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On “Military Anthropology”

Anna Simons

*This commentary addresses Montgomery McFate’s book *Military Anthropology: Soldiers, Scholars and Subjects at the Margins of Empire*, published by Oxford University Press (2018).*

It may seem unfair to use Montgomery McFate’s *Military Anthropology* to launch into a critical commentary about the utility of anthropology for the US military. But her book places her in the position of attempting to define a subfield—military anthropology—while trying to sell anthropology to the Department of Defense as well. Unfortunately, in the process she gets too much wrong and not enough right.

Without question, those of us who are McFate’s peers—other anthropologists who have worked with and for the military—would adamantly agree: anthropological sensibilities are vitally important when it comes to fashioning a more astute foreign policy in the twenty-first century, and are essential for at least some decision makers in uniform to have. But anthropology has never been a “discipline perpetually joined to the military execution of foreign policy,” despite what McFate claims (335).

Nor is it fair or historically accurate to accuse anthropology of having been colonialism’s handmaiden. This charge has become a favorite of progressive revisionists and is one McFate enjoys turning to her advantage. But the truth is, more anthropologists actually argued with authorities on behalf of the people they studied than abetted officials in oppressing or even governing them. Thus when McFate promotes the idea anthropology can—and even should—be reweaponized to serve the Department of Defense today, she treads on shaky ground. Worse, of course, is to want any academic discipline to be weaponized to do anything. The point of academe is to investigate, analyze, report, question, and even interrogate carefully what passes for conventional wisdom. Insights can certainly be used—otherwise, what is the point? But no *discipline* should be harnessed to a political endeavor of any type.

More troubling than McFate’s sins of commission, however, may be her sins of omission. Take the 10 very interesting individuals she profiles in her book. In order of appearance they are: Gerald Hickey, who worked among US military advisers in Vietnam during the 1960s; Robert Rattray, employed by the British colonial office in West Africa; Ursula Bower, who led Naga tribesmen in northeastern India during World War II; Gregory Bateson, who briefly worked for the Office of Strategic Services during World War II; Tom Harrison, who helped lead tribesmen in Borneo during World War II; John Useem, who served in Palau in the wake of World War II; Jomo Kenyatta and Louis Leakey, who operated on opposite sides of the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya during the 1950s; Don Marshall, who participated in the Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of Vietnam study begun in 1964; and lastly, David Barrows, who

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was the assistant chief of staff G2 of the American expeditionary force sent to Siberia on the heels of the Bolshevik revolution.

Oddly, by showcasing these 10, McFate reveals a degree of ethnocentricity one hopes none of them would indulge in were they practicing anthropology today. I say this because the idea that it takes Westerners to explain foreign locals to other Westerners is hopelessly outdated. Yet this idea seems to be McFate's subtheme (minus her inclusion of Kenyatta).

Equally peculiar is that several of McFate's anthropologists weren't even anthropologists. As she tells us in her introduction, "Each chapter uses the life and times of an anthropologist who worked directly with the military" (10). Yet, at least one (John Useem) was an American sociologist not an anthropologist, while two (Ursula Bower and Tom Harrisson) lacked any formal anthropological training prior to their service with British authorities. Meanwhile, several individuals McFate profiles never worked directly for the military. So one has to wonder, what is McFate up to when she treats these 10 as paragons?

As McFate explains in her introduction, *Military Anthropology* originated as a professional military education project; the idea was every chapter could be used as a standalone lesson. Unfortunately this means McFate has saddled each of her anthropologists with helping her prove some broader point—about courage under fire, indirect rule, military leadership, information operations, unconventional warfare, governance operations, the counterinsurgency system, the strategic objective, and military execution.

In several cases her pairings work well. In other chapters, she overwhelms readers with too much extraneous or only partial information. To her credit, McFate can be a vivid writer, and her focus on strange rites and practices will likely appeal to nonanthropologists who will not be upset that she overfetishizes the exotic (a considerable anthropological sin), though why she then thinks any but the most committed graduate students will be interested in the details of recondite anthropological debates remains a mystery.

The real issue with *Military Anthropology*, however, is McFate bills it as, "a history, insofar as it explores certain key episodes in the history of military anthropology" (10). Yet her sequence is not chronological and she never relates key episodes. She does not because she cannot. Military anthropology did not exist between 1918 and 1970 when the individuals she profiles were in the field. It still does not exist. Unlike psychology with military psychology, sociology with military sociology, and history with military history, anthropology has never had a recognized military subfield. Indeed, when several of us tried to kick-start such a thing several decades ago, it was the controversy over the US Army's Human Terrain System, a program McFate conceived and helped run, that nipped our efforts in the bud.

As McFate notes, anthropology has not always been skeptical of or hostile to the military. Animus dates from the 1960s and is as much a relic of Baby Boomers' reaction to Vietnam as to a handful of projects some anthropologists assisted with in Indochina and Latin America. This enmity is why the prospect of our gaining acceptance remained touch-and-go even as several of us who were studying militaries both

here and abroad tried to affect a thaw in the late 1990s. Unfortunately with the Human Terrain System's revival of anthropologists' suspicions of the military, back into the deep freeze we went. One consequence has been that since 9/11 the military has too often deferred to pseudoanthropologists who purport to have insight into other cultures. The other consequence has been anthropology's still too primitive view of soldiers and soldiering.

As for who can be considered a bona fide *military* anthropologist today, there are still (maybe) only a dozen academic anthropologists worldwide who have pursued firsthand studies of military units. In contrast, many more anthropologists and archeologists have engaged in applied work, either directly for the military (through the Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, and the like) or indirectly via think tanks, such as RAND.

Others, when willing, have been consulted *by* the military as regional experts, forensic experts, and other specialists. A fourth small category of anthropologists are those who teach courses in professional military education institutions and elsewhere, and who learn about the military's own service cultures in the process. And a rising fifth category is comprised of veterans now earning their PhDs. But, does this make all of us *military* anthropologists?

In some regards the differences among us might seem, well, academic—akin to those between armor, aviation, intelligence, and finance. Still, my hunch is that most of us would agree McFate's conception of what we do does not reflect what we *are* doing or can do.

I say this because if McFate had her way, our chief role would be to provide the military with useful insights, better information, and greater understanding so that it can better proceed with whatever it seeks to undertake. It is apparently not our place or our job to raise questions about the wisdom of doctrine or policy, or even to wonder whether it makes sense in the twenty-first century for one set of Americans to advise another set of Americans about what they should (or should not) be doing in someone else's country.

Yet most of us, I would like to think, recognize the days are long past when there are no educated natives who could explain *native* behavior or effectively relay local grievances, resentments, or concerns to interlopers, especially since most populations today have at least some members who can better explain what is going on locally than all but the most gifted outsiders can. After all, from whom do the best anthropologists, journalists, and other regional experts get *their* information? From well-informed locals, of course.

In 2020, the Department of Defense should not just be *acting* as though it wants to take knowledgeable locals seriously, but, given twenty-first-century sensibilities, the Department of Defense should be *taking* them more seriously. Or from a slightly different angle, consider Afghanistan and Iraq. There are Afghans and Iraqis with graduate anthropology degrees. In fact, Afghanistan's current president, Dr. Ashraf Ghani, was once on the anthropology faculty at Johns Hopkins University. Surely he had as good a sense as anyone about what might or might not have worked well in terms of US military approaches to

Afghanistan back in the early 2000s—and doubtless still has views worth listening to.

In other words, it is past time for Americans to think that only we can come up with good ideas for others, or formulate more fitting ideas than they can generate for themselves. At most, we might be able to help broaden others' horizons by offering them examples of what has or has not worked elsewhere, and we excel when it comes to technical assistance. But now to promote the notion we would better succeed at occupying other peoples' countries through a smarter application of anthropological insights ignores what anthropological insights actually suggest: doing anything these days without fully vesting others in determining their own futures dooms us, and not just them.

Something else McFate overlooks is that anthropology has never only been about better understanding others. Its dual purpose has always been to help us better see ourselves. When done well, anthropology forces us to take a good hard look at our own contradictions and inconsistencies. And certainly, an institution as large and complex as the military is rife with both, which makes it ideal terrain for anthropologists. Especially when you consider a second reality anthropologists routinely tackle.

No matter how often we Americans are enjoined to speak truth to power, no one in a hierarchy is ever apt to speak truth to power. But well-trained anthropologists will. Indeed, questioning truth *and* power have long been anthropologists' forte. So is taking an inside-out, bottom-up approach. Anthropologists are not just prone to question everything we see and hear but are primed to treat nothing as sacred, including doctrine, strategy, customs, organizational constructs, or what have you. Consequently, no one is better positioned than we are to raise critical questions about best *and* worst practices before offering objective analysis.

Although our role of perpetually asking *why* is one McFate would apparently prefer we not engage in, a number of us who have worked in and around the military have been doing our best to shake military sensibilities constructively in myriad ways for years (particularly in professional military education). But because we are a small scattered band and have acted as quiet professionals, no one yet has captured all of our endeavors. Even so, and just given the contributions of which I am already aware, numerous misconceptions will be overturned when military anthropology's history *is* finally written. Among the premises to be overturned will be most of those feted in *Military Anthropology*.

The Author Replies

Montgomery McFate

Unfortunately, Anna Simons mischaracterizes the arguments in *Military Anthropology* without actually discussing the substance of the book. Simons seems to believe my book is a marketing pitch for anthropology. However, I am certainly not trying to “sell anthropology to the Department of Defense,” nor am I promoting the idea that “anthropology can—and even should—be reweaponized to serve the Department of Defense today.” In fact, I state quite clearly the purpose of this book is to understand how military organizations have used sociocultural knowledge at the strategic, operational, and tactical level in a variety of different conflicts, and how individual anthropologists contributed their knowledge about the human condition to difficult national security problems, so that if sociocultural knowledge plays an important role in future conflict, some of the pitfalls of the past might be avoided.

If anything, my book is quite skeptical about the use of anthropology by the military since so much anthropological advice has been misused or gone unheeded. In the introduction, for example, I discuss how Gerald Hickey provided advice to the US Army in Vietnam, advocating for a viable ceasefire in accord with Vietnamese concepts of conflict resolution, arguing against forced relocation of Vietnamese peasants and Montagnard tribes to strategic hamlets, and so on. As I note, Hickey’s “predictions proved disturbingly accurate in retrospect, most of Hickey’s recommendations went unheeded” (3).

In Simons’ view, anthropologists should “investigate, analyze, report, question, and even interrogate what passes for conventional wisdom.” I agree wholeheartedly with her view. Thus the vast majority of case studies in the book detail the way in which anthropologists argued with authorities on behalf of the people they studied, sometimes while governing them. For example, the chapter on Robert Rattray details his efforts while employed as a government anthropologist in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) to convince the government to recognize the queen mothers officially, preserve African institutions, and to counter the biased, erroneous stereotypes in the minds of the administration through empirical research.

Simons takes issue with the idea of military anthropology on the grounds it is not a recognized subfield in the discipline of anthropology. Given the historic hostility of anthropologists to the military (and the government in general), it is hardly surprising anthropology does not include military anthropology as a recognized subfield. But as my book demonstrates, the history of anthropology and the military is a long and interesting one.

For example, the concluding chapter concerns the experience of a young Army lieutenant colonel named David Barrows, who struggled to understand the politics of intervention in the 1918 American intervention in Siberia. Later in his life, Barrows became the only US Army general to

have a PhD in anthropology. When I was a student at the University of California, Berkeley, I took classes in Barrows Hall, but I did not know who he was. His remarkable books and incredible life experiences are completely forgotten by anthropologists. Just because anthropologists do not recognize their own intellectual legacy does not justify its absence from history.

Simons seems very concerned about the membership of a club she does not believe should exist. She notes John Useem was a sociologist and Ursula Bower and Tom Harrison lacked formal training. Just to address one example, Tom Harrison lacked a PhD in anthropology. However, Harrison did exactly what anthropologists do, and he did it with great panache. To employ Simons' words, he investigated, analyzed, reported, questioned, and even interrogated "what passes for conventional wisdom."

For example, before he served with the Office of Strategic Services in World War II, Harrison conducted research on the island of Malekula in the New Hebrides and lived among people who still practiced ritual cannibalism. In his book about the experience living among cannibals, *Savage Civilisation* (1937), Harrison challenged the conventional progressive liberalism of 1930s British foreign policy, arguing the Malekulans did not need Western democracy, religion, or customs because they were "in many ways as, and in some ways more, civilized than the Europeans in the same part of the world." Professor Simons' complaints about whether these historical figures count as anthropologists raises the question: is anthropology defined by *what one does*, or is it defined by an official stamp on university letterhead?

Simons characterizes my book as "promot[ing] the notion we would better succeed at occupying other peoples' countries through a smarter application of anthropological insights." Undoubtedly, as I have argued elsewhere, had the US military and policy community better understood the culture, history, politics, and economics of Iraq and Afghanistan, less blood and treasure would have been lost. But the actual argument of my book is military intervention always interferes with the local society; strategic objectives must take social conditions into account; problem framing determines problem solution; and the instrumentalism of national security often negates the objective. Because these problems arise consistently during the military execution of foreign policy (as demonstrated by the case studies in my book), intervention should not be the option of first resort.

No book is perfect, and I am certainly aware of the flaws in *Military Anthropology*. I could have perhaps chosen more illustrative cases, or included more recent material from Iraq or Afghanistan, or perhaps ensured the conclusions better followed from the premises. However, Simon's criticisms do not appear to concern the actual book I wrote, *Military Anthropology*, but rather her own notions of the role of anthropologists vis-à-vis the military. In using me as an example of a naughty anthropologist who uncritically assists the military in achieving its foreign policy objectives, she casts herself as a critical voice in the military establishment who speaks truth to power. Actually, one can do both: I have spent most of my career questioning the conventional military wisdom and then doing something about it.