



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

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A statement from current and former SAA presidents concerning the importance of National Science Foundation-supported social science research:

In a recent op-ed piece (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2013/09/30/cantor-gop-budget-science-spending-column/2896333/>), Representatives Eric Cantor and Lamar Smith question the National Science Foundation's support for social science research, and argue that such funding should be redirected toward "improving Americans' quality of life." Why they ask, should the government support research on Mayan architecture and Mongolian herding?

We have three simple answers.

First, look to our recent past. The US has spent more than a trillion dollars and thousands of Americans have lost their lives engaging with tribal societies. The military's new counterinsurgency doctrine stresses the importance of understanding local cultures and histories—exactly the kinds of things that we learn from social science research. Beyond the potential military significance of social science research, our increasingly globalized economy and the delicate nature of diplomacy in an era when non-Western countries are becoming major players in the balance of world power make the social sciences critical to our national interest.

Second, the social sciences have a huge impact on our quality of life. Research in archaeology, for example, fuels local pride and contributes to the multibillion dollar heritage tourism industry all across the U.S. Individuals and communities value the places of our past and the knowledge about those places that social science research provides because they give us a sense of who we are and where we've come from as Americans. For many Native American communities, these places and the knowledge about them are not simply of interest, they are vital to their very survival as a people. It is no coincidence that one of the most visible and anger-inducing impacts of the current government shutdown is the closing of our national parks, monuments, and museums, many of which are centered on themes of history, anthropology, and archaeology. Dwight Eisenhower famously ordered the protection of cultural monuments prior to D-Day, because "they symbolize to the world all that we are fighting to preserve." He was right then, and he is right now.

Third, of course medical research should be one of our highest nation priorities, and it already is. The archaeology program at NSF currently represents 0.1% of NSF's budget; the entire archaeology budget would barely be sufficient to fund even a single major research grant in medicine. Yet this same 0.1% of NSF's budget sponsors large numbers of grants for research into myriad aspects of the past that enrich our lives in the present and are critical to our future in this increasingly interconnected and diverse world.

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