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## Pentagon Proposes Cuts to Social Science Research

Elizabeth Redden

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The Trump administration has proposed cutting a Department of Defense program that funds unclassified, university-based social science research relating to topics of national security.

Supporters of the Minerva Research Initiative say the program plays a critical role not only in funding important, policy-relevant research but also in building connections between social scientists and the military. Critics of the program raise concerns about the role Pentagon funding has played in shaping U.S. social science work in certain areas.

President Trump's budget, released last month, proposes that the Pentagon's Basic Research Office, which manages the Minerva program, discontinue funding for it and notify grant recipients involved with 23 ongoing projects that their awards will be terminated early. The funding from the Basic Research Office amounted to about \$11.4 million in 2020 and has historically been the main source of financial support for the program, which also receives funding directly from the Air Force and Navy.

The Trump budget said that new awards for the Minerva program will not be made, except with funds earmarked by Congress or directly from the military service branches.

Pentagon officials "conducted a rigorous prioritization review of its research, development, test and evaluation activities and identified where funds could be reinvested in lethality and readiness," a DoD spokesman said. "The question was not 'Is this a good effort?' but, rather, 'Is a dollar spent on this effort more important to our military capability'" than dollars spent in other priority areas, he said. "We are making these tough choices in order to properly support and resource the war fighter."

The Consortium of Social Science Organizations noted that Minerva is far easier for the Trump administration to cut than most other programs.

"Because the Minerva Initiative does not receive a direct Congressional appropriation, the Department has the authority to terminate it unless Congress affirmatively acts to prevent it (unlike the majority of the changes proposed in the President's budget request)," the group said

in a [Feb. 18 article](#) in its newsletter. “Should Congressional appropriators wish to maintain the MRI, they would need to include specific language in their FY 2021 appropriations bill stipulating that funding for the program continue.”

The proposed cuts to the Minerva program, which was launched in 2008 by then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, threatens a sizable source of money for political scientists and international relations scholars in particular. The program -- which, according to [a National Academies report](#) issued last year, has typically received \$20 to \$22 million in annual funding from the Pentagon and the various service branches combined -- awarded grants in recent years averaging \$1.5 million over three or four years. Funded projects have addressed issues related to climate change, cyberconflict, political violence, power alliances and terrorist organizations; recent awards have gone to projects focused on Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns, analyses of burden sharing in international alliances and defense cooperation agreements, and the implications of Africa’s [youth bulge](#) for national security, to name a few topics.

About half of Minerva recipients are political scientists, and scholars from economics, mathematics and computer science, and psychology are also well represented among grantees. The National Academies report found that Minerva-supported research "has been published in top journals and tends to have strong citation records. The research has also resulted in books and produced policy-relevant statistical models, databases, and mapping tools, reflecting the value placed by the program on innovative outputs beyond publications and conference presentations."

"The Minerva Initiative has provided funding for valuable political science research and supported interdisciplinary collaborations within and beyond the social sciences since its launch in 2008," said Steven Rathgeb Smith, the executive director of the American Political Science Association. "Now more than ever, the federal government should increase its investment in scientific research that provides deeper insight into the way political processes, movements, conflicts and institutions shape our lives and impact our national security. As technology and the rate of change increases, the data and research political scientists are producing is critical to help determine how we approach challenges we face as a society."

Brandon Valeriano, the Bren Chair of Military Innovation at the Marine Corps University and a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, has some problems with the way Minerva has been structured and the processes for evaluating and awarding grant proposals (a detailed discussion of the grant selection and awarding processes is included in the National Academies report). But he thinks the program should be improved, not cut.

“It’s critical to have social science and humanities involved in national security,” he said. “There’s a lot of research being done in the United States by strong scholars who can contribute to the national defense. To mobilize these scholars for the benefit of the nation is an important process.”

“It has really expanded the amount of money that’s available for social scientists who are doing security-related research,” said Sara Mitchell, the F. Wendell Miller Professor at the University

of Iowa. Mitchell, a political scientist, received a Minerva grant to support her work on political conflicts between countries that have shared ethnic groups.

“My work is more on the human side of political violence, and how governments design political, social and economic interventions, so I think that would be a real loss if DoD decided only to fund the more science-technology side,” Mitchell said. “They’re going to lose what social science brings to the table, which is an understanding of the political and policy environment within which these technologies are used.”

“I think the most important thing the program has done is it has helped support the creation of a research community that is addressing social science questions that are of greater interest to the defense community than to other aspects of the academy,” said Jacob N. Shapiro, a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University who has been a principal investigator or co-PI on three Minerva grants. “It’s pushed research in slightly different directions than it would have otherwise gone, and I think for the most part increased the total volume of work. There’s more social science research being done now on conflict and violence and ways to address those phenomena than there would have been absent the program.”

But Zackariah Mampilly, the Marxe Chair of International Affairs at the City University of New York, raised concerns about the degree to which Pentagon priorities have shaped what social science research gets done.

"Way too many US political scientists are reliant on Defense funding in ways that directly compromise the integrity & objectivity of their research," he said on Twitter. "I think if the general public were aware of how much Defense & Intelligence funding shaped US social science work on social movements, political violence & even topics like climate change, they would be shocked. As a research community, we should have canceled Minerva ourselves."

Mampilly said in an interview that he understands why "many academics have turned to the relatively easy funding offered by Minerva. But my fear, particularly with relation to the subject of political violence, where much of the money has flowed, is it has systematically shaped the topics and approaches, which I view as a bad thing ... Even if the topic itself is worthy of research funding, for example, climate change -- of course I believe we should have more government research for funding research on climate change -- but I'm not sure that money should be coming from the U.S. military, because that has the effect of reducing climate change to its significance for U.S. military interests."

The American Anthropological Association noted concerns from its members when Minerva was launched that only research that suited the Pentagon's agenda would be funded. It also called for the program to be administered through research agencies such as the National Science Foundation. The initial round of Minerva grants was funded in collaboration with the NSF, but the National Academies report notes that the collaboration ended after the first year "because the two agencies' differing approaches to awarding and managing grants proved too challenging to combine into one program."

Hugh Gusterson, a professor of anthropology at George Washington University, said the Pentagon funding skews the pool of grant applicants, both by limiting it to scholars who have no objection to taking money from the military, and by limiting the kinds of methodologies that can be used. He argued that for anthropologists, who have to build trust with their sources in the field, taking U.S. military funding is vexed in a way it wouldn't be for a scholar who was doing a project based on government data sets.

He suggested the program might look very different if the Pentagon had taken the pot of money for Minerva and given it to the Social Science Research Council with the same broad mandate.

“I think they would have gotten a broader disciplinary mix of applicants, and they might have gotten different results,” he said. “If your question is why are people becoming insurgents, you can imagine a range of answers to that, and some of them would be things that the Pentagon might not want to hear, but they should hear. And people who might produce well-documented arguments that might have to do with bad things the Pentagon is doing with the Middle East are not going to apply to the Pentagon to do that work, but they might apply to the Social Science Research Council.

“It's the same as you don't want tobacco companies funding research on the health effects of tobacco; you don't want the sugar industry funding research on Coca-Cola,” Gusterson added. “It's the same basic principle: you want neutral funding agencies who don't have a stake in what you fund.”