



## *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* by Michael C. Desch.

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*Scientific men are in the habit of writing for their colleagues rather than for the general public.*

— Charles H. Judd (1938)

In *Cult of the Irrelevant*, political scientist Michael Desch (Notre Dame Univ.) poses two intriguing questions: first, why have scholars in social sciences tended in recent decades to avoid addressing fundamental issues of national security policy? Second, should scholarly research always be narrow and rigorously objective and neglect the problems and issues of the day to the point that social scientists in American universities are sometimes seen as “self-licking ice cream cones?”<sup>1</sup>

Desch proceeds chronologically. The first of his book’s nine chapters summarizes why current public policy issues ought to matter to academics, with particular attention to why social science scholars’ efforts to “professionalize” their disciplines have had little impact in the broader arena of national security. Chapters 2–3 cover the significant, if short-lived, contribution the social sciences made to the American and Allied causes in World Wars I and II. Chapters 4–6 trace the waxing and waning influence of the social sciences during the Cold War. Chapters 7 and 8 concern the “Vietnam Quagmire” that widened the divide between academics and policy-makers and take the story up to the challenges arising after 9/11. A final chapter preempts critics of Desch’s arguments and offer advice to the scholarly community.

For most of the last century, the social sciences have been viewed (and have viewed themselves) as the lesser siblings of the true stars of academia: the “hard” sciences (chemistry, physics, biology, etc.) or so-called STEM subjects. Social scientists have long striven mightily to emulate the quantitative methodologies and rigor of the hard sciences. The result has been that “As the social sciences sought to professionalize on the model of the natural sciences, research in the various disciplines became narrower and focused on smaller and more arcane questions” (24).

Social sciences are necessarily inexact compared with the natural sciences. Studying “human events” seldom lends itself to mathematical precision. The social sciences established a foothold in public policy during World War I, notably with the multifaceted research campaign called the “Inquiry,” sponsored in part by the influential advisor to President Woodrow Wilson, “Colonel” Edward M. House: “established in the fall of 1917, it was comprised largely of academic social scientists who served as a brain trust for the Wilson administration as it planned for the postwar European settlement” (28).

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1. I first heard this droll phrase in 1986, used by Lt. Gen. Sidney T. Weinstein, the US Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, as a colleague and I were briefing him on an intelligence study of Soviet military operations in Afghanistan. He was concerned because the report carried a Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Intelligence classification, which greatly restricted its readership inside the defense community.

How much influence these scholars and their reports had with the diplomats at Versailles is debatable, but “it is fair to credit the Inquiry with shaping American policy toward postwar Europe” (29). Social scientists also participated in the Committee on Public Information (mobilizing public support for the war effort) and the development of aptitude tests for Army recruits. Academic economists introduced cutting-edge statistical and analytical tools to help manage the nation’s wartime mobilization.

And yet, in the interwar period, policy-relevant national security studies within academia languished. This comes as no surprise, given America’s fervent isolationism. The Great Depression and the sea change in domestic politics caused by the New Deal did much to intensify that fervor. But it is nonetheless strange that the global catastrophe of the Great War generated so little scholarly interest in the 1920s and 1930s, even as fascism was on rise in Europe and Asia. The author quotes Hans Morgenthau’s judgment that “With the end of the First World War there began what can properly be called the age of the scientific approach to international affairs” (37). But more science meant less relevance to policy questions, a trend not reversed until full-scale US involvement in World War II. The war dragged scientists and engineers out of academia and into direct government support roles. As Desch notes, the formation of the Office of Strategic Services put policy-relevant area studies back on the table, and academic disciplines like anthropology and sociology made meaningful contributions to both wartime planning and postwar analysis. The invention of operations research brought both physical and social scientists into a fruitful collaboration that continues today.

The author astutely explores the convoluted history of Cold War cycles of engagement and disengagement. Posing a major challenge to policy relevance, the “behavior revolution” within academia aimed to transform the social sciences into a hard “policy science”; specific geographically and ethnically focused area studies were replaced by “universal approaches to comparative politics” (68) that proved of little use to policymakers. Academic researchers, the author observes, were unduly confident that the benefits of their research would, in time, “trickle down” to the policy community.

A further blow to many in academia was the postwar National Science Foundation (NSF), in which President Franklin Roosevelt’s science advisor, Vannevar Bush, played a leading role. The NSF was understandably tilted toward the natural sciences, given the dramatic, war-ending success of the Manhattan Project. Bush, however, leveraged his influence to ensure that the NSF charter emphasized basic rather than applied research, on the questionable assumption that scientific breakthroughs would certainly become policy-relevant. Bush’s NSF channeled much government funding to a few elite universities, privileged the intellectual property of researchers (69), and scrupulously shielded federally funded research from political influence. This postwar retrenching hurt the social sciences, trapped between the conflicting poles of methodology and policy relevance. Desch discusses three outstanding scholars—Bernard Brodie, Henry Kissinger, and Zbigniew Brzezinski—whose extraordinary policy influence eventually compelled them to leave academia.

The author sees academia as stubbornly resisting government calls to conduct research useful in the policy realm during the Cold War. “Basic research” was still the order of the day for both the natural and social sciences, even though the federal government was their best source of funding. Even before the Vietnam War, relations between academia and its federal policy clients were growing ever more strained. For one thing, “members of Congress were put off by the jargon and other inaccessible aspects of much social science research” (70). The government responded by turning to “think tanks,” including Federally-Funded Research and Development Centers

(FFRDC) like the RAND and Mitre corporations, and sponsoring ad hoc, problem-focused interdisciplinary research teams conducting “Summer Studies” and the like. The national security community and the Defense Department expanded their use of the social sciences throughout the Cold War, often creatively financing policy-relevant research ancillary to well funded weapons programs: “the whole history of the federal government’s involvement in science is a record of pragmatic response to particular problems” (96). How could it ever have been otherwise? And why was academia so resistant to the obvious?

The most contentious Cold War policy issue was nuclear weapons strategy. It involved eminent scholars applying innovative methodologies like game theory and econometric modeling to nuclear warfare decision-making. Economist Thomas Schelling was a leading proponent of a “science of strategy” (147) that would yoke theory to policy. This promising effort made inroads among national security decision-makers, but ultimately foundered on the rocks of messy Third World conflicts during the Cold War, Vietnam in particular. Strategy as science quickly broke down in the face of stubbornly persistent regional issues that preoccupied policy-makers. Theory alone, even promulgated by leading “realist” scholars of international relations, could not solve the problems posed by Vietnam.

The author has fleshed out and clarified the long history of the tensions between academia and the federal government, punctuated by periodic crisis-driven cooperation. The Cold War engendered the flourishing cottage industry of think tanks that pilfered expertise from academia to produce policy-relevant studies for government agencies. Social scientists filled the ranks of think tanks and FFRDCs, and a few returned to academia. Still, government supported academic research got a new lease on life after the Cold War. The Defense Department launched its Project Minerva in 2007 to “rebuild the bridges between the Beltway and the Ivory Tower” (233) with ample funding authorized by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.<sup>2</sup> But the initiative failed to generate much interest in academia and aroused serious concerns in Congress. Lawmakers holding the purse strings feared the residual suspicions within academia over cooperating with the government and doubted that NSF involvement would yield much in the way of useful, applied research.

The author insists he is not suggesting “that scholars would make better policy than bureaucrats and elected officials” (242). But he also echoes a warning from a recent *Science* magazine article warning that “to the extent that the research community disdains work on major national missions or behaves self-servingly in mission-oriented work, anti-intellectualism will increase its influence on American science” (243). With *Cult of the Irrelevant*, Michael Desch offers us a persuasive “critique of the increasing tendency of many social scientists to embrace methods and models for their own sake, rather than because they can help us to answer substantively important questions” (241). So long as academic social scientists abstain from confronting the hard realities faced by policy-makers, they will dwell in irrelevance.

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2. Gates had a long career on the analytical side of CIA, rising to become director of the agency. Before being recalled into government service, he had been president of Texas A&M University, and since his second retirement he has served as chancellor of the College of William and Mary.