

A story
about two
strangers.

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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

A True Culture War

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Chicago

IS the Pentagon truly going to deploy an army of cultural relativists to Muslim nations in an effort to make the world a safer place?

A few weeks ago this newspaper reported on an experimental Pentagon “human terrain” program to embed anthropologists in combat units in Iraq and Afghanistan. It featured two military anthropologists: Tracy (last name withheld), a cultural translator viewed by American paratroopers as “a crucial new weapon” in counterinsurgency; and Montgomery McFate, who has taken her Yale doctorate into active duty in a media blitz to convince skeptical colleagues that the occupying forces should know more about the local cultural scene.

How have members of the anthropological profession reacted to the Pentagon’s new inclusion agenda? A group calling itself the Network of Concerned Anthropologists has called for a boycott and asked faculty members and students around the country to pledge not to contribute to counterinsurgency efforts. Their logic is clear: America is engaged in a brutal war of occupation; if you don’t support the mission then you shouldn’t support the troops. Understandably these concerned scholars don’t want to make it easier for the American military to conquer or pacify people who once trusted anthropologists. Nevertheless, I believe the pledge campaign is a way of shooting oneself in the foot.

Part of my thinking stems from an interview with Ms. McFate on NPR’s “Diane Rehm Show” to which I tried to listen with an open mind. My first reaction was to feel let down. It turns out that the anthropologists are not really doing anthropology at all, but are basically hired as military tour guides to help counterinsurgency forces accomplish various nonlethal missions.

These anthropological “angels on the shoulder,” as Ms. McFate put it, offer global positioning advice as soldiers move through poorly understood human terrain — telling them when not to cross their legs at meetings, how to show respect to leaders, how to arrange a party. They use their degrees in cultural anthropology to play the part of Emily Post.

More worrisome, it was revealed that Tracy, the mystery anthropologist, wears a military uniform and carries a gun during her cultural sensitivity missions. This brought to my increasingly skeptical mind the unfortunate image of an angelic anthropologist perched on the shoulder of a member of an American counterinsurgency unit who is kicking in the door of someone’s home in Iraq, while exclaiming, “Hi, we’re here from the government; we’re here to understand you.”

Nevertheless the military voices on the show had their winning moments, sounding like old-fashioned

relativists, whose basic mission in life was to counter ethnocentrism and disarm those possessed by a strident sense of group superiority. Ms. McFate stressed her success at getting American soldiers to stop making moral judgments about a local Afghan cultural practice in which older men go off with younger boys on “love Thursdays” and do some “hanky-panky.” “Stop imposing your values on others,” was the message for the American soldiers. She was way beyond “don’t ask, don’t tell,” and I found it heartwarming.

I began to imagine an occupying army of moral relativists, enforcing the peace by drawing a lesson from the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans lasted a much longer time than the British Empire in part because they had a brilliant counterinsurgency strategy. They did not try to impose their values on others. Instead, they made room — their famous “millet system” — for cultural pluralism, leaving each ethnic and religious group to control its own territory and at liberty to carry forward its distinctive way of life.

When the American Anthropological Association holds its annual convention in November in Washington, I expect it to become a forum for heated expression of political and moral opposition to the war, to the Bush administration, to capitalism, to neo-colonialism, and to the corrupting influence of the Pentagon and the C.I.A. on professional ethics.

Nevertheless I think it is a mistake to support a profession-wide military boycott or a public counter-counterinsurgency loyalty oath. And I think it would be unwise for the American Anthropological Association to do so at this time.

The real issue for academic anthropologists is not whether the military should know more rather than less about other ways of life — of course it should know more. The real issue is how our profession is going to begin to play a far more significant educational role in the formulation of foreign policy, in the hope that anthropologists won’t have to answer some patriotic call late in a sad day to become an armed angel riding the shoulder of a misguided American warrior.

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