

The Gap Has Been Bridged!

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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.”¹ 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.² 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,³ climate policy,⁴ and emerging technologies.⁵ He brought in a leading international relations

theorist to red team the national defense strategy.⁶ 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.⁷ The architect of the successful American response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is a Princeton-trained historian of early modern Dutch empire.⁸

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.⁹

1 Alexander George, *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press), xxvi.

2 Derek Chollet, Francis J. Gavin, Colin Kahl, and Mira Rapp-Hooper, “Remembering Robert Jervis, Part 1,” *Horns of a Dilemma Podcast*, July 12, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/07/remembering-robert-jervis-part-i/>; and Derek Chollet, Francis J. Gavin, Colin Kahl, and Mira Rapp-Hooper, “Remembering Robert Jervis, Part II,” *Horns of a Dilemma Podcast*, July 26, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/07/remembering-robert-jervis-part-ii/>.

3 “Dr. Vipin Narang,” U.S. Department of Defense, accessed Nov. 4, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/About/Biographies/Biography/Article/3001188/dr-vipin-narang/>.

4 Lauren Nelson, “UT Professor to Serve as Part of Biden Administration,” *Daily Texan*, July 26, 2021, <https://thedailytexan.com/2021/07/26/ut-professor-to-serve-as-part-of-biden-administration/>.

5 “Dr. Michael C. Horowitz,” U.S. Department of Defense, accessed Nov. 4, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/About/Biographies/Biography/Article/3022638/dr-michael-c-horowitz/>.

6 “James Fearon Joins Scholars in Service, Will Work at Defense Department,” Stanford University, Oct. 5, 2021, <https://impact.stanford.edu/news/james-fearon-joins-scholars-service-will-work-defense-department>.

7 Julian Gewirtz, *Never Turn Back: China and the Forbidden History of the 1980s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022); Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

8 Ellen Nakashima and Ashley Parker “Inside the White House Preparations for a Russian Invasion,” Feb. 14, 2022, *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/02/14/white-house-prepares-russian-invasion/>.

9 Charlie Cooper, “The Man Who Knows What ‘Global Britain’ Means,” *Politico*, Jan. 14, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/john-bew-global-britain-uk-eu/>.



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 bringing 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 Washing-

ton, 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, unobtrusively, 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 a long shelf-life, and the key players seem to spend a lot of time on Twitter arguing with each other, even when they are together during in-person meetings. There are even D.C. think tanks whose purpose appears to be to bemoan the influence of think tanks!¹⁴

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

10 “The Ax:son Johnson Institute for Statecraft and Diplomacy (AJI),” Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, accessed Nov. 4, 2022, <https://sais.jhu.edu/kissinger/programs/aji>.

11 “Nuclear Studies Research Initiative,” Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, accessed Nov. 4, 2022, <https://sais.jhu.edu/kissinger/programs/nsri>.

12 “International Policy Scholars Consortium and Network,” Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, accessed Nov. 4, 2022, <https://sais.jhu.edu/kissinger/IPSCON>.

13 Francis J. Gavin, “Blame It on the Blob? How to Evaluate American Grand Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, Aug. 21, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/blame-it-on-the-blob-how-to-evaluate-american-grand-strategy/>.

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

one — is like a diamond ring on a desert island: abstractly valuable but practically useless.”¹⁵ The release of anodyne, cliché-ridden official national security 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 Aristotle’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 history 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 Kennedy 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 policymakers, to better understand the civilizational challenge that nuclear weapons presented to American decision-makers. Historian Bruce Kuklick offers a devastating account of their contribution: “The defense intellectuals did not know very much. They frequently delivered obtuse judgments when required to be matter of fact, or merely offered up self-justifying talk for politicians.”¹⁶ These lionized, often university-based thinkers and scholars — the so-called “wizards of Armageddon” — at times performed 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 successful. I was reminded of this when reading Robert Evans’ fascinating autobiography and account of Hollywood in the 1970s, *The Kid Stays in the Picture*.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 essential 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, however, 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, Washington’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.

15 Jeremy Shapiro, “Who Influences Whom? Reflections on U.S. Government Outreach to Think-Tanks,” Brookings, June 4, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2014/06/04/who-influences-whom-reflections-on-u-s-government-outreach-to-think-tanks/>.

16 Bruck Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 230.

17 Shapiro, “Who Influences Whom?”

18 Robert Evans, *The Kid Stays in the Picture* (London: Aurum Press, 1994).

19 For an outstanding overview of this world, see Jonathan Kirshner, *Hollywood’s Last Golden Age: Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

20 This is a complex issue; Kirshner offers a thoughtful reflection. Jonathan Kirshner, “Art and Artists: Where We Stand,” *MidCenturyCinema*, Dec. 4, 2017, <https://midcenturycinema.org/2017/12/04/news-and-commentary-art-and-artists-where-we-stand/>.



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."²¹ 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).²² When decision-makers make foreign policy choic-

es, 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.²³

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*. ■

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21 "The general theorem for the second best optimum states that if there is introduced into a general equilibrium system a constraint which prevents the attainment of one of the Paretian conditions, the other Paretian conditions, although still attainable, are, in general, no longer desirable ... In other words, given that one of the Paretian optimum conditions cannot be fulfilled, then an optimum situation can be achieved only by departing from all the other Paretian conditions." R. G. Lipsey and Kelvin Lancaster, "The General Theory of Second Best," *Review of Economic Studies* 24, no. 1 (1956): 11–32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2296233>.

22 Francis J. Gavin, "I Was Wrong – Now What?" *Texas National Security Review* 5, no. 3 (Summer 2022): 3–8, <https://tnsr.org/2022/07/i-was-wrong-now-what/>.

23 Evans, *The Kid Stays in the Picture*, 176.