Written by Joanna Davidson, Contributing Editor

Last Spring at the AES Board Meeting we discussed what we could do -- as the largest and longest standing sub-section of the AAA -- to engage members in developing projects and programs on contemporary, pressing issues that we care about. The decision to initiate in a series of “working projects” emerged out of discussions that many members of our Board have had, with one another and with colleagues, over the last several years. Developing AES initiatives along these lines also reflects ongoing concerns regarding new ways in which governments, foundations and corporations are seeking to use anthropological knowledge, to redefine the parameters of that knowledge, and to restructure anthropological research. As AES President David Nugent has observed, “These are processes that we need to understand far better than we do at present. We need an informed discussion of the pressures we are under, the options we have, what we might to do to use them creatively. AES is committed to contributing to these discussions in whatever way it can.”

For example, AES Treasurer Linda Green has been involved, for the past few years, in a collaborative project with her students that focuses on U.S veterans of the Iraq War. In order to highlight the human cost of the war, she and her students have been interviewing Iraq veterans and publishing excerpts from these interviews on a blog. This effort, the Board concluded, could be used as a model for other graduate students eager to connect their research to issues of contemporary concern.

The AES Board is exploring ways to institutionalize Linda’s experiment. One possibility would be to have an annual AES-sponsored competition for new “working projects” that connect anthropological research with current, politically engaged concerns. These projects could be collaborative, involve multiple institutions, and include participants at different career stages. After soliciting project proposals, the AES board would select one or two that would become the focus of AES programs and events for that year. Projects could be supported through a pilot grant, and as they progress AES could disseminate information about them (and perhaps attract more participants and inspire future and similar engagements). Such “working projects” could be showcased through the AES website, invited panels at the AAA and/or AES annual meetings, AN Section News columns, and perhaps through AE.

Stimulating and supporting projects of this kind is a central concern of AES leadership. But before launching such a competition, we want to hear from you. We want to reach out to as broad a constituency as possible and to learn: what kinds of concerns do you think should be at the forefront of politically aware anthropological engagements? What kinds of support are most crucial to make such projects viable? If you are already engaged in projects of this nature, please let us know and share your experiences with us. We are eager to hear from you as we

develop a set of initiatives that promote and highlight our collective engagement with new topics of social and political concern, and open up opportunities for novel areas of expertise that could potentially transform the discipline. Please contact AES President David Nugent (david.nugent@emory.edu) with your comments and ideas.