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## Knowledge is for Cutting: Waging War on the Human Terrain

### Abstract:

The notion of war as a social problem is derived from a troubled legacy in the social sciences. Whereas the discipline of anthropology has a multifaceted and comprehensive record of engagement with war studies, sociology's efforts have been less robust and critical. Previous work in anthropology looks at the history of military anthropology studies and area studies within counterinsurgency operations. This article builds on that critical work as it presents observations and findings from research conducted while the author worked with the U.S. Army Human Terrain System (HTS). The research was conducted using traditional participant-observation methods to document how HTS conducted research operations. Findings and analysis draw from the critical tradition to consider what HTS research practice might tell us about what Bruno Latour referred to as "science in the making" and to shed light on a contemporary social phenomenon—the problem of "alternative facts", "fake news", and "fake science".

**Key Words:** Human Terrain System, military anthropology, covert ethnography, war science

### Introduction

The notion of war as a social problem derives from what might be termed a troubled legacy in the social sciences. Whereas the discipline of anthropology has a multi-faceted and comprehensive record of engagement with war studies, sociology's

efforts have been less robust and critical. War studies in sociology in the present day continue to comprise a small sub-discipline within the social sciences, as they continue to privilege applied approaches to problem solving. Such studies tend to be restricted to a small group of well-funded specialists, many of whom work with think-tanks that continue the focus on public policy and the problems of the military as an institution.<sup>1</sup> Previous work in anthropology that looks at the history of military anthropology studies and area studies within counterinsurgency operations has been more critical.<sup>2</sup> This article builds on that critical work as I present observations and findings from research conducted while working with the U.S. Army Human Terrain System (HTS).

## Critical Theories of War and Science

Critical approaches owe a debt to C. Wright Mills, the only major sociologist to ever seriously consider the problem of war in society. Often at odds with peers like Merton, Mills focused on institutions, whose interpenetrating influence he wrote about prolifically in works like *The Power Elite*.<sup>3</sup> The languishing of Critical Theory in our contemporary period poses a contrast with the robust, albeit negative, critique that typified the mid-century period. I locate my work and situate observations of HTS within these frameworks, where I draw from the critical tradition to consider the more specific problem of HTS research practice; this problem shares resonance with contemporary social phenomena that are garnering attention of late—the problems of “alternative facts”, “fake news”, and “fake science”. I address these issues in addition to other debates through discussion and analysis of findings obtained from my covert ethnographic study. Data are drawn from my time spent working for HTS.

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<sup>1</sup> Segal, David and James Burke, *Military Sociology*, (Sage Publications, Volumes 1-4) (2012); Gentile, Gian, Michael Linick, and Michael Shurkin, *The Evolution of U.S. Military Policy from the Constitution to the Present*, (Rand Corporation) (2017).

<sup>2</sup> Price, David, *Anthropological Intelligence: The Deployment and Neglect of American Anthropology in the Second World War*, (Duke University Press) (2008); Gonzalez Roberto, *Anthropologists in the Public Sphere: Speaking Out on War, Peace, and American Power*, (University of Texas Press) (2004); Lucas GR Jr, *Anthropologists in Arms: The Ethics of Military Anthropology*, (Lanham, MD: Alta Mira Press) (2009); Kelly John, *Anthropology and Global Counterinsurgency*. (University of Chicago Press) (2010); González RJ, Gusterson H and Price D, *Introduction: War, culture, and counterinsurgency*. In: *Network of Concerned Anthropologists, The Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual*, (Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press) (2009); Griffin, M., *An anthropologist among the soldiers: Notes from the field*. In: Kelly JD, Jauregui B, Mitchell ST and Walton J (Eds.) *Anthropology and Global Counterinsurgency*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press) (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Mills, C. W. *The Power Elite*. (Oxford University Press) (1956).

Grounded in the tradition of the sociological imagination that situates everyday life in the complex structures of history and social power, my work helps extend debates in the social sciences about war beyond a mere focus on institutions and policy. This focus on HTS research practice is undertaken to understand how military ideas influence knowledge-making practices. In taking this approach, I make a case for the reinvigorated application of critical theory to study the problem of war in contemporary times. Consequently, instead of asking questions like “*Is it ethical for social scientists to conduct this type of research?*”, I ask, “*What are HTS researchers doing as a matter of practice?*” Rather than the question “*How does HTS support or fail to fulfil the aims of the COIN (counterinsurgency) doctrine?*” I ask “*What kinds of knowledge might be produced by these encounters?*”

## Methods and Data

This research was conducted using traditional participant-observation methods. Fieldwork focused on one organization, HTS, where I document how they conducted research operations. I entered my field site in Leavenworth, Kansas after being hired by BAE Systems, which during this time held the U.S. government contract to provide HTS with social science research personnel. While employed there, I obtained a secret-level security clearance which enabled me to examine different forms of textual document records (classified and unclassified). As many of the research reports were classified, I do not reproduce report excerpts here. Other documents that I reviewed included job descriptions for social scientists, research protocols, survey instruments, descriptions of data collection methods, and military manuals that contained protocols for report writing. At no time were human subjects (employees of HTS) studied.

Although I did not conduct field research operations with HTS in Afghanistan as I originally intended, I participated in three months of extensive pre-deployment social science research operations. Field experience consisted of working 12+ hours a day, during which I assumed the role of a social scientist on one of the operating teams. The HTS team members with whom I was associated were distributed across two different class cohorts comprised of approximately 70 individuals. Our days were spent learning how to implement HTS practice guidelines within the context of conducting field research operations. We prepared reports, designed survey instruments, conducted rehearsals, participated in language training, and provided daily briefings to HTS staff members. My role as a social science researcher likewise provided access to team members who were previously deployed with field research teams in Iraq and Afghanistan.

For purposes of full-disclosure, I think it is important to note how this research is a product of my own reflexivity. It is informed by more than 15 years of professional and academic work experience as a U.S. Army Captain working as a Signals Intelligence and field service officer and as a social scientist; I hold three advanced degrees from accredited academic research institutions, including a Ph.D. in sociology. I currently hold a full-time lectureship with a U.S. public research university, where I teach Field Research Methods and Critical War Studies. This combined experience informs my approach to problem solving and ability to interpret study data. In taking this qualitative approach, I am of course aware of the standard criticism levelled at ethnographic social science research. Qualitative research (ethnography in particular) has historically been subject to critique for reasons that it is not generalizable, falsifiable, or that it lacks validity and other quality control measures.<sup>4</sup> However, the strength of this approach in the current context cannot be overstated—there was no other way to access this information. Discovering, as I did, that HTS was a military intelligence operation—not a social science research operation—is a finding that could not have been obtained using statistical methods of inquiry. This finding forms the basis of an important conceptual shift that I distinguish in my critique and analysis, which looks at the pattern of institutional deception to ask not only questions about “how” but also “why?”

All research observations were made on site at HTS’s field operations office; however, where they lie within the spectrum of covert to overt observation, I cannot exactly say. My identity as a researcher and institutional affiliation were fully disclosed, though I did not disclose the intent to write about my experiences. The combination of intelligence and academic research credentials positioned me to gain entry to an organization that was known to be suspicious of traditionally trained academic applicants. Thus, while I fit the description of a traditional academic, my previous military intelligence background most likely had a favourable impact on my hire. Lastly, I should note that my observations are particular to the time and place they were made.

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<sup>4</sup> There is a tradition in the social sciences dating back to the time of social psychologist George Herbert Mead that more recently includes others like Michael Burawoy, Norman Denzin, and Mitchell Duneier, who advocate for the importance of journal writing, self-conscious reflection, and interpretation when making observations. Situated ethnography as such has found increasing support in the literature, in which researchers are encouraged to incorporate active measures; they essentially operationalize reflexivity by systematically documenting how their personal experiences influence the research process. Thus, while quantitative methods value prediction, the replication of research methods, and the social distancing of researchers from subjects, qualitative work promotes the closeness of researchers to subjects, where inter-subjectivity and epistemological reflexivity are understood to be assets and not liabilities. See Burawoy, Michael. “The Extended Case Method”, *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Mar. (1998), pp. 4-33; Denzin, Norman K. and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd edition) (2005); Duneier, Mitchell, *Sidewalk* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux) (2001).

In September 2014, shortly after my tenure with the organization ended, HTS was disbanded.

## The Human Terrain System

For those not be familiar with the original controversy surrounding HTS, I offer this short overview. HTS was social science research support program that was set up in 2006 under the United States Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), headquartered at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Founded by Colonel Steve Fondacaro and Montgomery McFate, the program was managed jointly by the U.S. Army and the Marine Corps and in partnership with its original contractor, BAE Systems.<sup>5</sup> HTS employed researchers that represented the full range of social science disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, psychology, area/regional studies, and linguistics. The stated mission of HTS was to provide military commanders with socio-culturally informed research. The operations' areas of focus were primarily Iraq and Afghanistan. Discussions were underway during my tenure about plans to broaden the scope of operations, including places such as Africa, Syria, and Mexico. Although officially disbanded in September 2014, it remains a matter of speculation as to how/if their operations might be replicated and incorporated into different organizational elements within the U.S. Defense Department.<sup>6</sup>

Previous estimates of the efficacy of HTS research operations are mixed. While constituents internal to the U.S. Army have spoken highly of the program, going so far as to state that the Human Terrain Teams helped to keep soldiers alive by mitigating tribal rivalries and correspondingly reducing violence.<sup>7</sup> Others, like David Price and Hugh Gusterson, are more critical.<sup>8</sup> Significant efforts were undertaken at academic professional conferences, where debate focused on HTS and the issue of whether or not professionally affiliated social scientists should be engaged in military research operations. While the American Anthropology Association (AAA) did not rule out the engagement of its anthropologists with the military, they ultimately issued prohibition

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<sup>5</sup> Gusterson, Hugh, "Project Minerva and the Militarization of Anthropology", *Radical Teacher*, 86:4-16 (2009); "The U.S. Military's Quest to Weaponize Culture". *The Bulletin Online*, June 20 (2008); and Is Resistance Futile?, Paper presented at workshop on Capturing Security Expertise' Copenhagen, June 16-17, 2011; Montgomery McFate, "Cultural Knowledge and Common Sense", *Anthropology Today* 24(1):27 (2008).

<sup>6</sup> Kassel, Whitney, "The Army Needs Anthropologists," *Foreign Policy* (2015).

<sup>7</sup> Whitney Kassel (2015).

<sup>8</sup> Price, David, *Weaponizing Anthropology: Social Science in Service of the Militarized State*. (Counterpunch: AK Press) (2011); Gusterson Hugh, "Project Minerva and the Militarization of Anthropology", *Radical Teacher* 86:4-16 (2009).

guidelines that stated work with HTS was not compatible with ethical anthropology practice.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, while the AAA's prohibition was admirable and perhaps necessary on ethical grounds, I want to point out that it produced the unfortunate effect of discouraging or precluding professionally trained social scientists from undertaking first-hand observations of HTS. The prohibition precluded informed critique because it forbade "ground truth" observations.

## Discussion

Although it has been a few years since controversy regarding HTS peaked, the findings here share a dynamic relation to current events, in which there is a privileging of "alternative facts" that approximates "fake science". This section highlights select findings and suggests that HTS research practice, as a form of what Latour called science in the making, represents a systematic effort to, more or less, "fake it and make it".

In offering here what is mostly a negative review, I want to state my personal biases. Prior to entering the field, I was aware that the institutional environment for women at HTS was reported as being especially problematic. I did in fact experience and observe problematic encounters between men and women in the program. My bias, however, does not undermine the textual evidence upon which this report is based. Moreover, I want to emphasize that this research does not make claims of "representativeness". The fact that I did not find evidence of institutional competency during my tenure with HTS took me by surprise. I entered the field open to the idea of potential benefit being served by having trained anthropologists assist decision-making in military operations and that this might, as HTS claimed, offer some level of protection to civilians from violence.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, in addition to the much-cited ethical problems, there were structural barriers that precluded success. Credentialed experts (specifically, those with extensive training at research universities) were viewed as suspect by HTS. The institutional social context of HTS was not, given the events I witnessed and experienced, tolerant of criticism. Voiced criticism guaranteed quick dismissal from the program. I opted to withhold personal criticism because I wanted to remain with HTS as long as possible in order to make observations; however, over the long-haul this proved unsustainable.

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<sup>9</sup> Glenn, David, "Program to Embed Anthropologists with Military Lacks Ethical Standards". *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3 December, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> This logic constituted the basis for how the program was originally sold to the U.S. government/military by the group's founders, Colonel Steve Fondacaro and Montgomery McFate.

## Observations and Findings

This section reviews select observations from my field work. Admittedly, balancing my role as both an HTS team member and researcher was difficult and required careful management of social interactions. All my work with HTS was conducted within the confines of a communications-secure facility. This imposed operating restrictions, which meant no photography, no zip drives, and no removing of reports from the premises of the facility. To overcome this, I kept detailed notes in a daily journal. While there is no consensus for evaluating qualitative research, professional practice guidelines emphasize research methods and reflexive interpretation.<sup>11</sup>

HTS group research operations were set up in such a way as to maintain geographic proximity to the Fort Leavenworth Kansas military base, although our work site remained strategically separated from the base operation: we were located in an unmarked facility under a Mexican restaurant within the town of Leavenworth. It is interesting to note that at one point during my security screening process, active duty Army personnel candidly admitted to me that HTS was denied permission to operate on the military base due to the poor reputation of the organization and its personnel.

One of the general takeaways of my observations was that the research competency of HTS was not only lacking—it appeared to be fully absent. This assessment, of course, is based on my own observations and findings, which are consistent with others who have written about the poor quality of the research.<sup>12</sup> Not only was HTS producing research of dubious value, they were using science as a shield to produce military intelligence reports, which they in turn marketed to constituent users as social science research. My own training, certification, and work experience handling intelligence reports informs this finding that HTS research and data collection methods were indistinguishable from methods common within military intelligence organizations. Put differently, HTS was not producing research in a manner consistent with the protocols that distinguish professional academic research. Rather, what they did instead was produce a form of “fake science” that was passed off as research. They were, in other words, *performing* science.

These performative aspects of conducting social science research were on full display during my work with HTS: I found that what HTS called “research” was not guided by empirical ethically informed research methodology. By this I mean there was limited or no use of hypothesis generation, systematic sampling, and triangulation; there

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<sup>11</sup> Salzman, P.C., “On Reflexivity”, *American Anthropologist*, 104(3), pp. 805-813; see also Hsuing Ping-Chun, “Teaching Reflexivity in Qualitative Interviewing”, *Teaching Sociology*,(2008): 36(3), pp. 211-226.

<sup>12</sup> Whitney Kassel (2015).

were no defined audit procedures, nor were there tests for validity. Comparison studies were similarly not in evidence. Operating in place of the standard research methods that form the basis of rational inquiry and the ethic to do no harm was a discernible military logic that was informed by an ethic of violence: the aim of study was to produce sufficient knowledge of people and populations to bring them under military control. As such, violence served as both method and epistemology. The resulting fake/pseudo-science was not produced as a result of hapless failure; it was an outcome that indicated intentional practice and strategy.

My evaluations of report-based evidence, which I document in personal journals, revealed that the formatting and content of research reports as well as in the data collection protocols gave the indication that they were not, nor were they ever intended to be, research products; they were always military intelligence products that were produced and marketed to the constituents of HTS (units within and outside the U.S. military). When I evaluated their research reports ( $N = 60$ ), I found the methods, practices, and protocols did not reflect even the slightest modicum of adherence to professional research standards and practices. A clearly written protocol is typically the first indicator of a professionally conceived research plan. Likewise, professional reports will often contain clearly defined concepts and definitions. Literature reviews, including the incorporation of relevant studies into research, were not typically addressed by field research teams, but were instead handled by a remote research team, located in Kansas. This team with whom I worked was further destabilized by logistical and staffing turnover problems, which were evident during my tenure; this fact precluded their efficacy and inhibited the performance of work of teams in the field. Briefly put, the basic recognizable quality indicators of research products were missing in every case that I evaluated.

One of the key goals of qualitative research is rich/thick description in addition to interpretation and explanation of social practices. To be fair, this was sometimes accomplished in reports that I reviewed; however, the research was almost never guided by explanatory hypotheses. As for quantitative research, HTS admitted it was not well-equipped to conduct quantitative research; they struggled in their efforts to produce multivariate research. A common failure in surveys that I reviewed was that they failed to clearly articulate research questions and tie them to instrument questions. Analysis was similarly bereft of substance and reflected common inference errors (i.e. ecological fallacies, overgeneralization, faulty reasoning). Noteworthy was a general tendency for research protocols to evidence confirmation bias; in many cases, question wording demonstrated the cultural biases of the researchers that wrote them. Research questions were sometimes proposed in such a manner that they would inevitably produce data that would confirm pre-existing bias. Study findings, not surprisingly, did not evidence causal connections among social phenomena and were more often predicted by study

designs. Data collection efforts thus tended to produce the information researchers sought to “empirically” acquire.

Specific research methods employed by HTS researchers comprised standard interviews, surveys, and participant-observation methods; this included the infamous and deservedly ridiculed “windshield ethnography” that was performed as a standard battlefield research practice. For those uninitiated and not familiar with this critique of HTS, the term refers to the practice of driving through research operations field sites, at which point team members conducted remote visual surveys, looking through the windshields of moving vehicles. Though the practice was widely criticized, I found it to be somewhat emblematic of the failures of the HTS organization as a whole.

Team members were given daily tasks to complete what were called “Baseline Assessments”. This framework constituted the basis for the research plan. The acronyms (ASCOPE and PMESII), which are commonly used by military field personnel to analyse operations environments, guided report preparation.<sup>13</sup> These operations assessments, of course, bore no resemblance to social science research protocols. The differences between the two products—an intelligence product vs. a research product—were measurably different.

Research practice failures were not only limited to the research products that were produced. The research credentials of HTS researchers, I noted, were markedly different from researchers practicing in the disciplines. This occurred in spite of HTS’s extensive (and expensive) outreach efforts to recruit credentialed researchers. Researchers possessed the requisite degrees and credentials (M.A., Ph.D.); they were not specialists. Many that I came to know did not have active research agendas, nor were they affiliated with professional research organizations. Professionalization was further suspect, as evidenced by normative failures to publish and attend professional meetings. These findings, in my estimate, outweigh previous findings of deficit with regard to language skills, which I can confirm were, likewise, weak if not entirely absent. As both Gusterson and Connable have noted, the Human Terrain Teams have been challenged in their efforts to employ trained anthropologists.

Previous scholarship and professional meetings documented at length the problem of ethical conflicts with HTS. Equally problematic, however, are my observations that confirmed evidence of an overlooked dimension of the problem: researchers exhibited a profound lack of critical reflexive awareness in their approach to research. By this, I mean that I noted a wide-spread lack of awareness of how their embeddedness as social actors not only compromised their role as researchers, but also the integrity of research outcomes. This failure to acknowledge their situated role and

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<sup>13</sup> ASCOPE: Areas, Structures, Capabilities, Organizations, and People, Events; PEMESI: Political, Economic, Military, Social, Infrastructure, and Information. See military field manuals FM 6-0, “Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces.” and FM 3-24, “Counterinsurgency.”

what in ethnographic research is widely known as the Hawthorne Effect (by which a researcher's presence can distort findings) was, in my estimate, a significant failure.<sup>14</sup> A similar failure occurred to the extent that researchers failed to acknowledge role conflict, particularly as this pertained to working alongside armed soldiers. The researchers' failures to address such conflict and potential bias in their reports did not, in my estimate, occur due to wilful indifference; rather, it reflected what is perhaps best described as simple ignorance. To illustrate the point, one social scientist told me, beaming with pride no less, about a field research method he improvised in Afghanistan: he zip-tied the hands of interviewees when he conducted surveys in order to give onlookers the impression that they were not cooperating with the Americans. This was, he explained, his way of helping to ensure the safety of human subjects.

Finally, I should add here, weak attempts were made to organize field-appropriate ethical research protocols (i.e. external review). Debate on the problem of vulnerable subjects was documented in the AAA meetings as well as the in published literature that has been critical of HTS.<sup>15</sup> Despite the near constant refrain of protest from HTS, who argued they were working toward establishing a field IRB, HTS continued as late as 2012 to operate without oversight from an external IRB authority.

### Analysis: Why Did They Do It?

Previous critics attributed HTS failure to a variety reasons, including poor management, fraud, misbehaviour, and contractor failure.<sup>16</sup> All of these problems were demonstrated in the time I spent working with the organization. Turmoil among the staff and research teams was, moreover, found to be normative and not exceptional. Researchers confided to me that conflict and poor working conditions typified their experience of working for HTS on deployment. HTS staff members openly voiced frustration that they were having difficulty finding follow-up assignments with the government as their contracts all approached termination. Consequently, while my observations support these criticisms, such an assessment stops short and belies more comprehensive explanations revealed to me during my tenure with HTS, as I noted there was a discernible institutional failing by design—a failing that implicated both the institutional culture and leadership of HTS. But instead of focusing on individual-level failure, I looked to the organization itself as I questioned why, for example, such a well-funded organization would tolerate such a low level of institutional competency?

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<sup>14</sup> Lee R.M, *Unobtrusive Methods in Social Research* (Buckingham: Open University Press) (2000).

<sup>15</sup> Schrag, ZM, *Ethical Imperialism: Institutional Review Boards and the Social Sciences, 1965–2009*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press) (2010).

<sup>16</sup> Whitney Kassel (2015).

The reasons for this, I will argue now, were purposive and functional. Despite HTS declarations that they aimed to produce social science research, their actions betrayed an organization that never aspired to accomplish this on a practice level. This explains why there was such a high tolerance for researchers with a deficit of skills and credentials. Rather than attribute research shortcomings to a combination of the above-cited failures and benign ignorance, I observed that some of these things appeared to be meticulously cultivated. To this end, critical voices in my research cohort, a number of whom possessed professional-level research credentials, were all terminated within weeks of their arrival for training at the Kansas facility. In my own case, I managed to remain with the group for three months, a reprieve that was temporary and purchased with silence. Once I determined there was no “science” in the HTS approach to social science, it was the act of asserting a critical voice that secured my exit from the program.

One functional advantage secured by employing credentialed (but not necessarily practiced/trained) researchers was that it furnished the Army and the U.S. government with an imprimatur of sorts—one that could be used to advance “truth” claims to support operational needs that were already determined. Worthy of note was that there was an outsized representation of credentialed economists represented in my research cohort, many of whom had been employed by the failed coalition provisional authority in Iraq; no one in this group demonstrated more than a passing familiarity with social science field research methods (though all appeared to be accomplished, even skilled, government institutional actors).

Hiring poorly trained researchers conveyed another distinct advantage: such individuals were less likely to register ethical complaints when conducting field research. This had the added benefit of minimizing role conflict and concern for human subjects because these particular individuals lacked professional/ethical social identities. In other words, they would not conventionally self-identify as researchers. Such individuals could be trusted to operate outside the boundaries of professional research practice guidelines, especially when working with vulnerable populations.

For the record, HTS researchers did not indicate to me that they were acting unethically in a wilful sense; many were simply ignorant of what constituted ethical research practice. Nevertheless, despite these professional lapses and failures, HTS researchers operated as effective accomplices to the extent that they worked to produce the “fake science” that was ultimately sold as research. In this case, I find social science research methods and discourses were used by the Army and HTS to “de-operationalize” what was always a military intelligence mission. The language of science here worked as an effective cloaking device insofar as it helped to conceal the organization’s real intelligence gathering mission. But here again one must ask, *Why?*

One need only reflect back to examine the U.S. Executive level strategy that was implemented in the days pre-dating the launching of the Iraq War. During that time,

research and intelligence data were produced by the Office of Special Plans as part of an effort to justify an interventionist foreign policy—war to put it bluntly—that might be sold to the American people. HTS fit this model, even as it played a small but important role. Operating under the pretence of methodological positivism in conducting research operations, HTS researchers satisfied the “appearance” of possessing expertise, despite not producing research of substance. This in turn helped impart a veneer of respectability to HTS, whose data constituted the substance of reports provided to U.S. military clients and other constituents distributed across the government and beyond—to all stakeholders who stood to benefit from data that supported the political agenda to perpetuate ongoing war.

In light of this, I argue that what occurred with HTS is not isolated to the organization itself; as my observations demonstrate, the social dynamics that came to define HTS were operating across public as well as private institutional boundaries: government, military, and private/commercial. In other words, the problems associated with HTS are indicative of multi-level institutional phenomena; they potentially demonstrate a potential shift in broad-scale knowledge-power dynamics across different institutional sites, many of which are operate under the aegis of providing “good governance”.

To this end, the HTS case illustrates how war is bound up in efforts to shape ongoing understanding of concepts of knowledge, objectivity, evidence, and truth. No longer simply attuned to the control of land and resources, war shapes the scientific knowledge-making process as evidenced in how it performs research practice. In what is shaping up to be a “post-policy” and “post-truth era” of politics, groups like HTS are merely functioning nodes in a chain of organizations engaged in similar work to produce battlefield intelligence for the U.S. government and its military. As it turns out now, the trend of hybrid public/private entities, including corporations like the one that hired me (BAE Systems), operate as part an assemblage of intelligence providers, including others more recently like WikiLeaks and Cambridge Data Analytics, all of whom are vying for leverage in efforts to gather human intelligence data to engage in politics, policy, and war by other means.<sup>17</sup> Like HTS, these organizations operate on the periphery, virtually, and otherwise, in social spaces dispersed far beyond the limits of ethical scrutiny. They remain invisible to the public eye as they set about the process of making “truth” and what is essentially secret fake science.

To summarize, the findings from my field work support a claim that the research products produced by HTS were never intended to conform to the guidelines of ethical empirical research in the traditional sense; their fundamental approach to research

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<sup>17</sup> Von Clausewitz, Karl, *On War*, trans. Col. J.J. Graham. New and Revised edition with Introduction and Notes by Col. F.N. Maude, in Three Volumes (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & C., 1918) (Vol. 1. Chapter 1: What is War?).

revealed they were always producing a military intelligence product. And so it follows, the credentialed degree holders hired by HTS were never expected to conduct research operations; they were hired to be role-players who were tasked to perform science in the making. These findings further demonstrate how individual and institutional actors, working cooperatively, if not always in a coordinated fashion, with counterparts in the U.S. Army, government, and private corporate sectors, operated to benefit their mutual interests, as these were articulated within a classified, closed, self-referential, information loop. Taken together, my findings suggest that HTS failures constituted a success at a military intelligence strategy level.

## Conclusion

In a speech to Rutgers University in 2016, the former U.S. President Barak Obama said, “The rejection of facts; the rejection of reason and science—that is the path to decline”.<sup>18</sup> This political backdrop offers a basis for reflection, as it provides context for problems unfolding in the contemporary period. Evidence-based fact and truth are increasingly being rendered unstable by efforts to substitute “alternative facts” and “fake news”. I argued that HTS was producing “fake science” to the extent that what they claimed they were doing and what they were actually doing were not the same. The purpose of the organization was not, as HTS stated, to produce “socio-culturally informed research” for military commanders and staff; rather, the aim was to collect military intelligence data to support an interventionist foreign policy strategy. Put another way, HTS is what happens when rationally performative social science is given access to weapons and a budget. Through the act of subverting research methods, they upended conventional research practice to produce social facts that fit a pre-determined war strategy. As such, they rendered questionable the knowledge produced by their efforts. The impact HTS had on academic debates should not, furthermore, be underestimated. To be sure, there may be long-lasting implications for how the academic disciplines themselves might be shaped by wartime knowledge-making practices. When we consider that military and defence funding, unlike traditional academic funding, is potentially more resilient (if not entirely impervious) to the market influences and political whims that have come to typify the neoliberal takeover of universities, it is not inconceivable that the insurgent “expert” of the future might not be an expert at all.

The HTS research program, it was noted, ended its operations. The findings presented here remain relevant, nonetheless, as they offer a window into understanding ongoing developments in regard to knowledge-making practices; they call attention to

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<sup>18</sup> Keynote address given at Rutgers University’s commencement, May 15, 2016.

how HTS, even if it is judged to be a “failed” research organization, managed to succeed in ways that may be relevant to understanding the current political moment. The HTS research model, for all of its flaws, is symptomatic of larger social, political, and economic problems. As a model, I have argued that it presented us with a disruptive counterinsurgency model for doing research. Boundaries were blurred and things were not as they seemed. Far from demonstrating that unethical “bad” science was produced, I argued that HTS was *performing* research, which is a qualitatively important distinction. As such, the HTS example illustrates how war and militarism work together to reconfigure knowledge-making practices. The result was “fake science” produced not as matter of ineptitude, but through purposive design. In this respect, the HTS descent into pseudo-science lies within a continuum of developments in which the contrived performance of empirical research becomes normative in efforts to “make” and “un-make” the factual registers of military research operations.

To summarize briefly, ethical empirical research methods were not incorporated in HTS’s approach to conducting research. They did not, based on my observations, possess the technical knowledge or ability to incorporate competent ethical research methodology into their field research practice. My situated observations of the culture of the organization—that is, the social context within which research was produced and where I worked and produced reports—do not support findings that there were intentions to produce this type of research. To be clear, this is not to say that the organization was not capable of producing a descriptive field report that contained value. I am simply stating that I did not observe evidence of this. Furthermore, using untrained field researchers who possessed neither the technical research acumen nor, for that matter, the appropriate reflexive, tactical, or situational awareness to assure their own safety and the safety of their subjects was a despicable practice. The researchers themselves, although many seemed not to know it, were in my estimate expendable assets. Deception and to some extent “self-deception” appeared to be hard-wired into the group’s organizational culture, which operated as a small unit functional elaboration of the larger deception upon which the entire political project of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Middle East continue to be based. One area in which HTS did excel was in efforts to maintain the appearance of doing research. This was, in my view, accomplished to the detriment of conducting effective, substantive, ethical research operations.

As for the issue of whether or not social scientists should embed themselves with armies conducting military operations, I think the ethical question is settled. The original AAA mandate—that professionally identified social scientists should not affiliate with these operations—was in my estimate both appropriate and necessary. The problem is that HTS research operations were never intended to function as stated; they were always a military intelligence operation. And so on that basis, I concur with findings that suggest military Civil Affairs units and Psychological Operations units

operating within the Army's Special Operations Command are organizationally better equipped to conduct intelligence research operations to meet the needs of the military.<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding, I think there is a legitimate liminal zone that can be carved out where academic researchers working from critical paradigms might conduct ethnographic research within organizations like HTS, recognizing there are access issues and other limitations (security clearance and document classification restrictions), all of which impact publishing. To this end, it is the duty of scholarship to engage with these organizations, if only to bear witness, so they might render visible social phenomena that governments, armies, and corporations would prefer to remain occluded from observation. Forsaking these realms of inquiry—leaving them to be solely occupied by military researchers—guarantees that military methodologies driven by epistemologies based on ethics of violence will prevail, for they alone will regulate access and determine what counts as knowledge on the battlefield.

HTS reminds us that where there is a public display of performing research, power too is on display. The group's research activities constituted an expression of political power, in which the power to produce "research" functioned to confirm the status of researchers as the "real" knowledge experts. With that, the real power of HTS research lies in how it effectively undermined the boundaries of what constitutes acceptable empirical research practice. In doing so, it operated outside the techno-mechanical process of collecting data; they challenged the boundary of what academics like to think of as the institutional "inside" that defines research practice. Power and research methods worked together in this manner through the modulation of affect to create a research spectacle—a veritable theatre of war, or what Clough (2012) refers to as "a becoming obscene of the social", where there is a "technicalization or socionormalization of violence that resets the limits of obscenity in a redesign of the scene of the social that is resonant with ongoing war".<sup>20</sup> Not empirical certainty, but ambiguity, indeterminacy, and the modulation of affect are the predictable outcomes of research based on a counterinsurgency model. Such a model is arguably incompatible with the pursuit of knowledge to advance human understanding.

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<sup>19</sup> Connable, Ben, "All Our Eggs in a Broken Basket: How the Human Terrain System is Undermining Sustainable Military Cultural Competence", *Military Review*, (March-April 2009): p. 58.

<sup>20</sup> P.T. Clough, "War By Other Means: What Difference Do(es) the Graphic(s) Make?" In: Karatzogianni, Athina and Adi Kuntsman (eds.) *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion* (London: Palgrave, 2012), p. 28.

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