

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH THOMAS MAHNKEN, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR POLICY PLANNING, VIA TELECONFERENCE SUBJECT: THE MINERVA CONSORTIA INITIATIVE TIME: 9:59 A.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, MAY 7, 2008

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Thank you very much for joining us here for the Bloggers Roundtable this morning. Dr. Thomas Mahnken is the deputy assistant secretary for Defense for Policy Planning. Dr. Mahnken, the floor is yours. Do you have an opening statement for us, sir?

MR. MAHNKEN: Well, I guess the subject today is, you know, the secretary's outreach effort, you know, the Minerva project. And it's something that is very near and dear to his heart as a former university president and, I think, something that he sees as being a -- something that'll, you know, help the department and help the government and frankly help the nation in years to come as we position ourselves to -- you know, to meet some of the challenges that we face today and face in the future. In the -- the Defense Department, the government, you know, in the past has played important roles in sponsoring important research, getting the academic community and the intellectual community more broadly focusing on challenges. And I think he sees this as an opportunity to get some more attention to areas where we as a government, we as a Defense Department don't have the expertise that we really need. And we as a nation need to cultivate that expertise.

And I would just -- you know, I'd be happy to fill in any details and, you know, answer questions and kind of go from there.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Very good.

David Betz is on line first with us. David?

Q Oh. Great. Well, I'm glad to come up first. I didn't expect that. I'm here representing Kings of War, which of course is an academic blog with the Department of War Studies at King's College London.

So all I can say for our part that we're -- we welcome the secretary's proposal. This is something that we're, of course, involved in doing with the British government. And I note that the secretary does point out that the projects will be open to foreign institutions in partnership with those of the United States. So I would imagine that my colleagues here and myself would be interested in following -- in following this up.

MR. MAHNKEN: Hi, David. It's -- no, I think it's -- that's exactly right. You know, I think this is an opportunity for broad collaboration throughout the academic community, and that includes, you know, not just American institutions, but more broadly. And certainly King's has a lot of -- has a lot of expertise to bring to bear. We're still working through the implementation mechanism, so watch your inboxes. (Laughs.) It's the best thing to say.

Q We'll be doing that and bombarding yours, I should think.

MR. MAHNKEN: There you go.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Sharon.

Q Yeah, I was going to break this up into three parts. I'm curious why the decision was made to put this under policy as opposed to, for instance, DDR&E. And related to that: How much funding do you actually have or plan to have against the Minerva project?

MR. MAHNKEN: Okay --

Q I guess the DDR&E question comes through because it seems like this is more under the sort of -- it would just -- it makes sense that -- I mean, DDR&E's usually the one that deals with universities, so I'm just curious why it was put under policy.

MR. MAHNKEN: Right. Well, you know, as you point out, I mean, there is a lot of DOD research that already -- you know, that already goes on. Most of that research is in, you know, the physical sciences, both basic and applied. You know, we have not -- the secretary pointed out we have not, for various reasons on both sides, done as much research in social science. And so, you know, we -- so whereas, you know, we in the department are well equipped as a whole, I think we in policy are sort of best equipped to deal with these things. Now, as I told David, you know, the exact implementation is being worked out. You know, it's likely that we will go, you know -- we won't be managing this directly, but we sort of -- you know, we have the expertise. If you look at the list of topics that the secretary discussed, you know, these are topics of policy interest.

And on funding, I mean, I think we're -- you know, we are talking millions of dollars. You know, we're probably not talking tens of million dollars but, you know, one of the virtues of social science research as opposed to, you know, the physical science research is it's relatively inexpensive.

And certainly the -- you know, the program I would anticipate growing over time, and I think it will be -- you know, the funding will be driven by the -- you know, the number of quality proposals we receive in -- you know, in each area. This is -- I mean, this is an area where, you know, 2 (million dollars) or \$3 million actually goes a long way.

Q Thank you.

MR. MAHNKEN: Sure.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Corey (sp).

Q Yes, sir. As I read this, you're looking for consortia to be generated sort of in an ad hoc basis to do a specific proposal and then sort of go away as the project is done. And our interest is whether you are interested at all in funding sort of existing consortia on a contract basis, if they can put together proposals for projects in these areas.

MR. MAHNKEN: Actually, let me just -- I wanted to follow on one thing with Sharon before I forget, and then I'll come back to that.

Q Sure.

MR. MAHNKEN: It's -- and it's -- Sharon, to you, it's not policy or DDR&E. I mean, we are going to develop a governance structure that brings all the stakeholders to the table. Just this is a -- this is a proposal that originated in policy, you know, because of the reasons I said. You know, the concern about terrorist groups, the concern about -- particular concerns about new approaches are ones that are very -- that we are very keen on.

On the issue of consortia, I mean, whether they're new consortia or existing consortia, I think the proposals will really be judged on their merit. I would say in some -- you know, in some areas, like in China studies, you have existing institutions, you have existing consortia, and the interest there is getting them, you know, focused on, you know, on military issues and S&T issues.

In other areas, like -- and the best example I can think of is, you know, political Islam -- you've got individual scholars who are scattered across the country. And the interest there is really bringing together and networking those folks. So we'll be -- we'll certainly be open-minded as to -- you know, as to the consortia. It's really going to be, you know, judged on who's best or which consortia are best.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. MAHNKEN: Sure.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Grim.

Q Good day. This is Grim at Blackfive.net. We've talked occasionally about the U.S. military as an alternative way of pursuing the life of the mind, just the way that it has become that -- things like DARPA and whatnot. Military science is not taught outside of ROTC programs in most of academia. There's really nothing like the War College. ROTC is less and less often offered.

Military recruiting is increasingly banned on what were once elite colleges. We've seen that there is a sort of deep suspicion, by some members of the anthropology community, to your efforts.

How do you plan to address these cultural differences? Will you be sending officers more often to school maybe in academia instead of internal military schools? Or will you detach military officers who are scholars to teach? Will you do things like that as part of this program?

MR. MAHNKEN: Oh, boy. How much time do we have? (Laughter.)

First, in terms of, you know, full disclosure, look, I mean, I taught at the Naval War College. I taught in the Strategic Studies Program at Johns Hopkins SAIS.

And so while you're right that military, you know, quote-unquote, "military science" is, I mean, that's taught as part of ROTC programs. There are a number of first-class graduate-level programs that teach strategic studies.

As a matter of fact, you know, David -- that's not limited to the United States. David is part of a first-class program at King's. And that includes strategic studies and that includes familiarizing graduate students with national security and how the military works.

And these are graduate students, you know, who go into the State Department, who go into the Defense Department, the intelligence community as well as Wall Street, NGOs, you name it. So there are those programs, you know, there are those programs out there.

As far as ROTC is concerned, I mean, the secretary is on the record, you know, saying we need to get, you know, ROTC back on campus. And you know, I think there are -- I think there are some, you know, there are some encouraging signs there. Certainly you know, more broadly you know, we are looking for opportunities to get officers out more in civilian graduate schools.

We're also -- about a year ago now the president signed an executive order on national security professional development, which envisions really building a cadre of national security professionals; bringing in civilians, folks in uniform, from across the national security community; getting them a graduate-level education in specifically the instruments of national security; and certifying them as national security professionals, much as Goldwater-Nichols 21 years ago set us on the path to have a, you know, joint officer corps.

We're just wrapping up the first -- the first pilot program of that over at National Defense University. And it involves a couple dozen people, and next year there will be more, and there will be another pilot program. And so, you know, those initiatives are going on.

I think Secretary Gates -- again, as a former university president, he's quite attuned, you know, to the intellectual health of the institution and very much wants to build the intellectual capital of the officer corps with the department as a whole, and Minerva is part of that effort. I mean, it's -- if you think about it, certainly our hope is that not just the research from these consortia will enrich the government and enrich academia, but, you know, those who perform that research, you know, some percent of them may decide to go into public service, and that will benefit the country as a whole.

Q Thank you.

Q Can I contribute just one point on that?

MR. MAHNKEN: Certainly.

Q It's David from Kings of War. I think it's true that the military needs to get out into the civilian universities, but the civilian universities need to address how they might better deliver their programs to military students. There has to be more investment, I think, both in distance

learning and in flexible online learning to account for the fact that it is a time of war and these are professional officers on these programs who need to access that subject matter in creative ways, which -- I must say, at the War Studies Department here we've got now 50 British army officers who are serving in theater who are doing our master of War Studies degree entirely on-line.

MR. MAHNKEN: That's great.

MR. HOLT: Okay, yeah. And we had some others join us. Who else is on the line with us?

Q Greg Grant, here.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Greg?

Q I'm just curious as to why you're not turning to -- with some of the -- kind of DOD's more traditional research outfits such as IDA or CSBA or even going to some of the contractors -- I know BAE, NSA -- they have pretty big policy shops and lots of big minds over there. Why are you -- why are you going specifically to universities and such versus kind of outside that normal -- that traditional research?

MR. MAHNKEN: Well, we're doing it because, as you say, we already -- you know, certainly, the department has a range, you know, of assets, whether it's the federally funded research and development centers or, you know, 501(c)(3)s or contractors.

But what's -- I think what -- you know, what Secretary Gates is trying to get at is a more fundamental gap, you know, that's developed for various reasons between academia and the government, particularly in the area of social sciences.

And again, full disclosure: My -- both of my parents, when I was growing up, worked at the Scripps Institute of Oceanography, and you know, Scripps gets a lot of its money from ONR and NSF. And if you're in, you know, oceanography or if you're in a lot of other fields of science, government contracts and government funding is just part of what you do.

For various reasons, you know, that's not the case when it comes to social science. And as a result, we find ourselves at a disadvantage understanding -- you know, understanding our world and understanding some of the challenges that we face. You know, we're able to call upon the full talents of the nation when it comes to, you know, physical science or engineering. We're not able to do that when it comes to some of these vitally important topics. And I think that's the -- you know, that's the challenge that Secretary Gates is seeking to overcome with this.

Q Are you looking for just teams of people, or are you willing to fund individual -- provide such scholarships, for example, to students at SAIS or whatever?

MR. MAHNKEN: Right. Well, right now the focus is on consortia.

Q Yeah.

MR. MAHNKEN: But the consortia -- you know, we would certainly envision it's -- that's not just, you know, faculty members, but presumably

that's going to include their graduate students as well. And so, you know, that will give -- you know, we see this as being able to fund kind of a new generation of scholars.

Q Okay. And while we've got you on the line, I'd just be curious to hear you -- what is your response to the pushback from the anthropological community on the whole teams problem?

MR. MAHNKEN: Yeah. Well, first of all, I mean, I would differentiate between pushback from a professional society

Q Yeah. MR. MAHNKEN: -- and the attitude of the members of a profession. And look, I am the member -- I'm a member of several professional societies, and those professional societies don't speak for me as an individual. So you know, societies make -- you know, they make statements, and I know that the membership of societies is much more diverse.

And I think, you know, their -- some of their concerns, you know, certainly are based -- are based upon history, but we, you know, we live in a different era. And I think, again, as someone who taught graduate students before coming into the government, you know, we have just an incredible generation out there, you know, whether it's -- we call it the 9/11 generation or something else. I mean, we have a generation of young scholars who are interested in working on topics that are, you know, valuable and of interest to the nation and the government.

And, you know, we see this as an opportunity to give them, you know, incentive to do just that. Just as, you know, previous generations of historians cut their teeth on the Nazi archives and the imperial Japanese archives and gave us great understanding of, you know, those countries and those societies, you know, we believe that there's value in giving today's generation of scholars access to the -- some of the jihadist writings and certainly the archives of Saddam Hussein's regime, that will, first off, you know, give us -- the government -- greater insight, but also give them, equip them with kind of the intellectual tools and skills that they need to succeed, whether it's in academia or in government.

Q Could I ask another question? Or if there are other people waiting, I'll wait.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q It's Matt. Matt at MountainRunner. Yeah.

Sorry, Sharon.

Q No, no, that's all right.

Q Quick question. Two questions, actually. One is the long -- this is a great program, by the way. I like it, and the concept of the cultural exchange backwards; instead of the military going to the civilian world, civilian going into the military world, which doesn't happen enough.

But the questions are, what's the longevity of the -- the hoped- for longevity of this program, considering that we're at the end of this administration or nearing the end of this administration and we have all of these shifts happening to prepare for the next four years? So one, what's the

intended length of the Minerva Consortia project? And then two, the project length for the things you're going to fund, what is your intended length of time that you would want to see this proposal -- excuse me, these proposals for?

MR. MAHNKEN: Right. Well, I think the two -- you know, the two really are linked. We are -- you know, I think we're talking about multi-year proposals. You know, it's not written down in stone yet, so I'll just say, you know, multiyear. We're probably talking about, you know, a handful of years, give or take. I mean, that the nature of this -- you know, this type of research is that you don't just, you know, turn the crank and produce something overnight.

So we want to provide, you know, a stable funding base for that. If you look at our Multidisciplinary University Research Institute, the MURI program, I mean those generally -- you know, those run three to five, five to seven years. I think that's basically the range we would want to go for. But at the same time, you know, as responsible stewards of taxpayers' money, you want to be able to do reviews, so you have to strike a balance between not micro-managing the program but also, you know, making sure that the money is being wisely spent.

And that really -- you know, that dovetails with actually your first question about, you know, the next administration. Obviously, we can't -- you know, we can only make -- you know, we can't tie the hands of the next administration.

But what I would say is that it seems to me that the topics that Secretary Gates selected, in part he selected them in part because these are enduring challenges. These are not challenges that are going to be solved or dealt with on January 20th, 2009. So these are longer-term -- you know, longer-term issues, and presumably the -- we would certainly hope that the next administration would see those as, you know, equally important. But our intent is to get these consortia going. We'd like to get awards made by the end of this -- by the end of this calendar year.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And anybody else with us?

Q Yeah. Just one question, from Steve Corman at COMOPS Journal here. As far as these document databases that you're planning to make available, are those in the original languages? Are you planning to provide translations of those, or do you know?

MR. MAHNKEN: The documents are in the original language, overwhelmingly Arabic.

In some cases, there have been translations made. But in all cases, you know, we would make the original documents available.

In other words, we're not going to ask anybody to trust us on the translations in part because, you know, translations occur, you know, for different purposes at different times and so forth. So you know, the original documents will be made available in all cases.

Q Okay.

Sharon, you had a follow-up?

Q Yeah. I'm going to word this carefully because I don't want to say I'm agreeing with it.

But one of the criticisms, that Congress had back in the Vietnam War, of a lot of the social science research that was funded, some by DARPA, some by DDR&E, was, they said, you know, why doesn't State, you know, why is this the responsibility of the Pentagon?

And so when I look at the topics, I can certainly see the application of Chinese military technology. I can also certainly see why the Pentagon would be interested in these other areas.

But how would you answer the criticism that some might say of, how is this not the Pentagon again encroaching on what should be, you know, things that are funded by State Department, by Department of Education?

I mean, we've long had, for instance, Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships for national-security-type languages. Why should the Pentagon be involved in these areas?

MR. MAHNKEN: Look, we would certainly welcome other parts of the government funding this research as well. But I don't see that that is an argument against us doing it. I mean --

Q Well, let me ask that question.

Do you feel the Pentagon is doing this because others aren't sort of stepping up to the plate?

MR. MAHNKEN: Well, look, I think, you know, inherent in the argument is the fact that we as a government, and then certainly we as the Defense Department, you know, have a deficit of expertise in these areas. And the reason there's a deficit, I mean, there are many reasons.

In part, it's because, you know, academia, academics aren't focused on these issues. Or if they are, it's sort of -- it's not -- it's kind of sprinkled about, as I said, with some of these topics. You have individuals who are doing outstanding work, but it's not really coordinated into a research program.

You know, so -- you know, I guess I'm somewhat sympathetic to the argument that, you know, we need to be doing more. Absolutely. But again, I don't see that as an argument against us funding it as opposed to nobody funding it.

Q Right. This is Corey (sp). Can I ask one last question?

MR. MAHNKEN: Sure.

Q What is your anticipated timeline?

MR. MAHNKEN: The anticipated timeline is really working back from, you know, getting projects funded by the end of the -- by the end of the year, by the end of the calendar year. And we're hoping, you know, very shortly to finalize the mechanism for carrying this forward. In other words, it's not going to be -- you know, it's not going to be my office that's going to be managing this effort.

And then from there, you know, there will be a request for proposals that comes out -- comes out on the street and, you know, institutions will be invited to submit their proposals. There will be, you know, a formal, academically rigorous review and selection process by the -- you know, by the organization that actually runs this program. And then, you know, there will be a -- you know, these consortia stood up again hopefully by the end of the year so we can get started.

Q Thank you.

Q Let me -- Greg Grant here. I wanted to ask another question. And you know, I know you're part of academia or you certainly were. I'm just curious to know what you're hearing from your own peers about this initiative. What's the chatter out there about this?

MR. MAHNKEN: What I hear is a lot of excitement, quite frankly. You know, I've done -- I've met with a lot of university presidents and provosts and chancellors. And again, let's put this in perspective: You know, many of these folks are people for which this is uncontroversial. I mean, they come from the physical sciences, they come from engineering, and government funding is part of the way they do business.

They've been very helpful in helping us, you know, to formulate this initiative so that it is -- you know, so that we don't step on any land mines. That's why we are -- you know, we are just interested in open-source, unclassified research.

That's it. That's why we're not going to be micromanaging this program. They're really excited about it because, I think, they, like the 9/11 generation I spoke of earlier, they realize that we are living in complex, challenging times and that there's more that academia can do to support the nation. And so, you know, I've gotten a lot of letters of support from the university community. That's been the overwhelming response. So, yeah.

Q Great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And we -- I know you're -- we're tight on time here, sir, so Dr. Mahnken, if you've got any last thoughts or closing comments for us --

MR. MAHNKEN: Well, no, look, I appreciate everybody's interest in this. And I know there's always, you know, there's always a push to, you know, to find a, you know, find a story here, but you know, at least from, you know, from my perspective, this really is a good news story. I mean, Secretary Gates really is trying to -- you know, to build some bridges here that fell into disrepair, if not, you know, fell into the river some time ago. And I think it's only something that can benefit the nation over the long term, so I do appreciate your interest in it.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Dr. Thomas Mahnken, the deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Policy Planning with us here for the Bloggers Roundtable today. Thank you very much, sir, and we look forward to speaking with you again, sir.

MR. MAHNKEN: Great. Thanks very much.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

MR. MAHNKEN: Bye-bye.

MR. HOLT: Bye-bye.

END.