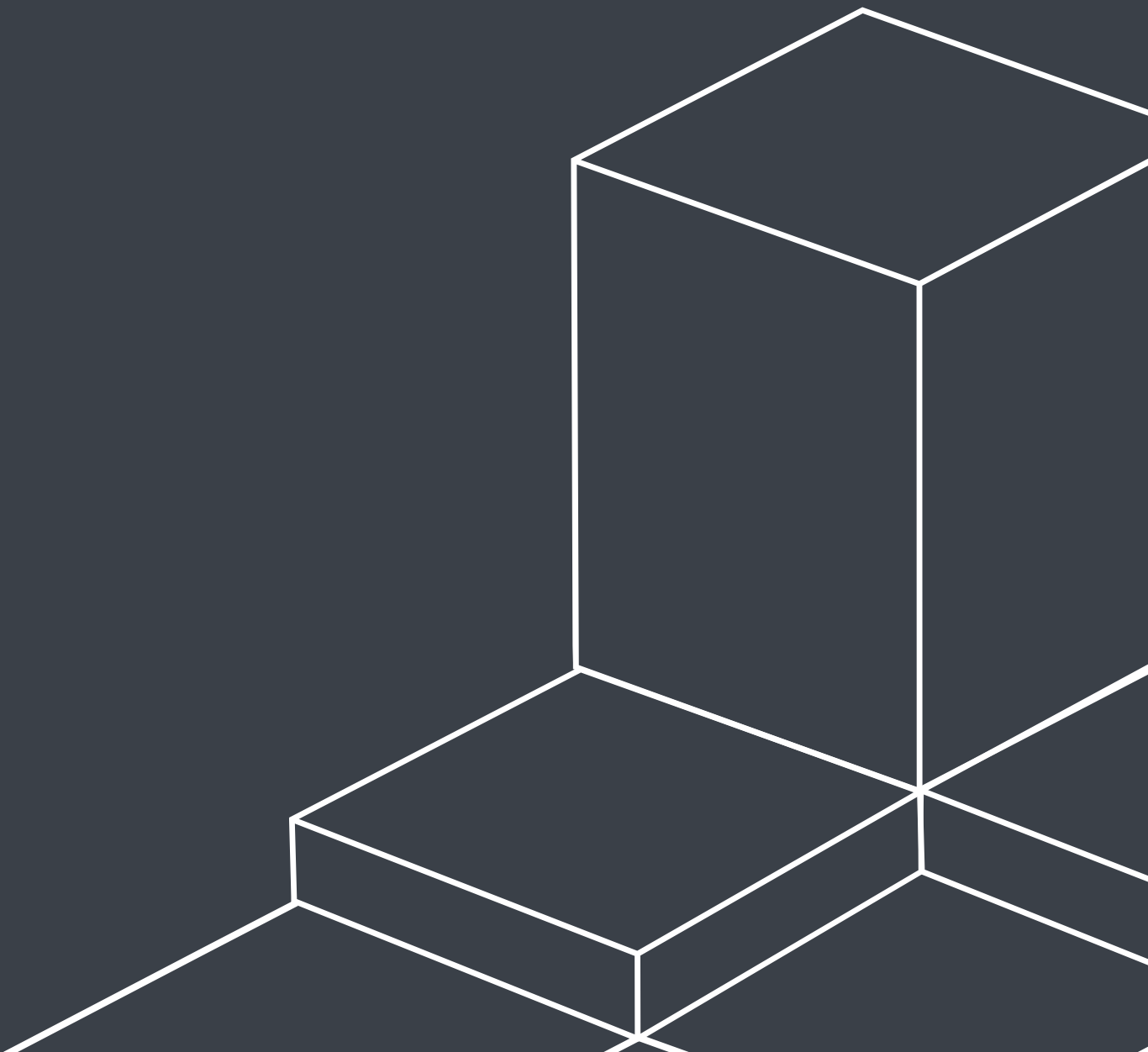


# THE BEST OF THE BRIGHTEST? IDEAS AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

Francis J. Gavin



In his introductory essay to Volume 3 Issue 2 of TNSR, chair of the editorial board Francis J. Gavin considers how we should think about the role of ideas, expertise, and influence in the making of American foreign policy.

**W**orld politics is complicated, ever changing, and uncertain. Boiled down to its simplest elements, however, the basic goal of each actor within the international system — once empires and kingdoms, now largely nation-states — often centers upon getting others to do what you'd like and preventing those same actors from forcing you to do things you don't want to do. This excellent issue examines and assesses the tools available to leaders to try to achieve these goals, with a focus on strategies of coercion.

Hal Brands and Evan Braden Montgomery explore the traditional tool of strategy — military force — and ask whether the new national defense strategy and its emphasis on fighting one large war doesn't leave the United States vulnerable to a second, concurrent conflict. Erik Sand — in a paper I am proud to say first appeared in a class taught by Jim Steinberg and me at MIT — lays out a powerful case that economic warfare, and especially blockades, is more effective than we often think by driving the target state into riskier and ultimately losing strategies. Erik Lin-Greenberg examines perhaps the newest, most uncertain tool of strategy — artificial intelligence — and asks how this technology affects alliance behavior and interoperability. Tami Davis Biddle provides a fascinating deep dive into the intellectual origins of coercion theory, with the goal of helping policymakers and military officials better understand and apply the lessons of Thomas Schelling.

This thoughtful issue provokes three questions. What are the best instruments and strategies for achieving state interests in the world? What are those interests? And what role do ideas play in both framing and answering these questions?

As Biddle demonstrates, Schelling transformed the way we engage the first question. From the middle of the 20th century onward, scholars from Bernard Brodie to Robert Jervis and beyond recog-

nized that the bomb made intentional great-power war between superpowers possessing thermonuclear weapons an absurdity.<sup>1</sup> These strategists were not unconcerned about conflict, however. The very nature of nuclear weapons meant that an accident, misperception, or perverse incentives — such as the powerful logic of launching an attack first during a crisis — could generate a war nobody wanted. In 1961, Schelling and his co-author Mort Halperin, participating in a Harvard-MIT Faculty Seminar, laid out the intellectual origins of modern arms control in their classic, *Strategy and Arms Control*.<sup>2</sup> Strategic stability and mutual vulnerability enshrined by nuclear arms control negotiated between the great powers would guarantee the peace.

This new world of mutual vulnerability, however, confronted statesmen with a dilemma. If launching a fully mobilized, great-power war was no longer a meaningful instrument of strategy, and if even threatening to intentionally unleash such a war was not credible, what tools were left to a state to achieve its ambitions in the world? Interestingly, Schelling provided his answer in another book written around the same time as *Strategy and Arms Control*, *The Strategy of Conflict*, and expanded upon these ideas in his 1966 book *Arms and Influence*.<sup>3</sup> Policymakers had to embrace new kinds of strategies to achieve political ambitions in the world. In a nuclear environment, “military power is not so much exercised as threatened” to generate “bargaining power” or what he also called “the diplomacy of violence.” Concepts such as “the threat that leaves something to chance,” “the art of commitment,” and “the manipulation of risk” provided policymakers with a different way of thinking about employing both the threat and use of force.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of military power thus shifted from defeating an enemy's armies and navies, to conveying signals by imposing or withholding pain.

These were not simply theoretical considerations: At the same time that Schelling's ideas were

1 See the TNSR book review roundtable, “The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution Thirty Years Later,” April 30, 2020, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-the-meaning-of-the-nuclear-revolution-30-years-later/>.

2 Thomas C. Schelling and Morton H. Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1961).

3 Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966).

4 These are chapter headings and well-known concepts developed in Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*.



laying the groundwork for strategic nuclear arms control between the superpowers, his other concepts were helping to shape the Johnson administration's strategy of coercive warfare against North Vietnam. Through the plans of Schelling's friend and protégé, John McNaughton, the Johnson administration employed his belief that measured, graduated bombing of the North Vietnamese could coerce them into changing their behavior — in this case, ending their support for the Viet Cong insurgency. The goal was not to *defeat* North Vietnam's armies, but rather to send signals and alter incentives.<sup>5</sup> Schelling, it should be noted, imagined such compellence might eventually be needed against a larger enemy, China, though with targeted tactical nuclear weapons instead of conventional ordnance used to convey the message. It is chilling, to say the least, to go back and read these passages in *Arms and Influence*.

### **The Best and the Brightest, the “Blob,” and the Restaurant School**

This leads to the insightful and timely historiographical essay by Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall. That their piece generated an enormous Twitter controversy over a point that, for most intelligent observers, is common sense — that to understand international relations since 1945, it might be a good idea to understand how and why the most powerful player in world politics, the United States, made its decisions — says much about the strange state of academic history in the United States. To me, however, the article prompted a far more important, powerful set of questions: Do we actually know what the United States thought it was trying to achieve during the war in Southeast Asia? Do we fully understand why the United States chose strategies that led to over 50,000 American combat deaths and killed approximately 3 million people in that region? What explains a tragic set of policies that wreaked unimaginable physical destruction while generating economic malaise, deep political

and cultural polarization, and a loss of faith in governance within the United States?

The journalist David Halberstam thought he had an answer. In his 1972 classic, *The Best and the Brightest*, he argued that, in addition to domestic political expediency and an obsession with credibility, the hubris and lack of accountability of American policymakers and their advisers blinded them to their own mistakes and the limitations of American power.<sup>6</sup> *The Best and the Brightest* became a classic, joining other explanations of the Vietnam War that dismissed the idea that the United States was a force for good in the world or that its decision-makers could overcome their own myopia or self-importance.<sup>7</sup>

A version of Halberstam's argument has made a comeback, as analysts try to make sense of America's grand strategy in recent years, only now “best and the brightest” has been replaced by “the blob.” An odd coalition from the political left and right, including libertarians, paleo-conservatives, Bernie Bros, and defensive realists, has come together to skewer U.S. policy in the world since the end of the Cold War. This group goes by various names — they often refer to themselves as offshore balancers, whereas their critics label them neo-isolationists. I call them “the restaurant school.” Why? Years ago, when my friend Barry Posen kindly gave me an autographed copy of his newest book, *Restraint*, a member of my family misread the title and asked, “Why is Barry writing about restaurants? Has he become a food critic?” To his credit, when I mentioned this to Barry, he responded, “Well, the members of the blob certainly enjoy fine food and junkets.” Touché. I continue to use the appellation “restaurant school,” if only to lower the temperature in what often seem to be heated and overly personal debates about American grand strategy.<sup>8</sup> Similar to Halberstam's diagnosis almost 50 years ago, the restaurant school identifies the actions of a self-appointed, inner circle of arrogant officials and intellectuals, misled by their overreliance on military instruments and their mistaken belief that deep American engagement is good for

5 Lawrence Freedman, “Vietnam and the Disillusioned Strategist,” *International Affairs* 72, no. 1 (January 1996): 133–51, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2624753>; Fred Kaplan, “All Pain, No Gain: Nobel Laureate Thomas Schelling's Little-known Role in the Vietnam War,” *Slate*, Oct. 11, 2005, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2005/10/nobel-winner-tom-schelling-s-roll-in-the-vietnam-war.html>; and Richard Ned Lebow, “Thomas Schelling and Strategic Bargaining,” *International Journal* 51, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 555–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F002070209605100308>.

6 David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972).

7 Halberstam's other key argument — that Lyndon B. Johnson was intimidated by the Ivy League-educated advisers he inherited from his predecessor, John F. Kennedy — was exposed as ludicrous once Johnson's secret phone recordings were released. Listening to these tapes, there is no disputing Johnson was in charge and driving policy.

8 For my own, libation-aided views, listen to, Ryan Evans, Francis J. Gavin, Jim Steinberg, “In Defense of the Blob,” War on the Rocks Podcast, March 9, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/03/in-defense-of-the-blob/>. The phrase “restaurant school” strikes me as about as descriptive and nuanced as the other terms used in the debate, such as blob, swamp, isolationist, free-rider, primacy, hegemony, etc. For an outstanding critique of this concept of the blob and two of its leading proponents, see, Robert Jervis “Liberalism, the Blob, and American Foreign Policy: Evidence and Methodology,” *Security Studies*, published online May 14, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2020.1761440>.

either the United States or the world.

How far do these arguments get us? As Richard Hofstadter brilliantly pointed out in his seminal essay, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” blaming a cabal of cosmopolitan, unaccountable elites — who are overly influenced by events abroad — for America’s woes is a populist trope that goes back to the country’s founding.<sup>9</sup> Debates over America’s foreign policy are often marked by the extremes of revolutionary, evangelical fervor to remake the world and an equally intense desire to withdraw from its corrupting influences. The historical sources of both impulses are closer to each other than adherents from either camp are willing to acknowledge. Blaming the blob for America’s misadventures in the world is as old as the Republic, as the bitter debates over the 1795 Jay Treaty between the United States and Great Britain make clear.<sup>10</sup>

How then should we think about the role of expertise and influence in the making of American foreign policy? Consider again Schelling, a card-carrying member of the best and the brightest, or the so-called blob, if ever there was one.<sup>11</sup> There is a remarkable but rarely commented upon tension between *Strategy and Arms Control* — which sought to minimize the danger of nuclear war by enshrining mutual vulnerability and arms control — and Schelling’s other two works, which suggested employing strategies to exploit uncertainty, manipulate risk, and use targeted, graduated violence to signal credible commitment to achieving a particular political end. The first set of ideas — strategic stability and superpower arms control — laid the groundwork for the Antiballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) and the series of Strategic Arms Limitation treaties (SALT), which may have prevented a thermonuclear war and, if nothing else, limited arms racing and made international politics more stable and predictable. The second set of ideas provided inspiration for one of the worst, most tragic strategies in American history — the “strategic” bombing of North Vietnam. Would the world have been better off if Schelling had never published his ideas, or if government officials had not been open to his innovative insights into strategy? To put it bluntly — would you take a world without Rolling Thunder if it meant no ABM and SALT treaties?

Or consider the officials of the Johnson administration who crafted America’s disastrous military policies in 1964 and 1965, as laid out in Logevall’s masterful study *Choosing War*.<sup>12</sup> Concurrent to their deliberations over Vietnam, many of these same officials confronted the aftermath of China’s detonation of a nuclear device. Intelligence analysts expected the emergence of a dangerous world with dozens of nuclear weapons states in the near future if nothing was done. The same administration, even many of the same officials who blundered into war in Vietnam, crafted a nuclear non-proliferation policy that was a great success. Their policies, which included negotiating the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, are largely responsible for the fact that the number of nuclear weapons states is in the single digits, the overall number of nuclear weapons is far lower than in 1965, and the danger of nuclear war has receded further into the background than anyone in the Johnson administration could ever have hoped for or imagined.<sup>13</sup> Were these members of the blob, the so-called best and the brightest, arrogant, unaccountable, and myopic about America’s power and purpose when meeting about Vietnam, only to become enlightened and visionary a few hours later when the deliberations turned to nuclear proliferation?

One can imagine similar considerations in more recent times. How does one balance, for example, between the Bush administration’s disastrous policies in the Greater Middle East and the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which has saved millions of lives? Both were driven by experienced experts who looked beyond narrow conceptions of the national interest and believed America’s deep engagement benefited both the nation and the world. Obviously, in an ideal world, the United States would do only those things that are good and avoid those things that are bad. This desire, however well meant, is naïve. The necessary critiques of America’s blunders should be accompanied by a recognition that it is much easier to dissect an outcome that has already unfolded than to provide guidance about an unknowable future. Furthermore, we need to imagine and evaluate the counterfactual world in which the United States embraced the ideas of the restaurant school after the end of the Cold War.

9 Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harpers* (November 1964), <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>.

10 Jeffersonian republicans bitterly accused Alexander Hamilton and John Jay of being monarchists while selling out America’s interests and values for their own personal and political gain.

11 For an outstanding analysis of the origins of Schelling’s ideas, see, Benjamin Wilson, “Keynes Goes Nuclear: Thomas Schelling and the Macroeconomic Origins of Strategic Stability,” *Modern Intellectual History*, forthcoming, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244319000271>.

12 Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

13 Francis J. Gavin, “Blasts from the Past: Proliferation Lessons from the 1960s,” *International Security* 29, no. 3 (Winter 2004/2005): 100–135, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137557>.



What would Europe or East Asia look like today if the United States had gone home in 1989–91? The fact is, making foreign policy in a world of great danger and complexity, where the future is unknown, restraint comes at its own high and often unrecognized costs, and even the best, most well-meaning efforts can end in tragedy, is very hard.

Similar to Schelling's time, debates over how, in what ways, and for what purposes the United States should or should not engage the world carry more than academic interest. This introduction is written as COVID-19 and its consequences are devastating America and the world. The crisis has also generated deep worry and concern about the future of U.S. foreign policy and international relations. On the one hand, the restaurant crowd's argument about the inapplicability of old-fashioned military interventions to emerging global challenges is lucid. On the other hand, this hardly seems a time to dismiss the deep knowledge and expertise of public policy officials, nor does continuing America's retreat from the world seem wise. Perhaps a Trump administration better staffed with more members of the blob, actively engaged and advocating America's interests in the world, would have generated a more coherent, better coordinated global response that may have saved countless lives.

Which leads to the final essay in this issue, a beautiful tribute by Beatrice Heuser to her mentor, the great military historian Sir Michael Howard, who passed away late last year. Howard had fought in World War II and understood the tragedy of conflict. When asked by a student which was his favorite war, he replied, "Why, I hate them all!" Yet, having come of age in the 1930s, he understood that pacifism and simply withdrawing from the international system was not an option.

Howard was, in many ways, the opposite of Schelling in temperament, focusing on humility and the difficulty of understanding, to say nothing of shaping, a complicated world. To Howard, theories were at best "heuristic" and could "never be predictive." They should always be recognized as "tentative hypotheses to be critically re-examined as new data become available."<sup>14</sup> History had no lessons, only patterns. Yet, like Schelling, Howard believed that intellectuals had a moral obligation to their societies to provide their best ideas to help decision-makers navigate the difficult questions of making policy in a confusing and dangerous world. His gentle style was not in accord with the sharp barbs and hot takes common in the age of social media. "Persuasion, rather than hostile confrontation, was to him a cardinal goal," Heuser writes.

Howard's "wisdom was to contribute to a wider perspective, whether in a debate behind closed doors or in public, about any live issue, with an understanding of history that shed light on a topic from a different angle." An urgent task before us — one this journal is deeply committed to — is how do we get the best from our brightest? As we navigate the current national and global crisis, and confront great uncertainty about the future, let us be inspired by Howard's legacy, a combination of modesty, intense curiosity, and penetrating, searching intellect, oriented toward helping decision-makers — something that is increasingly needed today. ■

**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 is *Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy* (Brookings Institution Press, 2020).

---

14 Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 9.

