CULTURE, CRITIQUE AND CREDIBILITY
Speaking truth to power during the long war

In the ‘long war’, it seems, anthropologists are a hot property. I am surely not the only anthropologist whose position on involvement vacillates uneasily between the poles of a debate that is unlikely to go away anytime soon. My career has me smack inside what George Marcus refers to as the ‘intel/security apparatus’,1 where I watch policy-makers’ quest for the computational equivalent of a crystal ball. The work I have cut out for myself is to develop a cogent critique of attempts to apply complexity mathematics to culture for the purposes of decision-making (see McNamara 2006). Whether or not anyone will listen is another question: history says I will have minimal impact working from inside these institutions,2 while Jeremy Keenan (2006) warns that we should ‘remain located outside the corrupting sphere of intelligence agencies and government bodies’ so that we can credibly act as witnesses, recorders and interpreters of truth.3 And yet, as we follow Keenan’s exhortations to witness truth against the official ‘conspiracy theories’ about terrorism and war, I wonder if we shouldn’t be more stringent in applying the same standards of intellectual credibility to ourselves.

On two recent occasions, I have heard PhD-level anthropologists make claims about 9/11 hijackers currently hiding under the protection of the US government. Wacky fringe? Consider Houtman’s recent AT editorial, which summarizes two ‘alternative’ explanations for 9/11 (Houtman 2006). One of the theories alleges ‘massive complicity in this attack by US government operatives’, while another claims that the Twin Towers were taken down by thermite explosive charges. Houtman writes: ‘It is deplorable that academics critical of incomplete, often inaccurate versions of these disasters are professionally ridiculed.’4 Reading this article, a physicist colleague put it, ‘an astounding, even wilful ignorance of basic physics’.5 Many were surprised at how packed the business meeting was; see Vesperi 2007. Even from a coldly utilitarian perspective, there is an obsession with ‘informant interrogations’ that is counterproductive, as concluded by Fein et al. (2007); see also Myser 2004.


Dear Mr. President,

My thanks go to Meg Harrell, Brian Selmeski, Inga Teifler and John Aidun for comments on this article.

Laura A. McNamara

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2. Price for forthcoming: see chapter 11 for Price’s discussion of the lessons of history for present-day anthropology.

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