

Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security

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Michael C. Desch in this thought-provoking book examines the contribution and extent to which academic discourse within the political and social sciences has affected and influenced the US's National security policy since the Post-War era. His stance, which is already given away in the title, takes serious exception to the notion of academia in general's relevance to key national security and policy issues, in the way both have evolved throughout Modern US history. His stance quite clearly reflects that the contribution of the political sciences as well as its subset of security studies has become increasingly irrelevant to policymakers in addressing real-world issues and problems.

His argument is derived from a detailed historiographical account of this relationship between academic scholars and researchers at one end and government policy and decision makers at the other. Within this relationship, he unravels important epistemological issues that deal directly with how academic research within the political sciences has advanced over the last few years. He argues that the direction taken by scholars and researchers has been largely attuned towards 'basic' research as opposed to a more 'applied' form of research. He also presents this dichotomy as the Social Sciences' preference of academic 'rigor' over policy 'relevance' as the dominant trajectory taken within the discipline as a whole. He uses this dichotomy to thus show how the pursuit of an objective and scientific methodology has

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conversely limited the real-world application of such efforts. He states, “the tragedy of the professionalization of social science is that it is both the engine of scientific progress but also contains the seeds of its own irrelevance” (p.12). That in pursuit of an objective or grand science or strategy, the emphasis on solving or addressing some of the more pressing issues with regard to national security are often lost or subsumed in the very approach itself.

Desch argues that this approach highlights more quantitative, mathematical and at times even abstract perspectives that have taken increasing precedence as part of the epistemological trends that have remained prevalent within the social sciences. He compares this with how political science (as social science), in its attempts at developing the analytical rigor and objectivity which has served as the hallmark of natural sciences, has often lost out in what it can otherwise offer to policymakers dealing with international security and diplomacy. Throughout the book he can be seen criticizing this approach which he terms as the “increasing tendency of many social scientists to embrace methods and models for their own sake rather than because they can help us answer substantively important questions” (p. 241).

He does this by showing how while times of war have always required policymakers to seek the help and advice of academia, social scientists have mostly played second fiddle to the huge contributions of their more empirically inclined brethren hailing from the natural sciences. These include for instance the immense role played by physicists in World War II in helping give birth to the atomic era, or by economists and behavioral science specialists during early years of the Cold War era. Desch highlights the key role played by the likes of Walt W. Rostow, Thomas Schelling and Henry Kissinger as studied academics that focused single-mindedly on directing their academic expertise on key policy issues of the time. All these examples have been used by

Desch as instances of how not to bring political science to the realms of policy showing the disastrous effects of such an approach.

Desch highlights these efforts as part of the so-called Golden Age of Strategy (1945-1961) when social scientists had perhaps the greatest impact on national security policy. However, even though policymakers became increasingly disillusioned with academia's contributions during the Vietnam War, there has been a resurgence of social scientists being sought to help deal with emerging nuances of the post 9/11 world order. Desch shows that despite this love-hate relationship with social science and national security policy, scholars have not really changed their approach with the lack of applicability of their work continuing even today. He argues that this "increasing preoccupation with abstract models and sophisticated methods has been a result of their growing embrace of economic approaches to (for instance) nuclear strategy to turn it into a 'science'" (p. 146).

Hence, a major part of Desch's very premise is to advocate for a more problem orientated approach in the very design of the research and inquiries being undertaken within this field. His emphasis on this notion is evident in statements such as "Scholars cannot simply sit back and wait for their results to sprinkle down on policymakers like rain from the clouds" (p. 41), and that they have a "moral obligation to answer its enduring relevance question" (p. 255). His approach is to thus more directly address the problems associated with key issues of national security and foreign policy by taking a 'problem rather than method driven approach' (p. 207) to the discipline as a whole. Providing detailed recommendations on how to bridge the gap between rigor and relevance, Desch calls for a more interdisciplinary and subjective approach that recognizes more normative and ethical obligations scholars have to weigh in the problems being faced by the world at large. Instead of focusing on the mere intrinsic value of their research and breaking free of their ivory towers, Desch argues that

political sciences scholars would do well to grapple directly with pressing issues without the fear of politicizing their research.

Desch's recommendations present an eye-opening take on what has been accepted by many within academic and policymaking circles as the norm of what has now come to be expected from it. With some of the world's leading academic and peer reviewed journals focusing on analytical rigor and a more quantitatively objective approach to research and scholarship. Desch's call to bring relevance and greater applicability to real-world problems is as refreshing as it is controversial. While his focus has been more on examining and recommending changes to the academic side of things, it is also worth examining how the other side of the relationship i.e. policymakers and the bureaucratic apparatus also need change based on how they have influenced such trends. After all, Desch in arguing from a more normative and principled stance is calling for scholars to quite visibly take sides and offer concrete resolutions on issues that have already divided governments and world leaders across the globe. In calling for real-world relevance at the expense of analytic rigor and objectivity, Desch's case while likely to stir intense debate should also help refine the scope and purpose of academic inquiry within the emerging contexts of our changing world. This relationship between the two which Desch has so masterfully charted and based his case on, most definitely demands to be further discussed and built upon.