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A N T H R O P O L O G I C A L
A S S O C I A T I O N

The Honorable Jim Nussle
The Office of Management and Budget
725 17th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20503

May 28, 2008

Dear Mr. Nussle:

I write to you on behalf of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in response to the April 14, 2008 announcement of *Project Minerva* by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. Founded in 1902 and headquartered in the nation's capital, the AAA is the world's largest organization of anthropologists, with over 11,000 members.

In a speech to the American Association of Universities, Gates described *Project Minerva* as "a consortia of universities that will promote research in specific areas...and repositories of open source documentary archives...the Department of Defense, perhaps in conjunction with other government agencies, could provide the funding for these projects." The Association wholeheartedly believes that social science research can contribute to reduction of armed conflict, but we believe that as *Project Minerva* moves towards implementation, its findings will be considered more authoritative if its funding is routed through the well-established peer-reviewed selection process of organizations like the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Secretary Gates identified four areas of work that Project Minerva might fund: an archive of sources on Chinese military and technology developments; work on documents captured in Iraq; research on the relationship between terrorism and religion, especially Islam; and the "New Disciplines Project," which seeks to leverage anthropology and other disciplines historically under-utilized by the U.S. military (Gates specifically mentioned history, anthropology, sociology and evolutionary psychology, voicing the hope that support for these disciplines might produce new areas of study analogous to efforts undertaken during the Cold War).

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 (NSF), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

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 who referee individual grant proposals and give their time to sit on selection panels. All have expedited review processes for perishable data and other urgent problems as well.

Lacking the kind of infrastructure for evaluating anthropological research that one finds at these other agencies, 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. To lay the groundwork for the type of academic research involved in *Project Minerva*, it is critical that an association like the AAA be consulted on its creation, structure and implementation.

It is also likely, given the history of our discipline, that many anthropologists who would have a great deal to contribute to a national conversation about terrorism and violence would apply for funding from the National Science Foundation, as it is a familiar informational and research interlocutor to study such topics, but will be unfamiliar with any such processes for the Department of Defense.

For these reasons, we urge the Office of Management and Budget, the House and Senate Committee on Armed Services and other key stakeholders to encourage the funding of such research through civilian agencies that have traditionally sponsored anthropological research, rather than through the Department of Defense.

Thank you for your prompt consideration of this matter. If you have any questions, comments or concerns, please feel free to contact Damon Dozier, AAA Director of Public Affairs, at (703) 528-1902 or ddozier@aaanet.org

Sincerely,



Setha Low
President

Cc: House Armed Services Committee
Senate Armed Services Committee
House Budget Committee
Senate Budget Committee
Secretary William Gates, Department of Defense