Social Science Goes to War: The Human Terrain System in Iraq and Afghanistan, ed. Montgomery McFate and Janice H. Laurence

Yvonne R. Masakowski
Scholars: The Centennial History of the U.S. Naval War College (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1984), is “a former professor of naval history” whose history of the College lacks “critical analysis.” At the time of publication, Hattendorf was and remains the Ernest J. King Professor of Maritime History at the Naval War College, and is still recognized as the preeminent scholar on the history of the U.S. Navy at Newport.

In addition to these two notable errors, Playing War still reads like a dissertation in need of another round of editing. Chapter introductions and descriptions of the students are repeated several times and add little to the analysis presented. With the main body of the book ending at 137 pages, this work leaves the reader with the impression that there is still more to explore about the relationship between the interwar war games and how the U.S. Navy fought during the Second World War. While this imperfect volume has some merit, the definitive history of the Naval War College’s interwar war games remains to be written.

Jon Scott Logel


The twenty-first-century security environment has been characterized by numerous cross-cultural battle spaces, such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. Army initiated the human terrain team (HTT) because it needed to address the impact of the human cultural dimension in the combat operational environment. The HTT’s mission was to conduct research (in the social sciences and anthropology) and to advise military commanders about the unique cultural aspects of the local/regional population. In eleven chapters, McFate and Laurence have compiled an invaluable collection of experiences from the scientists involved. They afford us the opportunity to accompany these scientists on their journeys, as they share their perspectives with the military. We learn the value of embedding social scientists with military units and how important their knowledge and expertise are for military leaders to achieve an understanding of today’s complex, culturally diverse operational environments. In this way, social scientists can help military leaders make more-informed, and therefore better, decisions.

General David Petraeus (Ret.) states in the foreword that the “key terrain in irregular warfare is the human terrain.” He highlights the role social scientists played in shaping the cultural framework of the battle space and how they contributed to military leaders’ knowledge to ensure mission success. General Petraeus posits the notion that the military indeed may require even greater sociocultural knowledge to conduct future military operations.

Today’s military leaders are well trained in tactics, techniques, and procedures; however, the twenty-first-century battle space presents inherent difficulties for military leaders. One of their principal deficiencies is a lack of cross-cultural competence (C3). C3 is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures. As the number of multinational coalition military operations
continues to increase, military leaders will need to achieve C³ to be effective. Military leaders must be prepared to adapt to a wide range of cultural, social, and political challenges in the operational environment. Education in cultural competency, cultural intelligence, and social intelligence plays a pivotal role in a military leader's ability to lead, build relationships based on trust, and develop unity of effort and command within complex, culturally diverse environments. A leader’s ability to engage and communicate effectively requires that he or she understand the unique social and behavioral qualities of the local population. This capability is a requirement for successful negotiation and conflict management. Lack of it can mean the difference between success and failure.

This volume is a tribute to the knowledge and expertise of social scientists who served as members of HTTs. Their stories serve as evidence of their unique experiences, insights, and contributions toward achieving cultural understanding in combat zones in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan. It is worth noting that HTTs offered more than just cultural expertise. Rather, they made a considerable investment in developing relationships with local people and provided their military units with critical assessments about operating in and among members’ host nations. This information was critical for military decision makers and those involved in counterinsurgency campaigns, so it was critical for the social scientists as soon as possible to build rapport and credibility with the local population, as well as with the military units to which they were assigned. Laurence and McFate invite us to share their experiences as we join each scientist on that journey.

For example, James Dorough-Lewis’s chapter, “Investing in Uncertainty,” provides a clear illustration of some of the challenges the social scientists faced in the HTTs. We learn about the need to delineate between social scientists and members of the Intelligence Community. This distinction is critical for social scientists as they attempt to establish relationships based on trust and credibility. Their research task is to assess and understand the cultural nuances and the cultural environment that may impact the overall military operation; in contrast, the intelligence analyst probes the environment for meaningful information that will be used to understand the operational environment. The social scientist seeks to understand each individual’s cultural perspective and relationships among people living in the environment. Social scientists and anthropologists in the HTTs work with the local people to build relationships based on trust and to find ways to help local people continue with their daily lives. In one such example (p. 196), the Army had built a hospital to meet all the security requirements. However, Sunni women needing medical care preferred to travel to a hospital an hour away—rather than travel the path on which their husbands, sons, and brothers had lost their lives. Social scientists were able to communicate with these women and understand their cultural perspective, which they shared with the military team. This incident highlights the need to understand the culture, beliefs, and values of the local people when operating in a culturally diverse region. Social scientists provide a cultural lens toward the local people, examining and explaining how they perceive what is happening in their unique cultural point of view.
This book provides the perspectives and experiences of social scientists who, embedded with military teams, shared their knowledge and cultural expertise to help military leaders make informed decisions within culturally diverse environments. This volume will prove to be an invaluable resource for military leaders, as it highlights the importance and impact of understanding the role of cultural diversity in military operations. McFate and Laurence have performed a service to the military by providing a valuable resource for all military leaders to guide them in future military operations. In addition, this book applauds those scientists who were daring enough to join in the human terrain effort and share their experiences with us. The ability to achieve cultural competence must be viewed as a war-fighting imperative and as a prerequisite for all future military leaders. This volume is informative and inspiring—a must-read for all those interested in the cultural and human dimensions of multinational warfare. The detailed bibliography provides recommendations for further reading to enhance the reader’s knowledge of this topic.

YVONNE R. MASAKOWSKI


Once again, Sean Naylor has produced an authoritative and well-written book. Relentless Strike chronicles the history of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), America’s top-tier special operations military unit. To the benefit of history and the reader, and most likely to the consternation of the Pentagon, Naylor’s knowledge of special operations and his extensive contacts reveal the temperaments and competencies of key individuals and the details of numerous clandestine missions and organizational capabilities. Many will condemn Naylor for revealing these secrets, but the fault is not with Naylor; it is with those who talked. The book also, perhaps unintentionally, exposes flaws in how the United States wages war, as well as the limitations of special operations. The book begins by recounting the creation of JSOC after the failed Iranian hostage rescue operation in 1980. New threats to national security required a new military organization that had the resources and capabilities to respond quickly to crises and apply specialized military capabilities to rescue hostages, kill terrorists, and neutralize weapons of mass destruction. Naylor reminds us that senior military leaders opposed the new command, but the failure in Iran trumped parochial thinking. The second and more interesting part of the book addresses the expansion of JSOC as one result of the momentous impact of the 9/11 attacks. From the beginning, JSOC had significant advantages over both conventional military organizations and nonaffiliated special operations units. The units placed under JSOC’s direct control were the best-trained and best-resourced units in the military. Each of these units had its own sophisticated—and grueling—selection process. Remarkably, JSOC headquarters had nothing that mirrored such careful processes for selecting its staff. Also oddly, the Pentagon had no process for selecting a JSOC commander whose experience...