Go Forth and Learn

As The American Interest begins its 13th year, magazine and online both, our original purpose remains unchanged: We seek to explain America to the world and the world to America; and to do it through an ideologically un fettered, problem-solving orientation. As always, we use history leaned forward and social science admixed with the vast and varied experience of our authors.

We aspire to go beyond explanation from time to time to propose reform in both domestic and foreign policy. As a recent case in point, the July-August issue is rich with specific ideas for genuine health care reform, and offers specific proposals to fix the State Department and shore up the U.S. nuclear deterrent. The issue you see before you, however, only implies policy prescriptions, for it takes on questions of great difficulty and significance—we must truly understand a challenge before we can have an inkling of how to solve it.

The first of these questions boils down to how rapid and widely spread technological change is making mincemeat of our accumulated stock of knowledge about how political and social worlds work. Disintermediation is an old phenomenon, but in its current global form, hitched to hyperconnectivity, it is propelling us outward into heretofore unimagined places. The same technologies pointed inward, so to speak, are also busy disarranging the stabilities of our personal emotional lives, creating intergenerational cleavages we struggle to grasp. Beware: These two essays, if taken to heart, may well keep you up at night.

A second question concerns the derangement of our political vocabulary of the moment. Is all nationalism populism, or is nationalism only populism when it rushes upon us in recoil from globalist idealism unhinged? Are current manifestations of what is commonly presumed to be both populism and nationalism congruent with the generic label “conservative”? The short answer is no, and knowing the distinctions is, as usual, far more useful than any number of lazy conflations. Enlightened conservatism, insofar as it still may exist, is neither static nor populist—as the two essays in our “Up and to the Right” section illustrate, each in their own way.

The third major question treated in this issue concerns the West’s institutions of higher learning—specifically, what seems not quite right about them lately. The three essays in our “Academentia” cluster investigate different aspects of this subject—none of them, mercifully, obsessing on the by-now hackneyed plaint concerning political correctness and associated assaults on free speech and open debate. Not that these problems are imaginary; they’re not. It’s just that they do not begin to exhaust the topic, properly defined.

I have tended over the years to use the review section to broaden the shoulders of The American Interest, even thereby admitting some entertaining lighter fare into our pages. Not this time. If you think parsing the sources of inequality, of the mass incarceration of African-Americans and the racist history of American eugenics, and plumbing the depths of Shakespeare’s approach to politics are examples of lighter fare, then you probably pursue more serious hobbies than I do.

We do not apologize for the focused and serious character of this issue. These are seriously troubled times, after all. So, as a certain ancient religious pamphlet adjures: “Go forth and learn.” 🕊
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Academics are a conflicted lot, simultaneously cherishing and bemoaning their isolation from the world. Pursuing the life of the mind necessarily entails cultivating independence and even detachment from politics, the news cycle, and government policy. Yet detachment can easily become irrelevance, and in recent years there has been a tidal wave of concern—from academics and non-academics alike—that international relations scholarship has become ever more remote from the affairs of state.

In a 2009 Washington Post op-ed, Harvard scholar and former policymaker Joseph Nye warned of a “growing gap” between academics and government.1 A contemporaneous study concluded that “the walls surrounding the ivory tower have never seemed so high.”2 Robert Gallucci, then president of the MacArthur Foundation, lamented in 2014 that the academy was making only inadequate contributions to critical debates on global security and U.S. foreign policy.3 And in another stinging assessment issued that same year, New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote that “some of the smartest thinkers on problems at home and around the world are university professors, but most of them just don’t matter in today’s great debates.”4

Such concerns are hardly new, of course; handwringing about academic irrelevance dates back decades. But there is nonetheless systematic evidence that the scholarship-policy gap is real and widening. A 2011 survey found that 85 percent of American international relations scholars felt that the academia-policy divide was as great or greater than it had been twenty to thirty years prior.5 The alienation appears to be mutual. Another recent survey, this time of policymakers, informed academics that “what the academy is giving policymakers is not what they say they need from us.”6

The gap endures, moreover, despite myriad efforts to close it. The late, great international relations scholar Alexander George created his “Bridging the Gap” initiative to forge closer links between academia and government some fifty years ago. Secretary of Defense (and Georgetown University Ph.D.) Robert Gates created the Minerva Initiative in 2008 to encourage “eggheads” to do more research...
on critical national security issues. The list of such projects goes on, yet so does the gap. Why is this the case?

The explanations are diverse, and the reasons offered many. International relations scholars—particularly political scientists—increasingly emphasize abstruse methodologies and write in impenetrable prose. The professionalization of the disciplines has pushed scholars to focus on filling trivial lacunae in the literature rather than on addressing real-world problems. The tenure process punishes young scholars for “sucking up to power” and cultivating audiences beyond the academy. The long timelines of academic research and publishing make it difficult even for the most engaged scholars to offer prompt policy advice. Busy policymakers, for their part, simply lack time to engage academia as much as they might like.

Many of these factors are hard-wired into the academia-policy relationship, and many do indeed contribute to the gap. But a more fundamental factor is also at work. On some of the most crucial issues of international security and American statecraft, the academic and policy communities have significantly—even dramatically—opposing views of what is at stake and what ought to be done. What we have here, then, is not a mere failure to communicate. It is a harder, yet more illuminating reality—that those who study international security and those who practice it see the same world through very different conceptual lenses.

Before we attempt a theory of the case, let us first illustrate the case. Consider, for instance, divergent policy and scholarly perspectives on nuclear proliferation.

For decades, there has been a bipartisan policy consensus that the spread of nuclear weapons represents a grave threat to American security, and that strong—even drastic—measures to impede proliferation are warranted. U.S. officials have long worried that aggressive rogue states would use nuclear weapons to blackmail America and its allies, and that the spread of the bomb would heighten the chances of nuclear terrorism, nuclear war, or other calamities. Accordingly, both Democratic and Republican administrations have used economic sanctions and coercive diplomacy to restrain potential proliferators. They have also seriously considered taking preventive military action against enemies pursuing nuclear weapons, from the Soviet Union and China during the Cold War to North Korea and Iran thereafter. In 2003, the United States even fought a counter-proliferation war to preventively disarm Saddam Hussein. For U.S. policymakers, it often seems, there is nothing more dangerous than a hostile state obtaining the bomb.

Scholars, however, are generally more sanguine. There are, certainly, diverse views within the academy on this matter. Yet most academics hold that the dangers of proliferation are overstated, the likelihood of nuclear terrorism or nuclear war is infinitesimal, and the costs of aggressive counter-proliferation policies dramatically outweigh the benefits. Dangerous adversaries such as the Soviet Union, Maoist China, and North Korea have gotten the bomb, after all, and we have lived to tell the tale. Leading academics even contend that nuclear proliferation can be stabilizing, because the iron logic of nuclear deterrence will foster peace between rivals. John Mearsheimer famously argued for a Ukrainian nuclear deterrent in the early 1990s, as U.S. officials were working feverishly to foreclose that very prospect. Kenneth Waltz, the dean of modern international relations theory, controversially argued that “more may be better,” and in 2012 he predicted—altogether contrary to established U.S. policy—that a nuclear Iran would exert a benign, stabilizing influence on the Middle East. When it comes to nuclear proliferation, the gap can be sizable indeed.

Or consider an even bigger question: what America’s grand strategy should be. Within the policy community, there has long been a virtually unassailable consensus that American engagement and activism are the pillars of a stable, prosperous, and more democratic world. It follows that forward military deployments, alliance commitments, and the other aspects of a globe-straddling geopolitical posture are indispensable to global wellbeing and U.S. security. Call it “primacy,” “empire,” or “American leadership,” but this idea has been affirmed in every major U.S. strategy document reaching
back decades, and it has been the single over-arching theme of both Democratic and Republican foreign policy since World War II. This consensus has been challenged by the rise of Donald Trump, but the fact that so far his presidency has seen far more continuity than substantive change indicates that American globalism remains resilient.

Within the academy, however, a far dimmer view of that tradition prevails, and the dominant school of thought favors American retrenchment of a dramatic variety. “Offshore balancers” and advocates of “restraint” call for rolling back U.S. alliances and overseas force deployments, swearing off the significant use of force in all but the most exceptional circumstances, abandoning democracy-promotion and other “ideological” initiatives, and even encouraging selective nuclear proliferation to reduce America’s global burdens. These scholars argue that U.S. engagement is actually destabilizing and counterproductive—that it creates more enemies than it defeats, causes wars rather than prevents them, and weakens America rather than protects it. This view is no fringe position. It is supported by ivory-tower giants such as Mearsheimer, Barry Posen, and Stephen Walt. And, some prominent dissenters notwithstanding, it commands widespread adherence within the academy.

The gap is even wider when it comes to another critical issue: the concept of credibility. Since the early Cold War, U.S. policymakers have worried that if Washington fails to honor one commitment today, then adversaries and allies will doubt the sanctity of other commitments tomorrow. Such concerns have exerted a profound impact on U.S. policy; America fought major wars in Korea and Vietnam at least in part to avoid undermining the credibility of even more important guarantees in other parts of the globe. Conversely, most scholars argue that credibility is a chimera; there is simply no observable connection between a country’s behavior in one crisis and what allies and adversaries expect it will do in the next. Policymakers insist that credibility is worth protecting; scholars reply that some of America’s costliest wars have been fought to sustain a tragic illusion.

Nor are the disagreements between scholars and policymakers confined to abstract or theoretical issues. On some of the most significant and pitched foreign policy debates of the post-Cold War era, the battle lines have also been starkly drawn. In the 1990s, for instance, the policy community coalesced—albeit after much internal debate—in support of expanding NATO to include former members of the Warsaw Pact. NATO enlargement would subsequently be carried out by Democratic and Republican administrations as the best way of ensuring U.S. influence, geopolitical stability, and democratic consolidation in Eastern Europe. International relations scholars, by contrast, overwhelmingly opposed NATO expansion on grounds that it was unnecessary and would deeply antagonize Russia. John Lewis Gaddis wrote that he could “recall no other moment when there was less support in our profession for a government policy”; similar views prevailed among Gaddis’s political science colleagues. The policymakers, in other words, concluded that NATO expansion was a strategic necessity; the scholars sided with George Kennan—the quintessential policymaker turned academic—in deeming it “a fateful error.”

The clashes were even sharper over the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. That decision was, admittedly, contentious even within the policy world, but the Bush Administration—as well
as most foreign policy elites, and significant bipartisan majorities in the Congress—ultimately resolved that war was the only way of disarming a dangerous and implacable adversary. That conclusion, however, was vociferously rejected by most international relations scholars, who argued that Saddam was not an imminent threat, that he could be contained and deterred at an acceptable price, and that war was likely to be very costly and unleash a flood of unwelcome consequences. Several dozen leading academics bought a full-page ad in the New York Times to make their case; hundreds of additional international relations scholars later signed a letter calling the invasion the “most misguided policy since Vietnam.”

Across an array of enormously consequential issues, then, the policy and scholarly communities have often found themselves at loggerheads. There are, of course, issues of war and peace on which one can find greater agreement between these two groups, and neither community was—or is—fully monolithic on any of the issues discussed here. But the basic pattern remains. The gap between academics and policymakers is real, it is profound, and it is deeply substantive in nature. The question is how to explain it.

One potential answer goes back to the idea of a failure to communicate. Perhaps the academics have been unable to get their arguments before the policy community, and so policymakers have not been exposed to their wisdom. This would be reassuring, at least for the academics, if true; unfortunately, it is not. On most of the issues discussed here, the barriers that frequently impede communication between policymakers and scholars simply have not been present. Academics have made their arguments in major newspapers and policy journals; they have written in admirably intelligible English; they have entered policy debates in a timely fashion. Academic critiques of NATO expansion, for instance, began to appear several years before that initiative was consummated, and the Clinton Administration was well aware of them. Policymakers have not been oblivious to well-reasoned academic arguments; those arguments have simply failed to carry the day.

A second and related possibility is that policymakers are just not interested in reasoned debate. Some scholars of American grand strategy claim that, since any clear-eyed assessment reveals the wisdom of retrenchment, policymakers resist this conclusion only because they are gripped by liberal ideology, compromised by bureaucratic or professional self-interest, or in thrall to political interest groups. Likewise, academic critics of the Iraq War have sometimes asserted that the policy community’s arguments for confronting Saddam were misleading or downright dishonest, and that the war was waged not on the basis of hard facts but on irrational fears or hidden motives. Scholars and policymakers disagree, in other words, because scholars care about objective analysis and policymakers don’t.

Alas, this explanation probably reveals more about academic arrogance and condescension than it does about the gap. There have been cases, such as the Iraq War, in which scholars were more prescient than the policy community, although the idea that policymakers were driven by nefarious motives was always risible. But it is not self-evident that the scholars have been right and the policymakers wrong on many of the issues considered here.

There is a credible intellectual case, for instance, that one key reason why Europe did not quickly revert to an unstable, violent multipolarity after the Cold War—as leading scholars such as Mearsheimer predicted—was that the persistence and expansion of NATO helped stifle destabilizing influences. There is a similarly credible case that a capacious American grand strategy, although costly and often frustrating to manage, has for decades muted security competitions in key regions and thus prevented the emergence of a more dangerous international environment that would require far greater U.S. resources to manage.

And, as William Wohlforth has noted, there are myriad instances in which academics themselves have gotten it wrong. Most scholarly observers warned that seeking German reunification within NATO in 1989-90 would precipitate catastrophic upheaval; it was the policymakers who understood that rapid reunification within NATO was the best way of averting such turmoil. Analysts could debate
at length which group has had a better batting average over the years, but the idea that academics have the answers and policymakers refuse to listen just doesn’t hold up.

The gap, then, is not a product of policymakers’ ignorance or biases, welcome as that idea might be to academics. It results, rather, from the fact that academics and policymakers operate according to very different intellectual paradigms that lead to very different ways of viewing the world. These paradigms reflect the divergent imperatives and intellectual perspectives that shape the two communities’ work, and they can best be understood by considering several key dynamics that frequently set scholars and policymakers at odds.

Citizens of America or Citizens of the World?

At an academic conference on nuclear statecraft I attended some years ago, one discussion regarding the effects of nuclear proliferation turned on whether one assessed the issue as a citizen of the United States or as an analyst of the “international system.” The consensus answer was that scholars are first and foremost citizens of the world; they should be less concerned with the parochial American perspective.

That makes sense for individuals whose professional remit is not to advance U.S. interests, but to study—as disinterestedly as possible—big, conceptual questions about how the world works. It makes particular sense for structural realists, who locate answers to these questions not in the policies of individual states but in power imbalances and other structural characteristics of the international system. Yet for policymakers, this approach makes no sense at all. Policymakers are not citizens of the world; they are advocates for the United States. The intellectually curious ones may be interested in the workings of the international system, but they are primarily and properly concerned with advancing U.S. interests, and tend to value abstract concepts like stability and peace only insofar as they advance those interests.

This distinction is critical when it comes to nuclear proliferation. If the stability of the system is an end in itself, then perhaps nuclear proliferation is a good thing, because it might foster mutual deterrence between foes like Washington and Moscow during the Cold War, or Washington and Tehran today. For policymakers, however, such stability is undesirable. American officials don’t want to be deterred by U.S. adversaries; they don’t want enemies capable of checking American power by threatening U.S. territory with devastating nuclear strikes. They want maximum freedom of action in dealing with those adversaries, and to be able to contain and if necessary defeat them at the lowest possible cost. Secretary of State Dean Rusk once put it well: “It was almost in the nature of nuclear weapons that if someone had them, he did not want others to have them.” What’s good for the system may not always be good for America. This tension is one key contributor to the gap.

American Power: For Good or Ill?

A second and closely related dynamic involves sharply contrasting views of American power. Almost without exception, policymakers see the United States as Harry Truman once described it—as “one of the most powerful forces for good on earth.” There have been mistakes and excesses over the years, policymakers would admit, but American power and policy have largely been on the side of the angels in promoting freedom, advancing prosperity, and shaping a better world.

Many scholars, by contrast, have a more skeptical view of American power. They see patriotic fervor as the enemy of objectivity, and they commonly believe that no great power can be as exceptional and benign as American officials claim. Their skepticism also reflects the lingering ideological fallout from Vietnam and later Iraq, conflicts that caused deep ruptures between academia and government, and convinced many scholars that America was itself a dangerous, destabilizing actor in global affairs.

Leaving aside the question of who is right, these conflicting perspectives push scholars and policymakers in radically different directions. Policymakers tend to believe that the assertive use of U.S. power will have benign and
A broadly beneficial effects: That belief has been central to forward-leaning initiatives from NATO expansion to the invasion of Iraq to the preference for a globally ambitious grand strategy. Many scholars, conversely, prefer to constrain American power—whether through self-abnegation in the form of grand strategic retrenchment, or through constraints imposed from without in the form of nuclear proliferation.

For if Washington is, as Kenneth Waltz once wrote, an aggressive power “fond of beating up poor and weak states,” then developments that make it harder for America to play the global bully are welcome. If American dominance and immoderation lead to destabilizing behavior, then American power should be balanced. If the notion of “credibility” has spurred America to undertake unwise interventions in the past, then that concept must itself be discredited. In sum, if scholars and policymakers disagree on the first-order question of whether American power is usually used for good or for ill, then it is hardly surprising that they differ on so many policy matters.

Costs of Action Versus Costs of Inaction

Many academic critiques of government policy focus on the costs of U.S. action in foreign affairs—the costs of invading Iraq, expanding NATO, maintaining a globe-spanning grand strategy. Scholars are naturally drawn to this sort of accounting because the costs of action tend to be concrete and quantifiable (lives lost, dollars spent). At the very least they are usually observable (relations with Russia degraded). Yet this approach often distracts scholars from something that policymakers intuitively understand: that there are also costs of inaction. Those costs can be just as severe as the costs of action, but they are far harder to measure because they are necessarily prospective, and, if the policy succeeds, they never materialize. As Henry Kissinger, the quintessential academic-turned-policymaker, once wrote, “Mankind will never know what it was spared because of risks avoided or because of actions taken that averted awful consequences—if only because once thwarted the consequences can never be proved.”

Such considerations weigh heavily on policymakers in ways academics often find difficult to grasp. In the 1990s, Clinton Administration officials were hardly blind to the potential costs of NATO expansion, but they also had to consider the potential costs of not expanding NATO. Instability in Eastern Europe? Tensions between Germany and its eastern neighbors? Nuclear proliferation by historically insecure states such as Poland? “Many threats to European stability seemed very real,” one insider later recalled.

To take another example, in 2002-03 the Bush Administration certainly underestimated the costs of action against Ba’athi Iraq. But academics frequently missed just how much the Administration feared the possible consequences of inaction: unconstrained Iraqi WMD programs, an eroding sanctions and inspections regime, opportunities for cooperation between Iraq and various terrorist proxies. Indeed, given that 9/11 had demonstrated the potentially horrific consequences of inaction against another enemy, it would have been odd indeed had the Bush Administration not been preoccupied with avoiding another catastrophic failure of omission.

In the case of Iraq, of course, the costs of action turned out to be far higher than the likely costs of inaction, largely because Saddam’s capabilities were themselves overestimated and the aftermath of the invasion was bungled. But the basic intellectual divergence remains: Academics have the luxury of focusing on the disasters caused by U.S. policy, while government officials must also consider the disasters that decisive action might avert.

Cutting Cleanly Versus Muddling Through

The academic enterprise rewards sharp, strongly argued analyses that come down cleanly on one side of a given debate. Few professional points are awarded for splitting the difference or straddling a divide; the articles and books that have the most impact and gar-
ner the most citations are often those that make provocative arguments in plausibly persuasive fashion. Policymakers, for their part, believe that wisdom—or at least prudence—often resides in splitting differences and muddling through. They recognize that uncertainty is plentiful and hedging useful; they seek not to foreclose options but to keep them open for as long as possible; they hope that nuanced statecraft can mitigate the drawbacks inherent in a given approach.

The NATO expansion debate is a classic example of this divide. Most academics insisted that Washington had an either/or choice: It could either conciliate and integrate Russia, which meant foregoing NATO expansion, or it could expand NATO and poison the relationship with Moscow. But policymakers treated this as a false choice, and so pursued a strategy that involved expanding NATO while also seeking to preserve decent U.S.-Russian relations. They made it clear that Russia had no veto on NATO membership policies, yet they simultaneously lavished attention and praise on Boris Yeltsin, brought Moscow into the G-7, APEC, and other institutions, helped keep the Russian economy afloat through bilateral aid and IMF and World Bank lending, and established new forums to provide Russia with greater involvement within NATO. Academics derided this approach as wishful thinking; in retrospect, they may well have been right. But policymakers might well have responded that their approach made sense—in a world characterized by imperfect choices and considerable uncertainty—as a way of achieving one goal without prematurely foreclosing another.

The Elegance of Theory Versus the Messiness of Reality

In the policy world, beautiful concepts count for little. The key question is whether any concept can actually be implemented amid imperfect information, the constraints imposed by bureaucracy and politics, and the general messiness of a world in which neither adversaries nor allies ever behave precisely as one might like or expect. In academia, the elegance and parsimony of the concept is what counts, and the challenges of implementation are an afterthought. Simplifying assumptions can be made, practical constraints ignored, inconvenient political realities buried in a footnote. In academia, the idea must work in theory; in policy, it must work in practice.

As a result, policymakers are often skeptical of the bold ideas scholars proffer. Realist academics might advocate a grand strategy that leaves human rights and democracy promotion by the wayside; most political leaders understand that such a brutally amoral realpolitik—whatever its geopolitical merits—cannot long survive in the American system. Offshore balancers confidently assert that America should withdraw all of its troops from key theaters and then quickly return if a threat emerges; policymakers understand that the diplomatic, logistical, political, and military difficulties of doing so are daunting and perhaps insuperable. Scholars downplay the near-term instability that American retrenchment will create by touting the supposed longer-term benefits; policymakers cannot ignore the tumult and violence that generally accompany the transition from one international order to another.

Similarly, with respect to nuclear proliferation, scholars can predict—on the basis of neorealist theory—that stable deterrence will take hold if Iran or other U.S. adversaries get the bomb. But policymakers understand that, in the past, nuclear stability between rivals has often emerged only after a series of dangerous crises—such as the U.S.-Soviet crises over Berlin and Cuba during the early 1960s—and they question how well deterrence can work in a region as congested and volatile as the Middle East. Academics see no problem superimposing the Cold War deterrence model onto a region that hardly resembles the U.S.-Soviet environment; policymakers intuitively realize that this is a bad idea.

It is thus ironic that academic critics of U.S. policy so often claim the mantle of realism. From the policymaker’s perspective, true realism often lies in recognizing the constraints and complexities that bring high-flown concepts down to earth.
Probabilistic Judgments Versus Worst-Case Scenarios

At its best, academic theory generates reliable probabilistic judgments about how the world works—ideas that explain or predict most of what happens, even if they don’t account for everything. But policymakers are less concerned with general propositions than with imminent particularities. “Analysis . . . seeks principles of general validity,” Kissinger wrote, whereas “effective policy fits its measures to circumstances.”27 Scholars, in other words, are hedgehogs, seeking to formulate one encompassing idea about the international system; policymakers are foxes, concerned with the distinctive characteristics of each situation. And whereas social scientists are primarily concerned with trends rather than outliers, policymakers must continually be preoccupied with low-probability events that could have outsized, even catastrophic, consequences if they occur.28

Scholars can thus take a fairly relaxed view of nuclear proliferation because, in general, nuclear deterrence works. Policymakers have to consider whether this might be the case in which it doesn’t. Scholars could argue in 2002-03 that it was extremely unlikely that Saddam would use his suspected WMD capabilities against America or distribute them to terrorists. Policymakers had to ask whether Saddam—who was exceptional in so many respects—might be an outlier in this regard as well.

Moreover, in the wake of another high-impact, low-probability event that few observers had anticipated, how could policymakers not conclude that even fairly remote but horrifying dangers had to be confronted more aggressively than before? This was the essence of Vice President Cheney’s “one percent doctrine”—the idea that, in a post-9/11 world, one had to credit the dangers of potential outliers, that it was not the likelihood but the magnitude of a potential threat that mattered most. For scholars, a solid probabilistic judgment is good enough; for policymakers, it is only the beginning of the analysis.

Rational Choice in an Irrational World

Most international relations scholarship proceeds from the “rational choice” model, which assumes that all states act on the basis of their objective interests, and that their behavior is thus fairly predictable. Countries do not commit suicide; regimes and leaders do not knowingly pursue courses of action that jeopardize their own survival. Policymakers know from their own experience, however, that rational choice does not always prevail in an irrational world. Ideology, politics, and other factors distort leaders’ choices; adversaries make decisions that, if not irrational, are certainly puzzling. How else to explain the fact that the Soviet Union acquiesced in its own dismemberment—thereby violating every tenet of realist theory—when it still retained the military power to hold onto its empire? How else to explain the fact that Saddam Hussein did not fully come clean regarding his WMD programs in 2002-03, when it seemed clear to everyone else in the world that the survival of his regime, as well as his own personal survival, hinged on it? Rational choice may be a good point of departure for understanding the world, but there is too much it simply doesn’t explain.

How do these clashing perspectives influence the gap? Consider, again, the case of
nuclear proliferation. Scholars can argue that an Iranian bomb is unlikely ever to be used or even aggressively brandished, because rational Iranian leaders understand that such recklessness could invite national obliteration. Yet policymakers—who see the viscerally anti-American ideology that drives the Iranian regime, and who intuitively understand that escalating pressures can be severe even when escalation is not desired—find such assurances not entirely reassuring.

Or consider the Iraq War. Leading academic theorists were dismayed that the Bush Administration failed to grasp that Saddam would be deterred from using his WMD or handing them off to terrorists because he would, surely, understand that such an act would bring about the destruction of his regime. Yet leading U.S. officials knew just how rashly and violently Saddam had behaved in the past, and America had just been dealt a staggering blow by an enemy that was indeed suicidal. In these circumstances, the Bush Administration—rightly or wrongly—found it impossible to stake national security on the presumption that Saddam would behave in cautious and predictable ways. Presumptions of rationality are critical to international relations scholarship, for few theories can work without them. Yet they offer only so much comfort to policymakers who know how crazy the world can be.

**Experience Versus Empiricism**

In the 1990s, Paul Nitze acidly observed that, while political science might be intellectually impressive, too often it was “contrary to experience and to common sense.” As Nitze’s comment indicates, policymakers place great value on their own experience in assessing the international environment; they are often skeptical of the work of academics who have never faced the same dilemmas. They invest real significance in common-sense propositions about how states interact; they are less taken by deeply researched or elegantly theorized accounts that run counter to experience or basic geopolitical logic. Academics, on the other hand, are dubious of policymakers’ experience or received wisdom as a guide to how the world works; they seek to base their conclusions on empirical evidence that can be gathered and measured.

These differing epistemologies lead to differing conclusions on the issue of credibility. Scholars are skeptical that “credibility” and “reputation” really matter, because these concepts are ultimately states of mind and are thus difficult to measure. (The fact that measuring them requires getting inside the heads of foreign policymakers only adds to the difficulty.) Most policymakers, however, find this skepticism bemusing. They know that credibility matters from their experience of allies and adversaries constantly trying to assess how seriously the United States treats its commitments, and because it seems commonsensical that how a nation—or a person—behaves today has some bearing on perceptions of how it will behave tomorrow. If the United States fails to enforce a red line in Syria, or wavers in its response to Chinese salami-slicing in the South China Sea, then of course friends and foes will wonder what Washington will do the next time one of its positions is challenged. In other words, the fact that credibility is elusive may make it less real to scholars who rely on hard data—but not to policymakers who place their faith in experience and common sense.

**Accountability Versus Impunity**

Stephen Walt, one of the premier international relations scholars of his generation, has argued that bad ideas persist in the policy community because policymakers are not punished for their mistakes. That assertion seems ludicrous to policymakers, because it gets things precisely backwards. If a tenured academic makes a bad prediction or advocates a wrongheaded policy, no real-world consequences ensue. Walt’s sometimes co-author, John Mearsheimer, paid no professional price for predicting that NATO would break up after the Cold War; he even gained considerable prominence by wrongly forecasting that Europe would return to a Hobbesian state of nature once the superpower conflict ended. Policymakers, however, are painfully aware that their own misjudgments can cause cata-
strophic results. Lives may be lost, resources squandered, the national interest impaired—to say nothing of reputations and careers ruined. This is perhaps the most fundamental intellectual difference between academics and policymakers—the impunity that comes with being an inhabitant of the ivory tower versus the responsibility that comes with having a position of real decision-making authority—and it matters greatly to the gap.

It is easy for academics to advocate dramatic, epochal shifts in U.S. grand strategy, because they bear no ultimate responsibility if the world reverts to a more violent and dangerous state. Policymakers are naturally more circumspect because they are responsible for the consequences of such an enormously risky grand strategic experiment. It is easy for scholars to blithely assert that things will be fine if Iran gets the world’s most destructive weapons, but policymakers charged with protecting U.S. security and regional interests cannot reasonably do the same. It is easy for scholars to urge that U.S. policymakers confronted with a severe international crisis should just forget about credibility. Government officials charged with deterring adversaries, sustaining a global alliance network, and preventing the next crisis cannot be so cavalier. Walt is thus right, albeit in an ironic way. There is indeed an accountability gap, and it makes all the difference.

The academia-policy gap will persist, then, because of the conflicting intellectual traditions and imperatives that cause these communities to disagree so profoundly on so many critical issues. This persistence will undoubtedly be a source of frustration for those—on both sides of the gap—who seek a closer relationship between the world of thought and the world of action, and particularly for academics who wish policymakers would take them more seriously.

But the fact that the two groups see the same world so disparately is not, in itself, such a bad thing. Academia and policy represent two different intellectual cultures for a reason, which is that they exist to fulfill different societal functions. And intellectual diversity and even intellectual tension is usually a blessing, not a curse, in addressing any important subject; there is wisdom, or at least insight, in the approaches taken by scholars and policymakers alike. The gap could be narrowed if it were possible to turn academics into policymakers or policymakers into academics, but a great deal would undoubtedly be lost in the bargain.

What would be helpful in rendering the inevitable intellectual tension more constructive than confounding, however, is for both sides—especially the academics—to achieve a more explicit understanding of the intellectual barriers that often stand athwart a closer relationship. Doing so will not lead to perfect conceptual harmony between philosophers and kings, but it could engender more intellectually constructive dialogues that get to the analytical nub of the disagreements between the two communities. It could also foster greater empathy between groups that both care passionately about the issues they confront.

The unhappy alternative is that scholars and policymakers will be doomed to mutual incomprehension, continuing to talk past each other because they are operating from different first principles and worldviews. At a time when the United States needs every bit of intellectual firepower it can muster to deal with an increasingly challenging world, neither academics nor decision-makers—nor the nation they both care about—would find such estrangement rewarding. 

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Endnotes


7 Gates, Speech at Association of American Universities, April 13, 2008.


17 Also, most academics did not challenge the essential premise of the war—that Saddam had active and advancing WMD programs.


27 Kissinger, “The Policymaker and the Intellectual,” The Reporter, March 5, 1959, p. 34.

28 The fox/hedgehog distinction has been made, most recently, in Philip Tetlock, Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know? (Princeton University Press, 2006).
