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SYMPOSIUM: THE SCHOLAR–STRATEGIST GAP

Policy and the Publicly Minded Professor

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In recent years, there has been a vigorous effort within the disciplines of political science and strategic studies to encourage scholars to become what is termed ‘policy relevant.’ These initiatives have supported an array of activities, including fellowships in government, training in opinion writing and media engagement, and funds to produce research that is perceived to be useful to decision-makers.¹ To be sure, young scholars are still expected to produce deeply researched papers and monographs on disciplinary concerns that, to the outsider, may appear narrow. There has also been a clear shift in focus in graduate training toward mastering methodological tools like statistics, sometimes at the expense of substantive knowledge, languages, or area studies. Nor is the trend toward policy relevance universally accepted. The young scholar still risks receiving little or no credit in their tenure file for an article in *Foreign Affairs* or testimony before a congressional committee; yet if they rack up enough technically proficient publications in obscure journals considered prestigious within the discipline, they can secure lifetime employment without ever meeting an elected official or policymaker.

That said, the trends are clear: there is a move by many important figures in the field to make at least part of the mission of political science in the United States engaging, shaping, and influencing national discussions over policy. Some of these are simply generational: what scholar under the age of 40 does not possess a Twitter account, an easy way to engage larger, potentially influential audience? There has also been a proliferation of digital outlets – the most prominent being *The Monkey Cage* collaboration with *The Washington Post* – that encourage political scientists to translate their scholarly work for broader, more policy engaged audiences. Many soon to be or recent PhD graduate students spend at least one fellowship year, if

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¹Many of these activities have been generously supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. For a partial listing of some of these impressive programs, see Lena Andrews, Rebecca Friedman Lissner, Julia Macdonald, Jacquelyn Schneider and Rachel Whitlark, 6 May 2015, ‘Getting Involved in Policy: An Overworked Grad Student’s Guide,’ *War on the Rocks*, 28 Oct. 2016, <<http://warontherocks.com/2015/05/getting-involved-in-policy-an-overworked-grad-students-guide/>>.

not more, in university centers or programs associated with schools of public policy or dedicated to policy relevant research.

This move toward policy relevance is, for the most part, a good thing. I regularly participate in various 'bridging the gap' style exercises and have written the occasional bromide, even jeremiad, arguing for greater efforts by scholars to engage policymakers. I have sometimes wondered, however, if we have had enough discussion about what *policy relevance* means, how scholars can achieve it, and whether it is an unalloyed good. The answers to these questions are not always obvious.

This is what makes Jochem Wiers's penetrating essay in this roundtable so timely and thoughtful. Wiers's brings three unique and advantageous perspectives to this discussion. First, his training is in international and European law, not political science. Perhaps this is simply the gripes of a historian, but many of the bridging the gap activities often seem more oriented toward making political science relevant, as opposed to supporting and generating policy-friendly research regardless of where it comes from. As Wiers's essay makes clear, useful knowledge can and should be applied to policy from any number of academic sources, from anthropology to behavioral sciences to law, and the best perspectives are interdisciplinary. Second, he is European, not American. Too many bridging the gap efforts focus narrowly on US policy and American higher education. Third, and most importantly, he is a policymaker, serving as the equivalent of the head of policy planning in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while simultaneously participating in academic life as the Chair of Dutch Foreign Policy and Policy Development at the University of Groningen. While he reveals remarkable goodwill to both sides of the gap, he has a keen sense of what both sides misunderstand about the other. And perhaps most importantly, he recognizes that not all gaps can or should be filled.

As Wiers understands, these two worlds possess divergent incentive structures.² Several characteristics mark the world faced by the policymaker. Those in positions of responsibility confront uncertainty and complexity. They pursue a host of ambitious and sometimes inconsistent objectives. And while they have an abundance of information and opinions, they do not have an abundance of time. Probabilistic assessments of the future, common in the academy, are less helpful than one might think, and even lure the policymaker into thinking decisions are far easier and their affects more predictable and controllable than is warranted. Future cases of an issue of concern are often similar enough to events in the past to tempt the decision-makers to historical precedent and just different enough to make

²For my view on this divergence, see Francis J. Gavin, 'International Affairs of the Heart,' *Yale Journal of International Affairs* (Sept. 2012), <http://yalejournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/irscholars_forum/Francis%20J%20Gavin.pdf>.

past analogies inaccurate and even dangerous. Even if the case is similar, most policy issues are connected like a dense web of wires to many other, equally complex policy issues. In the unlikely event that a decision-maker could correctly predict the effect of a policy treatment, it is impossible to prevent that treatment from influencing other important issues in unknowable ways. Furthermore, the policy landscape often unfolds in dramatic, non-linear ways, erupting when it is least expected.³

Even if the policymaker could concoct a policy that was, theoretically, ideal, she would be limited by all sorts of constraints: domestic and bureaucratic politics, the views and policies of adversaries and allies, and the age-old difficulties involved in effectively implementing even the best ideas. The policymaker's world is marked by nuance, context, complexity, and uncertainty. And this assumes that coming up with the best ideas, to say nothing of implementing them, is straightforward. In fact, most problems, especially in international relations, are of what former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger labeled the 51/49 variety – it is difficult to know ahead of time if you are making the right decision. Even the best process and most well-thought-out ideas and implementation do not guarantee the policy would not produce a bad result. Unlike the scholar, the policymaker lives in a world that is dominated by the theory of second-best solutions. 'Second best' does not mean just a little less good than what is theoretically optimal; it typically involves changing both the policy and mix of tools, sometimes in ways much different than what would be called for if the abstract, optimal solution was possible. Finally, while Wiers is too polite to point it out, academics and policymakers possess different risk profiles because the consequences of their actions are so different. Rarely is blood and treasure lost or careers ruined in the ivory tower by ideas that prove impractical or because their predictions do not come to pass.

Scholars are not always aware of, to say nothing not sufficiently empathetic to, the complexities and pressures faced by government officials. Policymakers, for their part, may be too quick to dismiss the idea that help can be found outside their government department or agency. Wiers makes it clear, however, that policymakers face their own set of pressures and pathologies that limit their effectiveness. It is not as if these policymakers do not desperately want help, as his comments about research on complexity attest. This is even more so for a small state like the Netherlands than a hegemon like the United States. Wiers chronicling of the challenges faced by the Netherlands undermines the

³For an overview of this perspective, see Francis J. Gavin and James B. Steinberg, 'Mind the Gap: Why Policymakers and Scholars Ignore Each Other, and What Can be Done About It?' *Carnegie Reporter* (Spring 2012), <<http://teaching-national-security-law.insct.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Carnegie-Corporation-of-New-York%20Mind-the-Gap.pdf>>.

ridiculous notion that only great powers can have grand strategies.⁴ In fact, the Netherlands faces a complex, interconnected set of challenges, both in the short- and the longer-term. Some of these challenges are of the traditional power political sort, such as Russia's recent aggressiveness. Most, however, are of the complicated, interconnected, and global nature – refugees, terrorism, anemic economic growth and banking crises, and climate change. As a smaller power, nested within large transnational institutions like the European Union and NATO, no Dutch foreign minister can simply issue diktats to the world and hope to see them implemented. It must carefully choose its time and place to act, and ruthlessly order its priorities, in order to provide for its security and advance its interests.

Is there much that the political scientist working on foreign policy and national security can offer this beleaguered decision-maker? Wiers politely suggests – less than one might hope. Not the parsimonious theories that, by explaining everything, tell the policymaker nothing. Not the quantitative studies that isolate and excise complex, interactive events from their particular situations lump them together with other events separated by decades, cultures, particular leaders, and institutions, lumping them together in a large blender to see what soup emerges; not the postmodern assessments that challenge the meaning of the words and concepts policymakers use and assume the reality they face is an (unconscious) construction of their own making.

Instead, Wiers points to the work that best grasps the realities policymakers face: research that seeks to better understand complex systems. Their decisions affect (and are influenced by) a hodgepodge of actors, networks, and social practices. Simple cause-and-effect relationships are rare, so policymakers need other ways to understand their options. Interdisciplinary work on complexity and behavioral science does not offer ready-made policy solutions, but it can enrich how policymakers think about policy problems.

Wiers offers excellent suggestions for how the two sides of the academy-policy gap can work together. Of particular interest are his thoughts on how both sides can interact without being co-opted or losing their comparative strengths. All his ideas are sound and should be pursued. But they do beg the question of whether political science needs revisit some of its assumptions about its commitment to policy relevance.

Consider the work Wiers identifies as most useful to foreign policy officials – not international relations scholarship from political science, but research in behavioral science and complexity theory. Rarely did scholars in

⁴For an excellent critique of this idea, see David Kennedy, 'Thinking Historically about Grand Strategy', <http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/Kennedy_ThinkingHistorically.pdf>.

these worlds explicitly set out to shape specific policymakers or policies, or to be 'policy relevant.' Inter- and cross-disciplinary work in these areas, however, deals with interesting questions of greater public interest, and efforts have been made by at least some prominent scholars to make the work accessible to larger publics.

The truth is, there is little most political scientists can do to shape policy as it happens. Policymakers face far more intense time pressures than scholars, have to contend with bureaucratic and political factors few professors can appreciate, and have access to far more and better quality data. Nor does the hallowed academic traditions of Monday morning quarterbacking and proclaiming 'you are doing it wrong' make for healthy interactions between the two worlds. Nor should scholars try to compete with the massive supply of punditry, instant reaction, and policy briefs put out by think tanks and journalists. Little of this work has a long shelf life, and does not play to the strengths or opportunities provided to the academic protected by tenure and secure funding.

This does not mean, however, that political science should abandon its admirable desire to be more relevant.⁵ I would suggest changing both the term used and the strategies followed to something I call 'public mindedness.' One of the roles scholars can usefully play is shaping and influencing larger public debates about important questions, and not only those that directly engage policy. Instead of trying offering specific suggestions on time-sensitive and narrow policy issues, why not try to shape and influence discussions of the pressing questions felt by publics throughout the world. We live at a time when many citizens, both in the United States and abroad, are deeply uncertain and worried about larger political, economic, and cultural trends, and there is a lot of important, cutting edge research from political science that might help alleviate or at least contextualize those concerns. Reaching these broader audiences and contributing to larger public debates will require trade-offs within the discipline of political science: interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research and engaging, accessible writing, and broader questions will have to be emphasized over narrow navel gazing and the discipline's off-putting obsession over method. Given the importance of these issues, especially in national and international security, this is a trade well worth making.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

⁵For an excellent, broader guide to policy relevance by political scientists, see Michael Horowitz, 'What Is Policy Relevance,' *War on the Rocks*, 17 Jun. 2015, <http://warontherocks.com/2015/06/what-is-policy-relevance/>.

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