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From the SelectedWorks of Adrian Myers

Spring March, 2011

Letter to the Editor of the SAA Record: A Response to Jackson

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The September 2010 (Volume 10, Number 4) issue of *The SAA Archaeological Record* includes the article “Cultural Property Protection in Stability Operations,” by Richard Jackson (pp. 23–27). Though I generally attempt to follow the admittedly tired adage that reminds us to not “judge a book by its cover,” upon reading this particular article title I was swept by a now familiar sense of dread at what I suspected would follow. Unfortunately, though my prej udgment was perhaps unfair, it was not incorrect.

Jackson's article might be seen as a representative example of a recent trend in archaeological publications that both adopt the tenor and terminology of, and promote the martial-political goals of, the United States military. Authors of these works, Jackson included, are so immersed in their violent military world that they do not see just how absurd their language has become. For Jackson, a term like “Stability Operations” is both straightforward and perfectly appropriate for a short article about cultural heritage in a publication such as *The SAA Archaeological Record*. But “Stability Operations,” in fact, is just one of many American military euphemisms that feebly mask real-world, tangible, horrifying bodily violence. As with the other military euphemisms, “Stability Operations” is a stand-in for less palatable terms. I suggest we cut out the euphemisms all together. Why not just write what we mean?

In this “write what we mean” fourth dimension, double-speak terms such as “Stability Operations” revert. “Stability Operations” might become “imposition of aggressive, pre-emptive, uninvited, inconceivably hubristic violent military force, torture and murder, towards total subjugation of a local, vulnerable population.” Yes, less palatable indeed. But as First Peoples and archaeologists are (or should be) equally well aware, America has of course been exercising such programs for centuries. This is nothing new, nothing to be surprised about. Alarmed, saddened, disgusted—these are reactions, however, that we should all have.

Some recent writing in anthropology and archaeology discusses concepts of culture and the protection of cultural heritage in wartime (read: the preemptive American attack on Iraq) as if the goal of the study of foreign culture by the military, and the protection of monuments and antiquities by the military, can be seen as coolly dispassionate—as separate from the political and cultural domination goals of the American military operation in Iraq. Smoke and mirrors I say. But Jackson, to his credit, does not even attempt this feint. Jackson plainly states that “Cultural awareness, too, is a critical competency for successful counterinsurgency” (pp. 25). A critical competency for successful counterinsurgency. Was this sentence really published in *The SAA Archaeological Record*?

Should archaeologists, then, be working towards successful counterinsurgency? Is this what we do, what we are interested in learning about from our society’s newsletter? Should we also be interested, as Jackson suggests, in “improved intelligence and targeting techniques” (pp. 26)?

Jackson’s article is a very small part of a daily juggernaut assault of normalization of the murderous work of the United States military abroad. The sentences of the written and verbal aspects of this assault are rife with semantic acrobatics, treacherous euphemisms included. This program is of course much larger than any single publication in any single discipline. And Jackson’s piece on cultural heritage and antiquities is, of course, small potatoes. Jackson’s article does demonstrate, however, that in America the thinly-veiled language of military apologetics and propaganda is all around us—printed, packaged, and delivered, even, to our doorsteps and inboxes in the SAA’s own newsletter.

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**Correction:** In the Table of Contents for the January 2011 issue, there was an error in the listing of the guest editors for the special forum, Digital Communication and Collaboration: Perspectives from Zooarchaeology.

The correct listing is as follows: Sarah Whitcher Kansa and Iain McKechnie, Guest Editors.