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Anthropologists Critique Pentagon's 'Minerva': AAA Media Conference Call July 31, 2-3pm EST

Anthropologists have a long and, at times, troubled history of working with the military during times of conflict—from World War II to the present-day war on terror.

Recent controversies surrounding the Pentagon's Human Terrain System, a \$40 million program that embeds cultural advisors in combat brigades in Iraq and Afghanistan, have spilled over into new anxieties surrounding the Pentagon's 'Minerva' program, a Defense Department initiative to fund social science and humanities research in Pentagon-designated national security-related areas, including terrorism, religious fundamentalism and Chinese military and technology.

Following a speech on April 14 by Defense Secretary Robert M Gates announcing his vision for Minerva, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) issued a letter from its president to address some concerns about the program. The letter called for a redirection of program management to external organizations that have extensive experience in peer-review and are familiar with the ethical standards and concerns of the anthropology discipline.

"Rigorous, balanced and objective peer review is the bedrock of successful and productive programs that sponsor academic research. Agencies such as NSF, NIH and NEH have decades of experience in building an infrastructure of respected peer reviewers who referee individual grant proposals and give their time to sit on panels," President Low stated in the letter to key White House and congressional leaders.

On June 30, the National Science Foundation signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Defense Department, sealing the deal that the two agencies will cooperate on the management of Minerva for the next three years, with the possibility of an extended contract.

According to the MOU, research proposals will be evaluated by the NSF's standard merit-review panels, but Pentagon officials will have decision-making power in deciding who sits on the panels. Research will not be classified and researchers are free to publish their results.

Despite the AAA's enthusiastic support for NSF involvement with Minerva, there remain concerns within the discipline that research will only be funded when it supports the Pentagon's agenda. Other critics of the program, including the Network of Concerned Anthropologists, have raised concerns that the program would discourage research in other important areas and undermine the role of the university as a place for independent discussion and critique of the military.

Following discussion on Minerva, the July 31 conference call will feature a discussion on the global food crisis with anthropologist Sol Katz, co-chair of the AAA Task Force on World Food Problems.

For more information or to sign up for the call, contact Jennifer Steffensen at 703-528-1902 x 3039 or jsteffensen@aaanet.org.

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Useful Links:

DoD Broad Agency Announcement:

<http://www.arl.army.mil/www/DownloadedInternetPages/CurrentPages/DoingBusinesswithARL/research/08-R-0007.pdf>

Letter from AAA President Setha M Low: <http://www.aaanet.org/issues/policy-advocacy/upload/Minerva-Letter.pdf>

Statement by the Network of Concerned Anthropologists:

<http://concerned.anthropologists.googlepages.com/concernsaboutdod%27sminervaproject>

NSF Press Release:

http://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=111829&govDel=USNSF_51

AAA President Setha M Low's Web page:

<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/Psychology/faculty/slow.htm>

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Founded in 1902, the American Anthropological Association is the world's largest professional organization of anthropologists and others interested in anthropology, with an average annual membership of more than 10,000. The Arlington, Va.-based association represents all specialties within anthropology — cultural anthropology, biological (or physical) anthropology, archaeology, linguistics and applied anthropology.