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AAA Board Statement on HTS

Welcome

On October 31, 2007, the American Anthropological Association's Executive Board passed a statement concerning ethical aspects of the U.S. Military's Human Terrain System (HTS) project. The project, which has received widespread national and international media coverage, embeds anthropologists and other social scientists in military teams in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Ethical and procedural concerns regarding anthropologists working with U.S. Military and Intelligence agencies have been under investigation by an ad hoc commission of the AAA. The Commission will submit their final report on this subject—which extends beyond the particulars of the HTS project—during the AAA's Annual Meeting in Washington DC.

To facilitate discussion on this subject, the AAA has created this blog as a forum for members to post comments regarding the Executive Board Statement and related issues.

<http://www.aaanet.org/blog/resolution.htm>

American Anthropological Association
Executive Board Statement

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on the Human Terrain System Project

(October 31, 2007)

Preamble

Since early October, there has been extensive news media coverage of the U.S. military's Human Terrain System (hereafter, HTS) project and of that project's use of anthropologists. Later this fall, the American Anthropological Association's Ad Hoc Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with U.S. National Security and Intelligence Communities will issue its final report. In advance of that report, the Executive Board affirms that it is important that judgments about relationships between anthropology, on the one hand, and military and state intelligence operations, on the other, be grounded in a careful and thorough investigation of their particulars.

The Commission's work did not include systematic study of the HTS project. The Executive Board of the Association has, however, concluded that the HTS project raises sufficiently troubling and urgent ethical issues to warrant a statement from the Executive Board at this time. Our statement is based on information in the public record, as well as on information and comments provided to the Executive Board by the Ad Hoc Commission and its members.

The AAA Executive Board's Assessment of the HTS Project

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The U.S. military's HTS project places anthropologists, as contractors with the U.S. military, in settings of war, for the purpose of collecting cultural and social data for use by the U.S. military. The ethical concerns raised by these activities include the following:

1. As military contractors working in settings of war, HTS anthropologists work in situations where it will not always be possible for them to distinguish themselves from military personnel and identify themselves as anthropologists. This places a significant constraint on their ability to fulfill their ethical responsibility as anthropologists to disclose who they are and what they are doing.
2. HTS anthropologists are charged with responsibility for negotiating relations among a number of groups, including both local populations and the U.S. military units that employ them and in which they are embedded. Consequently, HTS anthropologists may have responsibilities to their U.S. military units in war zones that conflict with their obligations to the persons they study or consult, specifically the obligation, stipulated in the AAA Code of Ethics, to do no harm to those they study (section III, A, 1).
3. HTS anthropologists work in a war zone under conditions that make it difficult for those they communicate with to give informed consent without coercion, or for this consent to be taken at face value or freely refused. As a result, voluntary

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informed consent? (as stipulated by the AAA Code of Ethics, section III, A, 4) is compromised.

4. As members of HTS teams, anthropologists provide information and counsel to U.S. military field commanders. This poses a risk that information provided by HTS anthropologists could be used to make decisions about identifying and selecting specific populations as targets of U.S. military operations either in the short or long term. Any such use of fieldwork-derived information would violate the stipulations in the AAA Code of Ethics that those studied not be harmed (section III A, 1).

In addition to these four points about the activities of anthropologists working in the HTS project itself, the Executive Board has this additional concern:

5. Because HTS identifies anthropology and anthropologists with U.S. military operations, this identification?given the existing range of globally dispersed understandings of U.S. militarism? may create serious difficulties for, including grave risks to the personal safety of, many non-HTS anthropologists and the people they study.

Conclusion

In light of these points, the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association concludes (i) that the HTS program creates conditions which are likely to place

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anthropologists in positions in which their work will be in violation of the AAA Code of Ethics and (ii) that its use of anthropologists poses a danger to both other anthropologists and persons other anthropologists study.

Thus the Executive Board expresses its disapproval of the HTS program.

In the context of a war that is widely recognized as a denial of human rights and based on faulty intelligence and undemocratic principles, the Executive Board sees the HTS project as a problematic application of anthropological expertise, most specifically on ethical grounds. We have grave concerns about the involvement of anthropological knowledge and skill in the HTS project. The Executive Board views the HTS project as an unacceptable application of anthropological expertise.

The Executive Board affirms that anthropology can and in fact is obliged to help improve U.S. government policies through the widest possible circulation of anthropological understanding in the public sphere, so as to contribute to a transparent and informed development and implementation of U.S. policy by robustly democratic processes of fact-finding, debate, dialogue, and deliberation. It is in this way, the Executive Board affirms, that anthropology can legitimately and effectively help guide U.S. policy to serve the humane causes of global peace and social justice.