

ANTHROPOLOGY DURING WARTIME

By John Fox

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Last week when I read the front-page New York Times headline, "Army Enlists Anthropology in War Zones," I have to confess my gut response was, "Wow! Actual long-term job potential for anthropologists!" As an anthropologist who's made a living mostly outside of academia, I've always argued the need for our kind to stray beyond the ivory tower to infiltrate remote corners of American life and industry with our subversive viewpoints on culture and social change. I've always believed we could make more of a difference out in the real world sitting on town planning boards or boards of directors than sitting on conference panels debating, say, the "politics of enchantment" or the "epistemology of human agency in Palau."

But when I read on about the Pentagon's new \$40 million program that assigns anthropologists to combat units in Afghanistan and Iraq, I found myself pining for the good old days of irrelevance, potluck faculty dinners, and harmless postmodern navel-gazing. The Army's new "Human Terrain Teams," as they're called, apparently represent the bleeding-edge of counterinsurgency theory, which postulates, as articulated in Counterinsurgency Field Manual FM 3-24, that "understanding the societies in the AO [area of operation] allows counterinsurgents to achieve objectives and gain support." Col. Martin Schweitzer, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division in Afghanistan, described anthropologists' on the ground contribution to date with a more specific example: "In '02," he said, "we used to kick in doors. Now in '07 the Afghan army or Afghan police knock on doors and request to come in." Now that's what I call putting a bunch of PhDs and \$40 million to work.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting our military leaders couldn't benefit from a crash course in Anthro101, though I think they're a bit late to class by this point. I mean, a couple of mandatory brown bag lunches on the cultures and history of Iraq could have done wonders back in the early days of Operation Iraqi Freedom. My concern is what these Human Terrain Teams do to anthropology, or any other self-respecting social science, when our ideas and methods are placed squarely in the service of military objectives.

To be fair, anthropology's no purist, agenda-free enterprise, nor has it ever been. Back in the days of 19th century colonialism my earliest predecessors went around measuring heads to compare racial intelligence, recording the traits and habits of their subjects as though pinning butterflies. But it wasn't long before Franz Boas was beginning to counter the very idea of race with good ethnographic data and Margaret Mead was advocating for gender equity and women's liberation.

Like most of my colleagues, I became an anthropologist out of genuine, if naïve curiosity about other cultures: other ways of thinking, other variations on what it means to be human. In my fieldwork days, I may not have always been welcome among the people and cultures I studied and I'm still not sure I was ever able to do much for them that they couldn't do better for themselves. But I always strived to follow the most basic

ethical rule in our field: to cause no harm or wrong. Last time I checked, that mandate was not to be found in the pages of FM 3-24.