

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Engaging With National Security

As the AAA Executive Board convened on November 30, newspaper headlines across the country alerted us to secret prisons maintained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that appear to be staging areas for the interrogation of terrorism suspects. On the board's agenda that day were two items related to this breaking news: a review of the AAA's acceptance of CIA recruitment advertisements in AAA publications, and consideration of the Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholars Program (PRISP).

It was impossible not to sense the anticipation that preceded discussion on these two items. Board members recognized the potential significance of any actions they might take with regard to anthropology's involvement in national security and intelligence affairs. Acknowledging the complexity of the two issues and sensing that a more inclusive, structured and in-depth conversation was warranted, the board provisionally declined placement of CIA recruitment advertisements on its online job portal and in all of its print publications, pending further examination by the AAA of the discipline's overall engagement with US national security. The board also authorized the establishment of a commission to review issues related to such engagement.

The board's discussions on CIA recruitment advertisements and PRISP were passionate, thoughtful and forward-looking. Board members recognized that an ad hoc approach to national security and intelligence matters—that is, occasional input on issues that arouse membership interest—may no longer be viable at a time when security continues to be an urgent public policy priority, and when policymakers are increasingly seeking out anthropological expertise. Instead, the board leaned toward a more comprehensive “grappling” with the fundamental questions, such as what are the key ethical, methodological, practical and political challenges faced by the profession in its future engagement in national security and intelligence? Is the AAA sufficiently informed to provide all segments of its membership with meaningful guidance on these matters? And what questions must be answered for anthropology to coherently define and structure its relevance to the national security and intelligence communities?

The board considered several arguments for rejecting or accepting recruitment advertisements from the CIA. Reasons against acceptance included: the CIA's history of human rights abuses as well as the recent revelation about secret prisons; the potential for disruption to anthropological research and even threats to anthropologists falsely seen as operatives of the CIA or other clandestine agencies; and the CIA's general disregard for the principles of informed consent and transparency. Reasons for acceptance included: uphold-

ing the right to freedom of speech; supporting the freedom of members to pursue employment options and make their own ethical choices; recognizing that applied work in anthropology is often undertaken for a client, implying limited transparency—in this matter the CIA is not unique; and disallowing a job advertisement may either have no ultimate consequence on the involvement of anthropologists in national security matters or perhaps worse, would further limit the use of anthropological knowledge in arenas where it is needed to protect the rights of individuals with little access to power.



In considering the PRISP, the board noted the larger context. Questions posed but unresolved included: How does secrecy, nondisclosure and clandestine research related to perceived links between anthropology and national security entities impact anthropologists in the field? And to what extent does or doesn't the discipline's engagement with intelligence and national security—via the PRISP and other mechanisms—constitute a threat to academic openness

and independence? The board did not attempt to answer these questions as it did not have the time, all of the necessary background information, or the expertise to do so. Rather, the board resolved to identify key issues and provide some initial architecture for a more systematic inquiry.

The decision to establish a commission represents a commitment by the AAA to facilitate an informed, educational conversation about the complex terrain linking anthropology to national security policy in the US. The decision is an acknowledgement that our discipline does not yet have all the answers or all the information necessary to navigate a familiar challenge to the anthropology community: negotiating the relevance of our expertise in rapidly changing global contexts

In the weeks ahead, the board will commence the work of establishing the commission—crafting a charge, defining a scope of work, specifying a process for appointing members, developing a work plan and timetable, and setting clear objectives. Above all else, the commission will be oriented more to chart a way forward for anthropology and national security by addressing the fundamental issues relevant to both, and less to render judgment on the rightness or wrongness of any particular approach. In the end, it is the goal of the commission to better enable the association to stay true to a vital part of its mission: the dissemination of anthropological knowledge and its use to better the environments and lives of individuals throughout the world.

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