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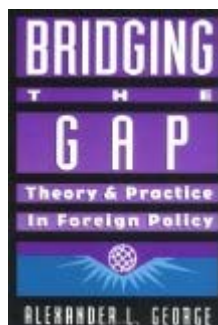
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The Battle of the Bridge

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[Paul R. Pillar](#)^[2]



[Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy](#)^[3] Justin Logan's [take](#)^[4] on the long-discussed gap between academia and national security practitioners raises issues that I have had opportunity to think about from different angles. As someone who was trained to be an academic, took a thirty-year detour in government service, and has for the past few years been on a university faculty teaching students who hope to become national security practitioners, I have a somewhat different take on some of the views cited in Justin's piece. Yes, there is a genuine gap in perspectives that in at least some respects runs along academic-vs.-government lines. And yes, there are insights in academia that, if better noticed and absorbed, would make for more insightful and ultimately more successful national policy, including foreign and security policy. But the insight deficit in U.S. policy-making is not chiefly a consequence of attitudinal warfare between academics and government officials, as much of the commentary on this subject would lead one to believe. There are more good intentions and good will on both sides than the commentary suggests.

I recall hearing a talk on this subject by a distinguished academic political scientist, Stephen Krasner, while he was on leave from Stanford to serve as director of policy planning at the State Department. This was someone who certainly can understand academics' language, particularly regarding international relations theory (to which he has contributed), and also was temporarily in a good position to try to inject insights from that

academic world into the formulation of U.S. foreign policy. The ability and the will to bridge the gap were certainly there. Krasner's comments were rather downbeat about the possibilities, however, for insights from the academy being able to contribute directly and profitably to policy-making. The missions and the manner of framing questions in each world are simply too different. Krasner did say there can be a beneficial indirect effect by having the perspectives of a discipline such as political science brought into the policy-making world in the person of someone like himself, or like his fellow political scientist and boss at the time, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Another Stanford political scientist, the late Alexander George, had a lot to say about these issues in his book *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy*. George had good advice to offer to those on both sides of the gap. But he also pointed out the ways in which policy-makers, especially because of the limitations of time and political resources, inherently will approach problems differently from intellectuals outside government, no matter how much effort is made to apply the advice. From my own observations, limited time—to absorb information and to analyze decisions—presents the biggest constraint on applying insights from the academic world. Because of limited time and the plethora of demands on it, I would not expect the secretary of the treasury to stay up to speed on what is being published in economics journals.

Policy-making is awash in issues on which academics have relevant expertise to offer, but where the decisive considerations are tactical, political, or resource-driven considerations rather than the insights imbedded in the expertise. As the Soviet Union was nearing its end at the time George H.W. Bush was the U.S. president, Sovietologists inside and outside government, including in academia, had plenty of relevant things to say, some more insightful than others, about what was happening in the USSR. It was right for policy-makers to hear their analysis, and they did. But such analysis did not drive U.S. policy, nor should it have. The secretary of state at the time, James Baker, tells in his memoir of getting briefed by outside experts who debated among themselves whether Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* was better interpreted as *peredyska*, an effort to gain breathing space, or as *perekhod*, a more fundamental redirection. To Baker, this was “academic theology” and almost useless. The one respect in which it was useful was to demonstrate that no one really knew where Gorbachev's policies were headed, probably not even Gorbachev himself. Against that background, Baker's wise decision, based not on any single academic nugget but instead on his own political sense and negotiating experience, was to do business with Gorbachev and lock in as many gains for the United States as possible, in the realization that no one could be sure what would come after Gorbachev.

Another respect in which the verbal battle of the bridge between academics and officials is artificial is that some of the most significant and damaging failures to tap expertise and absorb insights are across divides other than the one between government and academia. Paul Bracken is quoted in Justin's piece as saying

The academy had little or no role in the debate about America's response to 9/11. The decision to invade and occupy two Muslim countries, and to declare a “global war on terror,” came from inside the beltway, the loose association of the Pentagon, the intelligence community, Washington think tanks,

Congressional staffers, and contractors.

I don't know what he is talking about, especially with regard to launching the Iraq War. That decision was indeed an abominable instance of decision-makers not only being insulated from relevant expertise but also disdaining expertise and consciously rejecting it. But the war was the product of a cabal of self-sure ideologists who rejected *all* expertise, inside and outside government. It was not just the academy that was cut off from the decision-making but also the professional military, the foreign service, the intelligence community, and the rest of the bureaucracy.

Let us speak out in favor of bringing intellect and insight to bear on policy-making. But let's cool the verbal warfare over whether it is academics or policy-makers who are most to blame for a failure to communicate. The most egregious failures have not occurred along that battle front anyway.

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