The Gap Has Been Bridged!

Francis J. Gavin
The Gap Has Been Bridged!

In his introductory essay for Volume 5, Issue 4, the chair of our editorial board, Frank Gavin, declares that the gap between scholars and policymakers has been bridged, but he also offers some words of caution.

Alexander George would be very happy.

Three decades ago, George lamented the divide between international relations scholars and foreign policy practitioners in his classic Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy. George bemoaned how these two worlds had less interaction and exchange than was ideal, with consequences for both communities. Policymakers needed theoretical frames to make sense of a complex world but were loath to admit it. Scholars rarely made the necessary efforts to provide the kind of knowledge decision-makers needed.

At heart, the issue was the “differences between the two cultures of academia and the policy-making world.” George laid out thoughtful, if modest, strategies to overcome these differences.

I am here to tell you that the gap has, at long last, been bridged. Indeed, if the composition of the current Biden administration is used as evidence, it may have been eliminated altogether.

Examples abound. Protégés of the great international relations scholar, Robert Jervis, shape America’s grand strategy in the White House, the State Department, and the Department of Defense. One of them, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl, populated the Pentagon with scholars at key posts to tackle the most critical foreign policy challenges, including space policy, climate policy, and emerging technologies. He brought in a leading international relations theorist to red team the national defense strategy. In the State Department, two whip-smart academics, Mareena Robinson Snowden and Jane Vaynman, are crafting an arms control policy for the 21st century. China policy is debated in the White House by two brilliant young scholars with different viewpoints, from different disciplinary traditions, who have published competing scholarly works. The architect of the successful American response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is a Princeton-trained historian of early modern Dutch empire.

There is, of course, no shortage of Yale-educated lawyers, think-tank lifers, beltway bandits, and former senators and flag officers filling important posts. Still, one cannot help but be impressed by the number of former, current, and future professors making U.S. foreign, intelligence, and military policy, a distinct shift from when George wrote his book in 1993. Nor is this simply a Democratic Party phenomenon: Outstanding scholars such as Will Inboden (the editor in chief of the Texas National Security Review), Philip Zelikow, Tom Christensen, and Kori Schake, among many others, served with distinction in Republican administrations. Gap-bridging is also an international phenomenon, from Brasilia to Berlin. In London, a distinguished young historian of Lord Castlereagh and Clement Attlee, John Bew, recently helped to transform British grand strategy.

The Challenges of Bridging the Gap

Is this change, this influx of scholars into policy and the greater intellectual exchange between decision-makers and the ivory tower, a good thing? I may be the wrong person to ask. Many of these people are good friends, former students, and/or colleagues. I have also been fortunate to be involved with a number of “bridging the gap” programs, including the Ax:son Johnson Institute for Statecraft and Strategy,10 the Nuclear Studies Research Initiative,11 and the International Policy Scholars Consortium and Network,12 all of which seek to pursue George’s vision of putting scholars and policymakers in conversation with each other (the unsung heroes of this vision are Stephen Del Rosso of the Carnegie Corporation of New York and Jim Goldgeier, both gap-bridgers who have done more than anyone over the last decade to support efforts to bring these worlds together). It seems hard to argue that populating the government with well-trained, smart people, while encouraging professors to make their scholarship accessible to policymakers, is a bad idea. And of course, the Texas National Security Review is dedicated to the mission of bridging the gap. We have published many of the aforementioned gap-bridgers and hope to publish many more in the future. Just look at this excellent issue, which contains deeply researched, sharp scholarly analysis on a number of key issues of great concern to the policy world: the future of globalization, hypersonic weapons, disinformation, and civil-military relations.

To be fair, not everyone shares my enthusiasm for this kind of gap-bridging. In the fall of 2017, I gave a presentation at Harvard’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, laying out how I hoped that the new Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs at Johns Hopkins-SAIS might contribute to efforts to bring scholars and policymakers together. Most of the seminar participants, especially the younger ones, were enthusiastic. JFK School of Government Professor Stephen Walt, however, was, to put it mildly, skeptical, arguing that our proximity to political power was a disadvantage, since the culture and allure of Washington, D.C.,’s foreign policy community was sure to compromise and even corrupt our best efforts. I disagree with Walt’s assessment of the so-called blob.13 But after five years of living and working in our nation’s capital, I can say that his concerns about the cultural challenges and misaligned incentives of scholars and policymakers are not to be dismissed out of hand.

President John F. Kennedy’s quip that Washington, D.C., possesses the charm of a northern city with the efficiency of a southern one is unfair — it is a lovely area filled with warm people. There are, however, aspects of the city’s culture that should give one pause. There does appear to be a lot of curious Middle Eastern money floating about, and you would be right to check the source of funding before assessing the pronouncements of many “experts” you read or see on television. I have attended a party or three in our capital city where my interlocutor has, unsubtly, looked around to see if there is someone more important they should be talking to (an admittedly low bar), in between name-dropping — “…as Jake mentioned to me recently…” — or re-introducing themselves for the 25th time: “I am the Senior Principal Deputy Assistant for Important Things, not to be confused with the mere Principal Deputy Director, though — and please keep this between us — I am in line to be the Uber Principal Senior Deputy. You can just call me the Tsar!”). I have met many impressive people who work at think tanks, though I confess I am not always entirely sure what they do: They don’t teach students, much of what they write is not meant for policy makers together. Most of the seminar participants, especially the younger ones, were enthusiastic. JFK School of Government Professor Stephen Walt, however, was, to put it mildly, skeptical, arguing that our proximity to political power was a disadvantage, since the culture and allure of Washington, D.C.,’s foreign policy community was sure to compromise and even corrupt our best efforts. I disagree with Walt’s assessment of the so-called blob. But after five years of living and working in our nation’s capital, I can say that his concerns about the cultural challenges and misaligned incentives of scholars and policymakers are not to be dismissed out of hand.

Perhaps no exercise is more performative and D.C.-like than when the high-ranking government official gathers a group of scholars and analysts for feedback on an important policy or document. Jeremy Shapiro captured the occasional hilarity of this phenomena in a 2014 essay: “To the senior government official, an outside idea — even a good

14 Quincy Institute, I am looking at you! With a nod to that old war horse, Cato.
The Gap Has Been Bridged!

one — is like a diamond ring on a desert island: ab-
strictly valuable but practically useless.”16 The re-
lease of anodyne, cliché-ridden official national se-
curity documents are treated in Washington with
the awe, speculation, and fevered anticipation that
my 14-year-old daughter and her friends afforded
to Taylor Swift’s recent album.

That said, the ivory tower has little right to throw
stones. Panels during the annual meetings of the
International Studies Association or the Society
of American Foreign Relations can make even the
most mundane government briefing look like Aris-
totle’s Lyceum. Visitors from outer space perusing
flagship journals like the American Political Science
Review or the Journal of American History would
be right to wonder if an obscurantist cult had
seized the disciplines of political science and his-
tory with a plot to destroy them from within (note
to aliens: read TNSR!). Neither world is without in
peculiarities, even pathologies.

In truth, professors can be compromised by their
proximity to power. Before he entered the Kenne-
dy administration, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. was an
accomplished Harvard-based historian. After he
left the policy world, he produced untrustworthy
panegyrics to his fallen heroes, the Kennedys. The
venerated academic field of security studies was
created in the aftermath of World War II to “bridge
the gap” between the ivory tower and policymak-
ers, to better understand the civilizational chal-
lenge that nuclear weapons presented to American
leaders. Historian Bruce Kuklick offers a
devastating account of their contribution: “The de-
fense intellectuals did not know very much. They
frequently delivered obtuse judgments when re-
quired to be matter of fact, or merely offered up
self-justifying talk for politicians.”17 These lionized,
often university-based thinkers and scholars — the
so-called “wizards of Armageddon” — at times per-
formed a role similar to the one Shapiro has called
out in more recent times: to justify policy decisions
that have already been made. “The thinkers are the
validators.”17

One should be careful, however, not to take these
critiques too far. Looked at closely, perhaps too
closely, and the organizational culture of any ac-
tivity, discipline, or craft — and the stars within it — can look dysfunctional or even perverse, even
while, comparatively speaking, they are wildly suc-
cessful. I was reminded of this when reading Rob-
ert Evans’ fascinating autobiography and account
of Hollywood in the 1970s, The Kid Stays in the Pic-
ture.18 Evans married seven times, became a coke
addict and was criminal-adjacent, and describes
thriving, then failing, in a movie-making culture
that it would be generous to call toxic. Reading
his memoir, neither he nor his colleagues appear
remotely likeable or admirable. Yet, Evans was es-

cessential to producing two of the greatest films ever
made, The Godfather and Chinatown, while leading
a studio that helped to create the New Hollywood
that revolutionized the movie business.19

To be clear, this is not to argue about the causal
arrow: People should never behave like Evans (or,
in a different context, Steve Jobs). One of the great
myths of the modern world is that you have to be
an a%$hole to succeed.20 Evans’ memoir was, how-
ever, a reminder that the sins of the ivory tower and
the so-called blob are relatively minor compared to
those of Hollywood, Silicon Valley, or Wall Street.
More to the point, like those other American-based
sources of global innovation and influence, Wash-
ington’s think tanks, scholars, and, yes, even its
foreign policy making processes remain admired
and widely emulated abroad. This becomes clear
when you travel to foreign capitals and speak with
top officials, who, surprisingly, often say they wish
their process and people (if not their results) were
more like those in Washington, D.C. They want
more and better think tanks and larger numbers
of university professors engaged in their policy
process, and they often try to imitate America’s
much-derided ritual of producing national security
documents. In other words, to paraphrase Winston
Churchill, the way the United States generates and
debates its foreign policy is the worst, except for
everyone else’s (Lord knows Beijing and Moscow
would benefit from even a crappy blob or low-key
gap-bridging effort!). Travel overseas and people
also note how much they wish they had their own
Texas National Security Review, a point of great
pride at the journal.

brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2014/06/04/who-influences-whom-reflections-on-u-s-government-outreach-to-think-tanks/.
17 Shapiro, “Who Influences Whom?”
19 For an outstanding overview of this world, see Jonathan Kirshner, Hollywood’s Last Golden Age: Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film in
20 This is a complex issue; Kirshner offers a thoughtful reflection. Jonathan Kirshner, “Art and Artists: Where We Stand,” MidCenturyCinema,
The Source of the Divide

In truth, George’s cultural gap wasn’t difficult to bridge because it wasn’t that wide to begin with. The population of people who become professors or enter foreign policy — or both — are not so different. In my experience, the median aspirant is a good person, filled with idealism, seeking to understand and hopefully improve a complex, often threatening world. They are ambitious, if occasionally insecure, kind, if somewhat socially awkward, and whip smart, if not always deeply reflective. Why, then, the disconnect between the ivory tower and the halls of U.S. decision-makers? While they begin with similar interests and values, it is important to remember a simple fact: Professors and policymakers do much different things, operating under distinct time horizons and facing dissimilar constraints and risk profiles. While there are lots of ways in which the vocations diverge, two differences lie at the heart of much of the divide between the ivory tower and decision-makers.

First, professors rarely appreciate that policymakers operate in an environment in which they are often forced to pursue what economists call the “theory of the second best.” In a dynamic and interdependent world, the professor’s preferred, parsimonious ideal outcome may not be possible, given the complexity and “imperfect market” forces of the foreign-policy making process and world politics. Indeed, to optimize on the professor’s preferred variable may actually make things worse, and the “second best” outcome — which in truth is the policymaker’s best choice — may look very little like the professor’s ideal “first best.”

Academic theories predicated upon “first best” assumptions can look to a policymaker like science fiction, unlikely to produce better outcomes than a theory that begins with real world — “second best” — constraints and realities.

Second, professors, when studying international affairs and foreign policy, have the luxury of knowing how the story turns out. In other words, they often offer their analysis and critique ex post, or, as Monday morning quarterbacks (and, as I discussed in the last issue, have little inclination or incentive to admit when they have been wrong). When decision-makers make foreign policy choices, they do so ex ante, having little idea of what a complex, unknowable future holds. That does not mean that there are not better or worse ways to make those consequential choices, and academic research and scholarship (and criticism) can be enormously helpful in navigating radical uncertainty. It is important for both communities to remember, however, that they come to similar problems from different perspectives, trying to accomplish different goals.

In truth, these differences between the worlds that professors and policymakers inhabit are probably impossible to fully bridge. But that isn’t necessarily bad. We don’t want these worlds ever to get too cozy with each other, and a certain level of conflict, both within and between these vocations, serves a useful purpose. As that great political philosopher, Robert Evans, reminds us:

Fighting is healthy. If everyone has too much reverence for each other, or for the material, results are invariably underwhelming. It’s irreverence that makes things sizzle. It’s irreverence that gives you that shot at touching magic.

The Kid, in spite of it all, had a point. Not a bad motto for what we are trying to do at the Texas National Security Review.

Francis J. Gavin is the Giovanni Agnelli Distinguished Professor and the director of the Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs at the School of Advanced International Studies in Johns Hopkins University. He serves as chair of the editorial board of the Texas National Security Review.