Debating WAC

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Alejandro Haber and I have written a paper on the history and meaning of WAC, as we understand it. It will appear in the next issue of the journal *Public Archaeology*, under the title “What’s up with WAC? Archaeology and “engagement” in a globalized world” (*Public Archaeology* 10(2): 96–115). This was a difficult paper for us to write. It takes issue with current policy and direction in the organization. At its centre is an account of the controversial meeting between the WAC Executive and Rio Tinto Limited, the mining multinational, in Melbourne in 2007. We were part of a group in the WAC delegation who were opposed to making a deal with Rio Tinto which would confer on WAC “trusted broker” status, in exchange for significant financial reward. Tough as the meeting with Rio Tinto was, it was the attempt to manage the debate and the flow of information following the meeting within WAC, which was really damaging. It is from then that we date our own disillusionment. Was this the WAC which we had joined, which so many people had fought so hard to establish and maintain?

Alejandro and I have been committed members of WAC for a long time. I remember how important the mere existence of WAC was to many of us in South Africa in the late-1980s, in the dying days of apartheid. Here was a group of colleagues who acted on the strength of their convictions, who could be trusted to do the right thing. I continue to edit this journal in the conviction that WAC matters, that it should be and could be an organization that shows us the way towards a better future for archaeology.

There is a time for solidarity and toeing the organizational line, and there is a time for speaking out strongly in defense of core principles. We believe that this the latter occasion. Nothing less than the future of WAC is at stake, as an organization which makes a critical intervention in a politics of knowledge in the discipline. It is sobering to reflect that contemporary contexts of practice in archaeology are arguably more—rather than less—complex and conflictual than they were in the mid-1980s, in the context of WAC’s founding. “What’s up with WAC?” was written as a way of calling for open, thoughtful, creative debate around the possible futures and multiple meanings of WAC as an organization. Please read the paper. And please contribute to the debate.