

Response to “Relations between Archaeologists and the Military in the Case of Iraq”

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In the United States, a comedian named Stephen Colbert has a daily television programme called *The Colbert Report*. One of his regular features is called “Stephen Colbert’s Formidable Opponent”. In these sketches, Mr Colbert puts on a red necktie, then a blue necktie, and debates with himself. In searching for a metaphor for the agonising ethical process that thoughtful archaeologists who work with the military subject themselves to on a daily basis, the ‘Formidable Opponent’ strikes me as the most descriptive.

Dr Curtis reflects on the back and forth aspect of his own ethical journey as he discusses his decision to participate in Iraqi projects and his recognition of the fact that he has accepted protection from, and cooperated with, active duty military personnel representing a variety of countries.

For me, the internal debate predates the conflict in Iraq. I began to work in a military setting during peacetime, five years prior to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. It strikes me that most of the current discussion focusing on the ethics of archaeologists working with the military fails to address the fact that the number of archaeologists actively working on military installations in the United States has numbered in the hundreds for over two decades. One of our primary responsibilities is to identify, evaluate and protect Native American ancestral places (also known as prehistoric archaeological sites).

In the late 1990s, when the United States Department of Defense (DoD) adopted one of the most proactive indigenous community consultation policies in the world, many DoD archaeologists took responsibility for diplomatic relations between military installations and Native Americans. Effective consultation often put the archaeologist in a position of advocacy for access to, and preservation of, ancestral places. Ironically, these activities directly supported increasing the availability of land for military training. During this time, however, there was virtually no comment or notice from the academic community, let alone a questioning of the ethics of military archaeologists. In fact, many academic archaeologists benefitted from DoD funding for archaeological survey and investigation in these settings.

This historical perspective points out the complexity that may not be obvious in Dr Curtis’ process of arriving at his personal resolution of the ethical challenge, in which he divides his participation into pre-conflict activities (which he views as unethical) versus post-conflict activities (within which he is participating). In following this dichotomy, land management for military training, including its indigenous advocacy component, clearly falls in the pre-conflict category and so would be considered unethical.

Dr Curtis, however, is more specifically referring to the process of mapping archaeological sites in areas where conflict may be imminent and sharing these locations with military planners. In addition, training military personnel about appropriate, respectful and cautionary behaviour when operating in the midst of valuable archaeological properties in order to prevent unnecessary damage would fall in Dr Curtis' realm of unethical behaviour. There is no question that I have chosen to work in both of these areas from before the time that the US military was globally criticised for damage at Babylon. From my perspective, the only way to avoid damage to cultural property during times of armed conflict is through planning and education. The text of the *Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property during Times of Armed Conflict* (1954) supports this view and, in fact, requires this preparation of the signatories. I cannot think of better people to support these efforts than archaeologists.

To make matters even more complex, the preponderance of damage to archaeological properties in Iraq resulting from military activity happened during the post-conflict phase, the phase often referred to as Stability Operations. All of the damage at Babylon described in Dr Curtis' article, for example, happened during this phase. From the planning perspective, this damage might have been prevented through better military planning and training – both pre-conflict activities. In addition, the damage might never have been systematically documented in a timely way without the embedded Polish archaeologists – individuals who clearly made ethical choices to work with the military. Given the complexity of the situation, dividing the demands of cultural property preservation into pre- and post-conflict phases is, to me, an artificial construct. Where is the dividing line between the phases? Would it be fair to criticise a military that failed to plan or train for encountering heritage and archaeology because all of the subject matter experts decided it was unethical to educate them about these issues?

Clearly, given my connection with the DoD In Theater Heritage Training Program for Deploying Personnel, the results of my personal ethical deliberations show that I have chosen to work in both the pre- and post- conflict phases of military activity. What, then, were the considerations on both sides of my personal version of 'Formidable Opponent'? Back in 1998, the first choice that I made was to take a job working for an institution that trains people to use whatever means necessary to defend the United States. I recognise the fact that many of these means are violent and that innocent people are killed and injured in the course of such conflicts. Those would be reasons not to participate. During peacetime, those concerns have a way of fading into the background. If we think about ethics as working toward an outcome that benefits the greater good, in 1998 the opportunity to develop an archaeological stewardship program at Fort Drum and to become an advocate for the Haudenosaunee people, whose ancestors lived on our installation, outweighed the military training aspect. In fact, the potential for Fort Drum soldiers going directly into combat seemed almost hypothetical. It may be hard to believe, but the main sign welcoming people to Fort Drum at that time read, "Fort Drum, Dedicated to Preserving the Environment".

At that time, two additional considerations fell into the negative category. One consideration for me was that I was uncomfortable with military culture, and the second was

that I mistakenly assumed that the Fort Drum leadership would be opposed to setting aside training land in order to preserve archaeological sites. However, during the five years between 1998 and 2003, my anthropological training helped me understand and appreciate military culture. There are few organisations that embody heritage preservation in their daily activities as effectively as the US military. I also discovered enthusiasm and support for sound land management and archaeological preservation among members of the 10th Mountain Division Command Group and the Fort Drum Garrison Leadership. During the demanding days of preparing to deploy overseas from Fort Drum, one of the Division Commanders graciously allocated an entire afternoon and two Black Hawk helicopters to help Native American elders to visit ancestral places. On a personal level, I look up to and respect individuals who offer these kinds of examples in their own behaviour and deportment, whether they are wearing a military uniform or not.

Dr Curtis doesn't discuss his considerations with respect to the privileges of living in England and working for an institution like the British Museum, an institution, I would add, that has ethical challenges of its own. From my perspective, it is a privilege to be a citizen of the United States. I live in a peaceful place with a more than reasonable social order. I am very aware of the fact that, every day, hundreds of people view the United States as a good enough place to risk their lives to attempt to enter. I was privileged to vote recently in a very historic election. For people who believe that this conflict is about oil, I am also using my share of petroleum products. I now work on a daily basis with people who are willing to risk their lives to defend this way of life.

Military leaders who care about preservation of archaeology in Iraq and Afghanistan now see value in my archaeological knowledge and expertise and are requesting my help as well as the help of my colleagues. At this point in time, I feel it would be unethical for me to withhold this expertise from them. As one Colonel told me, you will never find a more committed pacifist than a combat veteran. I have attended events where a Commanding General led a prayer for peace. Here is the critical point – conspicuously absent from the military and archaeological ethics debate in both the US and the UK: Dr Curtis and I both live in countries where civilian politicians made the decision to engage the military in the current overseas conflicts. Our ethical arguments are with these leaders, not with the honourable men and women who are serving what is supposed to be the will of the people.

In summary, ethics boils down to how individuals decide to behave in any given situation. These decisions are best made independently, with as many facts and as much first-hand information as possible. Many of the most severe critics of archaeologists who work with the military have had the least first-hand experience with military activity. Many of them have never met a military officer. Many of them have no idea that the United States has a robust domestic cultural property protection programme providing millions of dollars for archaeological investigation. Fewer of them know how many of their colleagues have been funded for years by these programmes. Many of these critics also appear to be unaware of well-established cultural property pro-

grammes in a wide range of ministries of defence with qualified archaeologists serving as reserve officers. Many of these heroic individuals have saved artefacts, archaeological sites, historic buildings and valued cultural properties.

Dr Curtis and I have made different determinations. That does not mean that either of us agonised less. I am sure that we have comparable internal “Formidable Opponents”. I admire Dr Curtis for giving these issues such careful consideration and for coming to a decision that has enabled him to make such significant and valued contributions to cultural preservation in Iraq. I offer him my deepest respect.

References

Colbert Report. Comedy Central (US). 2005-present.

UNESCO, 1954. Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. [<http://www.icomos.org/hague/>] [Accessed 13 June 2009].