

In your face, political science!! | Daniel W. Drezner

http://drezner.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/12/30/in_your_face_political_science?sms_ss=printfriendly&at_xt=4d1cbbb1d44a08ad%2C0

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Over at *The National Interest*, [Justin Logan](#) and [Paul Pillar](#) are debating whether academics or policymakers are to blame for the gulf gap separating the two groups.

Shorter Logan: it's a big deal, and the insularity of policymakers is to blame.

Shorter Pillar: it's not that big a deal, and the eggheadedness of academics is to blame.

I have some sympathy to both sides of the argument here. Pillar is correct to point out the ways in which this gap has been exaggerated, and Logan is correct to point out that there's still a gulf to traverse between the two communities. Both posts are worth reading in full.

Then we get to [Jacob Heilbrunn's intervention](#):

Should policymakers pay attention to academics? Should policy makers actually be academics? No and no. For the most part, policymakers should avoid them like the plague....

I would say that SAIS, the Fletcher School, and other such finishing schools for foreign affairs mavens have supplanted traditional political science departments, which became enamored of game and rational-choice theory. The only truly serious discipline in political science is political theory--Aristotle to Weber to Rawls. Is there much in international relations, by the way, that has not already been discussed by Thucydides--a dip into the Sicilian Expedition might have served George W. Bush well before he headed into Iraq (emphasis added).

Hah!! Fletcher wins!! *In your face*, traditional political science departments!! Heilbrunn has authoritatively--- no... wait, I can't do it. I can't gloat over a horses**t argument like this one, even if it advances my home institution.

I have to assume that [the Committee on Social Thought](#) has some of Heilbrunn's family hostage to produce that blog post. It's so rife with blanket assertions that I'll be warm all winter reading it.

First, as [Pillar noted in his post](#), and speaking from my own experience, the training involved in getting a political science Ph.D. or other social science doctorate is actually pretty useful when stepping into the policymaking world. Even if the theoretical models and empirical results of political science might be contested, the mode of analytical thinking usually leads to some useful insights.

Second, I love Thucydides more than most IR scholars, and [I teach him on a regular basis](#). Having read *Histoiry of the Peloponnesian War* every other year, however, yeah, there's actually a fair amount that's not in Thucydides that is part and parcel of modern-day international relations. There's very little on international political economy and/or economic interdependence in the text. The material on the democratic peace is interesting but radically incomplete. Last I checked neither Athens nor Sparta possessed nuclear weapons, which [even realist lovers of Thucydides](#) concede is a game-changer. I came up with those in less than five minutes, so I'm thinking that there's more if I bothered to ponder about it some more.

As for what's in Thucydides there's so much fascinating content that there is no consensus about the key takeaway points. Ask five people who've read *History of the Peloponnesian War* about its central theme and you'll get ten answers.

Thucydides is a great text, and I want everyone to read it, but there's a lot more out there in the world. As for political theory being the only "discipline" in political science, I'll leave it to [other political science bloggers](#) to ~~open up a can of whup-ass and~~ address Heilbrunn's argument.

Heilbrunn might be correct that institutions like Fletcher have more of an impact on policymaking than standard political science departments. Whether's that's as good of a thing as Heilbrunn thinks, however, is a seriously dubious proposition.