

## Making Sense of Minerva Controversy and the NSCC

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The Department of Defense, under Robert M. Gates, recently announced the creation of the Minerva Research Initiative, which would provide grants approaching an estimated \$18 million in 2009 and as much as \$75 million over five years to support social science research “focusing on areas of strategic importance to U.S. national security policy.”<sup>1</sup> The initiative is intended to increase the intellectual capital of the DoD, support fundamental research in universities, and develop linkages between the Pentagon and the academic community. In the process, expertise housed within universities will be harnessed to national security projects and new forms of expertise are to be cultivated within both the university and the military.

In a speech announcing the new initiative, Gates invoked Arthur Schlesinger’s call for “a return to the acceptance of eggheads and ideas.”<sup>2</sup> While Schlesinger’s statement followed the launch of Sputnik and referred to the need to develop the expertise of scientists in an effort to “meet the Russian challenge,” Gates looks to a very different set of experts in order to respond to a new range of concerns that animate national security interests.

The Minerva Research Initiative seeks to mobilize and build the creative capacity of area studies specialists, scholars fluent in strategically crucial but inadequately represented languages within the military, and university-based academics from a variety of disciplines, ranging from psychology to demographics and anthropology to economics. Reflecting a belief that recent strategies of apprehending national security issues are outmoded, the initiative signals a shift from an exclusive focus on military tactics to an additional emphasis on “social and behavioral dimensions of national security issues.”<sup>3</sup>

This new emphasis in fact reflects older but discarded projects such as the involvement of social scientists during World War II in the Office of Strategic Services, the Office of War Information, and the Ethnogeographic Board. Minerva perhaps mirrors even more closely Project Camelot, in which the Department of the Army and the Special Operations Research Office sought to enlist social scientists into classified counter-insurgency and counter-revolutionary research programs, focusing on Southeast Asia and Latin America respectively, a project that was discarded hastily in 1965 amidst significant contention, only months after the existence of the research project was leaked to press in Chile.<sup>4</sup> The sums pledged, \$3-5 million over three years, were conceived as seed money for a feasibility study that would lead to much larger amounts, as much as

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<sup>1</sup> Broad Agency Announcement No. W911NF-08-R-0007

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1228>

<sup>3</sup> Program Solicitation NSF 08-594 Social and Behavioral Dimensions of National Security, Conflict and Cooperation.

<sup>4</sup> Lybrand, Willam A. *Proceedings of the Symposium The U.S Army's Limited-War Mission and Social Science Research*. Washington DC: Special Operations Research Office. March 1962; Silvert, Kalman H. “American Academic Ethics and Social Research Abroad: the Lessons of Project Camelot,” *Background* vol. 9, no. 3 (Nov 1965), pp. 215-236; Horowitz, I.L. *The Rise and Fall of Project Camelot: Studies in the Relationship between the Social Sciences and Practical Politics*. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA (1969); Price, David. *Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI's Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists*. Duke: Durham, NC (2004).

\$50 million over the same period, a staggering amount when adjusted for inflation, which has not been approached by any funding body since.<sup>5</sup> The public controversy that erupted out of Camelot led to condemnation of the program by not only influential academics but also senators, including J. William Fulbright, and augured a retrenchment of the social sciences and a broad retreat from engaging the military or government programs broadly. One assessment that came out of the London School of Economics in 1969, shortly after the disbandment of Project Camelot, notes, “It is ironic that th[e] move to divorce academia from government is the principal legacy of Camelot.”<sup>6</sup>

The current Pentagon initiative aims to redress this outcome. Moreover, knowing well the outcome of Project Camelot, the DoD also seeks to avoid a similar, equally short-lived fate for the Minerva Research Initiative. As a result, amidst new concerns voiced, in particular, by anthropologists about the often awkward fit between military enterprises and academic research on human subjects, the Minerva Research Initiative, since the initial announcement, has gradually changed form. These changes indicate a responsiveness by the Department of Defense to its critics, and perhaps represent a conciliatory gesture informed by an initiative that looks to foster new working relationships among academics and the military, partnerships which were common as recently as the Cold War but have atrophied considerably of late.<sup>7</sup>

The original request for proposals offered a single stream of funding that was issued through a broad agency announcement (BAA), broadcasting the availability of \$10 million per year over the course of five years, for a total of \$50 million. The explicit goal is to build capacity for undertaking new, collaborative fundamental research programs on themes recognized as important by the Department of Defense. Research funded by the initiative, is not intended to be immediately instrumentalizable. Instead, the DoD proves more far-sighted than many academic research programs, as they look for long-term dividends, peering ten to fifteen years into the future, rather than short term ones. At present, the goal is capacity building.

Initial discussions of Minerva, and the subsequent release of the BAA, resulted in public condemnation of the structure of the proposed initiative in some quarters, especially among anthropologists. In particular the review structure, which referred proposals to senior members of the DoD in the final instance, rankled a number of scholars. The

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<sup>5</sup> See the remarks by Thomas R. Vallance, director of SORO at the time of Project Camelot, who indicates that the initial sums were mere seed money. He writes, “The willingness of the Army to call what was by far the largest single integrated social science research project ever undertaken (total costs programmed at from three to five million in a three- to four-year period) just a *feasibility study* was indeed impressive and foretold, given a generally affirmative conclusion, great things to come for and from social science.” Vallance, Thomas R. “Project Camelot: An Interim Postlude,” Horowitz ed., *The Rise and Fall of Project Camelot: Studies in the Relationship Between Social Science and Practical Politics*, 1967.

<sup>6</sup> Madian, A.L. and A.N. Oppenheim, “Knowledge for What? The Camelot Legacy: The Dangers of Sponsored Research in the Social Sciences,” *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol 20, no. 3 (Sept 1969), pp: 326-336

<sup>7</sup> During the cold war it was largely game theorists, applied political scientists studying such fields as Sovietology, and psychologists who worked alongside the Pentagon. In World War II the relationship between all disciplines and the military were much closer. In some disciplines, such as anthropology, it is estimated that nearly half of all practitioners were active in the war effort, a relationship which faltered after the bombing of Hiroshima and the ambiguous status of social scientists within the mission of the newly created NSF in 1950. See Solovey, Mark. “Project Camelot and the 1960s Epistemological Revolution: Rethinking the Politics-Patronage-Social Science Network,” *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 31, no. 2 (Apr 2001), pp: 171-206.

American Anthropological Association, in a letter addressed to the Office of Management and Budget, called for the involvement in the selection process of an independent agency familiar with the social sciences, such as the National Science Foundation (NSF), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), or the National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH), in order to ensure peer-review standards and to safeguard the “integrity of research in social science disciplines.”<sup>8</sup>

In response to such criticism, the DoD and the NSF signed a three-year memorandum of understanding whereby the NSF’s Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences Directorate standards will apply to all grant applications.<sup>9</sup> Soon after, a new stream of funding was announced. The Social and Behavioral Dimensions of National Security, Conflict and Cooperation (NSCC), while a part of the Minerva Initiative authorized by Gates, is to be administered by the NSF. The NSCC provides an additional \$8 million in 2009, increasing the sums available to the social sciences through the DoD by another 80 percent, an amount that may be continued (or even expanded) in years two and three of the existing memorandum.<sup>10</sup>

Under the terms of the memorandum, NSCC-funded research will be open, not classified, and the NSF will evaluate the proposals, although the DoD will give direction as to who might be placed on the review panels. Moreover, NSF proposals may now be considered for funding through the Minerva Research Initiative “on a case-by-case basis.” In these instances, some projects deemed meritorious may be given the choice to accept partial DoD funding. If refused, the project will be funded entirely through the NSCC.<sup>11</sup> While the involvement of the NSF is intended to allay concerns expressed by some scholars, at the same time this ambiguous relationship between the agencies potentially raises significant new issues regarding the status of any grant application passing through the NSF that might fall within the ambit of the Minerva research themes. In a sense, the entire NSF potentially is incorporated into the DoD efforts to develop a new national security strategy through the transfiguration of several branches of social science inquiry. On the other hand, the NSF has sponsored social science research programs in partnership with the DoD in other instances, and in this regards the program intensifies an already existing relationship.

The research themes supported by both Minerva and the NSCC overlap in many regards, though where the Minerva topics are restricted, the NSCC topics are somewhat broader. The Minerva Research Initiative seeks proposals addressing any of five topics (See Appendix A). These topics are: 1. Chinese Military and Technology Research and Archive Programs; 2. Studies of the Strategic Impact of Religious and Cultural Changes

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<sup>8</sup> Letter dated May 28, 2008. <http://www.aaanet.org/issues/policy-advocacy/upload/Minerva-Letter.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Press Release 08-114 “NSF Signs Memorandum of Understanding with Department of Defense for National Security Research” [http://www.nsf.gov/news/news\\_summ.jsp?cntn\\_id=111829&govDel=USNSF\\_51](http://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=111829&govDel=USNSF_51)

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication with Pauline Kusiak, Project Manager to MRI.

<sup>11</sup> This aspect of the funding structure was clarified in a speech given by Mark Weiss, Director of the Division of Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences and Directorate of Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences for the National Science Foundation, at the August 27, 2008 Smith Richardson Minerva Initiative Workshop.

within the Islamic World; 3. Iraqi Perspectives Project; 4. Studies of Terrorist Organizations and Ideologies; and 5. New Approaches to Understanding Dimensions of National Security, Conflict, and Cooperation.

The Chinese Military and Technology Research and Archive Programs, like the Iraqi Perspectives Project, is a translation program. The nature of the documents intended for investigation, however, are very different from one another, as the Chinese military and technology program seeks the translation of unclassified, publicly available documents which may not reflect state policy, while the Iraqi Perspectives Project draws upon state archives taken out of Iraq by the Department of Defense. The other three research pillars emphasize the study of culture, change, and conflict in a range of social, political, and historical contexts even as they identify as research programs the study of Islam, terrorism, and new approaches to national security.

The research fields within NSCC are significantly broader (See Appendix B). The NSCC supports research on three themes: 1. Studies of Terrorist Organizations and Ideologies; 2. Studies of the Strategic Impact of Religious and Cultural Change; and 3. Studies of Political, Cultural, and Social Dynamics under Authoritarian Regimes. These research themes pointedly avoid specifying the regions, social actors, and contexts that scholars might address. Moreover, whereas the language of the Minerva Research Initiative is often instrumentalizing, as in the case of the research topic Studies of Terrorist Organization and Ideologies, which calls for research that can “contribute to countermeasures to help revise or influence belief structures to reduce the likelihood of militant cells forming,” the NSCC supports historical, sociological, and textual research without proscribing uses for this scholarship.

Instrumentalizing or not, each of the research themes funded by the Minerva Initiative and the NSCC raise a range of important questions for social scientists. Analyzing controversies surrounding the Iraqi Perspectives Project, which draws on documents taken from Iraq to the Hoover Institution, brings one deep into ongoing debates about the legality of taking possession of records in the course of a military occupation versus the injunction to preserve fragile and possibly unique records that are at risk as a result of civil strife. Similarly, scholars must ask whether the incorporation of the study of Islam within a national security rubric will lead to the risk that much else about Islam and Muslims will be ignored because of the sudden availability of substantial funds for a narrow range of inquiry.

Another line of questioning would be to ask whether the categories operating within the research topics are adequately defined. Is terrorism, for instance, a coherent category sufficiently encapsulating the social logics and forms of violence that the DoD seeks to draw attention to, or does the term often obscure as much as it reveals? In addition, the emphasis on authoritarian regimes and dictatorial rule, while surely important, risks displacing much needed attention on the disruptive, unruly aspects of democracy and its promotion globally.

Along similar lines, but from a slightly different vantage point, one might also ask whether the proposed research topics adequately address U.S. security interests. While the initiative may support crucial avenues of study and help make sense of phenomenon that are little understood, certainly research that might have anticipated or made sense of the most recent crisis to emerge, the war in the Caucasus, would not easily find support through Minerva or the NSCC. Arguably, the broadest of the research themes supported by the initiative, *New Approaches to Understanding Dimensions of National Security, Conflict, and Cooperation*, might fund research on this topic or any other, but it is just as likely that the more clearly-defined research pillars risk creating a brain drain from under-studied and under-funded research areas to ones which offer generous funding. The result might, in fact, be an unintentionally diminished capacity within social sciences to respond to the next unanticipated crisis.

At the same time, these categories of funding are not static, the DoD recently explained. To date the Minerva Research Initiative has received over two hundred white papers detailing proposed research programs from universities across the world and over half of these papers fit the broadest of the research themes, *New Approaches to National Security*. Future iterations of the BAA will offer funding for research topics appearing within many of these white papers.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, it is equally important to note that while the DoD lists research programs that it looks to fund, this exercise is not just an effort to promote fundamental research on topics pertaining to national security. The research programs are intended to span disciplines in order to constitute a new field of research and a multidisciplinary community of scholars working on a common set of problems. An explicit goal of NSCC solicitation is to enable scholars to “develop into a community of security science researchers.” Moreover, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Policy Planning Thomas Mahnken bluntly noted in an interview that the initiative seeks to channel expertise sometimes existing within universities but missing from the Pentagon. He states, “One way to think about the desirable outcome is that 10 years from now we have a more diverse work force in terms of disciplinary backgrounds; we have a work force that is used to thinking about a range of issues.”<sup>13</sup>

Beyond creating a new field of study, a source of employment for the overproduction of Ph.D.s, and a new font of expertise for the Pentagon, the Minerva Research Initiative raises other critical issues for the social sciences that scholars must actively engage. The DoD-sponsored program promotes an engagement with social science methods and indicates a renewal of interest in social science findings after a prolonged period of neglect. The initiative promises material support for the social sciences at a time when sources of funding are elusive, in many ways a state arrived at precisely because of the strained relationship between the social sciences and any perceived public utility of its endeavors. Yet the initiative, in addition to offering recognition to the social sciences, also prompts concerns about the appropriate relationship between university-based

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Mahnken, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Policy Planning, explained that future cycles will fund entirely different research programs in a presentation at the August 27, 2008 Smith Richardson Minerva Initiative Workshop. He also indicated that there may be multiple BAAs related to the Minerva Research Initiative issued in a single year.

<sup>13</sup> Cragg, Jennifer, “Pentagon Funds National Security Research,” *American Forces Information Service*, July 14, 2008.

research programs and the state, especially when research might become a tool not only of governance, but also military violence.

Like its Roman namesake, the Minerva Research Initiative conjoins wisdom with war in a moment when arguably our public policy is equipped with too little of one and is infused with too much of the other. The Minerva initiative offers the opportunity for the generation of wisdom out of catastrophe but also suggests the cultivation of a gloomy form of knowledge that arrives too late, only after the disasters of Iraq, and which might encourage new catastrophic incursions as many scholars ruefully anticipate.

The prospect of the militarization of the social sciences will deter some social scientists from pursuing these funds, yet we should also address a more subtle but pervasive effect that might ensue from Minerva, in which the social sciences globally risk becoming moored to a state-driven program not just in the U.S., but globally as the project invites international collaboration. Can social science inquiry be rooted in national security programs or, alternately, does social science research have an obligation to strive toward cosmopolitanism, a form of knowledge production that crosses borders and is unaligned with any state agenda?<sup>14</sup>

These are not simple questions, despite the virtues of cosmopolitanism and the gravity of violence even in the service of the state. There are material benefits that ensue for the social sciences from this initiative, sure, and also the possibility of a renewal of a public, engaged social science that many scholars believe should not be too swiftly overlooked.

At the same time, these funds will put upon individual academics, universities, and entire disciplines pressures which might initiate a sea-change in ways in which academic research programs are pursued and structured in ways that should be carefully thought through and stated in advance. At the same time, consequences can never be wholly identified in advance and, given the tethering of this research program to a vast and complex military apparatus, the risk of these unintended consequences must also be assessed and debated.

The Social Science Research Council (SSRC) invites prominent scholars in the social sciences to speak to the questions and issues raised by Project Minerva. We ask them to articulate the opportunities and dangers associated with the renewed attention to the social sciences in the case of the Minerva Research Initiative and the NSCC and to offer suggestions for how social scientists should respond to Minerva and how the Department of Defense should respond to social scientists. We seek not consensus from our contributors but offer a forum in which scholars can and should disagree with one another, for we think that policy and research agendas alike are improved when a space exists in which dissenting, even argumentative, voices can be heard. Moreover, we recognize that the stakes for the social sciences are high even as the risks are great. This is an argument that none can afford to ignore.

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<sup>14</sup> See Nicolas Guilhot's SSRC memo, A Short Outline of Some Issues Raised by the MINERVA Project.