In the late 1950s and early 1960s, U.S. policymakers had to answer two questions about Vietnam. First, was Ho Chi Minh an implacable communist whose revolutionary ambitions inevitably threatened U.S. interests in the region? Or was he, as the Vietnamese leader had himself written in a 1945 letter to U.S. President Harry Truman, primarily an anticolonial nationalist who admired the United States and would accommodate to it? Second, could the United States prevail militarily in Vietnam where France had failed?

U.S. policymakers (“the best and the brightest,” as David Halberstam called them) got both questions wrong. The result was a calamitous war that killed more than 55,000 Americans, as well as about 3 million Vietnamese, while profoundly damaging the United States’ standing in the world.

Today, U.S. military planners and policymakers are confronted with another set of questions with profound long-term implications for U.S. security and international peace: Is Middle Eastern terrorism somehow inherent to Islamic theology? Is it an inevitable Islamic response to globalization and Westernization? Is it, instead, really a response to poverty and underdevelopment that happens to draw on the language of religion? Or, as Osama bin Laden himself has suggested, is it a response to U.S. military intervention in the region? If the United States draws down its interventionist presence in the Middle East, will al Qaeda leave Americans alone, or will it be emboldened to pursue them to their own shores? Are Middle Eastern countries readily capable of Western democracy, or is this a dangerously ethnocentric neoconservative fantasy?

If American policymakers get the answers to these questions wrong, the people in the region will surely suffer, and more Americans will die unnecessarily—be it in more Middle Eastern wars, in future 9/11s, or both.

In an attempt to mobilize academic expertise to address such questions, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently announced Project Minerva. Under Minerva, the Pentagon has allocated $50 million for academics to work on a number of fronts: writing about the connections between religion, especially Islam, and terrorism; translating, analyzing, and publicly archiving documents captured in the Iraq war; creating a centralized archive of publicly available documents on Chinese military doctrine and technology; and submitting blue-sky proposals for the development of new paradigms that Gates likened to the role played by game theory during the Cold War. The Pentagon has emphasized that this research will not be classified and has encouraged foreign and American academics to apply for funding. In his speech, Secretary Gates flagged the contributions that could be made by history, sociology, evolutionary biology and, above all, by my own discipline, anthropology.

At first glance, Minerva is a welcome breath of fresh air. Remember Donald Rumsfeld? The former defense secretary believed that technological dominance, not cultural understanding, was the key to victory in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But had Pentagon officials consulted anthropological experts on the Middle East before invading Iraq, they would have been warned that U.S. troops were unlikely to be greeted the way they were in France in 1945, and that, in the absence of Saddam Hussein, Sunnis and Shiites might well turn on one another.

Gates, to his credit, is much more interested than Rumsfeld was in mobilizing the human sciences in the “war on terror.” But the tragedy of his initiative is that the very thing that makes it so appealing—at last, the Pentagon is seeking expert input from the academy—could also doom it to failure.

Take anthropology, a field that holds important insights about religious extremism and terrorism. Many anthropologists simply will not apply for funding if it comes from the Pentagon. Their reasons will vary. Anthropologists already report being suspected of working for U.S.
intelligence agencies when they do field research abroad, and they will be concerned that research subjects will refuse to talk to them if they have been openly funded by the U.S. military. Some will be concerned that the Pentagon will seek to bend their research agenda to its own needs, interfering with their academic freedom. Still others will be nervous that colleagues will shun them. But many will refuse simply on principle: Anthropology is, by many measures, the academy’s most left-leaning discipline, and many people become anthropologists out of a visceral sympathy for the kinds of people who all too often show up as war’s collateral damage. Applying for Pentagon funding is as unthinkable for such people as applying for a Planned Parenthood grant would be for someone at Bob Jones University. One thousand anthropologists have already signed a pledge not to accept Pentagon funding for counterinsurgency work in the Middle East.

“So what?” you might ask. Isn’t that their problem? Graham Spanier, the president of Pennsylvania State University and a Minerva booster, recently told the New York Times that scholars who oppose Pentagon funding simply “shouldn’t apply.” This glib sentiment has an obvious appeal, but U.S. policymakers would be well advised to think hard before taking Spanier’s advice.

Think back to Vietnam. Why did “the best and the brightest” misread the situation so profoundly? Because U.S. foreign policy was made in an atmosphere that had been stripped bare of insights from the left and robbed of debate between left and right. Under McCarthyism, many left-leaning academics had been purged from universities, and Joseph McCarthy and his allies had rooted out the liberal experts on Asia from the State Department, leaving the policy debate bereft of the very people who might have foreseen the calamity of Vietnam.

Minerva, of course, isn’t analogous to McCarthyism. It is, in fact, an attempt to draw from a broader range of knowledge and opinion—an impulse for which we should applaud Secretary Gates. However, given the prevailing academic allergy to defense funding, any attempt to centralize thinking about culture and terrorism under the Pentagon’s roof will inevitably produce an intellectually shrunken outcome. Remember the reluctant anthropologists? The Pentagon will have the false comfort of believing that it has harnessed the best and the brightest minds, when in fact it will have only received a very limited slice of what the ivory tower has to offer—academics who have no problem taking Pentagon funds. Social scientists call this “selection bias,” and it can lead to dangerous analytical errors.

Happily, there is a quick and easy fix. Many academics would prefer that the National Science Foundation (or perhaps the Social Science Research Council) take on Minerva, rather than the Pentagon. Unlike the Department of Defense, the NSF already has deep experience supervising this kind of research, and as a neutral party it comes without the Pentagon’s baggage. You may wonder: Does it really matter whose name is on the letterhead? Absolutely—when it comes to top-notch academic research, details like the source of one’s funding can make or break the legitimacy of one’s work.

We are at a juncture where we are about to set our policy in the Middle East for a decade or more. If we want to avoid a desert Vietnam, if we want a policy debate that includes bright, knowledgeable people from the left as well as the right, we should move Minerva’s search for wisdom into the civilian sphere before it’s too late.