Montgomery McFate's Mission
Can one anthropologist possibly steer the course in Iraq?

Matthew B. Stannard
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We're trying to do something against mealy-mouthed policies that don't hold responsible those scum with Ph.D.'s who stand beside torturers," Gerald Sider, a professor emeritus of anthropology at the City University of New York Graduate Center, snarled to a reporter for Inside Higher Ed.

Sider was interviewed in November at the 105th annual business meeting of the American Anthropological Association in San Jose. The meeting was abuzz over a year-old New Yorker article by Seymour Hersh, alleging that a 1973 book by cultural anthropologist Raphael Patai, "The Arab Mind," might have inspired the Abu Ghraib prison abuses, on the theory that sexually humiliated Arab men would become willing informants.

Hundreds of anthropologists at the business meeting -- the first official quorum in 30 years -- unanimously endorsed a resolution condemning "the use of anthropological knowledge as an element of physical and psychological torture."

But one anthropologist, while sharing her peers' condemnation of torture as immoral and ineffective, worried that some of her colleagues had the wrong response to Abu Ghraib: Don't scold the military, she argued. Educate it.

"If Patai's book had been used correctly, they would never have done that. Because they would have understood that ... you're not going to get intelligence information out of these people, you're going to get them and their families attacking you," she said later. "Half-baked knowledge is sometimes worse than none at all."

She is Montgomery McFate, a Marin County native now at the United States Institute of Peace. For five years, McFate has made it her mission to convince the U.S. military that anthropology can be a more effective weapon than artillery.

"If you understand how to frustrate or satisfy the population's interests to get them to support your side in a counterinsurgency, you don't need to kill as many of them," she said. "And you certainly will create fewer enemies."
That kind of kumbaya comment seems misplaced in a militaristic era of shock and awe, but so does McFate: a punk rock wild child of dyed-in-the-wool hippies, a 41-year-old with close-cropped hair and a voice buttery with sardonic amusement, a double-doc Ivy Leaguer with a penchant for big hats and American Spirit cigarettes and a nose that still bears the tiny dent of a piercing 25 years closed.

Her ideas have made McFate the focus of bitter criticism -- but not from the uniformed forces. After four years of a war that was supposed to last more like four months, the military is now listening to McFate's ideas -- and committing money and manpower to make them a reality.

"By force of her intellect and personality, she's going to shape the way this is understood," said Kalev Sepp, a counterinsurgency expert at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey. "What she reveals can't be ignored."

The criticism of McFate comes from social scientists who say McFate is following a path of good intentions toward a diabolical future where science meant to improve humanity becomes a weapon of mass destruction.

"If people like McFate and their vision of anthropology becomes more powerful, the discipline will really change in ways that I think would be calamitous," said Hugh Gusterson, a professor of cultural studies at George Mason University and one of McFate's more vocal critics. "I think she's encouraging people to do things that I regard as unethical."

McFate has little patience for what she views as academic malcontents more interested in issuing resolutions than in finding solutions. After 30 years, she wants to see an anthropologist sitting on the National Security Council.

"The military is so willing to listen now ... and for anthropologists to sit back in their ivory tower and spit at these people that are asking for their help -- I think there's something unethical about that," she said. "If you're not in the room with them, you won't influence their decisions."

Montgomery McFate was born on Jan. 8, 1966 in Waldo Point, a Sausalito backwater of houseboats and hippies described by a San Francisco Examiner reporter in 1972 as "equal parts fantasy and ghetto reality."
McFate lived at what she calls the "art scene" of Gate 5. A childhood friend, author Cintra Wilson, calls the denizens there "practically squatters."

"I lived in a little bit more gentrified houseboats ... we had plumbing," said Wilson, who loosely based a character in her novel "Colors Insulting to Nature" on McFate. "But Gate 5 had resolved to not be gentrified, and there were riots where you'd have pregnant women hitting cops with boat oars, like 'No, we don't want plumbing!'"

McFate's mother, Frances Pointer, bought a surplus World War II ammunition barge for a dollar, converted it into studios and married Martin Carlough, a 6-foot-8-inch former Marine who got out of the corps on a mental health discharge.

"He used to walk around downtown in this pink denim jacket and it said, 'I am God' in giant rhinestone letters," McFate said. "It's my first memory of my father."

Frances won custody in their 1968 divorce, despite her estranged husband claiming that as the "living incarnation of the eternal Buddha" he made a fitter parent. Hospitalized and treated with electroshock therapy, Martin ended up wandering the streets of Sausalito in the early '70s.

"They basically fried his brain. He was no longer a human being," McFate recalled. "He rather flamboyantly threw himself off the Golden Gate Bridge."

McFate's mother was comparatively stable. But her rejection of society left her with no real income other than rent from the other apartments on her barge -- the white curtains in the bedroom of a Marin City friend seemed to McFate an unimaginable luxury.

"Her advice to me when I was a kid was never write anything down, don't leave any records, never trust the government, don't join any organizations. She was a real anarchist," McFate said.

The conflicts between the Gate 5 residents and the forces of development led to a long standoff around a pile driver near McFate's barge. Sheriff's deputies took up residence outside her bedroom, protecting the equipment.

"It made me feel really sympathetic toward the police, who I saw as people who were just trying to do their jobs as best they could," she said. "And these (protesters) have their really legitimate viewpoint, too, which is that they want to keep the wild world wild."
"It made me feel like, well, there are two sides to every story."

Her mother didn't encourage academics, instead urging McFate to get ahead on her looks. McFate and Wilson ended up studying at the local bus stop. She excelled academically, but the fashionable cliques of Tamalpais High School were daunting for a young woman who would be too poor to buy a new coat until she entered graduate school. She sought her own niche.

"She walked in the door one time and it was all black jeans, black combat boots, tight black sweater and this big black hat with a big black veil. It was this great look ... we called her 'Satan's beekeeper,' " Wilson recalled. "She was goth before anybody was goth."

In the Bay Area punk scene -- the Mutants, Pearl Harbor and the Explosions, the Offs -- it didn't matter if McFate had thrift store clothing and a bed on a barge. But after three boyfriends in a row died -- hanging, meth, heroin -- McFate escaped back into academics.

Hard work paid off in a slew of small scholarships and in August 1985 she moved into the freshman dorms at UC Berkeley and tried to call her mother.

"Her friend called me back an hour later and said, 'I have some bad news for you: She's dead," McFate said. Her mother had had a stroke. "I had no brothers and sisters. My father was dead. Really I had no one to turn to. ... It was just me."

She recovered enough to maintain a B-plus average in her first semester, develop an interest in anthropology and enroll in graduate studies at Yale with a full scholarship. But her dissertation on the Republican community in Northern Ireland puzzled other anthropologists.

"People said, 'You really should be doing this in political science, because it's not appropriate for an anthropology degree,' " McFate said. "And I was like, wait, you don't think that Republican community in Northern Ireland is a culture? It seemed to me that how human beings go to war is as much a product of culture as table manners or sexual practices."

In Belfast, McFate had an epiphany: The common view of the Troubles as a battle between Catholics and Protestants, or loyalists and Republicans, or even terrorists and the government, was not how the warring sides saw it.
"The way (Republicans) legitimate their activities is that they are an occupied country," she said. "They've been occupied for 800 years by the British military."

What's more, McFate said, the British troops involved in counterinsurgency recognized the same narrative.

"They may think personally that these people are terrorists and despise them, but they understand what's motivating it," she said. "They could not have built an effective strategy in Northern Ireland as they did without having a very full understanding of their enemy -- which, by the way, it took them 30 years to get."

But McFate was realizing that academia -- "where you read books about books and then write a book about other people's books about books" -- was not for her.

"I wanted to do something in the world, not about the world," she said. After receiving her anthropology doctorate in 1994, McFate jumped to Harvard Law School, where she earned her juris doctor in 1997 and landed a job as a litigation associate at Baker & McKenzie in San Francisco.

"But I got there, and they took me up to my 24th floor office on the Embarcadero and shut the door and I'm sitting there with a view of the bay and all of a sudden I just started to cry. ... 'This is all wrong. This is not what I should be doing. What am I doing here?' "

That quest for meaning would lead McFate into the gap between two communities that had maintained a frigid divorce for 30 years: anthropology and the military.

Anthropology has been called "handmaiden to colonialism" -- a phrase normally used to criticize the discipline, but one McFate uses to make a point of historical fact.

In 1902, when the American Anthropological Association was founded with an initial membership of 175, anthropology was dominated by British scientists reporting on the empire's subjects in Africa, or Americans studying the Sioux for the Bureau of Ethnology.

Even then, there were those who argued for separation. In 1919, Franz Boas, dubbed "father of American anthropology," publicly complained that colleagues had "prostituted science" by scouring Central America for German submarine bases under the guise of research and was censured by the association.
Boas died in 1942, when most anthropologists were helping wage World War II, studying everything from Japanese culture to the physiques of draftees. Even Margaret Mead, probably the most famous anthropologist of all time, wrote pamphlets for the Office of War Information.

Some later regretted their involvement in propaganda efforts; others complained that their advice to the military -- such as that the Japanese could be persuaded to surrender without a large-scale attack -- was ignored. Nevertheless, for many, victory was vindication.

"Everybody came out of World War II and said ... that was a necessary but nasty task," said David Price, author of the forthcoming "Weaponizing Anthropology: American Anthropologists in the Second World War." "Anthropologists came out of World War II and said, 'We can use anthropology to solve the world's problems.' "

American military mistakes in Vietnam -- a belief in American virtue, listening to a few locals pushing an agenda instead of the entire culture -- presaged those in Iraq, McFate said.

"We lost in Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the entire national security establishment decided that they would never do that again," she said. "They decided to focus their energies on a peer competitor -- the Soviets."

The decision to avoid Vietnam-style counterinsurgency warfare led to the creation of large-scale, high-tech, heavily armored conventional forces that could play the Soviets to a draw and utterly overwhelm any other foe. Military training mirrored that strategy, as young officers were encouraged to pursue careers in combat leadership over more academic pursuits.

"If what war fighting becomes is servicing targets from hundreds or thousands of kilometers away, you don't need cultural understanding," said Steven Metz, professor of national security affairs at the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College. "(But) the people who were opposed to us, they learned from the Gulf War as well."

The adversary applied its lessons of asymmetric warfare in the Sept. 11 attacks, the war in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq, and the American military under Donald Rumsfeld faced a task unlike any it had before -- and had all the wrong tools.

"Rumsfeld ... was going to optimize the way the force functioned. Other cultures didn't matter. Other societies didn't count. Just how efficiently could you deliver firepower," Sepp
said. "(But) in Iraq, just bombing and blasting things, the people who knew that wasn't working were the guys on the ground -- the captains and sergeants -- that had to make this happen. You just can't kill enough of these people."

At some point in the past 18 months, the focus in Iraq began to shift away from a military solution. Rumsfeld was replaced by Robert Gates, a former CIA director with a doctorate from Georgetown University. Operations in Iraq went to Gen. David Petraeus, a Ph.D. from Princeton, fresh from overseeing a new counterinsurgency manual that urged field commanders to consult outside experts in governance, economics and anthropology.

But as the military began embracing the academics it had effectively forsworn since Vietnam, there were relatively few anthropologists returning the embrace.

"Anthropologists for decades were screaming at the top of their lungs, 'Hey, we can help you to administer your colonial empires, we can help you to administer post-occupation Japan' ... and were ignored," said Dustin Wax, a doctoral candidate focusing on the history of anthropology at the New School for Social Research. "Now it's a couple decades later, and they're saying, 'Well, where are you guys when we need you?'"

The narrative of anthropology in the past 30 years is remarkably similar to the military's: a new generation recoiling from Vietnam.

"The elders of the day had not just fought in (World War II), but used anthropology in the war. And among the anti-war forces were a whole bunch of people who fought in (Vietnam) as 18- or 19-year-olds, got the GI Bill and were in their 30s," Price said. "So there was a generational split."

The resultant friction exploded in a series of meetings of the association in the 1970s, fueled by two of the last gasps of anthropological cooperation with the military: Project Camelot and the Thai scandal.

Project Camelot was a 1964 Defense Department effort to identify the potential for and means of preventing internal war in Chile, where protests forced the project’s cancellation in 1965. Five years later, documents stolen from a university professor suggested that anthropologists were helping the American and Thai governments study ways to strengthen loyalty to the Thai king. Again, those involved said their goals were salutary -- studying other cultures with the goal of preventing war.
"A less charitable way of looking at it is it was to keep regimes in power that were favorable to the United States," Price said. "If the regime is being propped up by the military, those regimes are probably not helping the peasants, which is who the anthropologists are out studying."

That, said George Mason University's Gusterson, points to a more fundamental issue that arose in anthropology in the 1970s: the idea that cooperation with the military ran contrary to the science's basic principles.

"You pitch a tent ... among the people you want to understand, you live with them, you catch their diseases, you eat their horrible food, you share their joys and pains," he said. "The thought that you would cultivate those relationships of trust and intimacy and then ... go to the Pentagon and say 'these are the people you should kill, these are the people you shouldn't kill,' that's extremely problematic for people with that methodology."

For some elder anthropologists, the discipline's recoil had by the 21st century led to practical irrelevance.

"Margaret Mead was on 'Johnny Carson' more than two dozen times," said Felix Moos, a University of Kansas anthropologist. "Today when I ask an audience can you name one internationally or nationally known anthropologist, I meet nothing but silence."

By 2005, less than 4 percent of American Anthropological Association members surveyed by the association were working for the government. The discipline also had become politically homogenous: A George Mason University survey found Democrats outnumbering Republicans in anthropology and sociology by 20 to 1 in 2004. In a largely symbolic act that year, the association rescinded the 1919 censure of Franz Boas.

Little wonder that when the military finally started looking for in-house anthropologists, the list of names was very short. One of them was Montgomery McFate.

McFate met her future husband, Sean, at Harvard in 1997. She was the daughter of West Coast hippies, he the scion of a patrician East Coast family. But they shared an interest in Taoism, and something else: She was an anthropologist interested in the military; he was a soldier seeking to study anthropology. They married in December 1997.
But Sean McFate found that the military took a dim view of his scholarly interests -- when he sought to leave the service for studies, they sent him to Germany for a three-year tour. His new bride traded her 7-month-old law career for the life of an Army wife.

"It was a nightmare for me," Sean confided. "Her punk rock, Ivy League background was very potent, but did not prepare her for the Army."

But by the end of three years, Sean said, "she spoke and understood Army."

The McFates returned to Washington D.C.'s trendy Adams Morgan neighborhood. A CD collection fills their entryway -- Sean's classical collection overwhelming a small grouping of rock CDs including Nirvana and the Sex Pistols. The remainder of the flat is filled with tikis, boat lights and Montgomery’s collection of Orientalist art.

Despite her return to American shores, McFate found herself still grasping for purpose until one night in 2002 when she ended a long talk with her husband about their futures by scribbling a sentence on a cocktail napkin: How do I make anthropology relevant to the military?

"It's one of those times where you get goose bumps all over your body," she said. McFate set out to work her way into the national security system: to Rand, where she studied North Korean society, then to the Office of Naval Research, where in 2004 she won permission to interview American Marines back from Iraq.

Some younger troops were frustrated with what they saw as Iraqi culture of inshallah, God willing -- failure to meet schedules, reluctance to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. McFate saw an imposition of American cultural expectations on a culture born of survival.

"There's a psychological legacy of living under a regime of fear. If you stuck your head out and tried to do something good, you would be potentially sent to prison," she said. "Now here we come and we just knocked over their sovereign government -- dictatorship or not -- and we suddenly expect they're going to behave like us. That's a preposterous idea."

But mainly, McFate found in the Iraq veterans a hunger for cultural knowledge, one the troops had fed through Google and Barnes & Noble, producing improvised innovations that were sometimes remarkable, if short-lived.
"This young Marine captain described how he had basically got there and been told it was his job to create a judicial system. ... He went on the Internet and found a copy of the 1950 Iraqi constitution. So he used their system and he used their law, so it had tremendous local legitimacy," McFate recalled. "But he was told by the (Coalition Provisional Authority), 'You're employing Ba'athists and you have to stop now.' "

In November 2004, McFate threw together a conference on "national security and adversary cultural knowledge," the first such conference since 1962. She expected a crowd of maybe 125. More than twice that number attended.

"The most embarrassing thing was we discovered we wait-listed a general," she said. "You don't wait-list a general."

Three years after her cocktail-napkin revelation, McFate received a call from a science adviser to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"I was the only person he could find," she said. "The basic message was, 'The war fighters say they want information about the society they are operating in. ... We need an anthropologist. Can you come over here right now?' "

Corralling a colleague who had done field research in Iraq, McFate came over, and soon was visiting the Pentagon almost every day. The McFate message, as enunciated in those meetings and in a series of essays, is that cultural ignorance is behind many U.S. problems in Iraq.

Her oft-cited simple example was a gesture -- arm straight, palm out -- that means "stop" in America but "welcome" in Iraq. That difference translated into Iraqi families driving blithely toward a seemingly welcoming American soldier at checkpoints until shot as a presumed suicide bomber.

On a more fundamental level, McFate has argued, the entire Iraq war was a colossal failure of cultural understanding at the highest levels of the Bush administration.

"They assumed that the civilian apparatus of the government would remain intact after the regime was decapitated. ... In fact, when the United States cut off the hydra's Ba'athist head, power reverted to its most basic and stable form -- the tribe," she wrote. "The tribal insurgency is a direct result of our misunderstanding the Iraqi culture."
In conversation, McFate takes the argument a step further, saying that had the Bush administration understood Iraqi culture, "we would never have gone to war. Not in a million years. There's no harder case than Iraq."

To the military -- particularly to those long-lonely counterinsurgency experts moving into positions of influence as the war soured -- these ideas were both obvious and revolutionary.

"These kinds of perspectives that McFate brought made instant sense to people who had been fighting on the ground in Iraq," Sepp said. "They were pounding on those issues going, 'Here's somebody who understands the kind of war were fighting.'"

These days, McFate is holding so many meetings that she is finding it hard to write her book, tentatively titled "Cultural Knowledge and National Security." Her expertise has been tapped for everything from writing part of the Army's new counterinsurgency manual to working with the Office of the Secretary of Defense to apply that manual to the current "surge" in Baghdad and evaluating the military's cultural information needs and training programs.

Meanwhile, the Department of Defense has started a program dubbed Cultural Operational Research Human Terrain System -- based on an essay McFate co-authored in 2005 -- to embed five-member teams of experienced military officers and civilian social scientists with operating brigades: an anthropological brain transplant.

Heading the program is Steve Fondacaro, a Fresno native and self-described radical who retired from the Army as a colonel after 30 years in the infantry and special operations.

"(McFate) is my political commissar. Every time she opens her mouth I stop what I'm doing and listen very closely, and then I apply it. Because she's always right," he said.

Originally, Fondacaro said, the military tried to turn McFate's ideas into a laptop-based tool. But he argued that field commanders needed human experts to explain cultural conundrums.

Such as why escorting home a person arrested in error, giving his family money and apologizing to his boss might sound polite, but will get the person killed as a collaborator. Or why parched villages might violently resist well-meaning efforts to dig new wells if you don't involve the local sheikh whose political legitimacy has for centuries been based on control of water.
"Give him credit for designing the plan and informing the population of what he is going to get the Americans to do, and when the ribbon-cutting time comes, we stand in the background and he takes all the credit," Fondacaro said. "You (now) have an incredibly powerful ally."

The first team arrived in Afghanistan at the beginning of March, Fondacaro said, and another should be ready for Iraq in July -- assuming he can add to the half dozen social scientists who have so far joined the program.

"If you're a scientist worth your salt, and you object ... to the way military operations and military thinking ruined the quality of life for the indigenous people we deal with ... then the approach to solving that problem in my view is engagement and education. It's not isolation," he said. "It's not because we're evil people, it's because we're stupid. And the cure for stupidity is education. And who's going to do that education if it isn't you, a cultural anthropologist?"

To McFate, early success in getting her ideas implemented by the Pentagon is a blessing. But if her work was winning her fans in the military, it was outraging some of her colleagues in anthropology.

In 2004, Felix Moos brought an idea to his senator, Pat Roberts, R-Kan., then chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

"My idea really was that the military desperately needs more language- and area-qualified people than they have," he said. "It seems to me that we would do much better in the world if we had a few thousand Arabic-speaking soldiers with us at the beginning of the current conflict in Iraq."

The idea turned into the Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholarship Program, which provided intelligence agencies with scholarship funds to recruit and train students with language and cultural skills. Moos was delighted. But the new program electrified the 2005 meeting of the association.

"Initial reaction ... was that the AAA should weigh in against this," said Paul Nuti, director of external, international and government relations for the American Anthropological Association. "(But) there were competing voices heard from the membership that maybe that was too hasty of a move."
One of those voices -- a loud one -- was McFate's.

"I, for one, did not know she existed. That's been the case with a lot of these folks that are already embedded and working for national security intelligence entities," Nuti said. "Montgomery and others have really opened up discussion on the many, many different roles and different applications of the discipline."

Rather than take an immediate stand against PRISP, the AAA established a commission to review its ethical guidelines and the challenges anthropologists face in national security work by late 2007.

But at the AAA's next business meeting in San Jose, members passed not only the resolution against the use of anthropology in torture but also one calling for an end to the U.S. presence in Iraq. If approved by the full membership in May, both will become official AAA policy.

"The anthropologist turned military consultant Montgomery McFate ... (and others) are suggesting a form of hit-man anthropology where anthropologists, working on contract to organizations that often care nothing for the welfare of our anthropological subjects, prostitute their craft by deliberately earning the trust of our subjects with the intent of betraying it," Gusterson wrote in an essay prepared for the meeting.

Prostituting the science -- the same charge Franz Boas levied against his spying colleagues in 1919.

McFate seems to relish some of the controversy -- in an early conversation about criticism of her work, she urged me to call Gusterson with what seemed like impish glee.

But her jaw sets at some of the personal attacks in journals or anthropology blogs -- not the accusations of intellectual prostitution, but claims that she is motivated by greed.

"I don't like being personally attacked. I don't mind if they attack my writing and say I'm full of crap," she said. "(But) if I were in this for the money ... I'd be a partner in a law firm making millions of dollars a year."

More academic critics of McFate's work cite, by and large, three main issues.

Some say her work involves a degree of secrecy that strikes them as counter-scientific, although McFate argues that secrecy can protect lives -- troops' and informants' both.
Others are concerned that she is placing anthropologists everywhere under suspicion of spying -- a suspicion many say they encounter in any case -- and effectively endorsing the military's agenda.

"The American military is being used by and large from my point of view for geopolitical domination," said Roberto Gonzalez, an associate professor of anthropology at San Jose State University who prepared the 2006 anti-torture resolution. "I think it is very problematic for anthropologists to be involved in a system of essentially domination."

Wilson, the childhood friend, argues that such critics fail to understand McFate. "The people we grew up around labor under the idea that no war is ever OK. (McFate), having been an anthropologist, comes from the understanding that war is a human impulse that's not going away. Like homosexuality or something that is utterly normal and has always been there -- you may object to it, but there's no point in doing so, because it's not going away," she said.

"At its core -- for her -- I know it's an altruistic mission. What she really wants is a bloodless war."

McFate displays little patience for such critics.

"Their intentional disengagement from policy process, their uninformed unwillingness to learn about what actually goes on in Washington," she said, a tone of icy exasperation briefly replacing the normal warm amusement. "There's a blanket condemnation without trying to understand, which strikes me as particularly un-anthropological."

But the most common criticism of McFate's work is that it conflicts with the most fundamental ethical principles of modern anthropology.

"She advocates that anthropologists should cultivate relationships of trust with those communities in order to advise the U.S. military apparatus how to control them," Gusterson said.

"If you want to do what McFate is suggesting, you have an obligation to tell people in the Sunni triangle, 'By the way, I'm going to be going back to Alexandria and explaining all this to Robert Gates. How do you feel about that?' I can't imagine many people in the Sunni triangle are going to talk to you then."
For some anthropologists, like Moos, that argument is grossly simplistic.

"In World War II, to study the einsatzgruppen of the SS, would you want them to be signing statements of confidentiality?" Moos asked. "I mean, that's ridiculous."

But Gonzalez argues that Moos' question is essentially correct -- and part of the reason why anthropologists should never assist the military, save perhaps in missions adjudged humanitarian by vote of the association.

"It's absolutely essential to explain clearly to potential informants -- whether they are Zapotec farmers or whether those are SS officers -- any possible risks that the work might entail for them. ... No matter how distasteful we might find what it is they do," he said.

McFate acknowledges the inherent tension in her work, and shares the fear of the abuse of anthropology.

Anthropologists, she said, need to balance "the anthropological interest in protecting informants and the national security interests of acquiring valuable information and knowledge that might potentially hurt an informant but might protect the lives of American and foreign civilians and members of the armed services."

"But most anthropologists ... live in a pretty simple moral world. Their only interest is the interests of their informants. That is the sine qua non of anthropology. That is the prime directive. And I live in a more complicated world where that is a directive, but it is not the prime directive. Perhaps that is what they find so objectionable."

McFate seems to respect her critics -- even vocal ones like Gusterson -- for at least taking part in the debate over anthropology and national security.

"I think Hugh is also doing a great service for the country. He's a dissenter. I'm also a dissenter. We're dissenting against different things. ... I'm dissenting against anthropology right now," she said. "Under different circumstances, we could have been great friends."

But those anthropologists who are sitting out the issue, she said, are missing a great -- and perhaps a final -- opportunity to influence America's interaction with the world.

"They have stayed in the ivory tower. It's a safe place, it's an easy place to be. I did a Ph.D. at Yale, so I'm very familiar with what that looks like. I'd just like to see them get out more,"
she said. "They have a unique voice, and they have a lot more power and a lot more authority than they think they do."

It is that concern, McFate said, that makes her evangelize her fellow anthropologists, that makes her giddy when amid the many fan letters she receives from military personnel appears the occasional note from a fellow anthropologist expressing a desire to get involved -- or at least an interest in the debate.

Because for McFate, it is not ultimately her colleagues' criticism that worries her. It is the fear that the entire discussion is taking place too late.

"Dave Petraeus ... is going over there. And he's been given carte blanche by the White House. He can have any resource he wants," she said that cold February day, seated on her bench across from the White House, keeping warm with a fur coat and an American Spirit, her eyes hidden behind oversize sunglasses.

"My fear is that ... he's going to go over there and it's going to be too late, and he's going to fail. And the whole thing is going to be delegitimized: the counterinsurgency doctrine, non-kinetic force, delegitimized," she said softly. "And then what's the Army going to do? It's going to fall back on what it had before ... technology and firepower.

"But if you can figure out how a society is wired, you don't need to do that," she said. "That's what the game is. That's what Petraeus is going to do. But you can't do that if you don't have information."

E-mail Matthew B. Stannard at mstannard@sfchronicle.com.


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