

## THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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## THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

# Enlisting Social Scientists

Compiled by EVAN R. GOLDSTEIN | JULY 04, 2008 ✓ PREMIUM

The Minerva Consortium — named for the Roman goddess of wisdom — was introduced by Robert M. Gates, secretary of defense, in a speech before the Association of American Universities in April. Quoting the late historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., who said after Sputnik's launch, in 1957, that the United States "must return to the acceptance of eggheads and ideas if it is to meet the Russian challenge," Gates declared his interest in establishing a project that would finance social-science research relevant to national security.

Two months later, the Department of Defense has officially begun the new program, inviting universities to apply for grants to study topics like the Chinese military, cultural change in the Islamic world, terrorist ideologies, and Iraq under Saddam Hussein — research that will be based, according to a Pentagon announcement, on the "vast number of documents and other media" that "came into the possession" of the American military during the war in Iraq.

This effort to foster cooperation between the Pentagon and academe has elicited reactions ranging from excitement to deep skepticism to outright opposition.

Setha M. Low, president of the American Anthropological Association and professor of environmental psychology, Graduate Center of the City University of New York: We believe that it is of paramount importance for anthropologists to study the roots of terrorism and other forms of violence, and to seek answers to the urgent questions voiced by many in the United States and other countries since the attacks of September 11. However, we are deeply concerned that funding such research through the Pentagon may pose a potential conflict of interest and undermine the practices of peer review that

play such a vital role in maintaining the integrity of research in social-science disciplines. From a practical standpoint, we believe it would be more efficient and more likely to produce authoritative results if Pentagon support for such research was managed through such agencies as the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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. ...

We are concerned that the Department of Defense would turn for assistance in developing a selection process to those who are not intimately familiar with the rigorous standards of our discipline. (Open letter from the American Anthropological Association)

Maximilian C. Forte, assistant professor of anthropology, Concordia University: Given the cash-strapped nature of many universities, and the many researchers without funding, one can expect that there will be many "compromises" and many "pragmatic reconsiderations" as even perhaps past opponents of [the Human Terrain System, another Defense program] find their way to submitting a grant proposal. Producing "nuanced" justifications for imperialism will become a subindustry in itself.

Nowhere in the proposed areas of research is there a call for studies of how decades of U.S. foreign intervention, invasions, occupations, and the systematic violations of human rights worldwide might have at least sparked some little militant opposition. ... As a result, the academic merit of projects funded under this scheme is automatically nullified. (Open Anthropology)

David Betz, senior lecturer, King's College London: The amount of money being stumped up is not huge — it is no Manhattan Project. It's the Defense Department's money being coughed up whereas arguably it should be coming from other agencies. And the appetite of universities for cash is so large (higher education is not cheap to operate, particularly to staff) that a few million is not going to go terribly far. All I'd say is

(a) it's a start, (b) other departments should be doing this, the DoD should be commended for actually doing it, and (c) if the funding is carefully targeted on issues which are otherwise extremely difficult to get funding councils to support, then it could make a useful impact. ...

The U.S. and the U.K. have been fought to a standstill in two theaters by global jihadists not because they're better at moving metal than we are but because they're better at the purposeful shaping of the ideas and beliefs of others to warlike effect. That's the cutting edge for insurgency research. (Kings of War)

Candace de Russy, writer and former member of the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York: Gates promises that the Minerva projects will hew strictly to "openness and rigid adherence to academic freedom and integrity." But would the controlling powers in the humanities and social sciences — those, in my view, primarily responsible for the treacherous treatment of military recruiters on campuses — respond in kind? What confidence can one have — or should Gates have — that this leftist monopoly can advance the kind of knowledge this nation needs to confront jihad extremism, ethnic conflict, and the other new, complex threats that he cites? (Phi Beta Cons, National Review Online)

gsed4, blogger: It is important to remember that there is a past and current history of governments' using professional expertise to justify and/or support human-rights abuses. (Global Studies in Education Digest)

Steven R. Corman, professor of communication, Arizona State University at Tempe: My first reaction to the project is "Hooray! What took so long?" This seems to be part of a growing realization in the upper reaches of the Department of Defense about the importance of soft power. ...

So kudos to the DOD for wanting to fund important social-science research on terrorism and other national security matters. But if they want research that will break new ground in a timely manner, they need to kick up the funding levels a few notches. (COMOPS Journal)

Network of Concerned Anthropologists: The United States university system is already

highly militarized — that is, many universities take in a large proportion of their research funding from military sources. This is problematic for four reasons:

- a. The fields so supported are distorted by focus on issues of utility to war making. Whole fields of study hypertrophy and others shrink or are never developed. ...
- b. These research foci begin to structure what gets taught to students and what research projects students themselves see as the best options for their own work. A brain drain from other research directions occurs.
- c. The dependence on single sources of funding with their own agenda tends to reduce intellectual autonomy in ways that go beyond the selection of subject matter for research.
- d. The university becomes an instrument rather than a critic of war making, and spaces for critical discussion of militarism within the university shrink. (Statement from the Network of Concerned Anthropologists)

Richard Stern, emeritus professor of literature, University of Chicago: The most level-headed, wise, and modestly self-assured of George W. Bush's appointees, Robert Gates, has proposed a Rooseveltian enrichment of the already de-Rumsfelded Pentagon. ...

There is mention of humanities scholars, none for poets and novelists, a loss. (In *Three Days of the Condor*, the Robert Redford character works for a small CIA outfit that reads such bizarre material in order to pick up out-of-the-box suggestions for unspecified machinations.) I just finished John Updike's novel *Terrorist*, one of his many recent books that most critics slammed. But Updike may be the wisest of all American observers, and I trust that Minervans will read — though it won't be necessary to fund — him. ...

The Pentagon Minervans shouldn't ignore jokes, irony, sarcasm, cynicism, or wit of any sort. The human enterprise, even in its destructive and diabolic forms, turns just as often on these axes as on the doom-heavy ones Messrs. Bush, Cheney, Petraeus, and McCain apparently prefer. (Open University, *The New Republic Online*)

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