



WHY WE WRITE

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In his introduction to Volume 7, Issue 3, the chair of our editorial board, Frank Gavin, considers the limitations that academic disciplines tend to impose on writing, the value in making such writing more accessible, and the need to consider big questions that lack clear answers. He highlights the role that TNSR seeks to play in facilitating an exchange of ideas between different disciplines and between scholars and national security policymakers and practitioners.

When I was a young scholar, I was torn between two models of academic writing. I was trained as a historian, but my mentors, research subject, and professional background had exposed me to international relations theory and security studies. These groups displayed different characteristics in their academic scribbles.

For the security studies crowd, academic writing was too often crafted like a terse but bold legal brief, with the key points presented in outline form, the argument simple, sharp, and often combative. “The long-held conventional wisdom about subject X, offered by the leading and misguided school of thought/methodology/paradigm, is embarrassingly wrong. My powerful, parsimonious theory upends what we thought we knew about war/conflict/street cleaning/circus clown management. The article will proceed in three parts. The first will demonstrate why the collective brainpower of the competing paradigm/methodology has been so breathtakingly mistaken for so long. Part two will lay out my all-powerful theory, mention canonical strawman texts that are oft cited but never read, while burying key caveats in long, discursive footnotes. Part three will provide an overly simplistic historical sketch based on a large data set that aggregates a disparate array of events that have little to do with each other but will be fitted neatly into a 2x2 matrix. I will conclude by emphasizing how embracing my one-size-fits-all conceptual lens and powerful, novel methodology/theory will transform the discipline and lead to smarter policy, less stupidity, and brighter teeth and fresher breath.”

The style of writing in scholarly history journals was much different. Articles often started with an obscure, strange story from the past that that would “illuminate a puzzle” and “expose lacunae” by exploring a previously unstudied event, person, or group of people, phenomena, or household commodity that no one had ever bothered to investigate before. “The fact that all the bakers in this small, 17th-century French village were left-handed and subsisted only on salted

beet roots may seem curious, even inexplicable to us today, but in truth it revealed something important about the powerful if hidden hegemonic sociocultural, socioeconomic, and neo-colonial structures that formed the foundation of the early modern world.” The article would then highlight a previously undiscovered archive, a “treasure trove” of diaries or municipal records, or uncollected trash that “sheds new light” even as it “problematizes, decenters, and complicates” our understanding of key parts of the world. It would conclude by saying that the history we thought we knew was more complex, more nuanced, and began much earlier than we once thought, while declaring that more research — indeed, a whole subfield — should be devoted to explaining this once-obscure issue or group.

This is, perhaps, an unhelpful caricature. And I certainly wrote my share of articles that mirrored these practices. Over time, however, I became dissatisfied with the stylistic practices of both fields. There were a few reasons for this.

First, I found it disconcerting that the language I used for my scholarship was so much different than how I taught my classes. As I have emphasized on these pages before, smart young people are both eager to learn about the world while possessing finely tuned B.S. detectors, and some of what passed for scholarship in both disciplines is not convincing.¹ Over time, I adjusted my syllabi accordingly. Early in my career, teaching Modern European History, I eschewed journal articles for primary documents and literary works. I found that asking the students to read Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s *Journey to the End of the Night* or Curzio Malaparte’s *Kaputt* provided a keener sense of the nightmarish brutality of war in Europe; Czesław Miłosz’s *Native Realm* revealed the contested, complex identities in Central Europe, and his *Captive Mind* exposed the beguiling, disturbing allure of Stalinism to intellectuals; Milan Kundera’s *The Joke* highlighted the absurd cruelty of communism; while viewing Leni Riefenstahl’s haunting, troubling film masterpiece, *Triumph of the Will*, emphasized the

1 Francis J. Gavin, “Dark ‘N’ Stormy,” *Texas National Security Review* 6, no. 4 (Fall 2023), <https://tnsr.org/2023/09/dark-n-stormy/>; Francis J. Gavin, “Cracks in the Ivory Tower?” *Texas National Security Review* 7, no. 1 (Winter 2023/2024), <https://tnsr.org/2024/01/cracks-in-the-ivory-tower/>.

horrifying appeal of Adolf Hitler to Germans in the 1930s. I realized that the goal of my pedagogy was not to teach how a particular academic field operated, to help students understand its scholarly methodologies and “literature,” or to identify who were the leaders of the field, but instead to provide young people with the insights to make sense of the actual world, in all its complexity, tragedy, and danger. I wanted to write more like how I taught, which resembled an intense but open conversation, rather than a didactic lecture.

Relatedly, I worried that the scholarly styles of my fields were often inaccessible, limiting the audience. To be clear, I learned an enormous amount from other scholars and their serious, thoughtful research, and I enjoyed the debates, the give and take, that took place in both fields. And many scholars tried to go beyond the stylistic inhibitions to engage the world outside of their narrow disciplinary confines. I was increasingly drawn to broader, bigger discussions. For example, I was swept away by Jill Lepore deploying her extraordinary historical skills in *The New Yorker* to introduce us to new worlds. Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama were fully versed in disciplinary debates, but instead of engaging in endless fights, they offered expansive, counter-intuitive insights into how the world worked. Their analysis generated scorn from scholars but shaped real-world policy debates.

None of this is to say that I was a self-loathing academic or believed anything I had to say was so interesting that it would be read beyond my narrow field. There was and is great scholarship being produced in security studies and history from which I benefitted enormously and that advanced our understanding of the world. And many of the expansive pieces were, to put it politely, problematic. Huntington and Fukuyama did deserve serious criticism, though perhaps not the jealousy-tinged rage thrown at them by fellow professors. When Lepore wrote a *New Yorker* piece about something I possessed deep expertise in, the result was, to be polite, not great. Daniel Drezner’s book, *The Ideas Industry*, highlights the occasionally problematic nature of thinkers seeking bigger, broader audiences, such as Ted Talk-ing “thought leaders” and intellectual endeavors funded by plutocrats.² Rigorous academic debate, deep research, an obsession with research design and methodology, peer review — these characteristics of scholarly journal articles had steep costs, no doubt, but it could be argued that they are the price that had to be paid to maintain quality and advance knowledge.

What Are We Trying to Accomplish?

As I reflected upon it more, I realized that my dissatisfaction had less to do with how academic articles were written and more with what they were trying to accomplish. Often, academic researchers were simply trying to decisively win an argument and to lay to rest an important question, or to reveal a history or phenomena we did not know or recognize before, as they were (correctly) trained to do. These are important, laudable goals, and to achieve it, the stylistic norms of each discipline are often appropriate.

Over time, however, I recognized that the questions that most interested me — the ones that kept me up at night — were often immune to final answers. They could not be solved for X; the best one could hope for was wisdom and guidance and perhaps a thoughtful road map. Sometimes the most important questions and answers in the field I cared about — war, statecraft, and strategy — were shaped as much by passions than by reason.³ Thucydides reminds us that people go to war for three reasons: fear (or appetite), honor, and interest. Social science traditionally focused most on the last, interest, but is far less insightful and convincing on fear and especially honor — factors that are increasingly salient in a world where conflict makes little rational sense.⁴ As such, perhaps these crucial subjects required less certainty, and were better served by writing that combined curiosity, playfulness, and humility — qualities rarely rewarded in the academy.

Who would be interested in such musings? It is easy to forget that earlier this century, short of winning the lottery and publishing an opinion piece in the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* or ghost writing for a presidential candidate or secretary of state in *Foreign Affairs*, it was not easy to find platforms that published serious, thoughtful writing about national and international security freed from academic norms and strictures. About 12 years ago, I had the good fortune of meeting Ryan Evans as he launched *War on the Rocks*. I confess I was a tad skeptical when he told me his vision, but years later, I am grateful. *War on the Rocks* helped transform and expand the publication landscape in exciting ways. In the years since, writing for *War on the Rocks* allowed me to pursue what a good friend calls my “epistolary” style: more conversational, open-ended, quizzical, playful, even as the issues I care about are deadly serious. I still occasionally write the sharp, tightly

2 Daniel Drezner, *The Ideas Industry* (New York: Oxford, 2017).

3 Francis J. Gavin, “Why Wars Keep Happening,” *Engelsberg Ideas*, June 17, 2024, <https://engelsbergideas.com/essays/why-war-keeps-happening/>.

4 Francis J. Gavin, *The Taming of Scarcity and the Problems of Plenty: Rethinking International Relations and American Grand Strategy in a New Era*, International Institute for Strategic Studies Adelphi Series (London: Routledge, 2024), <https://www.routledge.com/The-Taming-of-Scarcity-and-the-Problems-of-Plenty-Rethinking-International/Gavin/p/book/9781032805573>.

outlined academic jeremiad. But, over time, the gap between how I teach and how I write has narrowed, which has been gratifying.

How does this affect the *Texas National Security Review*, which is, after all, a refereed academic journal that publishes historians, international relations scholars, and researchers and practitioners from security and strategic studies? We understand that to attract the best work from the most creative thinkers, especially younger scholars in the academy, we can't completely ignore the incentives and norms of the institutions and disciplines that employ and assess them. Academics need to get jobs, promotions, and tenure — hallmarks that are judged by the often obscure, puzzling standards of their disciplines. As an older, tenured scholar, I have the luxury to lambast the at-times ridiculous ways that higher education rewards and punishes young people. I have sat in numerous faculty meetings, in both disciplinary and interdisciplinary settings, where my colleagues go on about metrics like Google Scholar, H-Index, citation numbers, and “first tier” journals or academic presses while assessing the value of younger colleagues by “how they’ve advanced the field” through the number of articles or books they publish, and the ranking of the journal or press in which they publish. What is rarely mentioned is that most intelligent laypeople would find many of these journals largely unreadable or irrelevant, and the books are too often formulaic and offered at extortionate prices that only well-endowed research libraries can afford.

Regardless of the field or university, my sense is that these faculty conversations all too rarely engage and evaluate the actual quality, importance, and relevance of the scholarship examined to a larger world outside of their discipline; nor do they recognize that one book or article that changes how we understand a complicated world is far more important than a “tenure package” containing ten articles in leading field journals that say little or influence no one outside of a self-defined, enclosed field. To make matters worse, this package is then farmed out to “experts” from the field for supposedly arm’s-length evaluations. Having read scores of them over the years (and written a few myself), the letters are often “gamed.” Instead of providing an honest assessment, people turn down the opportunity to evaluate a candidate unless they can say something nice, save for the two or three cranky professors (inevitably old dudes) who have little good to say about anyone and whose letters are then discounted (indeed, having one of these cranky letters in a file helps the bland,

rote, positive evaluations seem more credible). Both writing and evaluating these letters is perhaps the only good use I can think of for Chat-GPT.

This Journal’s Role

If things are so bad, you might wonder, why on earth am I so passionate about an academic journal like the *Texas National Security Review*? Since its founding almost seven years ago, we’ve strived, in our own small way, to improve the dynamics of academic publishing.⁵ TNSR is interdisciplinary, demands jargon-free language, is distributed widely to academics and policymakers, and is available for free. While we don’t always succeed, we strive to publish the best, most innovative, accessible work that respects but is not subservient to “inside baseball” academic or disciplinary norms. I have been very pleased to see our pieces placed prominently in “tenure files” that I have been asked to assess. And while I have no idea how well our articles perform on various citation indexes, one thing I am most proud of is how often I see our pieces on course syllabi.

This issue is no exception, as all the pieces are outstanding, providing critical insight on important questions. I want to highlight two pieces in particular, however, since they brilliantly reflect two of the most important qualities of excellent scholarly writing that I’ve come to treasure at TNSR: the playful or the precise.

What do I mean? When there is a difficult, contested question that can be answered, precision is the most important quality a scholar can demonstrate. M. Taylor Fravel, George J. Gilboy, and Eric Heginbotham’s penetrating analysis, “Estimating China’s Defense Spending: How to Get it Wrong (and Right),” is an exemplar of this kind of scholarship.⁶ Many American policymakers and scholars see China as a dire geopolitical challenge, whose threat to Taiwan and allies in East Asia could lead to a great-power war. American strategies that seek to deter China — and, if a war tragically began, to prevail — focus on, amongst other variables, China’s military capabilities. Assessing a military balance before a conflict is notoriously hard, and history provides countless examples of threat inflation and dangerous underestimation of adversarial capabilities. Perhaps the best measure we have is costing out precisely the resources a state expends on national security — figures that are notoriously difficult to assess, especially in authoritarian systems. Fravel, Gilboy, and Heginbotham meticulously go through the best and

5 Francis J. Gavin, “TNSR: Who We Are, What We Do, and Why You Should Care,” *Texas National Security Review* 1, issue 1 (November 2017), <https://tnsr.org/2017/11/tnsr-who-we-are-what-we-do-and-why-you-should-care/>.

6 M. Taylor Fravel, George J. Gilboy, and Eric Heginbotham, “Estimating China’s Defense Spending: How to Get It Wrong (and Right),” *Texas National Security Review* 7, issue 3 (Summer 2024), <https://tnsr.org/2024/06/estimating-chinas-defense-spending-how-to-get-it-wrong-and-right/>.



worst ways to pursue this analysis, an extraordinarily valuable service to scholars and policymakers alike. Their article will dramatically improve and shape an important academic and policy debate.

As I said, however, some of the most important, interesting questions cannot be answered definitively. All that one can do is to examine and explore, to look at questions from different angles and perspectives, to challenge unspoken assumptions and lazy thinking, and to assess what is right in front of us in a fresh, insightful way. That is precisely what Phil Zelikow does in his brilliant and beautifully written piece, “Confronting Another Axis: History, Humility, and Wishful Thinking.”⁷ Phil is a good friend, and I have had the pleasure of hearing him lay out his argument on several occasions; and, truth be told, I don’t buy much of the argument, either about the coordination between America’s rivals or the historical parallels to previous periods of crises. That is no matter, however, since the questions he superbly takes on are both of fundamental importance and, *ex ante*, unanswerable. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the excellence of the article does not depend on whether he is right or wrong. The best way to assess an article like Phil’s is to ask whether it forces us to challenge our own views, to see the world differently, and, if we disagree, to make our arguments sharper, better. Few pieces I’ve read in recent years accomplish that task more effectively.

In the end, there are many reasons scholars write — reasons that go far beyond the ones I chronicle here. That is what makes being associated with *TNSR* such an amazing experience. It is an honor and a pleasure to be associated with a journal that publishes such great work, that not only answers important questions, but generates new ones. 🏰

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7 Philip Zelikow, “Confronting Another Axis? History, Humility, and Wishful Thinking,” *Texas National Security Review* 7, issue 3 (Summer 2024), <https://tnsr.org/2024/05/confronting-another-axis-history-humility-and-wishful-thinking/>.

