Anthropology As We Know It

A Casualty of War?

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One of the more pernicious myths in our culture is that generals are technocrats, objectively seeking the best way to get the job done. Of course, the question, what job? comes to mind. As the saying goes, when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail. It is now thoroughly understood that the prior generation of military brass was using the wrong tools, fighting the wrong kind of war in Iraq (Mellowly 2006; West 2009). Faced with an impending cataclysm, the later Bush administration underwent a paradigm shift in the upper policy echelons, turning to its prophet, General David Petraeus. In his vision, the military had to retool for a newly imagined future of ‘long wars’ against irregular forces that are mixed in with the population we need to win over to our side. The new doctrine was the US Army’s (2006) FM 3-24, Counterinsurgency (González 2009: 8–12; Nagli 2007).

There was and is much opposition to this shift, both in and around the services (Bacevich 2008; Corn 2009; Dunlap 2008; Gentile 2008; Katel 2008). Traditional branches such as artillery have been hung out to dry, and much of Navy and Air Force operations seem less important than they used to. Fighters such as the F-22 are designed to combat other advanced fighters, not to fight long wars, so procurement has been cut back. On the other hand, critics ask, what happens if North Korea invades South Korea? Turf and funding fights within the Department of Defense (DOD) are legion and legendary. They remain intense (Gates 2009), and no doubt many would be glad to see Petraeus fall. But he is ascendant now—as demonstrated by his recent promotion to head the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Bumiller and Landler 2011)—and looks to be the dominating strategist for the foreseeable future.

Petraeus and those around him have rediscovered the basics of counter-insurgency warfare, directed at winning ‘the hearts and minds’ of the population in the area of operations (Kilcullen 2006). This means gaining the people’s trust and cooperation, getting them on the side of ‘us good guys’ and against ‘them bad guys’. But the new vision is far more ambitious than old campaigns. It aims to go to the roots of the problem, to eliminate those discontents that fuel insurgencies.

The avowed goal is to find out what the local population wants and needs and then to make it happen. This is clear in the report of then-Commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan Stanley McChrystal (2009: 2–12–16). The new orientation involves basics, such as providing clean water or electricity, collecting garbage, and building roads, but it goes much further. New businesses are to be conceived and started up, jobs created, schools built, and crop substitutions guided. Local and transparent systems of civil administration, finance, and justice are to be developed in place and purged of corruption. Local communities will be empowered. All of this is to be done in the face of a government that, where it exists, is seen as incompetent and thoroughly venal.

In this vision, US boots on the ground would help build new societies from the ground up. Co-visionary John Nagl sees the US military as tasked “not just to dominate land operations, but to change entire societies” (quoted in Bacevich 2008: 2).

There are many positions swirling around this vision. One friendly critic applauds McChrystal, but believes that the close circle around him has turned this doctrine into a “theology” for “armed social engineering” (Corn 2009: 11–12). An even harsher assessment comes from DOD analyst Kaley Sepp (2007: 222):

Call it militant Wilsonianism, call it expeditionary democracy, call it counterinsurgency, but this is ... decidedly not stabilizing. It is an overturning of nations. It is, at its core, a revolution. American soldiers are the instruments of this revolution ... The army would have to lead revolutions on a scale so vast as to completely eclipse what the USA experienced in breaking from Great Britain’s imperial rule, or in reconstructing the defeated slave states of the South following the American Civil War.

Today the talk is mostly about our current wars. But planners are always looking ahead, anticipating wherever a potential threat to US security and interests may be discerned on the horizon. Today Afghanistan, tomorrow the world. At the center of this thinking is the strategic deployment of culture (Brown 2008; Strader 2006).

Let us consider the demand side, as it applies to our profession. What does the military want? First on the list is the cultural preparation of forces—from elementary diversity training to sophisticated cultural competencies—which will enable productive interaction with ‘the locals’ (McFate and Jackson 2005). Second is tactical involvement, including various sorts of expertise applied to hot situations. Detailed understanding of local societies is recognized as an essential component in the full spectrum of military operations. Human Terrain Teams (HTT) are the obvious example, but ‘reach back’ specialists who can analyze local situations are part of the picture (Kipp et al. 2006). Third on the list is contingency preparation, using HTT or other ethnographic intelligence agents to begin mapping local societies and identifying key networks and individuals in areas that may pose a threat to US interests in the future (Featherstone 2008: 68; Renzi 2006). If push came to shove, our troops would have the information that they emphatically did not have when they went into Iraq. Lastly, the military wants predictive tools that would enable DOD planners to foresee issues and respond pro-actively, or to calculate better the leverage of different means of action in a conflict zone. This involves encouraging social science research on topics of security relevance, as in the Minerva Initiative, and elaborate fantasies of computer modeling that utilizes Human Terrain System (HTS) data in order to predict human behavior, among other things (see González, this volume).

We should understand that the DOD is not seeking an ‘anthropological perspective’. It wants ethnography, as the terms ‘cultural knowledge’ and ‘ethnographic intelligence’ imply. Those at the DOD are perfectly happy to work with non-anthropological social scientists, such as religion specialists, political scientists, psychologists, and geographers, to get the information they need—and these fields do not experience the ethical angst that troubles anthropology. This is one of the key unrecognized points in the current debate: much ‘anthropological input’ will be coming from non-anthropologists who have read some anthropology. As an example, the DOD is not interested in the issues that animate anthropological discussions of post-colonial situations. As McFate (2007: 21) puts it: “While long-winded discussions on ‘capitalism’ and ‘colonialism’
may hold great interest for scholars, military personnel have other more pressing tasks to attend to.” The DOD’s main theoretical range seems to run from Tylor’s ‘culture’ to Radcliffe-Brown’s ‘social structure’.

Another important point is that the DOD operates with a ‘micro’ view of anthropology: anthropologists are good for helping to understand what is happening at the village level. Once the military has decided on a course of action for a particular area, then it brings in local knowledge experts to figure how to implement its plan of action more efficiently. Our discipline’s focus on large-scale societal and global structures and processes, always in interaction with local dynamics, is not what military personnel are looking for.

What the DOD does want is spelled out clearly in its recent Army Field Manuals, Operations, Tactics in Counterinsurgency, and Security Force Assistance (US Army 2008, 2009a, 2009b), and in a commissioned study for revamping military intelligence (Flynn, Poitinger, and Batchelor 2010). Woven throughout DOD plans—what its doctrine absolutely requires—is thoroughly processed, detailed, operational, and cultural information for areas of operations in order to improve inter-cultural interaction abilities. This cultural input would contribute to a full spectrum of battlefield operations, from civil development to quick surprise assaults with overwhelming force (Ferguson, forthcoming).

When the DOD views something as necessary, it spends the money to get it—even if it does not work (e.g., anti-missile lasers). Figures for past and projected social science spending is peanuts for the Pentagon, however astronomical the figures seem to us. Requests for fiscal year 2009 totaled $127.4 million for HTS-related projects alone, not including other social science research, education, and so forth (Forte 2009). Leaving aside the much-discussed HTS field (see Ferguson 2011), how will this well-funded demand be manifested within anthropology over the next decade or so?

In several ways. First, the Pentagon’s priorities will have an impact on teaching (McFarland 2005). This comes in different forms and levels (Atrich 2008). There are one-off lectures (with PowerPoint presentations, of course) for pre-deployment forces. At a somewhat higher level, there are regular short courses given at military installations—on basic topics such as “Intro to Anthropology” or “Intro to Islam” (Capuzzo 2007)—as well as proliferating online cultural instruction programs and modules (Maselli 2009). Outside of military contexts, then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates issued a detailed call for greatly increased cooperation between the DOD and research universities (Jaschik 2008a), calling for military personnel courses that are “immediately relevant—the history of the Middle East, anthropology classes on tribal culture, and so on” (Gates 2008: 3).

We may see a surge of enrollments in MA programs in anthropology. For someone charting a military career today or a political scientist wanting to retool in an ethnographic direction, an MA would be a solid investment, especially if subsidized by the DOD. We all know how much university administrations love MA programs. Then there are the PhDs—military persons who obtain the highest degree from research universities (JFC 2008: 49). These ‘military anthropologists’ can provide a basis for a ‘grow our own’ option, in which higher-level anthropology training can be expanded within military postgraduate institutes, thus bypassing the concerns of our profession (Connable 2009: 64).

Second, the manifestation of the Pentagon’s demands will increasingly militarize ‘normal research’, that is, past or future work that is done without any connection to military
goals or funding. Our scholarly literature will be scanned and processed for military relevance, in what the DOD calls "open-source research." The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) has commissioned work on a "Machine Reading Program" that will read everything of any relevance, categorize information, process it through analytic programs, and pass it along to whichever security agency needs it. Every anthropologist should understand that what they publish today may be assimilated into ever-expanding databases. As one authority on military intelligence puts it, open-source information of all sorts is 90 percent of the future intelligence challenge, with the "other 10 percent, the clandestine work, [being] just the more dramatic" (Lieutenant Samuel Wilson, cited in Flynn, Pottinger, and Batchelor 2010: 23).

A third Pentagon demand is DOD-supported research. In April 2008, Gates, a former president of Texas A&M University, announced the Minerva Initiative (Asher 2008; Gates 2008; Jaschik 2008a, 2008b). After a series of private meetings with leaders of the Association of American Universities (AAU), in which the Bush-Obama secretary of defense addressed presidents of leading research universities, Robert Berdahl, the president of the AAU, described his excitement about the project and "the spirit of collaboration between the Pentagon and the university leaders" (Jaschik 2008a). The goal of the Minerva Initiative was to engage disciplines (history, anthropology, sociology, evolutionary psychology) considered to be of strategic importance to US national policy. Details followed—and changed. For five years, $10 million per year was made available in a Pentagon-administered program with five topic areas: (1) Chinese military and technology research, (2) the strategic impact of religious and cultural changes in the Islamic world, (3) analysis of appropriated (some say looted) Iraqi archives, (4) terrorist organizations and ideologies, and (5) new approaches to understanding dimensions of national security, conflict, and cooperation (Asher 2008).

After criticism and discussion of the Pentagon's direct administrative control, another $8 million (or more) for three years was allocated for administration by the National Science Foundation (NSF), but with DOD input on reviewers. Combined, that comes to a minimum of $24 million over the first five years. The NSF's broader topics are (1) terrorist organizations and ideologies, (2) the strategic impact of religious and cultural changes, and (3) political, cultural, and social dynamics under authoritarian regimes. Both programs are explicitly intended to cross disciplines, to build a new "community of security science researchers" (Asher 2008). If anthropologists do not step in, the funding space will be occupied by scholars from political science, sociology, comparative religion, economics, and psychology. No doubt, other sources of funding will also become available.

A fourth Pentagon demand is for analysts. People with social science training will find work at various levels, starting with low-level data entry and open-source research, on immediate tactical concerns. This will come in many forms. For example, BAR Systems Information Technology, the former HTS contractor, advertised for a "Senior Human Terrain Analyst" to use new toolkits to "address specific, often time sensitive topics that normally include the fusion of SIGINT data, tribal/cultural patterns, message traffic, imagery, open source and advanced geospatial technologies." At the other end, anthropologists may act as counselors for high-level policy decisions, as David Kilcullen did when he was chief counterterrorism strategist at the Department of State (Packer 2006: 62). How this would work in any given case, what information the analysts on the payroll would
be expected to provide, and how independent they would be are very open questions.

A fifth Pentagon priority concerns outside experts. Discussion of ethnographic intelligence often includes the goal of establishing a network of area specialists to call on whenever needed (Kipp et al. 2006: 14). This is not confined to or even mainly about anthropologists. The vision is trans-disciplinary, knitting researchers and findings into a loose community of security social scientists. In a recent report, *Understanding Human Dynamics*, the Defense Science Board (2009: xiv) puts this in an odd and interesting way:

> [B]oth the Army and the Air Force reported that each maintained an extensive network of expert cultural consultants. The combatant commands also have their own “rolodex files” ... [but the DOD as a whole lacks] procedures, funding lines, and automated expert finder/locator for effectively engaging and leveraging expertise in industry and academia.

Academia, NGOs and commercial operations have considerable expertise in human dynamics and are strongly motivated to continuously improve their expertise, as they seek to help and/or sell to all, friend and foe alike. The Department does not currently optimize use of these capabilities, which could augment military capabilities during operations and offer greater depth of human dynamics understanding. Recognizing the importance of such cross-disciplinary interactions, Secretary Gates is actively working to reassure those who may be reluctant to collaborate with the Department of Defense and to build partnerships between DoD and other U.S. government departments and agencies in order to build a “whole-of-government-solution” to challenging multi-disciplinary issues.

These are five major ways that Pentagon demand will impact anthropology. A further complication is that the DOD is only the biggest dog in the room. Many other institutions are or will be looking for some form of cultural/ethnographic input. A major one to watch is the Civilian Response Corps under the State Department’s Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization. This interagency program aims to develop the capacity of civilian experts in all forms of civil development for both rapid and long-term deployment to any crisis area around the world. Civilian technicians, too, will need cultural knowledge and ethnographic intelligence. Social scientists would not be working for the military but, in many cases, would be working alongside and with the military, posing a new layer of situational complexity.

How will anthropologists respond to these demands of the military? Professional discussions over the past few years have stigmatized engagement, so it even taints those with long-term projects of critically evaluating military institutions from the inside. But will that be a deterrent in the future? The job situation for anthropologists is worse than miserable. Universities are desperate for new sources of funding. The lure is strong. As possibilities of engagement expand in many different ways, individual anthropologists will see them from many different angles. At one end of the spectrum, those motivated by a sense of patriotism may say “Get on board!” At the other, those who believe that any sort of engagement further enables the empire and thus should be shunned may respond “No way, no how!” Most anthropologists will be in between, trying to figure it out (see González 2009; Gusterson and Besteman 2009; Kelly et al. 2010; Lucas 2009).7

As anthropologists navigate this ethical and political terrain (to borrow a word), they will invoke major positives and major negatives. Positives would include reducing overt military violence and all the suffering it causes;
avoiding easily foreseeable disasters, such as the invasion of Iraq; speaking truth to power from within; and giving voice to subaltern people in policy forums where they are currently non-existent. Negatives would include being co-opted into security groupthink; being used to provide support but not light, like a lamp post for a drunk; destroying the reputation of anthropology and undermining the trust of local peoples around the world; and improving the neo-liberal empire’s ability to achieve more efficient penetration and control. There will not be any unified ‘anthropological position’ on engagement. And it is also important to bear in mind that if anthropologists do not step up to fill the demand, other academics will assume their voice, as they do now with regard to HTS.

What will this pull to engage do to the discipline as a whole? One likely result is an accentuation of the existing divide between academic and applied anthropology. The two already have very different orientations, with the former being much more hostile and the latter much more open to engagement (see Omidi 2009). We could see a swelling of a new applied security anthropology, itself integrated into the envisioned multi-disciplinary field of security social science. There will be, as there already is, a range of people—those who are more from security and those who are more from social science. For this reason, and as a result of all the other trends discussed, we may expect a real blurring of the disciplinary identity. As I heard it asked from the audience at the 2009 annual meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology (whose theme included ‘ethical engagement’), “What is an anthropologist?” We will be asking that question a lot.

The fault line between academic and applied anthropology may see greater polarization among anthropologists, but other trends will also blur that divide. With multiple situations of engagement and multiple lenses for evaluating them, I expect that more and more of our colleagues will become involved, in one way or another. This will be nothing sudden, but rather a gradual drift. A decade from now, we may all know many anthropologists who have some direct connection to the DOD or other security institutions. Working with the military will become ‘normal’, as it was in the past—say, in the 1950s. As David Price (2004, 2008) continues to reveal, that kind of connection can have a major impact on our discipline, as it has on others from physics to political science to psychology. It will be like a gravitational force, pulling anthropology into a new trajectory.

When security engagement becomes normal, that is when it becomes the most dangerous. Saying yes to a new proposition will be easy—just another opportunity. Everyone will be doing it. The anxieties resonating across our field today will be old hat, and our long effort to emancipate ourselves from our colonial heritage will be undone. Critical views, as in this volume, will of course continue. But the discipline, as the sum of its members, will gradually become more dependent on DOD and other agency support, in the process becoming shaped by their priorities. As a young slave named Jerry once mock-preached to a young Mark Twain, “You tell me what a man gits his corn pone, en I’ll tell you what his ‘pinions is” (Twain n.d.)

To keep an independent and critical attitude in anthropology, I would suggest two steps to be undertaken now. First, we should push for independent, scholarly supervision of all security-related funding initiatives. If the DOD wants work done, let it set its priorities, even channel its money to properly independent funding agencies, such as the NSF, but get out of the social science grant business itself. Plus, there should be no covert funding or research.

Second, we can advocate that the American Anthropological Association (AAA), following up on the work of its
Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the US Security and Intelligence Communities, working with the Society for Applied Anthropology, should establish a permanent forum for discussing aspects of the opportunities and dangers of different forms of engagement. I would not expect any consensus to emerge. More likely, I would expect a constant storm. But continuing open discussion and argument would highlight what individuals need to look out for. It could keep anthropologists from comfortable complacency—once we all have gotten thoroughly tired of talking about FTT.

Postscript

The appointment of Petraeus to head the CIA has importance for anthropology. While the CIA and other intelligence agencies have already carved out a significant position on US campuses via the Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholars Program (PRISP) (Price 2005) and the Intelligence Community Centers of Academic Excellence (CAE) Program (Price 2010), from my own limited reading, the US Intelligence Community (IC)—a coalition of agencies and organizations within the executive branch—seems to lag behind the DOD in emphasizing culture and ethnography. In the IC’s “Strategic Human Capital Plan” (DNI 2006), there is minimal mention of culture and no mention at all of ethnography. Both PRISP and CAE seem to have an old-fashioned ‘foreign language and areas’ orientation. With Petraeus in charge at Langley, we may soon see the CIA playing cultural catch-up.

Notes

1. As explained on its Web site, the Minerva initiative is a DOD-sponsored social science research initiative whose goal is to improve the DOD’s “understanding of the social, cultural, behavioral, and political forces that shape regions of the world of strategic importance.” See http://minerva.dtic.mil/overview.html.

2. I met one active duty soldier who identified himself as an anthropologist on the basis of an MA. He told me about “putting on his anthropological hat” in field situations.

3. Details about this program are given in DARPA’s 2008 announcement at http://www.bao.gov/download/edp/edbaa9b9ad2cb7d-11d47ee2ad5a7b9f94b/Machine-Reading-BA-16Nov08_final.pdf (accessed 20 April 2010).

4. For concerns about these initiatives, see Gusterson (2008), Lutz (2008), and other postings at the Web site of the Social Science Research Council, an independent, non-profit organization (http://www.ssrc.org). See also Lutz (2008).


References


—. 2008. Operations. FM 3-0. Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, DC.

