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The Gap Can't Be Bridged Unless Those in Power Want It to Be Bridged

| More [1]
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Skeptics readers may have interest in a symposium in the current issue of *Perspectives on Politics* on Michael W. Mosser's article [3] [paywalled] addressing "the alleged disconnect between academics and military practitioners."

Mosser writes that

> The conventional wisdom is powerful and the idea, if not the reality, of a gap [between scholars and policy practitioners] is pervasive. Scholars and practitioners—more the former than the latter—have long decried the growing fissure between theory (the academic world) and praxis (the policy world), but it seems to have taken on a new sense of urgency in recent years.
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> In the halls of both academic and government buildings, the stories of the gap are legion. Practitioners speak of misguided academics and armchair generals criticizing the creation of strategy and the conduct of operations from the safety of their universities. Moreover, and at a more fundamental level, practitioners are frustrated that academics just don't seem to "get" the policy world. Conversely, academics bemoan the fact that practitioners often fail to fully think through the problems they claim need to be solved. If they did, many scholars argue, they would understand that the "solution" to a "problem" either becomes a part of the problem itself, or creates a whole new set of problems.

His conclusion is one that has been voiced frequently before:

> the academic community should not punish scholars who choose to pursue fellowship or short-term research opportunities with the military or government service. Such work, especially in disciplines such as political science, international relations, or the other social sciences, provides invaluable real-world empirical (dis)confirmation of

> academic theories, and gives the scholar a large body of work to draw from upon returning to the academy. Works published in journals that appeal more to practitioners than to the academic community should be given greater credence in tenure decisions, and ideas that actually get translated into policy should not be the academic equivalent of a scarlet letter. Finally, the *entire* academic community needs to understand that the relationship between theory and praxis is not automatically a detrimental one. While the value of establishing a bridge should not be underestimated, and the effort wholly encouraged, the bridge-building needs to take place beyond policy schools. To have lasting value, the university *system* needs to value the interaction.

The editors of the journal solicited a number of responses, but I wanted to highlight a few points from a few of them that I thought particularly pointed. First, Paul Bracken predicts [4] that the threat environment facing the United States is likely to get worse in the coming years, and this will bring scholars back into vogue in Washington. In the future, Bracken writes,

> [t]he contributions of academics may even be decisive, as they have been in the past. It should be noted that unlike the World War II and the Cold War periods, 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. This suggests an important aspect of academic involvement in the security debate. Staying out of it doesn't lead to improvement. It doesn't, in particular, lead to a sweeping rejection of the whole national security ethos, as many academic critics wish. What academics often forget is that there is a competitive market of ideas. There's an idea market, just like there is for everything else. You can pick and choose your own "content providers," on the Washington idea circuit, just as you can in a media company. What's taken place in recent years is an increased concentration of the idea market for foreign and defense affairs to the Washington, DC area.

Bracken worries about the low median quality of the thinking that comes out of the Washington foreign-policy elite, but thinks its days are numbered:

> My view is that several factors are now converging to increase the academic contribution to national security and international order. While there should be concerns about how close academia gets to power, there are other, equally valid concerns as outlined in the cases already discussed. Pulling out of the debate, drawing up the moat, isn't going to make things better.
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> A "withdrawal strategy" for academia will only make things worse. It leaves the field open to others who are only too happy to shape the public debate. There is already too much content that comes unfiltered from inside the Washington beltway. A kind of auto-stimulation occurs. Yes, there are sharp political and policy differences among those inside the beltway. I'm not saying that there is homogeneity. But the basic frameworks used in the debate are pretty much the same. The debate is self-referential, as people square off each other in one conference after another, oblivious to larger considerations. I've attended meetings where panelists advocate attacking Iran to disarm her, and in the next breath say that we also might have to move in to Pakistan to protect the nuclear weapons if things fall apart there. When I point out that this means the US Army occupying *four* Islamic countries simultaneously, I get a quizzical look as if I don't understand how the policy process works.

> Perhaps I don't. But to quote David Brooks, there's not much thinking going on in the think tanks nowadays. There are myriad reasons for this. But the point I emphasize here is that this creates an opportunity for academia to enter the debate. If we don't, others will…

Finally, the responses from Ronald Krebs [5] and Paul Yingling [6] do what I think has been needed for a long time: They pin the blame on an insular, narcissistic, and self-serving foreign policy elite in Washington who have failed to heed the warnings that have been offered by an academic elite that has perennially tried to intervene in policy discussions without getting a hearing. Krebs:

> It is revealing that the changes Mosser calls for rest largely, if not entirely, with the academy. "Ideas that actually get translated into policy should not be the academic equivalent of a scarlet letter," he writes; "the academic community should not punish scholars who choose to pursue fellowship or short-term research opportunities with the military or government service." At least in the field of international relations, however, the charge has little validity. Just look at the list of past Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellows; many former fellows are at the top of the discipline, in the very best departments. More importantly, some of Mosser's proposals would degrade the quality of scholarship. He suggests that "works published in journals that appeal more to practitioners than to the academic community should be given greater credence in tenure decisions." This is hardly objectionable—except for the fact that I cannot think of a single journal of international affairs or security or even strategic studies that has a substantial policy-community readership that operates on the basis of peer review. Peer review certainly has its problems, but it is, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, the worst of all systems for ensuring scholarly quality—except for all the others.
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> Michael Mosser and many others are deeply concerned that the modern academy has rendered itself irrelevant to the concerns of the state. They presume that the fault lies with scholars. There is some truth to that. But it is also true that an often short-sighted policymaking apparatus sees itself as having little interest in hearing alternative voices. In the wake of the series of disastrous foreign policy decisions of the last ten years, in Iraq and Afghanistan and around the world since September 2001, perhaps it is the state—not the academy—that needs to change.

Yingling really sticks the knife in, and twists:

> America's elites are indeed thinking critically, using the same thought processes, and pursuing the same end—personal or parochial advantage. The question they are concerned with is how to gain tenure, promotion, power, or wealth, and their actions are optimally designed to achieve these ends. Those elites who mismanage their institutions and betray their obligations do so for much the same reason that Willie Sutton robbed banks. America's institutions too often reward elite behaviors that are contrary to the public interest, so it's little surprise that such behaviors are so prevalent. It's not that American elites are somehow uniquely evil, but rather that they are all too human. They are merely responding to the incentive structures under which they live.
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> Given incentives that reward self-seeking behavior, examples of social responsibility among elites are all the more impressive. Nonetheless, every major institutional

> failure in recent memory has been accompanied by a corresponding warning from a handful of elites acting in the public interest. Prior to the war in Iraq, 33 international relations scholars published an advertisement in the *New York Times* arguing that "war with Iraq is not in America's national interest." [7] [.pdf] Many of their warnings proved prophetic, including the absence of an exit strategy and the diversion of resources away from the struggle against al-Qaeda. Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinsecki [sic] predicted that stabilizing Iraq would require "several hundred thousand" troops. However, the scholars were ignored and the general was pilloried; their outspokenness was as impressive as it was futile.
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> Society benefits when elites ask hard questions, think critically about important issues, speak truth to power, and accept responsibility for the results they produce. The challenge, then, is to create institutional arrangements that reward such behavior. Great enterprises require ordinary people to take risks and make sacrifices that benefit not only themselves, but society as a whole. Doing so is an act of faith and an expression of trust in the institutions intended to safeguard society and its members. No society can achieve anything of consequence in the absence of such trust. Trust cannot be earned by words alone; only those who place something of themselves at risk have the credibility to ask others to do likewise. People will not trust empty suits, whether those suits have patches on their elbows or medals on their chests. Therefore, restoring and maintaining popular trust in important institutions is a challenge worthy of our best minds—in academia, the military, politics, and business.

Stephen Walt [8], Joseph Nye [9], and other academics have been quick to turn the blame on the academy for being too insular, too theoretical, and too methodologically challenging to be of any interest to policymakers.

By Frits Ahlefeldt As a self-hating Washingtonian, let me say that this is backward. First off, the idea that academic work is just too hard for busy DC policymakers to understand is a bizarre defense of the Beltway. We expect, rightly, Timothy Geithner to be up to speed on important work being published in the economics journals, and Antonin Scalia to be able to make his way through law review articles. I challenge the reader to leaf through the most prominent economics journals without finding challenging methodologies or the leading law reviews without finding elaborate theories. So why should the DC foreign policy establishment get a pass on IR scholarship because it's too hard?

Second, from talking to staffers on Capitol Hill and elsewhere, policymakers are aware that academics differ significantly with their policy prescriptions—they simply don't care. They believe that their insights are better, their stewardship of American power more responsible, and on and on. They know where they could find informed but differing voices. They simply don't want to hear them.

Accordingly, I was refreshed to see Krebs and Yingling, in particular, push back against the idea that the academy is to blame and the poor DC policy establishment is broad-minded and desiring outside advice. They aren’t.

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