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A N T H R O P O L O G I C A L
A S S O C I A T I O N

Secretary Michael Chertoff
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528

July 25, 2008

Secretary Chertoff:

I write to you on behalf of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in response to recent reports that United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials have been searching the private electronic devices of Americans returning home from abroad. Founded in 1902 and headquartered in the nation's capital, the AAA is the world's largest organization of anthropologists, with over 11,000 members.

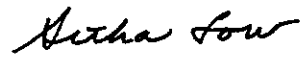
The AAA has recently learned that the DHS, through the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has allowed the search of private electronic devices, including laptops, of Americans reentering the United States. These searches include going over personal contents such as phone and email records. As anthropologists, we are especially concerned with this development, as confidential information, such as field notes, could potentially be reviewed.

The Fourth Amendment to the US Constitution requires that federal authorities have a warrant to conduct a search and seizure of personal property and all US citizens and legal residents have these rights. Current practices have grave implications for anthropologists, social scientists and their research participants, as informants allow researchers into their lives precisely because they believe they have the ability to protect them and obscure their identities. The ability of scholars to honor their commitments to these individuals and communities could be compromised if a search were to take place.

Unlawful searches not only violate the rights of the scholar, but they unlawfully infringe upon the lives of our research participants. We urge you to revisit this policy, and allow the critical work of social scientists to continue unencumbered and uninterrupted.

Thank you for your prompt consideration of this matter. If you have any questions, comments or concerns, please feel free to contact Damon Dozier, AAA Director of Public Affairs, at (703) 528-1902 or ddozier@aaanet.org

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Setha Low".

Setha Low
President

Cc: Kip Hawley, Administrator, Transportation Security Administration
W. Ralph Basham, Commissioner, Customs and Border Protection