

WARS WITH WORDS?

Francis J. Gavin



In his introductory essay for Vol. 2, Iss. 4, Francis J. Gavin, the chair of TNSR's editorial board, discusses academic combat, debates over "isms," and how to truly advance knowledge through intellectual exchange.

Though we are loath to admit it, we all enjoy a good academic fight. The recent passing of two noted, brilliant, but problematic intellectual pugilists — the historian Norman Stone and literary critic Harold Bloom — has made me wonder whether such battles are the best way to advance scholarly arguments and expand our understanding of the world.¹

I was certainly trained in the arts of intellectual combat. As an undergraduate, I had a front row seat to what had been called “the great 3:1 pissing match,” an intense debate over whether NATO conventional forces could withstand an attack from larger Soviet forces, and how to assess the military balance on the central front in Europe (3:1 is the concentration of forces needed to break through a well-established front).² Reading Greg Brew’s new article, “The Collapse Narrative: The United States, Mohammed Mossadegh, and the Coup Decision of 1953,” brought back memories of my first academic clash. Twenty years ago, an article I published on the same issue received a skeptical review at *H-Diplo*.³ I remember locking myself in my office for 48 hours, pulling out file after file of primary documents, and consulting with friends and mentors, all in order to craft the right response.⁴

In the academic world I was raised in, a negative review had to be met — immediately and with great force — with a sharp rejoinder. The pursuit of knowledge was often framed as a bitter contest between competing theoretical schools, where no side could concede an inch to its opponents. The leading journal, *International Security*, devoted scores of pages in the 1990s to

unending, contentious debates over which “ism” best explained how the world worked. Like other young scholars, I followed these arguments with rapt attention, rooting for my “ism” with the same irrational passion I have long devoted to my often emotionally crippling attachment to the Philadelphia Eagles. This model of intellectual battle was how I thought scholarship and knowledge advanced.

I no longer see things this way. The pursuit of wisdom is not about scoring points or attempting to defeat adversaries. Most of the issues we wrestle with in international security, foreign policy, and grand strategy are complex, contested, and difficult, defying parsimonious explanations or generalizations. Most people — both in the academy and in the policy world — explore these issues in good faith.

The correspondence in this issue of *TNSR* between Mark Bell, Julia Macdonald, Brendan Green, and Austin Long is, to my mind, an exemplar of how such exchanges over scholarly differences should take place: in a serious but respectful manner. All four are terrific scholars. And the fact is, the issue they are dealing with — how to define and understand a nuclear crisis — is an epistemological nightmare. What is a nuclear crisis? Is it any contest involving a nuclear armed state, which is how some political scientist have coded it, or does the use of nuclear weapons have to be explicitly mentioned? Nuclear weapons have perverse and puzzling effects on state behavior, dampening crises that might have otherwise have emerged (the Long Peace!) yet creating dangerous situations — like the Berlin Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis — that make no sense in a non-

1 Eric Homberger, "Harold Bloom, Obituary," *The Guardian*, Oct. 15th, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/15/harold-bloom-obituary>; Falstaff Agonistes, "Obituary: Harold Bloom Died on October 14th," *The Economist*, Oct. 24, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/obituary/2019/10/24/obituary-harold-bloom-died-on-october-14th>; Richard J. Evans, "Norman Stone Obituary," *The Guardian* June 25, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jun/25/norman-stone-obituary>; Marcus Williamson, "Norman Stone: Outspoken Historian and Writer Whose Work Polarised Academic Opinion," *Independent*, July 1, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/norman-stone-death-obituary-news-historian-dead-a8974476.html>.

2 While there were several competing articles published on the subject, the gist of the dispute can be found here: John J. Mearsheimer, Barry R. Posen, Eliot A. Cohen, "Correspondence: Reassessing Net Assessment" *International Security* 13, No. 4 (Spring 1989): 128–79, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538782>.

3 Francis J. Gavin, "Politics, Power, and U.S. Policy in Iran, 1950-1953," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 58–89, <https://doi.org/10.1162/15203970152521890>.

4 Francis J. Gavin, "Author's Response," *H-Diplo*, Oct. 8, 1999, <https://issforum.org/reviews/PDF/Gavin-response.pdf>.



nuclear world. And the bomb is always present, hovering like a dark shadow over world politics, even when nuclear weapons appear irrelevant or no one is talking about them. I've made the point elsewhere that coding anything involving nuclear weapons is hard, since the "Ns" we really care about are nine (the number of nuclear weapons states), two (the times atomic bombs have been used in battle, both within days of each other in 1945), and, most importantly, zero (the number of thermonuclear wars). In the nuclear realm, certainty is elusive and most of our assertions are historical interpretations. I am not sure I am convinced by either approach. Yet, all four are to be commended for their efforts, as the issues involved could not be more important. From a social science perspective, small Ns are a nightmare. In the world of nuclear weapons, however, small Ns are a miracle of history and policy, and we should continue our rigorous intellectual examination of these questions in our unending quest to keep those numbers — nine, two, and zero — exactly where they are.

The scholarly focus on competing theoretical frameworks can also blind us to how policymaking actually works and why it often fails. Philip Zelikow's important new article, "To Regain Policy Competence: The Software of American Public Problem-Solving," identifies what he sees as a steep decline in the United States' ability to conduct effective, competent statecraft. To be clear, Zelikow is not so much worried about which grand strategy or school of thought animates U.S. policy: Trendy academic debates over restraint, primacy, or off-shore balancing miss the point in the same way the battle of the "isms" did in the 1990s. His contention is that the skills needed to carry out successful policy should be thought of like engineering; an interactive process between assessment, design, and implementation. The good news is that these skills are teachable, and Zelikow's urging that universities update their pedagogy accordingly should be heeded.

Sometimes intellectual insight emerges that defies easy categorization by "isms" or schools of thought, yet this insight reveals a whole new way of understanding old problems. Andrew Rhodes' "Thinking in Space: The Role of Geography in National Security Decision-Making," is such an article. Rhodes identifies an irony: The contemporary tools available to scholars and policymakers to understand geography are extraordinary. Yet, rarely do we understand

or interrogate the mental maps to understand how space and geography affect international policy and world politics. Borrowing from Ernest May and Richard Neustadt's famous Harvard Kennedy School class and book, Rhodes says we must learn to "think in space." Jaehan Park makes the case that much of the international relations theory that developed after World War II was aspatial. Some of this had to do with the nuclear revolution, but much of it was driven by "emotional repugnance, as in the case of Morgenthau, or of 'physics envy,' in the academy in general." Systems analysis and game theoretic models thus replaced traditional geopolitical models for understanding international relations.⁵ Rhodes' piece is difficult to categorize, either in terms of a school of thought or a methodology. It is eclectic and smart, precisely the kind of article that is difficult to place in traditional disciplinary journals but finds a most welcome home at *TNSR*.

This is not to suggest we abandon sharp intellectual debate — quite the contrary. People may have important disagreements over how Todd Hall explains what is driving the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, or how David Betz and Hugo Stanford-Tuck portray urban warfare. Such contestation is to be welcomed, even encouraged, because the issues these scholars tackle matter enormously. The 1953 Mossadegh coup analyzed in Brew's article, for example, plays an outsize role in both Tehran and Washington in explicitly and implicitly shaping contemporary U.S.-Iranian relations. It is important that we rigorously examine and test our assumptions about the origins and consequences of this critical event.

There is a balance to be had. During the late 16th and early 17th century, scholarly debates at the world's most prestigious universities, Cambridge and Oxford, were often shaped by arid, formal, and bitter theological and philosophical disputes with little connection to the larger world. At the same time, a new, unheralded institution emerged in London — Gresham College — which was later to become the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge, or the Royal Society. Its members, pursuing science for the larger public good, helped transform our understanding of the physical world; including, most consequentially, the navigation of the sea. Oxford and Cambridge soon caught up and surpassed Gresham College. The world, however, should be grateful for its efforts to escape academic "inside baseball" and

5 Jaehan Park, "The Case for Geopolitics," unpublished chapter from his forthcoming dissertation, *The Age of Geopolitics: Japan, Russia, and the United States in the Far East, 1895-1905*.

connect knowledge to larger social purposes. Perhaps the way our current academic system operates when it comes to studying foreign policy and international security could use a similar helpful nudge.

I learned a lot sitting on the sidelines watching the great 3:1 pissing war. What I remember most as it unfolded in 1988 and 1989, however, was the strange allocation of intellectual resources. Intense, passionate, and even intemperate clashes over the military balance in central Europe were taking place just as the Cold War was ending and the Soviet Union unraveled. In just a few years, the great pissing war would be forgotten, the term “Fulda Gap” would largely disappear, and the participants would move on to other intellectual battles, with no one questioning whether this particular war of words had been especially fruitful. At TNSR, we enjoy and encourage sharp, big arguments. But any debate should be respectful and measured, while recognizing how hard it is to get definitive answers. Most vital of all, such debates should be important to people beyond the silos and ivory towers in which we often find ourselves. We hope you agree with us that this issue passes that test. ■

***Francis J. Gavin** is the chair of the editorial board of the Texas National Security Review. He is the Giovanni Agnelli Distinguished Professor and the inaugural director of the Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs at SAIS-Johns Hopkins University. His writings include Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958–1971 (University of North Carolina Press, 2004) and Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age (Cornell University Press, 2012). His latest book, Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy, will be published by Brookings Institution Press later this year.*