

Scholars and the Military Share a Foxhole, Uneasily



Thomas Munita for The New York Times

(Villagers waiting to see a doctor in Paktia Province, Afghanistan, where American social scientists have worked with locals)

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The United States military is frequently criticized for not doing enough to reduce civilian casualties or to stabilize the places it is fighting to protect. Yet what happens when the outside experts who can offer such advice are condemned for doing exactly that?

Questions about collaboration between soldiers and scholars have been around at least since World War II, but they have arisen with particular urgency in recent months at professional meetings, in journals, on campuses and on the Internet over programs related to Afghanistan and Iraq.

At [Harvard](#), some faculty and activists have been troubled that the university's Carr Center for Human Rights Policy helped revise the counterinsurgency field manual, even though the center's aim was to reduce civilian casualties. Members of the American Psychological Association have had fervid exchanges over what role — if any — its members should have in military interrogations. And anthropologists have passionately argued over a Pentagon program that uses these social scientists in war zones.

These sorts of controversies have appeared “in various permutations at different times,” said David Wippman, a professor at [Cornell](#) Law School who worked on humanitarian affairs for the Clinton administration, mentioning similar debates over participation in

humanitarian assistance, the Iraqi war crimes tribunal and the proceedings at Guantánamo's detention camp.

In the Harvard dust-up, the worry is that the essential secretiveness of the military will transform the long-cherished openness and transparency of the university, bringing the campus green a bit too close to the parade ground.

“How could Harvard sit there and put the imprimatur of a human rights center on counterinsurgency?” said [Tom Hayden](#), the Vietnam War-era activist, who has complained about the collaboration in *The Nation* and on *The Huffington Post* ([huffingtonpost.com](#)). “It lends an [Ivy League](#) cloak of legitimacy to counterinsurgency, which is inherently secret.”

For Mr. Hayden; Richard Parker, who now teaches at the Kennedy School at Harvard; and Harvey G. Cox Jr., a faculty member of the Harvard Divinity School for more than 40 years, the Vietnam War is a touchstone in these debates.

“I’m of a generation that is skeptical about this,” Mr. Parker said. “Universities aren’t innocents,” he added, noting that he was speaking from a campus building “named after a convicted felon.” (His office is in the [A. Alfred Taubman](#) Center for State and Local Government, named for the former chairman of Sotheby’s who was convicted of price fixing in 2002.)

“In the era of Abu Ghraib,” he said, such cooperation “does damage to the university’s credibility and autonomy.”

It is not as if the military “is unaware of these issues,” he added; “there’s nothing that they couldn’t get on the Internet” if they were interested in improving their practices.

Participants may think they are immune to being compromised, Mr. Cox said, but human nature being what it is, “I’m not confident that a lot of people who think they can humanize the system can prevent themselves from getting carried away.”

Sarah Sewall, the faculty director of the Carr Center and a former Pentagon official, said: “I hear grumblings from faculty at Harvard. For people who don’t understand, it can be a little mystifying.”

But once she has had the opportunity to explain how the center is trying to instill institutional change within the military, she said, skeptics have come around. “I have yet to find anyone with whom I’ve spoken for any period of time who doesn’t understand why,” she said.

The decision to explore where humanitarian and military interests might intersect dates back to 2000 — before 9/11, before the invasion of Afghanistan and before the Iraq war, Ms. Sewall said.

The work on the counterinsurgency field manual — considered the military’s “war-fighting doctrine” — grew out of a conference sponsored with the Army War College in 2005, in which the center tried to show that protecting civilians was critical to the success of counterinsurgency programs, she said.

Gen. [David H. Petraeus](#), now the top American commander in Iraq, was impressed with what he heard, she said, and on the spot began assembling a team to revise the doctrine. That group met with additional human-rights groups the following year.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with cooperating with the military, said David Rieff, who has frequently written on the moral complexities of human-rights assistance. “The counterinsurgency manual is really a manual about maintaining hegemony in the world,” he said, and if one thinks that American might can be harnessed for doing good, then it makes sense to collaborate.

“I don’t believe that,” he said, but he knows others do. As it turns out, the Pentagon program that employs anthropologists is part of the new counterinsurgency doctrine, although the idea of using social scientists to interpret the culture of an enemy has a long pedigree. In perhaps the most famous example, Ruth Benedict’s wartime study of the Japanese, eventually published as “The Chrysanthemum and the Sword,” played a critical role in how [President Roosevelt](#) shaped the terms of surrender with the Japanese.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, anthropologists explain tribal customs and work to improve health, security and education, efforts that have helped significantly reduce combat, Army commanders say. Some of the anthropologists’ colleagues nevertheless insist that such programs compromise the entire discipline, put all practitioners working abroad under suspicion and prolong the war. At the American Anthropological Association’s annual meeting three weeks ago, a special commission issued a report that analyzed this ethical minefield, though it did “not recommend nonengagement.”

Among psychologists, the arguments are even more pointed. The American Psychological Association has passed wide-ranging bans on participating in any form of torture, but some psychologists argue that the association should go further and forbid psychologists from even being at Guantánamo or in locations where secret [C.I.A.](#) interrogations take place. Situations in which prisoners are denied due process, are kept in isolation or jailed for an indefinite period are by nature inhumane, and psychologists who are there are inevitably complicit, opponents of the cooperation maintain.

But Navy Capt. Morgan T. Sammons, a psychologist who has worked with detainees, argued at the psychology association’s annual meeting in August that military psychologists had consistently opposed mistreatment and promoted safeguards.

“We cannot absent ourselves,” he said. “It would be irresponsible for us to do that. Only by becoming as involved as we have can we ensure that abusive practices do not occur.”

Bonnie Docherty, a human-rights researcher who also teaches at Harvard Law School, does not see what all the fuss is about. “We don’t want to be co-opted by the military,” she said, “but I think there can be an important dialogue between the two groups.”

Ms. Docherty recently completed a report on the National Training Center at Fort Irwin near Barstow, Calif., that was published by the Carr Center. She complimented commanders at Fort Irwin, saying they were “receptive to our recommendations” about protecting civilians and had followed some earlier advice.

“We offer recommendations to other governments and other bodies,” she said, “so I don’t see why we shouldn’t be able to offer them to the military as well.”