to “buy into” the HTT concept and began to look to their team for what might be termed “insight” as opposed to the specific “information” that he expected from other staff officers. However, that does not always appear to be the case, and with each new commander, the HTT has to prove itself all over, along with the

efficacy of its apparently inefficacious ways of carrying out research, assuming that the team members themselves have not bought into the more directive methods of their peers on the FOB.

In this respect, it is important to note that HTT's comprise one of a number of resources – Intelligence (Intel), Psychological Operations (PsyOps, now known as IO, or Information Operations), Civil Affairs (CA) – that the commander has at his disposal. While the officers in charge of each of these sectors are all dedicated to accomplishing the mission, they also have their own agendas and interests. Consequently, there is continual pressure the HTT to produce results, even if it means compromising the kind of research they have been set up to do. The likelihood that HTT's will succumb to the pressure not only of moving away from the time consuming work of ethnography to more directed forms of research, but also of seeking out target-focused research is made greater because of the number of HTT recruits who are drawn from the ranks of ex-Intel officers. While I have not seen data that could verify this impression, a number of current and recent HTT members have observed to me that Intel officers are disproportionately represented in HTS. If this observation were to be confirmed, it would seem to give weight to the fear expressed by critics of HTS that, for all its claims to preserving the “firewall” between cultural knowledge and enemy-centric targeting intelligence, that division is one that in practice does not and perhaps cannot exist.

### ***“The Brief”***

In the domain of classical anthropology, fieldwork represents the middle stage of the process of “doing ethnography.” The first stage is training: gaining adequate preparation in the history, language and culture of the area of research, as well as in general social theory and research methods that one hopes to employ in “the field.” Completion of training leads to the fieldwork stage itself, some aspects of which have been discussed in this essay. Fieldwork is then followed by the production of whatever “text(s)” one chooses to write that will serve the purpose of summing up the results of the field research. The text or texts produced reflect both the fieldwork experience itself and also the theoretical orientation that the anthropologist developed in the course of his training and in the process of shifting through and organizing his notes, interviews, artifacts and impressions. In my experience, the end product of ethnographic fieldwork rarely resembles what the anthropologist thought it would be when he started his research; indeed, one would tend to distrust the quality and depth of research that did not end up producing something very different from what it started out to be. As is said of sports, the reason they play the game is because the results often don't follow prediction, and so it is with ethnography: the experience of doing research and opening up one's preconceived plans and theories to other people's realities usually leads to a substantial recalibration of what the researcher took for granted in the first place.

If the final stage of “doing ethnography” in academia is the presentation of research result at professional meetings and the writing and publication of ethnographic texts, the final stage of ethnography in the military context is the presentation of research results to the unit commander in a ritual known as “The Brief.” The only examples of Briefs that I witnessed were in the HTS training center at Ft. Leavenworth, but between this experience and the testimony of informants I interviewed about their experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, the importance of The Brief in determining the outcome, as well as the direction of research, became readily apparent.

The Brief consists of formal presentations made by the various staff officers working under the unit commander. The verbal component of these presentations is synched to and

rhetorically constructed in relation to the PowerPoint slides that are invariably the centerpiece of the performance. In the military, it appears that if you can't say it through PowerPoint than you can't say it at all. PowerPoint is the medium by which tasks are translated into results. The standard by which all presentations are judged is operational relevance to the accomplishment of "the mission," and the goal for each staff officer in making his presentation is to gain the attention and praise of the commanding officer, who will determine the deployment of scarce resources as well as – in the long term – the next step in the career trajectory of those officers.

Not all results translate equally well into PowerPoint presentations, and one consequence of this fact is that the formal aspects of The Brief inevitably encourages not only a particular kind of communication, but also a particular kind of information gathering that emphasizes immediacy, precision and relevance. In this world, what works best is information that can be conveyed by means of a metric, for example, surveys that can be quantified. Vagueness or indeterminacy come across especially badly in the context of PowerPoint, and this can also lead to the problem of presenters packaging their information in a manner that maximizes the appearance of accuracy and that provides a degree of certainty that is not warranted given the tentative, incomplete, and circumstantial nature of information in a war zone.

In this context, anthropological research comes off especially badly, given that it tends more often to be impressionistic, anecdotal and inconclusive. Many military officers come from engineering and other scientific backgrounds, and they are most comfortable with information that can be presented as "data" and communicated in a metrical format that conveys a degree of certainty. In the realm of the "social sciences," survey research tries to approximate this ideal, but particularly in places like Afghanistan, such research – especially when coached in the statistical language of percentages and co-efficients – conveys a spurious sort of precision that is likely to mislead those who take it seriously.<sup>16</sup> It is especially dangerous when the consumer of this information is a battlefield commander who is required to make the most concrete of decisions based on the most tentative of information. It is one thing when those decisions are made on a traditional battlefield in which enemies, each in their respective uniforms, are arrayed opposite one another. It is an entirely different and more complex matter when the enemy is scattered among and indistinguishable from the civilian population. Given the precariousness of their task, commanders inevitably want quantifiable information that allows them to make (and, if necessary later on, to justify) rational decisions regarding the deployment of resources and, in the ultimate case, lethal force.

Anthropologists are in the business of interpreting what is going on around them more in the fashion of literary critics reading complex, multi-character, multi-strand novels (involving multiple narrators) than that of chemists carrying out controlled laboratory experiments. That being the case, as Clifford Geertz observed, one way to distort its results are "to imagine that culture is a self-contained 'super-organic' reality with forces and purposes of its own; that is, to reify it. Another is to claim that it consists in the brute pattern of behavioral events we observe in fact to occur in some identifiable community or other; that is, to reduce it."<sup>17</sup> Communicating the results of ethnographic research in the context of The Brief manages to accomplish both of these distortions simultaneously, by reifying a limited range of information from a few sources into

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<sup>16</sup> The documentary film, *Kabul Transit*, that I co-directed and produced contains a comic but not unrepresentative example of survey research in action in Afghanistan.

<sup>17</sup> C. Geertz, *Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture*. In C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*. Basic Books (1973). P. 10-11.

presumed examples of the way “Afghan society” operates, and by reducing actual complexity to the limited number of possibilities that will fit into the “bullet points” of a PowerPoint slide.

In assessing the efficacy of anthropological research in the context of the military, it is important to recognize the role of The Brief as the determining mode of communication by which tasks are assigned, expectations communicated, and results evaluated. The Brief is the master switch in the cybernetic communications loop that reinforces the status quo and makes it difficult for anyone to imagine the unit’s mission in a different and original light. The climax of the training session I observed at the HTS center at Ft. Leavenworth was an exercise known as “Weston Resolve,” which involves teams of trainees going out into local communities (including Weston, Missouri – hence the name) in pursuit of ethnographic information.

While much of the training prior to this final exercise prepared the novice HTT recruits for conducting interviews and recording their observations of what they were seeing, an equal or greater amount of attention was paid to how the trainees would convey their results in a manner that accords with military expectations, which is to say, how they would adapt what the information they had uncovered within the context of The Brief. Thus, before the final presentation, which was made before a retired brigadier general contracted to play the role of a brigade commander, the recruits labored for hours over their PowerPoint slides and repeatedly rehearsed the oral delivery to ensure that it conformed as closely as possible to the platonic ideal of The Brief. Trainee presentations were attended by more than a dozen retired army officers, who had been brought to the base to play the role of FOB staff officers and provide (at what must be an exorbitant cost) a semblance of authenticity to the Weston Resolve exercise.

Following their presentations, the assembly of retired officers critiqued the presenters, paying particular attention not only to the effectiveness of their PowerPoint slides, but also to their proficiency in military language and most important of all, the degree to which they supplied the commander with useful information. The message was, “This is a busy man. Don’t waste his time with details. Tell him what he needs to know.” The reward for packaging information in this way is that you get access to the commander. He runs the show, and if the briefer doesn’t manage to convince him early on that he has something concrete to contribute he will be spending his deployment in a corner of the FOB playing video games. Thus, whether it intends to or not, HTS training conveys to its recruits, through the relative weight given to The Brief, the message that learning how to speak “Army” is more important than learning to speak Dari or Pushtu, and that understanding the ins and outs of military culture are more directly relevant to their success than understanding Afghan culture.

### *Measuring Success*

It is one thing to decide that there is a fundamental discrepancy between how anthropology conceives of and carries out its work and how the military conceives of and carries out its work. In the end, though, the question is, does it really matter? The military has a job to do, and they will do it, with or without the participation of anthropologists, with or without the imprimatur of academic organizations. From the military’s point of view, at least, what matters is whether or not incorporating anthropological-type knowledge – however obtained – is helping it accomplish the missions they have been assigned. Today that mission is in Afghanistan, at some point in the future, it might be in Somalia or Sudan or some other country with its own unique culture, language and history. The military has always had to come up with jury-rigged solutions

to solve the problems it encounters. What matters are the results. That being the case, then, what are the results?

The answer, as it turns out, is not easy to come up with. For its part, the Pentagon has not released any study of how the implementation of COIN in Afghanistan is going.<sup>18</sup> The logical place to begin such an assessment would be with HTS, but to my knowledge no such study has been commissioned or released, despite the expensive and controversial status of the program and despite the military's fondness for metrical measures. What we have instead are a few advocates of the program and many more critics, mostly from the world of academia, but including a number from the military as well. Among these critics, U.S. Marine Major Ben Connable has argued that HTS's failures are far greater than the successes they have trumpeted ("hold(ing) a tribal congress to address grievances" and "provid(ing) a volleyball net to build rapport with local villagers"), which "demonstrate common sense in a counterinsurgency environment, not breakthroughs. Hundreds of Army and Marine staffs have been doing these things on a daily basis across Afghanistan and Iraq for years, all without the assistance of Human Terrain Teams."<sup>19</sup>

As a veteran Foreign Area Officer (FAO) who would like to see the role of FAOs augmented and not replaced, Connable has a stake in improving the system as it is, but his specific criticism of HTS is echoed by other critics of COIN, including Army Colonel Gian Gentile who served two tours in Iraq and who asserts that his "unit was already executing counterinsurgency operations, rebuilding the area's economic infrastructure, restoring essential services, and establishing governance projects" in mid-2003, well before the much celebrated launch of counterinsurgency doctrine.<sup>20</sup> Though he has not, to my knowledge, come out for or against HTS, Gentile has argued that COIN's current vogue is a victory of spin over substance, that its well-publicized successes (notably in Iraq) have been the result of many interconnected factors and not solely or even primarily because of the introduction of COIN, and that COIN's present ascendancy has eclipsed other capabilities and undermined the preparedness of U.S. forces to engage in conventional warfare.<sup>21</sup>

Col. Martin Schweitzer, who was the commander of 4/82 Airborne Brigade Combat Team to which HTT AF1 was attached, has been one of the fiercest advocates both of COIN generally and HTS in particular, and his congressional testimony has provided valuable ammunition for those seeking to continue the program despite the criticism leveled against it.<sup>22</sup> After two decades of training and command assignments, in which "the center of gravity, where I centered all my assets, resources, was against the enemy," Schweitzer became a convert to COIN during mid-career stint at the National War College. This led to him being chosen to oversee the first HTT, which was attached to the brigade he commanded in Afghanistan. His subsequent experience working with AF1 convinced him of the utility of the program:

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<sup>18</sup> According to some reports, the Rand Corporation has been contracted to prepare an assessment of the Human Terrain System. As of the time of writing (December 2010), it is not clear when this assessment will be completed or if it will be made public.

<sup>19</sup> Ben Connable, All Our Eggs in a Broken Basket: How the Human Terrain System is Undermining Sustainable Military Cultural Competence. *Military Review*, Mark-April 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Gian P. Gentile, A (Slightly) Better War: A Narrative and Its Defects. *World Affairs Journal*, Summer 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Gentile (Personal communications, November 2010).

<sup>22</sup> See Statement of Colonel Martin P. Schweitzer before the House Armed Services Committee, 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, hearings on the role of the social and behavioral sciences in national security, April 24, 2008. (<http://gop.science.house.gov/Media/hearings/research08/april24/schweitzer.pdf>)

You don't understand what this capability is doing for all maneuver commanders – both Afghan and Coalition alike. It's not just understanding that there are sixteen elements of *Pashtunwali*, it's not understanding, you know, that you don't do things with your left hand, you don't show the bottoms of your feet, you accept invitations. That's not what this is. We can get that from any place. It's being able to take the 16 tenets of *Pashtunwali* and apply them across the 101 sub-tribes that are there, so that we're operating and doing engagements and maneuvering, the collective we – our Afghan and coalition teammates – that it's not just that we're not violating norms, but we're being accepted.<sup>23</sup>

When asked to give some specific examples of the assistance his HTS team provided him, Schweitzer points to a time when his unit was based in Ghazni Province:

... after the first five or six days – a lot of fighting, a lot of problems, trouble, Tracey comes back and says, Sit down, you've got this wrong. You're dealing with the wrong people. Stop dealing with the village elders – like we've all been doing for the last five years. Deal with the mullahs. This is the home of Sufism. This is the mystic form of the Islamic faith. They are the power brokers in Ghazni, not the village leaders. We told that to General Halik. The next day he ran a shura with only the mullahs. The next day all fighting stopped. All fighting stopped...<sup>24</sup>

On one level, the story is impressive, of course, and he has become an effective advocate for the program because of these concrete examples and, more than anything else, because of his blunt declaration that the deployment of an HTT in his brigade resulted in a dramatic downturn in kinetic operations and significantly fewer combat and civilian casualties.

Such first-person accounts are hard to argue with, but at the same time, it is worth considering the implications of his testimony. Connable and Gentile, for example, have both argued that the insights Schweitzer obtained from his HTT were the sort that any observant military officer should be able to come up with in the course of performing his normal duties. Connable is right, as well, in his assertion that the military does not need the discipline of anthropology to do its job, at least if the job to be done involves this level of insight. For this, the various branches of the military can develop their own competency, just as they can add new components to their training and provide positive career incentives to officers who pursue cultural and language studies. But one still wonders whether it will be of much value, and whether commanders will ever progress much beyond the level of identifying the difference between tribal and religious leaders, if they don't have a greater degree of commitment and expertise involved in the COIN process. By way of comparison, one might consider the level of insight developed by British political and military personnel related to Afghanistan and the Pushtun borderlands, as preserved in a lengthy (if dusty) bookshelf of reports and monographs, most of which were originally intended for government use and only later published. These works go back as far as Mountstuart Elphinstone's *An Account of the Kingdom of Cabul*, published in 1815, and continue well into the twentieth century, through extended meditations on tribal structure, such as Evelyn Howell's *Mizh: A Monograph on Government's Relations with the Mahsud Tribe* (1931) and Olaf Caroe's *The Pathans* (1958), with many others in between.

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Col. Martin Schweitzer, Washington, DC. November 22, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Schweitzer interview.

Such works can be taken as both detailed, closely observed ethnographies of specific tribal groups and as practical primers in the art of dealing with Afghan tribes.<sup>25</sup>

One cannot expect U.S. military or civilian officials to display the level of expertise demonstrated by British officers, who had generations in which to develop their knowledge of the region, but that is precisely the point and what both Connable and Schweitzer overlook. U.S. military officers – however well-trained and well-intentioned – and whether or not they rely on the ‘home grown’ wisdom of FAOs or the expertise of civilian academics – will be at a disadvantage in the application of COIN doctrine to the far-flung areas of the world in which they have been and might in the future be asked to operate. British military and civilian officers did not need to hire anthropologists, because they themselves were the experts who would spend their entire careers in one geographical area, in the process learning the languages and customs of the people they governed. Their families accompanied them, and they set up homes and raised families in *their* part of the Raj. For many, if not most of these officers and officials, the next deployment was likely to be very near the last one, and even when they retired, they were likely to remain in India, though perhaps in a more temperate climate than that of Dera Ismail Khan or Kohat. They were there for the duration, in other words, as was the government they represented, and the result was that they had no choice but to get it right.

It is sometimes assumed that, because Great Britain lost some significant battles in Afghanistan, it was – like the Soviet Union – one more corpse in “the graveyard of empires” that Afghanistan is assumed to be. This conclusion, like the graveyard metaphor itself, is based on a misunderstanding of history, however, for there have been far more empires that have flourished in Afghanistan than have fallen. In the case of Great Britain, after committing its initial mistakes in the First Anglo-Afghan War, and paying a heavy price for doing so, they revised their strategy and managed thereafter and more or less continuously for the next hundred years, to maintain sufficient control over Afghan affairs to prevent the Afghan government from causing them much trouble. They did so, not by deploying their troops, but by paying the Afghan government an annual subsidy in exchange for the Afghan government agreeing to let Great Britain exercise nominal control over foreign policy (which kept Afghanistan more or less neutral through two world wars) and Kabul promising to contain the tribes under its nominal authority, which generally they managed to do.

Likewise, while current policymakers might lament that the British never succeeded in gaining the complete submission of the independent tribes living in the borderlands between Afghanistan and what was then India, for the British limited sovereignty worked out rather well. Even if bringing the tribal areas fully under colonial authority would have been possible, it is not clear what it would have gained Great Britain, besides a great deal of bloodshed. Instead, of absolute control over economically marginal lands, the British settled for partial control that was

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<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that these reports were prepared by civilian colonial officials. British colonial administration involved close cooperation between military and civilian authorities, with civilian authorities in overall charge. This brings up the peculiarity that public discussions of anthropology’s role in Iraq and Afghanistan have been almost entirely confined to the services it can or cannot, should or should not perform for the military, while almost no discussion has been heard about anthropology’s role in the civilian sector, most importantly with the Department of State and USAID. The absence of such discussion is not just because such collaboration would be far less controversial and ethically problematic. It is also because of the operational irrelevance of the Department of State to what is happening on the ground in Afghanistan. In the case of USAID, most of their operations are carried out by private contractors, which means that the American presence in these countries is largely defined by military and corporate entities.

premised less on mounting punitive expeditions into tribal lands than on limiting tribal access to the settled areas under their jurisdiction. Discounting periodic inflammations of rhetoric and the occasional incursion of mujahidin-cum-tribesmen, the Pushtun tribes of the borderlands generally behaved, and the British exercised sufficient sway for most of the century they remained in India that their rule was never seriously threatened from this quarter.<sup>26</sup>

## ***Conclusion***

In his previously cited essay “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” Clifford Geertz noted that the goal of doing ethnography among strangers is not the prediction of future events, but “the enlargement of the universe of human discourse.”<sup>27</sup> While this might appear a rather modest goal and of little obvious relevance to the specific tasks undertaken by military units in a combat zone, it is in reality a great deal less modest and more difficult than it would appear, especially when it is not simply dialogue across cultures that is at issue but rapprochement across longstanding lines of estrangement and misunderstanding. It is also a great deal more important than it might appear, for if COIN is to succeed, its practitioners must first learn to listen and to create the conditions, opportunities, and spaces in which listening can occur. If COIN is to succeed, military personnel from the commander making the momentous decisions he is charged with making to the foot soldier interacting with Afghans in their village must buy in to the ideas – enshrined in COIN doctrine – that not acting can be more productive than acting, that less force might result in more protection.

Maybe more than anything else, the military must give careful thought to how it goes about training its soldiers, because successful implementation of COIN doctrine will require a thoroughly different mindset on the part of military personnel, whose training to date has emphasized the importance of responding instinctively and violently to threats, an instinct that training cultivates and that is necessary to secure the transformation of civilians into warriors. How does this training mesh with acquiring the capability of seeing the world through other people’s eye, for standing in other people’s shoes, which is the essential component of anthropology and a requirement of COIN as well? Under COIN, the first requirement shifts from seeking out enemies to seeking out friends. Is this a good thing for a soldier? Is it complicating the already difficult role we are asking him to play? Does it potentially endanger his life, if his threat instincts are dulled and he hesitates a moment too long before pulling the trigger?

Before answering those questions, it first must be decided what it is that we as a society want from our military before our military can decide what it has to gain from COIN and whether the challenges and sacrifices, the price and peril associated with fully implementing the doctrine are worth it. COIN is arguably “the most important and influential doctrine in the history of the US Army.”<sup>28</sup> Before accepting that it is necessarily the right direction for our military to go, we should pause a bit and consider what embracing this doctrine really means, and in considering this question, it is important to consider if it has ever actually “worked,” and if so where. The examples are not numerous, and significantly they all come from imperial

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<sup>26</sup> For an excellent analysis of British frontier policy, see especially, Hugh Beattie, *Imperial Frontier: Tribe and State in Waziristan*. Curzon (2001). For a useful discussion of state policies that emphasize partial and complete control of peripheral areas, see Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton (2010).

<sup>27</sup> Geertz, *op cit*. P. 14.

<sup>28</sup> Col. Gian Gentile (Personal communications, November 17, 2010).

contexts, including – I would argue – Afghanistan and the tribal borderland of India under the *Pax Britannica*.

One important reason the British got it – to some extent, at least – right, and we – to a large extent, at least – have not is that the British embraced the role of an imperial power and to date, the Americans have not. In truth, the Americans do not know what their role is or should be.<sup>29</sup> The unapologetic objective of the British at the at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was to rule those parts of the world they had conquered (and upon which the sun never set) and to maintain that rule against ‘the forces of darkness’ that might oppose them. The United States at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century would never admit that “conquest” had anything to do with why its military is deployed around the world, and though it frequently refers to forces of darkness (“evildoers,” in the words of former President Bush), we are unsure how far we should go in opposing these forces because it is unsure what the ultimate goal of a *Pax Americana* should or could be.<sup>30</sup>

The United States has more firepower than Great Britain ever dreamed up, but not half the certainty of its role and purpose. COIN represents a seismic shift not only in how we organize and deploy our military force, but – whether we notice or not – in how we conceive of the military’s and, by extension, America’s role in the world. At first glance, there is much to admire and even to be hopeful about in this shift. Would it not be better, after all, to have a military whose first resort is not to use its weapons to kill people but rather to helping them lead more secure lives? On the other hand, is this a policy that will lead us into more and more unstable regions of the world, and if so, what does it help us when we do not have a clear idea in the first place what it is that we want to accomplish by going to these dangerous places? More than anything else, American policymakers must recognize that COIN is not and cannot be a substitute for policy and principles, and until they decide what it is they want to accomplish and why, even the best and most humane intentions will do little more than delay the inevitable and ignominious retreat to come.

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<sup>29</sup> In making the assertion that the British “got it right,” I am not arguing that they were justified in ruling India in the first place, only that they did it more effectively, given their objectives, than most imperial powers, whether of their day or this day.

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of British moral rhetoric of colonial control as applied Afghanistan, see David B. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier* (1996), pp. 184-190.

