

# **I Was Wrong. Now What?**

**Francis J. Gavin**

In his introductory essay for Volume 5, Issue 3, the chair of our editorial board, Frank Gavin, contemplates being wrong, the value of academic debate, and the importance of a society looking at itself in the mirror, warts and all.

I have a confession to make: I have been wrong quite a lot lately. I believed Vladimir Putin was pursuing a coercive bluff and would not invade Ukraine. I did not think Xi Jinping's China would be so foolish as to crack down on Hong Kong. Donald Trump serving out his full four-year term shocked me as much as his election did. Uber struck me as an impractical fad that would never work out, and, in 2010, when a friend excitedly showed me an iPad he had purchased, I thought he had wasted his money. I also believed the Philadelphia Eagles' 2018 Super Bowl victory was the start of a decades-long football dynasty.

Maybe I am just especially bad at understanding how the world works, an interpretation my daughters might favor. I doubt, however, that this is the whole story. While I am humble enough to admit mistakes, I am immodest enough to think I am smart, thoughtful, and careful in my analyses. And there have been times when I have been right about important questions. I have long pushed back against two popular predictions that have surfaced regularly since I began my academic career: first, that the world is at a nuclear tipping point and the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty regime is close to collapse, and second, that the dollar is about to lose its leading position as a reserve currency. The number of nuclear weapons states has stayed the same since I first heard this warning 30 years ago, and the dollar is strong and more central to the international economy than ever. While I am not sure what my batting average is, I confess I am more likely to highlight when I am right than linger on my misjudgments, be it in the classroom, casual conversation, or scholarly footnotes.

Why do I mention this? Events in recent years, such as China's belligerence, America's withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia's brutal attack on Ukraine and ensuing military incompetence, and the vigorous and unified response of the United States and its allies, have inspired "spirited" exchanges — both online and in print — about who correctly predicted these events and who got them wrong. Other forecasts, yet untested, generate equally contentious debate. Will Russia use weapons of

mass destruction? Will China invade Taiwan? Is the American-led order collapsing? Scholars and analysts of foreign policy and international relations often judge themselves, and are judged by the outside world, by the accuracy of their predictions. But as I read the excellent pieces in this issue, I began to wonder — is "prediction" the best way to assess and value expertise about world affairs?

As we all know, the analysts and scholars who make big, far-reaching forecasts based on their pet theories are often rewarded with greater prominence and exposure, regardless of whether they are right or wrong. The political psychologist Philip Tetlock captured this phenomenon in his classic, *Expert Political Judgement: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?*<sup>1</sup> As Louis Menand pointed out in a review essay, Tetlock's experiments revealed that foreign-policy experts were no better than "dart-throwing monkeys" in making predictions about future world events. The worst predictors, however, were part of a group that often receives the most attention and acclaim, those whom Tetlock, riffing off of Isaiah Berlin (who was riffing off of Leo Tolstoy, who was riffing off of the Greek poet, Archilochus), labelled "hedgehogs." According to Menand, "A hedgehog is a person who sees international affairs to be ultimately determined by a single bottom-line force: balance-of-power considerations, or the clash of civilizations, or globalization and the spread of free markets."<sup>2</sup>

Hedgehogs aren't all bad. As my international relations friends never tire of telling me, behind every policy decision lies a theory of how the world works. As Andrew Ehrhardt reveals in his article, "Everyman His Own Philosopher of History," even the discipline more populated by foxes — history — has hedgehogs lurking around the corner, be they Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, or Arnold Toynbee. Raphael BenLevi demonstrates, in this issue, that these underlying frameworks shaped how the United States developed and implemented its nuclear nonproliferation policies toward Iran. Philosophies of history and schools of grand strategy are not dissimilar.

The professional incentives to prioritize and re-

1 Philip E. Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgement: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

2 Louis Menand, "Everybody's an Expert: Putting Predictions to the Test," *New Yorker*, Nov. 27, 2005, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/12/05/everybodys-an-expert>.



ward hedgehogs, however, means that there is little motivation among analysts to admit mistakes, nor does anyone appear to keep track of and advertise when their predictions are wrong. On one level, this is not remarkable. We all suffer from what has been called the Lake Wobegon effect, named after a mythical place where, as Garrison Keillor put it, “all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.”<sup>3</sup> The truth is that we are all heroes of our own stories. Each of us remembers, in sharp detail, everyone who has broken our heart. Rarely do we invest the same intellectual or emotional energy reflecting upon those whose hearts we’ve broken. Modesty, humility, and self-awareness are rarely rewarded in life, to say nothing of the scholarly and analytical community.

My hunch is that, if rigorously examined, even the most impressive policy prognosticator gets many things wrong. This shouldn’t surprise us. The social and political world are enormously complicated, context and circumstances are crucial yet ever-changing, and rarely does a new crisis or political event precisely resemble any that came before it. Our models and theories about the world are extremely sensitive to their underlying assumptions, which are more often posited than proven. *Ex ante*, decision-makers face radical uncertainty about an unknowable future. Most foreign policy problems are what former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger called “51/49” challenges, meaning that it was virtually a coin flip as to how they would turn out.<sup>4</sup> Kissinger knows of what he speaks, as Marino Auffant demonstrates in his article, “Oil for Atoms.” The secretary of state’s efforts to keep the Western alliance unified during the 1970s energy crisis revealed a number of difficult, cross-cutting issues for actors with divergent interests. In a similar vein, Kathleen M. Vogel and Sonia Ben Ouagrham-Gormley highlight the extraordinary complexity and uncertainty surrounding big data and the threat of China hacking biomedical data. Nadiya Kostyuk and Erik Gartzke explain why the widely predicted cyber attacks that many feared Russia would launch against Ukraine have not materialized. Sahr Muhammedally and Dan Mahanty describe the moral and strategic dilemmas behind the effort to avoid civilian casualties during war.

In an ideal world, we would all acknowledge

that this business is hard and confess our sins as loudly as our triumphs, less for an accounting or truth squad and more because it is useful to assess the assumptions about the world that go into our predictions (and it is good for our students to understand that we are imperfect, not omniscient). Epistemological modesty is an underrated virtue. And as a community, this would also cause us to be more skeptical of anyone who offers a simple, all-encompassing explanation for how the world works and never admits when they are wrong, a psychological profile more appropriate for cult leaders and authoritarian dictators than famous international relations professors.

That is unlikely to happen. Partly this is due to a culture of debate and discussion among all those analysts whose ability to predict the future is, to be blunt, pedestrian. I recently took part in a poll offered by the journal *Foreign Affairs* that asked whether NATO expansion was a mistake.<sup>5</sup> They literally asked everyone remotely attached to the foreign-policy community or the so-called “blob” — I think my mailman took a pass when asked to participate. I have a particular interest in the question, not because I am an expert — far from it — but because I (randomly) seem to know, have worked for, worked with, hired, or been bitter rivals with the majority of the 17 people who, based on their policy experience, scholarship, or both, are actually *qualified* to provide an intelligent answer to the question (you all know who you are). In other words, I am the Kevin Bacon of the NATO expansion debate, and I have benefitted enormously over the years from these arguments. That said, I’ve always thought the debate a little, well, strange, in the way academic exchanges often are: NATO enlargement was obviously a difficult and consequential decision. It may have been right or wrong, and both sides made compelling arguments. But the narrow, obsessive focus on the issue, as opposed to all the other things going on in world politics, European statecraft, or Russian history over the past three decades, seemed a bit off and disconnected from how policy actually works.

What should we make of these fierce “Who was right?” exchanges? My first thought was that it matters *who* is making the decision. Whether I or my academic colleagues or think-tank friends are right or wrong is of little consequence to anything

3 “Inside Garrison Keillor’s Fabled World of ‘A Prairie Home Companion,’” *PBS News Weekend*, July 26, 2014, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/40-years-counting-inside-garrison-keillors-fabled-world-prairie-home-companion#:~:text=GARRISON%20KEILLOR%3A,-So%2C%20you%20just&text=Where%20all%20the%20women%20are%20strong%20and%20all%20the%20men,>.

4 Stephen M. Walt, “What Henry Told Harvard,” *Foreign Policy*, April 12, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/04/12/what-henry-told-harvard/>.

5 “Was NATO Enlargement a Mistake? *Foreign Affairs* Asks the Experts,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 19, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ask-the-experts/2022-04-19/was-nato-enlargement-mistake>.

but our own egos. When those who make policy are wrong, it can be a matter of grave consequence. We see clear evidence of this today. Putin's horrific blunders in Ukraine have cost countless lives and produced misery and fear.

I recently had an extraordinary opportunity to reflect upon the real-world consequences of decision-making while participating in a staff ride organized by the strategic studies students from the Bologna campus of my school, Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies. The ride was based on the 1943–44 Italian campaign during World War II. I joined the group in the small town of San Pietro before we travelled to the Rapido valley. I knew far less about the campaign than I should have, but what I learned shocked me. The decision to invade Italy in the first place was an ugly and arguably wrong-headed grand-strategic compromise between Winston Churchill's desire to protect British imperial interests in the Mediterranean and the preference of America's military leaders to prepare for a cross-channel invasion of Europe. After landing in Italy in September 1943 and predicting that they would reach Rome the next month, the Allied forces instead slogged through a slow, painful, and costly advance across the Liri valley, arriving in the Rapido valley early in 1944. Standing before the deep, fast-moving river, the Rapido, in a narrow, open plain surrounded by mountains, it was obvious even to a nonmilitary expert like me how brutally difficult getting north would be. To achieve success, the Allies would have had to capture the surrounding hills. On top of the highest hill, however, was a beautiful Benedictine monastery, founded in the early sixth century.

What happened next is well known. The *Wehrmacht* did not use the monastery for their strategic advantage, as the Allies had suspected it would. Instead, at great effort and expense, the German army carefully removed its artistic and historical treasures and returned them safely to the Vatican. The Allies, on the other hand, frustrated at their inability to advance, became convinced German troops were using the site to rain artillery fire on their positions and made the decision to bomb it. In the process, they destroyed one of the most venerated sites for Roman Catholics in the world. Furthermore, over 200 innocent men, women, and children who were sheltering in the abbey, believing they were safe, were killed. The rubble created an ideal spot for German soldiers to occupy and use to continue to stymie Allied efforts to take the valley, resulting in thousands more casualties.

The Allied campaign to take Monte Cassino and

cross the Rapido succeeded only after four bloody tries — five months after the first failed effort. It was done at an extraordinary cost in terms of casualties and with little evidence that it did much to advance the overall Allied cause. This staff ride generated some uncomfortable insights into and even comparisons with the ongoing, horrific Russian invasion of Ukraine. It was hard to see the Italian campaign as anything but a tactical, strategic, grand-strategic, and moral fiasco.

As tempted as I was to slide down the path of moral equivalency, however, an unexpected student presentation during the exercise shook me out of it. His subject was a young John Huston, who had been hired along with other contemporary and future great directors, to film the war. The movie he eventually made, about San Pietro, was starkly realistic, revealing the grinding carnage of battle for both civilians and servicemen alike. The top American military brass hated the film. It was not the sort of propaganda movie they thought they had paid for. When he was accused of making an anti-war film, Huston did not disagree. "If I ever make anything other than an anti-war film, I hope you take me out and shoot me." Hearing of the controversy, Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall asked to see the film. "This picture should be seen by every American soldier in training. It will not discourage but rather prepare them for the initial shock of combat." As a result of the film, Capt. Huston was decorated and promoted to major.<sup>6</sup>

This caused me to return to the *Foreign Affairs* debate over NATO. As silly as the poll seemed at first, it is important to recall that there is likely no similar poll in Moscow or Beijing asking, "Was the invasion of Ukraine a mistake?" or, "Will we regret the crackdown in Hong Kong?" Does this matter? A society that allows loud and even impolite academic and policy debates and engages its most talented artists to portray war, warts and all, is one worth defending. It is also one that, in the long run, is likely to be more effective. Few individuals, organizations, or nations get things 100 percent right at first. They must learn, and to do so they must be honest and open, identify their mistakes, and come up with better methods and processes, so that next time they do better. That is one of the core principles of scholarship, and it is where academics and analysts can help decision-makers. What may seem like repetitive and even obsessive debate and score-keeping is part of a process to help make sense of and improve decision-making in a complex and confusing world. It can be messy, feelings can get hurt, and sometimes the incentives

6 Mark Harris, *Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014).



cause us to listen to the wrong people for too long while ignoring quieter but wiser voices. These are the costs and burdens of an open society, which we all know too well. This system of unrelenting and sharp debate and disagreement is better than any alternative. And the costs to sustain it, while they often seem high, are well worth it.

So yes, I've been wrong, and will continue to be wrong. And while I don't plan on issuing many more *mea culpas*, I will keep trying to learn, especially from the great authors published in the *Texas National Security Review*. And come to think of it, maybe I haven't been all that wrong. The Philadelphia Eagles have had a great offseason, and anything is possible... 🏈

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