

# **Anthropology for the (Military) Masses: a moral-practical argument for educational engagement**

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## **Abstract**

Anthropologists employed by the military work in a variety of domains, from human remains recovery to cultural resource management to direct operational support. Although the last category understandably attracts the greatest disciplinary scrutiny, this paper argues that it is neither representative nor the most transformational form of engagement with the armed forces. Rather, a small number of anthropologists working within the professional military education system – a network of schools, accredited by regional civilian bodies and distinct from training centers – are slowly contributing to changes in the armed forces' corporate body of knowledge as well as their very culture. This paper will highlight some of these successes and setbacks by drawing on my personal experiences with the US Air Force. These data will demonstrate that the challenges of this educational enterprise are at times mundane, at others profound. However, in making this argument, it will also become apparent that this work is far more similar than different than that of colleagues in civilian schools. It therefore concludes that the difficulties posed by such hurdles are far outweighed by the moral imperative and practical benefits of performing a familiar task (education) in an unfamiliar milieu (the military). Finally, the paper ends with suggestions on how anthropologists can engage with the military through education and thereby contribute to positive reforms of the security sector.

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## **Preface**

I would like to express my thanks to Phil Stevens for organizing this diverse Presidential Panel, the other participants and all of you, colleagues who have joined us here today for what I hope will be a respectful and productive dialog. I also owe an apology to Phil and the discussants, Robert Rubinstein and David Price, for failing to provide them a copy of my paper prior to this panel. If they were not to speak with me for some time after this panel, they would be more than justified. They will also have the last work on my presentation, should they choose, though I have unfairly robbed them of the time necessary to prepare properly. I wanted to send them at least a draft; however, I could not share what I did not have. I struggled in preparing this paper; I struggled for the first time in a long time to write. I grappled repeatedly with two questions, both

of which turned out to be central to how I finally structured the result:

First, why am I teaching for the US Air Force? Is this worth the exhausting hours, occasionally exasperating challenges, prolonged separation from my family, lack of summers for research/writing and the occasional hostility I face from my disciplinary peers? Yes, I concluded, it is. Together with a small group of colleagues, I believe that I am slowly changing the way the Air Force learns about culture. This has profound implications for the institution, its members and me as an anthropologist.

Second, why am I giving this paper here at the American Anthropological Association (AAA) meeting? Was I simply going to re-tread ideas that I have presented previously, and perform a formalistic ritual that would allow me to attend the conference, catch up with old friends and buy new books? No, I decided, I would not. I wanted to synthesize old thoughts as well as plow some new ground, particularly regarding my concern over the narrowness of our disciplinary debate. I believe this is being driven, in part, by an excessive focus on one mode of engagement, direct support to operations, particularly the Human Terrain System or HTS. Call it a crowding out hypothesis, if you like. Let me be clear, I am not suggesting that the discipline ignore HTS. I understand anthropologists' concerns about the program and appreciate the contributions of both Roberto Gonzalez' presentation today as well as the panel by HTS members yesterday in addressing them. Instead, my desire is that we broaden our aperture to ensure that discussion is properly contextualized within an even wider set of issues, questions and processes.

## **Introduction**

What drives me to attend AAA, and why do I keep presenting here? What do I do for the Air Force, and why have I chosen this arduous path? Those are the questions I struggled with as I prepared this talk, as well as how I have structured my moral-practical argument for engagement. I want to be clear: This is my rationale for engagement. I make no claim as to its universal applicability; but I appreciate the opportunity to share it with you today nonetheless.

Let me get right to the heart of the matter: I do what I do because I think it is how I can best contribute to the prevention, minimization and recovery from conflict. It is not the only way I could do so, and it is certainly not the only way the discipline or society can. Some will protest flawed national policies – may they succeed in changing them. Others may research to present alternative perspectives – hopefully they will communicate with (and be heard by) influential people outside of our discipline. Many of us will teach to inform future decision makers – I pray that our students, military and civilian, remember and apply these lessons. The larger point, the one that unites all these efforts and mine as well, is that all of us as anthropologists are trying to make the world a better place. In other words, we share a common END, or purpose.

How I do this is more akin to conventional academia than most would realize at first blush. I teach, research/publish and perform service. Not only are the categories intentionally borrowed from academia, I work at a university after all, the nature of the work is far more similar to than different from that of colleagues in civilian schools. This is to say that we share similar, though not identical, WAYS or methods.

The tools or MEANS I draw are also comparable: First, people, particularly faculty members – academics, especially anthropologists – in addition to our practitioner counterparts. Second, ideas. Many are old, others are new and some originate in other disciplines.

Framed as such, “there is more that unites military anthropology with the rest of AAA than divides us,” to paraphrase the President Elect. Let me briefly unpack these categories– MORAL END, ACADEMIC WAYS and ANTHROPOLOGICAL MEANS (inspired in part by David Price’s new book, which I would commend to all present) – through the lens of my experience, concluding with an invitation to the audience and all AAA members.

## **Moral End**

Earlier this week, a senior Department of Defense or DOD official visited the Center I work in. Just prior to his departure, after two intense days of meetings and discussions, he turned to me and observed: “I’ve spoken with a dozen people here, and not one of you has talked about how your efforts will help the Air Force target, bomb, kill or destroy better.” It was a comment, not a question, but it begged for a response. I told him the following story:

*This summer, my children visited Alabama for the first time. One day I took them on a tour of the “historic air park” (a symbolic assemblage of old planes) on base. We walked among the decommissioned aircraft in the 100-degree heat, not uncommon that time of year, eventually seeking shade under the fuselage of an old B-52. “Is that where they put the luggage, Daddy?” asked my 8-year old son, pointing to the bay doors on the belly of the plane. “No,” I responded, in awe of children’s ability to put their finger on the crux of the issue. “That is where the bombs come out,” I explained matter of factly, secretly hoping he would find something else of interest. Instead, he responded, with astounding clarity, “I don’t think we should drop bombs, Daddy.” Out of the mouths of babes.... It was a make-or-break parenting moment. I took a deep breath and I explained that I don’t like the idea either, that I want him and his sister to grow up in world where bombs don’t have to be dropped and that is why I work for the Air Force – to help make that dream a reality. He mulled this for a bit, then suggested we get ice cream to beat the heat.*

The old Infantry officer smiled at the story: “Good,” he responded. “You know,” he explained, “the military doesn’t need your help to break things – we need your help so we don’t have to break things.” Make no mistake about it, the role of the military is not to be a “killing machine,” as I heard someone insist at the business meeting the other evening. Rather, it is to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States.” In other words, to do whatever lawfully constituted government tells it to do. Democratic civil-military relations, at least in the US, means that civilians tell the military what to accomplish, but determining precisely how is left largely (though not completely) to military professionals. I think that most of us quite like it this way, especially those of us who have done fieldwork or lived where the relationship is inverted. Yet, both the “what” and the “how” have changed significantly in recent years, and while violence is often still a defining characteristic of the context, objectives and missions ... it is no longer the defining characteristic. This is no trivial change.

The institution has asked my colleagues and me to assist in a process of institutional transformation responding to these changes. To help prepare military professionals to operate better in culturally complex situations and in the process transform the armed forces through education. Having looked under the hood and kicked the tires at Air University/the Air Force/Department of Defense for the past year or so, I believe it is a sincere desire and a dedicated effort. That has led to how I define my END: Making the military a better institution, not making it a more effective killing machine. Making the armed forces an institution that I, as an American citizen, can be proud of – regardless of the foreign policy du jour. When my assistance is requested to achieve this end, I find it difficult to refuse.

Nor do the individuals who inflict and suffer the most in conflicts – they come in many varieties, civilian and military, US and international, allied and undecided – often have a say in deciding what the military is to do or how, in the broadest sense. So, when those individuals – particularly junior officers and enlisted members who are students in the US professional military education system – ask for my help, I feel a moral obligation. It is true that America’s Soldiers, Airmen, Sailors and Marines are all volunteers. However, what they volunteered to do and what they are expected to do is often worlds apart. This is the other edge of military subordination to civil authority. The result can be pilots and submariners negotiating with Afghan and Iraqi elders as part of a Provincial Reconstruction Team, young men and women who thought they were going to drive trucks at Barksdale AFB winding up on the streets of Baghdad and so on. I have met many, and all want to get home in one piece. None of those that I’ve met in recent years has proposed that indiscriminant or excessive violence is the best way to do so. Real life is not like the movies.

Yet, and I recognize that this is an enormous caveat, there is the potential for what I teach to be used to intentionally cause harm. That is still part of what militaries do. I’m not naïve. I was a soldier once. I’ve done ethnographic and applied work among militaries in four countries. So, how do I reconcile this with the moral underpinnings of my argument for engagement?

First, I set limits to what I will do. The obvious “no go zones” are easily recognized and avoided – for example, I will not assist in targeting, conduct secret research or undertake any number of other activities that anthropologists regularly carried out in WW II. The funny thing is that I’ve never had to say “no” to a request made of me by the Air Force, because I have never been asked to cross any of those bright lines I’ve drawn. In part this is because as a professor, I have more latitude than most government employees, and abiding by my disciplinary ethics are the bedrock upon which my employment and utility rests. It is the more ambiguous challenges that concern me. What about the ethics of teaching, of publishing, of advocating and of engaging the armed forces, both as an institution and the people who make it up, in any number of ways? Current disciplinary codes are of limited use here.

Second, I accept that causing unintentional harm is possible, even probable. This is a hard pill to swallow, but to ignore it would be disingenuous. I navigate this ugly reality by weighing the probability of my intentionally doing good with my actions against the potential of accidentally doing harm. For me to engage, there must be greater chance of doing good than possibility of doing harm. When there is not, or more accurately, if there is not, I will demur. The potential to contribute to harm is also counterbalanced by what I consider the immorality of inaction. So long

as I believe that positive change is possible, and I do, doing nothing is not an option for me anymore. Of course, I could take another approach – teach, research and serve in protest, for example. Why would I, so long as I feel I am contributing to positive change from the inside?

Further, if I left, who would take my place in DOD? The opportunities for institutional change have increased, not decreased over the past few years. I expect this trend to continue under the next administration. If anthropologists relinquish this opportunity to shape the process in ways we find acceptable, members of other disciplines certainly will not. Academic colleagues from business schools, psychology departments, geography programs and elsewhere certainly have a role to play ... but do we really want them framing the issue of “culture” for the military – one of the most powerful institutions of the state? This brings me to ...

### **Academic Ways**

The military is a profession – the profession of arms. As such, it has its own professional educational system – much like other professions, the law, medicine, engineering, the clergy and so forth. The primary difference, and this is critical, is that military professional education occurs in shorter periods, generally less than a year, spread over the course of a member’s entire career. Over the course of 20 years, both officers and enlisted members are required to return to professional school about every 3-6 years. It is a life-long learning approach.

This makes professional military education, or PME, an incredible vehicle for not only systematic and incremental learning, but also gradual culture change. This process is being led by members of the armed forces, not imposed by civilian academics. Instead, the role of anthropologists inside the system is to guide and inform the process. When it comes to culture as a topic of study, however, the traditional way of defining and teaching it has been to rely on the disciplines of international relations, political science and history. These domains of academic inquiry are already well represented in the PME faculty – both civilian and uniformed, most of whom hold terminal degrees. Again, while good colleagues with much to add, they do not conceptualize culture the way anthropology does.

Moreover, the questions remain, however, how to insert more “culture” into the curriculum and what we mean by “culture” in the first place. This is where the Air Force leadership made what I can only describe as a series of (and hopefully wise) bold decisions:

- First, they made culture the focus of Air University’s Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), a five-year commitment that is required for reaccreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) – AU’s regional civilian accrediting body. SACS holds the school to the same standards as Emory, Vanderbilt, Auburn and Davidson, to name just a few. The QEP will subject our efforts to external academic review and contribute to greater transparency.
- Second, rather than turn to the existing faculty to design and direct the effort, Air University hired an anthropologist: me. I cannot overstate how honored I am to have been given this opportunity. Nor can I overemphasize just what a challenge the process poses. However, no single person can carry out any true transformation.
- So, third, Air University established a new department to be the academic engine behind this

process. At the core of the department are anthropologists. The charge of the department is to teach across the entire university. Imagine at your school, being told to ensure there is sufficient culture being taught in the Colleges of Architecture, Engineering, Computer Science, Medicine and Law ... and assist them if it is not. What anthropologist would not see this as an incredible opportunity to transform his or her institution of higher learning?

The department's charge should also sound familiar to you. Faculty members:

- Teach. The focus of our initial efforts is on education during the first six years of military service, so students from roughly 18 to 28 years of age. They are enlisted members, cadets and junior officers. The courses are at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Some are offered in residence, many are done via distance learning to reduce barriers to student learning.
- Research/Publish. Some of this we do ourselves, but most will be done by academics outside of and unencumbered by the military. Why? The armed forces need a variety of expertise and perspectives that the department faculty cannot provide alone. Anthropologists will be strongly encouraged to apply to our call for proposals, we'll peer review the proposals and do whatever else we can to reduce sample bias. However, we cannot compel anyone to apply.
- Serve. Air Force Culture and Language Center faculty members also contribute to: The *University* – serving on hiring, planning and other committees. The *Military* (the profession that sustains the military educational system) – over the course of the last two years, this small group and our colleagues in other services have succeeded in beginning to shape some important DOD policies (these are public documents) that will hopefully lead to more positive changes in the future. And *Academia* – we are still academics, part of larger groups and processes, which is one of the reasons I continue to attend AAA, to learn from as well as teach colleagues, and why I run a listserv for scholars and practitioners interested in culture and security.

Working within a military university also provides ample safeguards for those of us promoting change from inside the Air Force. Air University is an accredited institution of higher learning, so it must follow the policies, standards and best practices of the American Association of University Professors, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and similar bodies. Like any university, we have formal statements on academic freedom, academic integrity and academic responsibility as well as protection of human subjects, research/publication, promotion and many others. In fact, we often have multiple versions of these documents – from AU, the Air Force, DOD and US Government. (These too are public documents.)

Let me emphasize that anthropologists were not invited to join this process after the fact, as data providers or adjunct faculty members. Rather, members of the discipline have been involved in this process since day one. While brings me to how the transformation will occur, or ...

### **Anthropological Means**

In 2000, the US Air Force employed no anthropologists in their professional military education system. In 2001, they hired one – a week before 9/11. Last year I joined the institution, and doubled the count. This year, we have added another to our ranks. In any university, this would

be a significant statistical shift. In the Air Force, where technology and strategy have long reigned supreme, it is nearly unthinkable.

What is more, two other scholars who work on negotiation have been assigned to the Center, three additional positions are currently being sought from related disciplines and another hoped is for in the near term. When the department is fully staffed in 2009, there will be nine civilian PhDs in an interdisciplinary center run by anthropologists. This is nearly insurgent, and a seismic shift for Air University and PME more broadly.

Finally, at the core of any educational process are ideas. In this case, they are largely anthropological ideas. This is why I have repeatedly emphasized that anthropologists have designed and are directing this effort.

Some of the ideas that guide the effort will sound familiar to you: ethnocentrism, relativism, holism, reciprocity and so on. Can anyone say in good conscience that s/he would prefer the men and women who serve our country to be ignorant of the core concepts of anthropology? As for the critique that this is too little, I agree, initially it will be. However, as we say in Spanish, *algo es algo, peor es nada* (something is something, nothing is worse). Moreover, my job (this is actually written into my job description) is to ensure what we do is sustainable. This is an enormous undertaking, and we can't do it all at once. If we try, we'll probably fail. Nor do we expect to get it exactly right the first time. Thankfully, this is a long-term effort.

Other ideas at the heart of what we do are only familiar by analogy. Given that PME is professional in name as well as nature, it is incumbent upon this small group of faculty members not only to teach the basics of anthropology, but also to make the discipline relevant to our students. The same could be said of anthropology in law schools, medical schools or other professional schools. Our students face enormous challenges in their jobs, our goal is to prepare them by teaching anthropology in order to help them avoid, minimize and/or recover from conflict – not to turn them into anthropologists any more than we are trying to make them better killers. We have neither the time, the mandate nor the resources to do either. Further, it is not what our students desperately want or how we can best achieve our common end.

Lastly, there are ideas that do not come from anthropology. While recognizing that our discipline is a great one, we must also avoid becoming self-congratulatory. There are things that anthropology does not do, or does not do well. When we recognize these gaps, it is incumbent upon us to fill them with ideas (and colleagues) from other disciplines. After years of working on teams led by psychologists, I am personally a bit giddy about having one working on a team led by anthropologists. The potential benefits are equally exciting

### **Conclusion/Invitation**

A continuing, and oftentimes legitimate, concern voiced by anthropologists about the use of anthropology in the military is the lack of transparency. Even when the armed forces want to throw their doors open, a myriad of laws, regulations and habits tend to make them more restrictive and opaque than anthropologists would like. I understand this from firsthand experience: I did my doctoral then applied research in military bases in Ecuador and Bolivia. I

faced plenty of challenges to access, trust, data collection and so forth.

Now I work at a military university, and many, though not all, of those barriers do not exist (there are still guards at the entrance, however). So, let me conclude not by summarizing the key points of my talk, but by inviting interested and concerned anthropologists to engage with the Air Force Culture and Language Center. We will benefit from the multiple, at times critical, perspectives that other anthropologists will bring. Please take a look and tell us what you think: Contact me after this panel, to talk more about the program. Review our website, which is constantly being updated. Coordinate a visit to Montgomery, Alabama, to meet and talk with us in person.

Finally, and most importantly, as we continue this dialog, please do what you can to broaden our discussion to include professional military education and other important domains in which anthropology is making a difference in the military. Thank you.