

By Stephen Glain
Illustration by Christiane Grauert

The Pentagon Goes to College



FOR JOHN ALLISON, A RETIRED cultural anthropologist, it was a cold encounter with the business end of winning hearts and minds. In October 2009, he volunteered to embed with U.S. troops in Afghanistan as part of the Pentagon's Human Terrain System, a program set up ostensibly to ease relations between occupier and occupied. Allison, who had done fieldwork in Afghanistan during the late 1960s, wanted to return to the country to prevent further loss of civilian lives, and said as much to recruits during an orientation session.

"Some of my Afghan friends have died," Allison told his colleagues, "some having been executed because of their association with U.S. agents." That did not sit well with one of his fellow trainees, a retired U.S. Army colonel, who said he himself was participating in the system only because he "didn't want to see one more U.S. soldier's life lost." When Allison expressed sympathy for innocent Afghans who were killed by U.S. errors of judgment, his antagonist responded that he didn't

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“give a fuck about those people.”

Arriving in Afghanistan as part of a five-member team, Allison quickly recognized the civilian-military collaboration as a sham. While interviewing villagers in contested areas, he and his colleagues were forced to wear military uniforms and shoulder firearms—hardly appropriate attire when doing ethnographic fieldwork—and he was allowed no more than six or seven minutes to interview subjects before he and the rest of his squad would evacuate for fear of sniper fire. In early 2010, Allison resigned from the Human Terrain System. The program, he says, “was never an attempt at cross-fertilization between civilian and military sides, only an attempt to cover up a brutal war and occupation.”

In December 2009, the American Anthropological Association released a withering critique of the Human Terrain System, citing its “potentially irreconcilable goals which, in turn, lead to irreducible tensions with respect to the program’s basic identity.” Nevertheless, it remains a key part of the Pentagon’s counterinsurgency doctrine. It is a byproduct of Defense Secretary Robert Gates’s culture-centric approach to irregular warfare, and it is burdened by the same fatal tensions that bedevil other military-civilian partnerships encouraged under his watch. For civilians in the field, “collaboration” in reality becomes capitulation—or collusion.

Take the Minerva Initiative. Launched in April 2008, it funds academic research into everything from the political economy of terrorism to resource depletion. Minerva supporters say it will help reconcile the estrangement between the nation’s military and academic domains. A corps of vocal anthropologists, however, regards it as a nefarious bid to militarize the social sciences. Just as psychologists have aided military interrogation teams that employ torture, these scholars say, Minerva seeks to build

cadres of pliant academes who will provide data and intelligence for the sake of wars to come. It is, says David Price, a professor of anthropology at St. Martin’s College in Washington, “designed to give the tools of culture to those in the military who will be told where to invade and occupy, not to those who might be asked of the wisdom of such action.”

Price also worries about the distorting effect of Pentagon money.

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security state where the only source of funding is the military,” he says. “And in this world, there is no reward for low-balling threat assessments.”

Largely because of anthropologists’ longstanding reluctance to work under military patronage, Minerva has failed to generate the kind of basic research it was meant to incubate. Rather, its grant applicants tend to be feedback loops of Beltway orthodoxy: psychologists or political science and international affairs experts with established links

to the military.

A growing number of Minerva projects offer “computational analysis,” a way of collecting and analyzing data that might suggest where the next threat to U.S. interests will emerge. Computational social science not only presumes threats; it provides the coordinates for locating them. “Computational social science aspires to be predictive,” says American University assistant professor Rob Albro. “It assumes there is a there, there. The military loves this because it fits their needs.”

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The shifting bias of Minerva research away from old-school fieldwork and toward computer modeling is only one example of how the military’s vast financial resources are militarizing traditionally civilian realms. With the government’s civilian aid agencies neglected by Congress, the Pentagon is the nation’s fastest-growing source of developmental assistance. Now, as privately funded endowments struggle to stay alive in a prolonged recession, the Pentagon is quickly becoming the nation’s most powerful benefactor of social science research.

American anthropology has a long, if uneasy relationship with the U.S. government. In the mid-nineteenth century, social scientists attached to Washington’s Bureau of Ethnology gathered intelligence for use against indigenous tribes during the American Indian wars. In World War II, anthropologists were recruited to advise insurgency campaigns in Asia and to help run Japanese-American internment camps in the United States. In the early 1950s, the CIA-backed Center

for International Studies at MIT mulled ways to enhance counterinsurgency doctrine, as did the Air Force-funded RAND Corporation. The Vietnam War occasioned many an ill-advised attempt by the military to leverage anthropological expertise, from the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, which became the operational wing of the CIA-led assassination and coercion campaign known as Phoenix, to Project Camelot, in which agents recruited researchers for help in understanding revolutionary movements.

In some ways, Minerva marks a change from its predecessors. For one thing, it is quite transparent, with a public pitchman in Gates, who developed a high esteem for academia while serving as president of Texas A&M University before returning to Washington in 2006. Unveiling Minerva at a meeting of the American Association of Universities, Gates described the project as a Pentagon-funded “consortia of universities” and he assured his hosts of its “complete openness and rigid adherence to academic freedom and integrity.” Interest from anthropologists would be particularly welcomed, he said, especially those with fieldwork experience. As a model for Minerva research, Gates cited “Kremlinology,” the Cold War term for divining the shifting centers of power within the Soviet hierarchy.

Gates’s use of that term is revealing, as it is consistent with the Pentagon’s general provisioning for prolonged, even endless conflict. Minerva, after all, is not expected to yield dividends for decades. Kremlinology was also notoriously primitive and ineffective, and Gates himself was a Kremlinologist. As deputy national security adviser in the late ’80s and early ’90s, he was caught flatfooted by the Soviet Union’s collapse, along with the rest of Washington’s security elite. The term also suggests a nostalgia for superpower confrontation. Small wonder that the

Defense Secretary has identified China’s military, the closest thing the Pentagon has to a peer competitor, as a primary field of Minerva research.

University presidents have warmly welcomed Minerva. For concerned scientists, however, the price of Pentagon largesse was unacceptably high. In a May 2008 letter to the Office of Management and Budget, American Anthropological Association President Setha Low expressed concern “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.” Instead, she urged the Pentagon to channel its funds through established civilian agencies such as the National Science Foundation or the National Institutes of Health, which would attract a broader spectrum of scientists and ensure more authoritative research.

The Defense Department responded by meeting the association less than halfway, and with a stiff condition at that. It set aside \$8 million of Minerva’s \$50 million endowment for allocation by the National Science Foundation, and it insisted on having its own “silent observers” on the foundation’s candidate-selection panel. While a senior National Science Foundation official says the Pentagon has yet to meddle in its review process, anthropologists suspicious of Minerva insist such an arrangement makes a hash of foundation autonomy. In addition, with its own eyes and ears in the room with the reviewers, the Pentagon has access to proposals the foundation declines to endow. As Hugh Gusterson, a professor of anthropology at George Mason University, queried in the August 5, 2008, online edition of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, “Will some proposals judged substandard or overly ideological by academic peer reviewers be quietly rerouted for Pentagon funding through other channels? Will the Pentagon take ideas and information from proposals that

aren’t funded and make use of them in some way? This erodes the integrity of the peer-review process.”

Last September, Minerva grantees gathered at the National Defense University in Washington to brief defense policy officials on their initial findings. Topics ranged from studies of terrorist groups’ genealogies to the effects of climate change on political stability in Africa. They included a project by San Francisco State University psychologist David Matsumoto, a specialist in nonverbal communications, who was awarded a \$1.9 million Minerva grant over five years to examine the role emotion plays in fueling or extinguishing ideologically driven violence. Matsumoto, who has considerable experience working on projects funded by the Pentagon and other security-related agencies, sees little moral hazard in military-commissioned study.

“I see nothing controversial about Minerva,” Matsumoto says. “The work I am doing for Minerva could have been funded by any agency in or out of government, so in that sense I don’t see a danger of conflict of interest.”

Another Minerva fellow, David Beaver, is a linguist at the University of Texas at Austin. He is examining what language reveals about culture, including how leaders relate to groups and, by studying translations of Iraqi army transmissions, how superiors relate to subordinates. Like Matsumoto, Beaver sees little distinction between having the Pentagon as a benefactor of his research and any other U.S. government agency. Unlike Matsumoto, however, he received his Minerva grant from the National Science Foundation, and he concedes there are “ethical issues” associated with direct Defense Department patronage.

“I do worry about DOD funding,” he says. “It can be opaque about how the decisions are made, which is not in the best interests of the nation.” ♦