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Truth, Power, and the Academy: A response to Hal Brands

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Academic expertise should guide U.S. foreign policy. Unfortunately, it does not really work that way. On a host of issues, there is an enormous gap between scholarship on international relations and the policy consensus in Washington. The United States persistently pursues foreign strategies that run contrary to the policy implications of the academic consensus. And on questions that are hotly debated in academia, Washington displays inviolable bipartisan unity.

Hal Brands addressed the gap in an article in the *American Interest* last fall that was recently the subject of renewed interest on social media. There is “systematic evidence,” he writes, “that the scholarship-policy gap is real and widening.” And he accurately identifies the many disparities.

“For decades, there has been a bipartisan policy consensus” that U.S. non-proliferation policies are vital for global security. “Scholars, however, are generally more sanguine.” Policymakers in the post-Cold War era arrived at a consensus to expand NATO eastward, while international relations scholars “overwhelmingly opposed” it. Washington thinks credibility is so important that it is worth fighting elective wars to preserve it, while “most scholars argue that credibility is a chimera.” On Iraq, “most foreign policy elites, and significant bipartisan majorities in the Congress” supported the case for war, which was “vociferously rejected by most international relations scholars.” And in Washington, “there has long been an unassailable consensus” around a grand strategy of primacy, Brands notes; “within the academy, however...the dominant school of thought favors American retrenchment.”

Why this gap? According to Brands, scholars are “first and foremost citizens of the world,” and therefore less interested in pursuing the “national interest” than policymakers. Academics “see patriotic fervor as the enemy of objectivity,” and are therefore skeptical of “American power.” Third, scholars emphasize the costs of action while neglecting the costs of inaction. Fourth, they get swept up by “beautiful concepts” and elegant theories, naively blinding themselves to “the messiness of reality.” Prudent practitioners, he insists, incorporate unlikely worst-case scenarios into their policy decisions, while academics are free to privilege abstract risk assessment. Finally, policymakers face penalties for being wrong, whereas scholars get to spout off ideas while escaping the consequences.

Brands is likely correct that scholars are more inclined to think systematically about issues than policymakers. Indeed, scholars are privileged in having positions *that encourage* them to think rigorously. And it might be true that academics care more about objectivity than patriotic zeal – thankfully so, given the deleterious effects exuberant patriotism can have on foreign policy. Brands doesn't argue for unhinged nationalism, but he does seem to look favorably on the fact that much Washington-based analysis is tinged with love of country and patriotic puffery, emphasizing America's enlightened intentions and special prerogatives for imposing global order. This sort of sentiment should be irrelevant if one is trying to get to objective answers to hard questions.

Most of Brands' account, however, is just flat out wrong. The evidence repudiates the suggestion, for example, that policymakers are held accountable for their ideas. The Obama administration's war in Libya is widely considered a failure (Obama said not being prepared for the chaotic aftermath was the "worst mistake" of his presidency). Who in officialdom was held accountable? Which member of the Bush administration – or its Republican and Democratic enablers – suffered real consequences for the crime of preventive war against Iraq? Some point to Republican losses in subsequent elections, or the fact that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was fired for mismanagement of the war, as examples of accountability. But Rumsfeld got canned because of particular operational ideas he held about deployment and tactics, not because he favored the war. And short-term electoral losses in the mid-terms or the next presidential election are weak sauce, not just because these fickle changes can hardly rectify past wrongs of such magnitude, but because the same crop of analysts and politicians for whom the Iraq War made perfect sense continue to dominate the foreign policy establishment, both in and out of government. Trump's decision this week to hire John Bolton, a paragon of everything that is wrong with the war-prone and expert-allergic nature of U.S. foreign policy, as national security advisor is a perfect example of this lack of accountability. As Steve Walt recently pointed out, none of the scholars that signed the famed 2002 full page advertisement in the *New York Times* opposing the Iraq War have served in policy positions, whereas plenty of people in elected office, the unelected national security apparatus, and the foreign policy commentariat who did support the war continue to dominate these arenas.

But it's not just the big failures like Iraq and Libya. The ideas that drive these failed policies continue to dominate in Washington. The notion that America should fight preventive wars for the sake of non-proliferation is still widely shared. Fighting wars for the sake of credibility is also popular. Expanding NATO, despite the lack of benefit to U.S. interests and the instability it causes in Eastern Europe, almost amounts to religious doctrine. Despite its steep costs and risky adventurism, a grand strategy of primacy continues to monopolize U.S. foreign policy decision-making. The scholarship-policy gap persists because the people and ideas that drive foreign policy in Washington are not held accountable for their failures, and instead are often rewarded with a lifetime of high-status revolving door positions in the policy and think tank worlds. Bad ideas, particularly hawkish ones, and the people that hold them continue to win the day in Washington. That is not accountability.

Nor does Brands' discussion of worst-case scenario policymaking ring true. Brands speaks favorably of former Vice President Dick Cheney's "one percent doctrine," which says that if a threat has even a one percent chance of becoming a reality, it requires enormous resources to mitigate. The argument that Washington *ought* to design policies based on inflated threats of worst-case scenarios, instead of the rational cost-benefit risk assessments done by scholars, is dangerously wrong. America's post-9/11 "War on Terror" policies have done exactly that, and it has led to a host of destabilizing elective wars and egregious overspending on homeland security. Plus, Brands' reading of history here is selective. On issues ranging from NATO expansion and competition with China, to humanitarian intervention in Libya and beyond, policymakers have roundly espoused best-case scenarios for the outcomes of their policies. Instead, it has been *scholars* who have warned of worst-case scenarios – citing standoffs with Russia, escalatory risks with China, and the impossibility of reconstructing broken states at any reasonable cost.

In short, Brands has presented the problem in reverse: What needs to be explained is not why academics are out of touch, but why policymakers have been so doggedly resistant to their more reliable counterparts in academia.

One reason is that states resist dissent. Government bureaucracies tend to suppress ideas that challenge the reigning doctrine. The State Department purged officials in the 1940s and 1950s who questioned U.S. support for Chang Kai Shek's government and presented Communist China as something other than a monolithic threat. During the Vietnam War, the CIA silenced analysts who warned about the strength of the Vietcong. The analysis of intelligence officials who poked holes in the WMD case for the Iraq War were shoved into the footnotes of the National Intelligence Estimate, and dissent from Energy Department scientists about the infamous "aluminum tubes" was quashed.

In addition, states are bad at self-evaluation. As Steven Van Evera argues, "Myths, false propaganda, and anachronistic beliefs persist in the absence of strong evaluative institutions to test ideas against logic and evidence, weeding out those that fail." Socialization and status quo bias play a big role in the policy echo chamber as well. As Morton Halperin and Priscilla Clapp underscore, "Ideological thinking also tends to characterize staff members who have had a long period of involvement in a particular area and become committed to a particular doctrine, such as the need for American hegemony."

Parochial self-interest is a factor, too. As Micah Zenko and Michael Cohen argue, "The specter of looming dangers sustains and justifies the massive budgets of the military and the intelligence agencies, along with the national security infrastructure that exists outside government – defense contractors, lobbying groups, think tanks, and academic departments." Nobody whose job depends on inflating foreign threats wants to confront their own redundancy or hear that their searching for monsters to destroy is dangerous.

Nor is this just a bureaucratic issue. Elite politicking plays a role as well. As Jack Snyder shows, domestic coalition-building among various political, bureaucratic, and special interest groups in the Cold War era helped "pav[e] the way for a Cold War consensus behind expanded military

commitments.” These factions sometimes “resorted to disingenuous strategic exaggerations to sell their program,” resulting in a “spiral of myth-making” that provided “political and intellectual pressure toward global military entanglements.”

Then there are think tanks. One might assume think tanks help mitigate these problems in government. In reality, they are subject to their own perverse incentives that reinforce them. Benjamin H. Friedman and Justin Logan wrote recently that America’s current grand strategy of primacy “serves the interests of U.S. political leaders,” so “there is little demand for arguments questioning it.” Think tank analysis is plagued by an “operational mindset,” which takes existing objectives as a given and provides analysis mostly on how best to implement them, not whether they are wise to begin with. In this, think tanks are frequently beholden, consciously or not, to their funders’ policy preferences. The history of the RAND Corporation’s work on the Vietnam War is a good example. Projects on operational questions got more funding, and research that contradicted official thinking was shunned.

In short, since most think tanks service policymakers rather than guide them, their work tends to reflect the policy preferences of Washington rather than the scholarly consensus. Analysts who want to have an influence on policy face powerful incentives to conform to Washington’s preferences. Think tanks thrive on maintaining relevance and the appearance of policy influence, and if advocating for the scholarly consensus on an issue goes against the grain and gets analysts uninvited to the next closed-door meeting or high-prolife event, organizations are wont to assimilate to the agenda in Washington.

This is not to condemn analysts and practitioners as mendacious sell-outs. Most are earnest, well-meaning, and genuine adherents to the policies for which they advocate. Nevertheless, many often knowingly buck ideas that challenge the consensus du jour. I have personally listened to former officials privately take views popular in academia, but abstain from public advocacy because they feel constrained by the narrow parameters of debate in Washington. Fellow think tank analysts have told me of their reluctance to publicly tout policies that lie outside these parameters for fear of sabotaging their viability for a future job in government.

Scholars are not angels. They face their own institutional pathologies and perverse incentives, like everybody else. We should not slip into the logical fallacy of the Appeal to Authority. Still, scholars are far more insulated in this respect than the policy communities in Washington, and the fact that bad ideas, popular in D.C. but unsupported in academia, keep getting the United States into trouble abroad, should say something about the imperative of giving greater credence to scholarship.

Ultimately, Brands is right that there is a gap between scholarship and practice. The problem, however, lies far more with a policymaking establishment that is resistant to external input than it does with scholars who often go to great lengths and bear real costs to make their insights known to Washington. Before placing blame with the academy, we should pause to reflect on the policymaking establishment’s own problematic record over the last several decades. Bridging the gap is indeed important, but the solution lies in opening up the policymaking process to scholarly insights – not encouraging scholars to embrace Washington’s self-congratulatory discourse.

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