

Response to Gusterson and Price

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As Gusterson and Price quite correctly note, the issue of Anthropologists working with and/or for military, intelligence or security organizations is quite contentious within the discipline. They do make certain claims, however, that I disagree with.

First, at the very start of their response, they make the claim that the central argument of my article is “that anthropologists have, since Franz Boas, been monologically obsessed with the issue of espionage in regard to those who consult for the national security state.” This is, in fact, not true. The majority of the article from page 3 through to the start of page 8, focused on many of the complexities of the relationship between Anthropology and the military. Indeed, at the top of page 8, I clearly noted that it is only in “the recent past” that the culture of Anthropology has “conflated all relationships with the military into the singular relationship of "spying"”.

Second, in speaking of their article dealing with PRISP, Gusterson and Price state that:

Readers who have not read our article in Anthropology News may be surprised to learn that, far from being an exercise in totalitarian thought control and intimidation of ideological deviants, it was actually a call for debate among anthropologists about the implications of PRISP for our discipline. Our article included the following statement: “Given the arguable conflict between PRISP and the core values of openness in the academy, PRISP should be debated on campus in the same way that ROTC has been in the past. As with ROTC, some universities may decide that the program is compatible with their overarching values, and some may not, but the program should at least be debated.”

On its face, this certainly appears to be a reasoned call for debate. I will, however, point out that in the same article the following paragraphs belie their apparent neutrality in this call for debate. For example, their suggestion that

Key questions in campus discussions of PRISP would include:

What role should academics play in the so-called “War on Terror”? Is the academic culture of openness compromised by a secret scholarship program? Would PRISP scholars, as some in the intelligence community have claimed, be scapegoated on campus if their identity were publicly known? Will PRISP’s increased reliance on pre-selected intelligence analysts dangerously narrow the range of intelligence views at the CIA and elsewhere? Are faculty right to fear that PRISP scholars may be covertly compiling dossiers on them? Will increased knowledge of PRISP’s secretive presence on campuses chill open academic classroom discussions on controversial topics? Even though PRISP is described as a scholarship program to help students acquire particular skill sets, rather than a

program to fund research with human participants, should PRISP students engaged in research be required to report their ties to campus IRBs?¹

I will leave it to the readers to decide how open any debate would be on the issues if these were the “key questions” in that debate.

Third, I find it beyond belief that, given their widely circulated, and stated, political stance they should accuse me of producing a “policy-driven ideological analysis”. What particular policy was I advocating in this article? What particular ideological stance was I taking, other than one of “obstinate doubt” regarding their own, often stated, ideologically driven position?² Indeed, Prices’ own ideological position was just recently restated in an article in Counterpunch on the retiring of the term “the Long War”. Price states:

If the Pentagon is searching for a new name for the war, I suggest we just call it "the Lost War" to honor Bush's failed presidency and push a surge to bring the troops home.³

It is obvious to me that they were incapable of comprehending both the real and the stated goal of the article, which was for members of the military and those with military interests “to understand the current reactions of many Anthropologists towards working with the military” (page 1). Perhaps I had assumed too much by not making this absolutely crystal clear. I had, however, assumed that this would be an obvious interpretation since the article was published in the Small Wars Journal rather than, say, Counterpunch.

This article was never intended as a comprehensive examination of the entire relationship between Anthropology and the military, intelligence and security sectors. In fact, I have no hesitation whatsoever in recommending Prices’ excellent work in the area for those who wish a much more detailed analysis of the topic.⁴

On the whole, I must say that I find that the response by Gusterson and Price to have fully supported one of the contentions in my article – that “open, above board, examinations of the merits, and dangers, of Anthropologists operating with the Military and Intelligence communities languishes covered in a shroud of moral rectitude”.

¹ The full text of this article is available at <http://www.aaanet.org/press/an/infocus/prisp/gusterson.htm>

² Since it is apparent that they are unfamiliar with the use of quotation marks to highlight or emphasize key terms or points, I will note that the term “obstinate doubt” refers to the technical definition of heresy from the 1983 Roman Catholic Code of Canon Law.

³ "The Long Lost War: This Occupation Shall Remain Nameless" CounterPunch April 25, 2007. available at <http://www.counterpunch.com/price04252007.html>

⁴ Many of his articles and papers are available online at http://homepages.stmartin.edu/fac_staff/dprice/CW-PUB.htm