

## INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS OF THE HEART

Francis J. Gavin

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS SCHOLARS AND FOREIGN POLICY MAKERS often look at each other's profession the way a bored spouse might gaze upon a forbidden but tempting lover. To the policy maker, the impenetrable walls of the Ivory Tower seem mysterious and exotic, a place of deep reflection and refined dialogue where they can escape the vicious and politicized battles that often dominate government life. The scholar, meanwhile, is easily seduced by the allure of putting ideas into action, making a difference in the world, and escaping the arcane and trivial disputes that dominate the academic scene. The colleagues of both disapprove. Academics, the smitten policy maker is told, are impractical and arrogant, obsessed with theory, and clueless about the demands of making real-world decisions under enormous pressure. The philandering scholar is warned by tales of the corruption of power that comes with abdicating the purity of scholarship. Despite this advice, the temptation to stray is strong, and there has even been a happy marriage or two between academics and policy makers as a result. But for the most part, the relationship has been marked by longing, disappointment, and misunderstanding.

Like the history of love and romance itself, this relationship waxes and wanes over time. In the immediate postwar years until the middle of the 1960s, policy makers and scholars were quite open about their amorous associations. The nuclear revolution ushered in the so-called "Wizards of Armageddon," and the line between academic strategist and government official often blurred.<sup>1</sup> The disaster of Vietnam, however, ended the affair, leaving both sides bitter and wary, chastised by colleagues for their folly, and forbidden from any further intellectual embrace for decades to come.

Lately, there is interest anew in rekindling the spark. The puritanical Cheney-Rumsfeld years, where policy makers and academics took great pride in their utter disregard for each other, revealed that the virtues of chastity and fidelity are often overstated.<sup>2</sup> Then along came Barack Obama, former professor elected commander in chief, a man of decision and ideas reviving memories in both professions of those halcyon times before Vietnam. Could it be once again like Camelot, a young but wise

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Francis J. Gavin is the Tom Slick Professor of International Affairs at the LBJ School of Public Affairs and the Director of the Robert S. Strauss Center for International Security and Law. His most recent book, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* will be published by Cornell University Press in the fall of 2012.

President John F. Kennedy and his advisors consorting with esteemed historians such as Arthur Schlesinger and learned strategists like Thomas Schelling?<sup>3</sup>

Like many a case of the wandering eye, the cause for the flirtation is often dissatisfaction at home. Few would argue that national security and foreign policy-making processes are ideal. The pressures in the US national security environment are enormous, the rivalries are unpleasant, and the increasingly politicized atmosphere can

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be toxic. It is no wonder the so-called “life of the mind” in academia appeals to the beleaguered practitioner. But the contributions of foreign policy decision makers, regardless of their working environment in government, are nevertheless appreciated by the elected officials and parts of the larger public they work for. Scholars of international affairs rarely feel such appreciation within universities. For decades, the historical profession has marginalized the study of military and diplomatic history, decimating its ranks.<sup>4</sup> Similar trends are emerging within political science, where an obsession over methodology and arcane theoretical disputes threatens to crowd out qualitative studies of international relations.<sup>5</sup>

There are also deeper misunderstandings between the two professions about what it is that each actually does and can offer to the other. Several notable efforts to improve the relationship have emerged, largely within academia.<sup>6</sup> I have come to the conclusion, however, that many of these otherwise admirable initiatives mischaracterize and misdiagnose the problem. The first issue is that academic- and policy-bridging programs often conflate the problems *within* academic fields with the question of policy relevance.<sup>7</sup> For example, scholars often assume that the effort to amend their internal disciplinary pathologies — such as many political scientists’ obsession with methodology and its reverence for what has been called the “cult of the irrelevant,”<sup>8</sup> or historians’ distaste for the study of power and those who wield it — will lead to policy makers taking a greater interest in their work.<sup>9</sup> But few outside the Ivory Tower care or even understand these myopic, field-specific preoccupations. While ending “methodologism” and curbing political correctness may be good things in and of themselves, those fixes will not necessarily lead to more and better interaction between policy makers and academics, nor improve US foreign policy.

The second, and larger problem is the operating assumption underlying several of these efforts to “bridge the gap.”<sup>10</sup> The academics involved often contend that the real issue is a poverty of ideas in Washington, DC, and if only policy makers would read and implement the latest international relations scholarship, US foreign policy would benefit. This assumption is borne out in many of the proposed solutions to close the gap, which focus on *access*: finding ways to interact with and share ideas with policy makers, and to place research in venues that are more accessible to those in the Beltway. In other words, the message is that the ideas coming out of the Ivory Tower are just fine; they only need to find their way into the inboxes of key decision makers.

I don't think this is the right way to look at things. At the risk of alienating some of my Ivory Tower colleagues, I think the real problems lie on the supply side, not the demand side. My experience has led me to the conclusion that many policy makers would be quite grateful for useful knowledge, and don't have any problem accessing it.<sup>11</sup> Yet much of the scholarly production is not particularly helpful to them. What do the offerings of the Ivory Tower look like to the interested policy maker? Surveying the field, she is soon caught between the Scylla of aggressively pure theory valued only by political scientists, and the Charybdis of paralyzing indeterminacy that marks much historical scholarship. Neither Kenneth Waltz nor Hayden White is of much use to the overburdened decision maker forced to make hard choices with grave consequences.

There is also an implicit assumption in academia that scholars are simply a lot smarter than policy makers. Whether true or not – and in my experience there are smart and less smart people in both camps – such an attitude would obviously be off-putting in Washington, regardless of one's intelligence level.

### **Academics are from Mars, Policy Makers are from Venus**

A tool for quarreling couples, married or not, is to imagine what life is like in the other's shoes.<sup>12</sup> There are several elements of the decision maker's environment that are rarely appreciated by the professoriate. First, decision makers operate in a political world of *competing interests and values*. Effective policy is almost never the type of intellectually impressive answer that is developed in a vacuum, but rather emerges from a process that recognizes and mediates the conflicting desires of multiple actors. In other words, the most that can be achieved is often a "second-best" solution, and policy makers' records should be assessed accordingly. Second, policy makers face *radical uncertainty*: policy is about preparing for an unknowable future. Every action produces a whole series of unexpected and unintended consequences that create their own future policy dilemmas, with interconnected linkages and ripples across space and time. There are few easy choices, and most decisions fall into what former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger called "51/49 judgment calls."<sup>13</sup> Third, the policies crafted and implemented by policy makers are *consequential*. In other words, the decision to act – or not act – can carry costs in terms of lives, livelihoods, and treasure. Policy makers are, as they should be, held professionally and personally responsible for the outcomes of their recommendations.

These three factors understandably lead to far different *intellectual risk portfolios* for those making decisions than experts on the outside critiquing their actions. Sometimes this makes government officials frustratingly cautious, unwilling to change course or deviate from past policies. It is very difficult to simply end without notice even those policies largely recognized as failures, nor is the ship of state adept at dramatic changes or shifts. As a consequence, policy makers tend to focus on risks and dangers that scholars might dismiss as low probability events, resulting in policies

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that appear overly reactive – circumstances few academics understand or appreciate. Sub-optimal outcomes, then, are not necessarily produced by a lack of intelligence or thought on the part of decision makers, who in the end should be judged on their own terms, recognizing the constraints and incentives of the political milieu in which they labor.

Academics do not provide much that is helpful to the decision maker navigating this kind of environment. Instead, if she is a political scientist or economist, she might offer bold predictions based on a parsimonious – or overly simplistic – theory that attempts to explain how the world works. If he is a historian, he might offer a rich and interesting story, but when pressed, claim that the tale is context specific and offers no general rules the policy maker might apply to a different situation. If the academic is of the hybrid variety, such as a grand strategist, he or she might sit around suggesting that the best policies are those where means are properly aligned with ends, as if this were some kind of profound insight not recognized by every semi-competent policy maker within the first week on the job.<sup>14</sup> Given this offering, policy makers can be excused for not rushing to the nearest university seeking guidance.

The scholar's environment could not be more different. Often working alone, and with no "line" responsibilities, the academic only navigates the norms of the profession and its journals. Such a rarified world can lead to a false sense that policy choices are binary and simple. "Bomb Iran; don't bomb Iran," as if the decision will be determined solely on intellectual merits. And if the academic is wrong – and we know as a group they are as apt if not more likely to be wrong in their predictions about world affairs than average citizens<sup>15</sup> – he or she is rarely held accountable or punished. In fact, without mentioning names – we know who they are – the so-called "thought leaders" within international affairs seem to be rewarded more for boldness than correctness. Policy makers see what the Ivory Tower incentivizes, and this is bound to make them skeptical of what the most policy-inclined scholar can offer.

Before being labeled a self-loathing academic, let me point out that the protected environment of the university is ideal for doing lots of things other than offering policy advice that nonetheless have profound, long-term policy implications. Professors teach the next generation of citizens how to think systematically and logically, develop critical reasoning skills, and articulate their thoughts and arguments in clear and convincing ways to others. American universities top the world when it comes to undertaking the research that changes how we understand and navigate it.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, one of the true benefits of the US higher education system is its protection and distance from power and politics. There are great risks in being too close to power, seeking to please those in decision-making positions, or tailoring research and training too close to the demands of public policy. Both in the United States and abroad, the story of academics working with those in power is as apt to be tragic as productive. Historian Bruce Kuklick argues that during the height of the academia-policy affair in the 1950s and 1960s, the ideas of American defense intellectuals often "served to legitimate but not to energize policies." Often, "fashion was more important than validity" and policy intellectuals who "professed deep understanding" actually "groped in the dark."<sup>17</sup> This helps explain why in my field, history, the appetite for renewing

the relationship is frowned upon. As Jill Lepore has pointed out, “The American historical profession defines itself by its dedication to the proposition that looking to the past to explain the present falls outside the realm of serious historical study.”<sup>18</sup> Many within the Ivory Tower find Stanley Fish’s advice sound: “Don’t confuse your academic obligations with the obligation to save the world; that’s not your job as an academic; and don’t surrender your academic obligations to the agenda of any non-academic constituency – parents, legislators, trustees or donors.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Couples Counseling**

Does this mean there is no hope for “bridging the gap?” I don’t think that is the case. Most policy makers are acutely aware of how little they know, and how much help they need. The world is unstable and the future uncertain. The United States faces extraordinary global challenges and a wider array of threats and opportunities than ever before. Furthermore, the number and type of key actors on the world stage has expanded. Policy makers must assess complex problems while operating in an increasingly polarized environment under tremendous time and political pressures. Within government itself, the institutional capacity to generate quality analysis, to say nothing of research, is often compromised. Long-term planning, as opposed to reacting to the day-to-day news cycle, is less and less a priority within the halls of power. There was a time when many high quality think tanks, such as Brookings, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, supplemented the efforts of government by providing near academic quality research. But the same trends that have politicized and polarized large parts of the foreign policy establishment have also affected, negatively, the think tank world.

Thus, there is a need, or “demand,” for help. What can the Ivory Tower do?

A good start – but one traditional international affairs scholars may not appreciate – is to develop a better understanding of the types of knowledge needed by policy makers. The most interesting issues in international relations today, and likely in the future, demand deep technical, scientific, cultural, legal, economic, and historical knowledge. If any “bridging the gap” initiative is to really attract the attention of policy makers, it should be able to say something meaningful about topics like climate change, cyber-security, post-colonial history, global public health, or the drivers of technological innovation, to give just a few examples. Government is filled with people who can debate the various arguments over what the military rise of China portends for the future, but far fewer who understand what China’s demographic compression, its environmental vulnerability, or its complex ethnic make-up means for the future of world affairs. Finding experts outside of government to make sense of Shanghai’s water table might be a higher priority than reading another article about China’s efforts to build a blue water navy.

Think of all the information needed for a US Secretary of State to properly assess the consequences of the 2011 multi-billion dollar deal negotiated between Exxon-Mobil and Russia’s Rosneft to exploit oil and gas reserves in the Arctic, a transaction that had all the appearance of a state-to-state negotiation between Russian Prime

Minister Vladimir Putin and Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson.<sup>20</sup> Theories of great power war or the democratic peace don't strike me as the kind of knowledge that is remotely useful to a policy maker trying to figure out how to respond. Instead, insights about energy technology, global finance, international law, and climate change would be

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far higher up on the list. One thing international affairs scholars might do is act as a "platform" or gathering place for these fields, to mediate and match-make between academia and Washington. A program that included a wide range of fields – climate scientists, cyber experts, anthropologists, social psychologists, etc. – would likely be most welcomed.

Universities house an extraordinary amount of subject knowledge and sheer brainpower, and the national interest would be served if this expertise could be brought to bear on important policy problems. Scholars of international affairs have a role to play here, but in order to succeed they must be as willing to work with their colleagues in Physics, Computer Science, Law, and Psychology as their partners in policy planning and the National Security Council.

### **Stop Sneaking Around**

If the gap is to be bridged, policy makers and academics need to have a better understanding of the world each lives in, dispel the myths each clings to, and develop a more realistic appreciation of what the relationship can be.<sup>21</sup> The bridge must also be widened to include disciplines in the university other than political science and history. Furthermore, scholars in those fields must come to terms with the fact that the trends making their disciplines less policy friendly are unlikely to be reversed anytime soon. An amicable divorce and a new union, whereby policy-interested historians and political scientists leave their respective fields (and invite others to do so as well) to create a new one, is an obvious answer.<sup>22</sup> Though not without their own problems, schools of public policy and international affairs could act as a platform/halfway house for a revitalized field of international affairs/strategic studies.<sup>23</sup> There is little doubt such an arrangement would be a success: the most popular courses on many campuses are the ones taught by policy-interested scholars of international affairs, and important external constituencies including donors and politicians have been supportive of this kind of work.

In this new world, stripped of illusions and multiple loyalties, there is much that the scholar and policy maker can offer each other in an open and honest relationship. They have much in common. In foreign policy, the structure of international politics allows little freedom of movement, creating a suffocating world of equifinality. Who better than international relations theorists to help decision makers frame and categorize structural constraints and identify the causal drivers of world politics? The policy

maker is also tormented by the uncertainty of contingency. Who better to help guide a policy maker through that uncertainty than the “ambulance chasers of disruption and surprise,” historians? Even the differences I mentioned can be the source of attraction. The ability to evade the constant pressures of time, politics, and conflicting interests that plague practitioners allow academics to think longer term, to assess broader and deeper causes, and to challenge the core assumptions behind policy. Those type of insights would likely be of most aid to decision makers.

Would this renewed pairing of academics and policy makers lead to an ideal marriage this time around? Like all couplings, it would depend upon how much each partner put into the effort, whether shared interests and true differences were understood and respected, and whether both sides empathized with the other. Even if the relationship did not end in nuptials, it could surely lead to a deeper friendship, to the betterment of both. **Y**

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For popular accounts chronicling the rise and influence of the nuclear strategy community, see Gregg Herken, *Counsels of War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985); Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); and John Newhouse, *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990). For a trenchant critique that challenges both the ideas and influence of this community, see Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
- <sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most interesting reflection of this decline of interest is when the Bush administration—and the public at large—largely ignored the (arguably prescient) arguments against a US invasion of Iraq advertised in the *New York Times* and signed by some of the most significant “realists” in the international affairs community. See “War with Iraq is Not in America’s National Interest,” *New York Times* paid advertisement, September 26, 2002.
- <sup>3</sup> Caren Bohan, “Obama Vows ‘Best and Brightest’ Foreign Policy Team,” *Reuters*, August 21, 2008, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/08/21/us-usa-politics-obama-foreignpolicy-idUSN2149851920080821>.
- <sup>4</sup> Patricia Cohen, “Great Caesar’s Ghost! Are Traditional History Courses Vanishing?” *New York Times*, June 10, 2009, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/11/books/11hist.html?pagewanted=all>.
- <sup>5</sup> For a description of an earlier movement against the over-emphasis in math within political science, see “Storming the Palace in Political Science,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 21, 2001, available at [http://www.btinternet.com/~pae\\_news/Perestroika/Miller.htm](http://www.btinternet.com/~pae_news/Perestroika/Miller.htm).
- <sup>6</sup> The best, to my mind, is the National Security program of *The Tobin Project*, directed by Steve Van Evera, <http://www.tobinproject.org/research-inquiry/national-security>; and the *Bridging the Gap* project, run by American University, Duke University, and the University of California at Berkeley.
- <sup>7</sup> For an otherwise excellent piece that identifies problems *within* the political science discipline as a key reason for the less than ideal relationship between government and the ivory tower, see Bruce Jentleson and Ely Ratner, “Bridging the Beltway-Ivory Tower Gap,” *International Studies Review* (2011) 13, 6–11.
- <sup>8</sup> For “cult of the irrelevant,” see Michael Desch, presentation to MIT’s Security Studies Program, “If, When, and How Social Science Can Contribute to National Security Policy,” March 10, 2010, available at [http://web.mit.edu/ssp/seminars/wed\\_archives\\_2010Spring/desch.html](http://web.mit.edu/ssp/seminars/wed_archives_2010Spring/desch.html); See also Steve Walt, “The Cult of Irrelevance,” available at [http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/15/the\\_cult\\_of\\_irrelevance\\_Foreign\\_Policy](http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/15/the_cult_of_irrelevance_Foreign_Policy), April 15, 2009.
- <sup>9</sup> This is the recommendation of a scholar who has deep policy experience, Joseph Nye. See “Scholars on the Sidelines,” *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2009, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/12/AR20090412022260.html>; See also Patricia Cohen, “Field Study: Just how relevant is Political Science,” *The New York Times*, October 19, 2009, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/20/books/20poli.html>.
- <sup>10</sup> This phrase was made famous by Alexander George, in his important book, *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 1993).
- <sup>11</sup> During a recent visit to the US Department of State, I noted that there were many top international affairs journals, including *International Security*, in the waiting area outside the director of the Policy Planning Staff’s office.
- <sup>12</sup> Francis J. Gavin and James B. Steinberg, “Mind the Gap: Why Policymakers and Scholars Ignore Each Other, and What Should be Done About It,” *Carnegie Reporter* 6, no. 4 (Spring 2012): 10–17.
- <sup>13</sup> “What Henry told Harvard,” available at [http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/04/12/kissinger\\_returns](http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/04/12/kissinger_returns).

- <sup>14</sup> See John Lewis Gaddis, “What is Grand Strategy?” available at <http://www.duke.edu/web/agsp/grandstrategypaper.pdf>.
- <sup>15</sup> See Philip Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). See also Philip Tetlock and Dan Gardner, “Why Most Predictions are so Bad,” *Forbes*, March 17, 2011, available at <http://www.forbes.com/2011/03/17/why-predictions-bad-leadership-managing-forecast.html>.
- <sup>16</sup> US universities held eight of the top ten spots, and seventeen of the top twenty, in a recent ranking of the world’s best research universities. See “Academic Rankings of World Universities,” available at <http://www.arwu.org/ARWU2010.jsp>.
- <sup>17</sup> Kuklick, *Blind Oracles*, 15.
- <sup>18</sup> Jill Lepore, “Tea and Sympathy: Who owns the American Revolution,” *The New Yorker*, May 3, 2010, available at [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/05/03/100503fa\\_fact\\_lepore?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/05/03/100503fa_fact_lepore?currentPage=all).
- <sup>19</sup> Stanley Fish, “Why we built the Ivory Tower,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 2004, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/21/opinion/why-we-built-the-ivory-tower.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.
- <sup>20</sup> For details, see <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/31/business/global/exxon-and-rosneft-partner-in-russian-oil-deal.html?pagewanted=all>.
- <sup>21</sup> For an excellent description of some of the myths that bedevil the relationship, see Peter Feaver, “Five Myths about the policy-academy gap,” *Foreign Policy*, July 25, 2011, available at [http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/07/25/five\\_myths\\_about\\_the\\_policy\\_academy\\_gap](http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/07/25/five_myths_about_the_policy_academy_gap).
- <sup>22</sup> The best proposal to do just this is one Steve Van Evera has put forward: “Needed: A New Academic Field—International History, Politics, and Policy, January 5, 2012 / Draft 1.1. For a panel on “History and Strategy” at the University of Texas, Austin meeting on “History, Strategy, and Statecraft,” Jan. 7–8 2011, Austin, TX.
- <sup>23</sup> For an effort to create something similar before World War II, see David Ekblah, “Present at the Creation: Edward Mead Earle and the Depression-era Origins of Security Studies,” *International Security* Vol. 36, No. 3 (Winter 2011/12), pp. 107–141.