

IT'S NOT THE PLANE, IT'S THE PILOT

Francis J. Gavin

In his introduction to Volume 6, Issue 3, the chair of TNSR's editorial board, Francis J. Gavin, considers how time, space, and other factors shape perspectives — and why *Top Gun's* Maverick was right when he said, "It's not the plane, it's the pilot."

I am not always the best person with whom to watch movies. I love previews, and often feel like the two-minute highlight reel satisfies my need to watch a film any further. The annoying professor side of me likes to point out every inaccuracy and ridiculous plot device. Science fiction, epic fantasy, action, and adventure movies strain my sense of credulity and quickly lose my interest. Movie night can be a place of contestation, even conflict, in my household, especially when I recommend an old black-and-white classic or European movie my daughters find insufferably pretentious. I don't think I've made it through one Marvel movie.

Which makes my guilty secret all the more surprising — I love *Top Gun: Maverick*. Every long-haul flight, I say to myself, "watch something different," yet every time I settle into my seat, enjoy an adult beverage, and gleefully watch Capt. Pete "Maverick" Mitchell defy gravity and common sense.

The plot of the movie is, at best, moronic. Who is this enemy country with fifth generation fighters but no nuclear weapons, that must be attacked from the sea, and has the weirdest plan ever to store enriched uranium?¹ Is it possible that someone can stay in the U.S. Navy as a fighter pilot for 36 years and not be promoted above captain? What possible use is a Mach 10 plane, and who survives crashing it unharmed? Carrying out a dangerous mission in both films — shooting down Soviet MiGs in the 1986 original, destroying a nascent nuclear program in the second — seems more likely to escalate to World War III, than be the calm, satisfying conclusion the movies portray. And are we to believe that Penny — Mitchell's girlfriend four decades earlier and who in the interim seems to have acquired a seaside bar, a beautiful San Diego beach home, and high-end sailing yacht as a single mother — would fall back in love with him?

None of that matters. I love that Maverick has the perfect response to Ed Harris's crusty, drone warrior character — Adm. Chester "Hammer" Cain — telling him that pilots like him are heading for extinction. "Maybe so, sir. But not today." I subconsciously pump my fist when Maverick starts the training session with his young pilots by

splitting them in two from below, while The Who's "Won't Get Fooled Again" blares. The scene where a dying Iceman types out for Maverick, "The Navy needs Maverick. The kid needs Maverick. That's why I fought for you," gets me choked up every time. Henrik Ibsen or Eric Rohmer it is not, but I love every last cheesy part of the film.

Why do I like such a ridiculous movie? If I am honest with myself, it's simple (and yes, simplistic) patriotism. I love America, both as a place and a concept, and *Top Gun* is about America, for better and worse, warts and all. As a scholar, whose vocation aspires to de-nationalized, Archimedean objectivity, I am aware that this affection can be problematic. The first *Top Gun*, while still entertaining, is in retrospect an adolescent panegyric for a Reagan-era United States that celebrated arrogant straight white males, technological determinism, and American hubris. Four decades later, the original *Top Gun* is embarrassing. The 2022 film reveals a far more diverse but frayed America. The U.S. Navy now better reflects the racial melting pot that is the United States, and women get to compete to be Top Gun, while shirtless, homoerotic volleyball is replaced by the mixed gender — if nonsensical — postmodern game of dogfight football. Since the first film, Mitchell has aged and been humbled, his previous cocksure attitude and joy diminished. He is lost, personally and professionally, and this mission is a chance for redemption. Draw your own parallels.

I don't mention my love of Maverick to highlight my limited skills as a film critic. Instead, I offer it to reflect on the idea of perspective.

Perspective has two dimensions — spatial and temporal. My hunch is that the version of myself from Beijing, Moscow, Rio, or even Paris would not enjoy *Top Gun: Maverick* as much I do, nor would I revel in whatever films that generate a similar limbic brain response in my overseas doppelgängers. Temporal perspective is a reminder that, in a few decades, my grandchildren will likely find *Top Gun: Maverick* as ridiculous as I now see the original *Top Gun* to be. Which is an obvious but important thing to remember. As scholars, we often focus on identifying universal insights and timeless lessons that

1 Michael Baumann, "What Is the Enemy Country in 'Top Gun: Maverick'? An Investigation." *The Ringer*, Jun 3, 2022, <https://www.theringer.com/movies/2022/6/3/23151745/top-gun-maverick-enemy-country>



explain big issues like grand strategy, world order, and international relations, looking for truths that persist over space and time. But as we know, reality resists such easy definition.

In 1950, a much better movie was released. *Rashomon*, directed by the legendary Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa, portrays four distinctive characters who provide four alternative, contradictory recountings of the same event: the murder of a samurai. The film is often mentioned to describe when different parties offer plausible but divergent accounts of the same occurrence, shaped by factors ranging from their own self-interest, subjective perspectives, cognitive biases, or ambiguous evidence. Scholars regularly encounter and have to make sense of contested chronologies and events, which develops skills that can be useful to decision-makers facing similar dilemmas.

Understandably, we hope that the events or phenomena we care about and analyze can be easily apprehended, measured, and understood objectively. In other words, we *know* something has happened and that we should be able to discover what it was and what it means. Much of social science assumes this objectivity, both in the collection of data and evidence and in its analysis. A deep familiarity with history, however, reminds us that for many complex social and political occurrences, the question and answer to “what happened and why” — and why and how it mattered — can be understood differently by others. Scholars should be sensitive to perspective, or the idea that things can look different depending on who is perceiving the issue in question and when they are trying to understand it.

Consider an example I often reflect upon: the contrasting interpretations of the earthquake in world politics beginning in 1989 that led to the end of the Cold War, the revolutions in Eastern Europe, the reunification of Germany, and eventually the dissolution of the Soviet Union. I believe it is possible to understand at least some part of how contemporary states and leaders understand and act in global affairs today by recognizing and interrogating their interpretation — or perspective — of why and how the Cold War ended and what it meant for their country and international relations more broadly.

In Washington, the end of the Cold War was seen by many as validating the so-called policies of containment. The decisions to compete and even pressure the Soviet Union — sometimes with economic and political means, other times through proxy

and covert coercions, and other times through military buildups and arms races — controversial when they were made, were seen, in retrospect, by many as wise. Even those who might dismiss the focus on arms racing and competitive strategies, and believed the Soviet Union collapsed due to its own inherent weaknesses and flaws, would likely concede that those pathologies were best exposed through other forms of competition — economic, political, socio-cultural — with the West. It would be natural for an American analyst or policymaker in the decades after the Cold War to embrace and import these lessons to deal with contemporary and future challenges. How Americans understand the Cold War often shapes how they think about current challenges from China.

A different history and diverging lessons, however, likely emerged from Brussels, Berlin, and Paris. From the perspective of Europe, perhaps the Cold War ended peacefully, not because of competition and arms racing, but due to de-escalation, cooperation, and institution building that emerged on the continent in years prior. The European project, by focusing on integration, union, and turning “swords into plowshares,” suggested that the Soviet Union had nothing to fear — and much to gain — from orienting towards Western Europe. If France and Germany, bitter enemies, could bury their enmity and reconcile, and if Europe, the scene of murderous violence in the first half of the 20th century, had been pacified, then perhaps the armed camps of Europe could relax and demobilize.² This lesson — which is currently being fiercely contested and in many places overturned as a result of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine — may have led European policymakers to emphasize trade and economic integration over security in the decades after the Cold War, as countries like Germany and Italy dramatically decreased their defense expenditures. It may have also shaped their views towards China and Russia in ways that, until recently, contrasted sharply with the United States.

In the decades that followed the end of the Cold War, Moscow’s historical perspective on 1989–1991 largely consists of a narrative marked by the tragic incompetence of their leaders while being betrayed by broken promises from the West. While the United States and its allies celebrated the demise of the Soviet Union, Russian President Vladimir Putin has labelled it the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century. The historical lesson that Russian leaders gleaned from the Cold War might be that efforts to mirror the reforms

2 For an excellent version of this argument, see James J. Sheehan, “The Transformation of Europe and the End of the Cold War,” in Jeffrey A. Engel, ed, *The Fall of the Berlin Wall: The Revolutionary Legacy of 1989* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

of the West were doomed, that to embrace the liberal international order was folly, and that the promise of a peaceful Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals always excluded Russia. Russia might look to a different history — its imperial history and past glories — to shape its future policies. This perspective has clearly fed into Moscow's recent catastrophic blunders.

Beijing, on the other hand, might have accepted part of Moscow's historical lesson but with a different spin. Yes, how the Cold War unfolded demonstrated that the West, and, in particular, the United States, could never be trusted. Yes, liberal, democratic political reforms like those undertaken by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev were reckless and unwise — the near success of the Tiananmen Square protests proved that to the regime. But this did not exclude dramatic and thorough-going economic reforms to generate a dynamic, technologically advanced economy to compete with and ultimately supplant the United States and its allies as the shaper of world order.

The question of perspective shifts once again if, after looking to the past, your analytical frame shifts from the Cold War to another historical stream. From the view of New Delhi, Lagos, Amman, Johannesburg, or Brasilia, 1989 may have a different meaning altogether. The lens shifts further if you concentrate on forces outside of the narrow confines of statecraft — perhaps Silicon Valley or Hollywood or Wall Street or the City in London? How we see the world today, in other words, often depends on our perspective of how we got to where we are now and what matters most to us. Both the scholar and statesman benefit from recognizing that the same events are often understood differently when viewed from different places and times, even (especially?) when that contrasting view is held by an adversary.

The challenges and opportunities that an awareness of perspective provides is a feature of this excellent issue. It comes out clearly in Bob Work's defense of contested plans to reform the U.S. Marines and Henrik Larsen's ruminations on the best ways to rebuild postwar Ukraine. The three scholarly articles in this issue wrestle with the challenges of both spatial and temporal perspective in especially impressive ways. Historian Daniel Chardell's article impressively mines original sources in "The Origins of the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait Reconsidered." Analysts long puzzled by Saddam's reckless 1990 invasion of Kuwait have not understood how the Iraqi leader understood the dramatic changes the end of the Cold War wrought. "Understanding Saddam's interpretation of the end of the Cold War and, relatedly, his decision to invade Kuwait re-

quires taking seriously his worldview."

Divergent interpretations on how America's decision to invade Iraq a decade later similarly engage the issue of perspective. As Joseph Stieb highlights in his analysis of the "security school" versus the "hegemony school" arguments for the war's origins, it is perspective rather than known facts that explain much of the differences. "In sum, competing interpretations of the war's origins are entwined with debates about its lessons. It is proper that scholars contest how this war should inform the future of U.S. foreign policy. Nonetheless, partisans in this debate risk filtering history through ideological prisms and using it to win arguments." The very idea of uncertainty, of things that *cannot, ex ante*, be known, lies at the heart of the strategic challenge faced by the Biden administration as it seeks to support Ukraine's resistance to Russia's invasion without inciting a nuclear war. As Janice Stein argues in an important piece, "This contest between a strategy to *manipulate* uncertainty and a strategy to *reduce* uncertainty sets the framework for an analysis of escalation management and raises important issues of theory and policy." Uncertainty in a complex, dangerous, multiplayer competition only elevates the importance of understanding perspective, or how each side understands the world.

To be clear, recognizing perspective does not mean abandoning objectivity or a search for a singular "truth." Scholars vigorously try to uncover missing evidence, square contested facts, and cohere competing interpretations. Sometimes, however, what happened and why is unclear or disputed, with little chance that there will be a final resolution accepted by all. More often, the *meaning* of what happened is contested. Consensus on difficult questions can be hard to achieve, especially when viewed through different political, social, or cultural lenses. Scholars of foreign policy and international relations are at their best when they successfully balance two difficult, seemingly contradictory tasks: seeking to describe and evaluate an objective reality, while recognizing that finding it may be elusive.

There is another reason to mention perspective. The emergence of ChatGPT and generative artificial intelligence has generated reactions from excitement to alarm, with some even questioning whether teachers and even scholars could be, in time, replaced. This issue, perhaps inadvertently, should put at least some of those fears to rest. These articles demonstrate that no machine can fully capture the complex, interactive, human elements of perspective, or how people in different places and at different times saw the world, and



how that perspective continues to evolve. To understand these issues of competing temporal and spatial perspectives, while assessing complexity, chance, contingency, and radical uncertainty, requires analysts and scholars of great insight and sensitivity, such as those highlighted in this issue. As Maverick correctly points out, “It’s not the plane, it’s the pilot.”

As for my own perspective: As a scholar, my focus will be on seeking objectivity, while retaining strategic empathy when I encounter views at odds with my own. As a sappy American of a certain age and history, however, I will continue to like my version of *Top Gun* far better than the version of myself in China enjoys (and yes, there is one, translated as “Born to Fly”). 🏰

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