

9. Military Anthropologists

Winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people proved to be more of a challenge than the U.S. military command had anticipated. In 2003, the military turned to social scientists for help in understanding the complexities of interwoven tribal values and of local socio-economic realities of Iraqi culture. For instance, when one consultant realized that men from a particular village joined the insurgency for the wages the men could give their impoverished widowed mothers, the military began a job-training program for village widows. Similar responses to local issues reduced the incidence of armed conflict by identifying and addressing the underlying social and economic problems that fed the insurgency. As a result of these successes, the Department of Defense established the Human Terrain System, which embedded social scientists in military units in Iraq and Afghanistan and laid the foundation for the Minerva Consortia.

The Minerva Consortia were created to strengthen ties between the military and academe, with the Pentagon supporting and utilizing social science research. Priorities were established and included strengthening national security, addressing terrorism, understanding religious and ideological perspectives, assessing Chinese foreign military capacity and technological advances, and exploiting new disciplines that might emerge from current conflicts (as game theory emerged from Cold War technologies).

In an April 2008 speech to the Association of American Universities, Robert Gates, Secretary of Defense and former of Texas A & M University president, assured university officials that "...the key principle of all components of the Minerva Consortia will be complete openness and rigid adherence to academic freedom and integrity. There will be no room for 'sensitive but unclassified', or other such restrictions in this project. We are interested in furthering our knowledge of these issues and in soliciting diverse points of view – regardless of whether those views are critical of the Department's efforts. Too many mistakes have been made over the years because our government and military did not understand – or even seek to understand – the countries or cultures we were dealing with."

Social scientists were divided in their support of the Minerva Consortia. Proponents welcomed a closer collaboration between universities and the military. They applauded the Pentagon's commitment to understand diverse perspectives and values, claiming this had already helped reduce military conflicts. Establishing democracy and improving local governance in villages where armed conflict had occurred improved quality of life and safety in these communities by treating the disease rather than attacking the symptoms.

Opponents argued that academic and military values were so fundamentally different that this collaboration was faced with an inherent and irresolvable conflict between, on the one hand, the university's commitment to open discourse and continual challenging of ideas and, on the other hand, the military's strict hierarchy and unquestioned discipline. Opponents expressed fears that the military would exert undue influence on research programs and priorities; that researchers working in military zones could be perceived as spies, endangering themselves and future social scientists working on strictly academic research; and that military objectives violated professional ethics in the social sciences.

The American Anthropological Association, the world's largest professional anthropological organization with over 11,000 members, was among the most vocal critics of the Human Terrain System. The association affirmed the obligation of anthropologists to work with the government to enhance appreciation of differences of culture and value, and to help shape and implement policy. The organization's executive board, however, denounced the involvement of anthropologists in the Human Terrain System as a violation of the organization's Code of Ethics. "In both proposing and carrying out research, anthropological researchers must be open about the purpose(s), potential impacts, and source(s) of support for research projects" (Section III). It continues, "Anthropological researchers must do everything in their power to ensure that their research does not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of the people with whom they work, conduct research, or perform other professional activities" (Section IIIA2). Additional concerns involved violations of the code's requirement to obtain informed consent and identify the impact the study may have on subjects (IIIA4, 3), avoid exploiting subjects (IIIA6), maintain the integrity and dignity of the profession (IIIB2), and ensure that knowledge gained by research is used responsibly and not misused for social or political reasons (IIIC1).