

Social Scientists and National Security Policymaking

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Mike asked me to talk about the “historical role of social scientists [in] influencing national security policymaking,” and at first I didn’t think this would be a hard issue to deal with. But after I thought about it a bit, I realized that it was not perfectly clear to me what the real question here was. Are we talking, for example, about social scientists simply as an occupational group—defined as holders of Ph.D.’s or academic jobs in political science, economics, and so on? Is Henry Kissinger, for example, of interest in this context just because he got his Ph.D. from Harvard and taught in the Government Department there? Or is the Kissinger case of interest only to the extent that a certain set of ideas, or a certain type of thinking, associated with the term “social science,” had a real impact on what he actually did when he was in office?

The same kind of point can be made about “social scientists” influencing policy in more indirect ways—through their teaching, for example, or by participating in the public discussion of policy issues. Scholars often express their own personal opinions about various political or national security issues, and it’s hard, generally speaking, to view what they have to say as “social science”—think, for example, of Kissinger’s first book, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*. This was not a serious analysis of the impact the nuclear revolution had on the way foreign policy was conducted. It was instead an extended argument for basing the defense of Europe on tactical nuclear weapons. Is this the sort of thing—not “scientific” in any real sense of the term—that we should be interested in when we deal with the issue at hand? And how are we to treat ideas that *are* rooted in serious study—ideas that are not simply a particular scholar’s own personal views—but not the kind of study we think of as “scientific”—indeed, ideas rooted in powerful intellectual traditions that took shape before there even was such a thing as “social science”?

These are the questions that need to be answered if we are to bring the issue into focus. And it’s actually not hard to answer them. We’re really not interested in someone’s influence just because he or she happens to be a political scientist or an economist by profession; the influence should have something to do with a body of ideas or style of analysis associated with that academic field. And I don’t think we’re terribly interested in this context in the kind of work we’ve seen in

recent years that tries hard to be “scientific”; such work—work that draws heavily on game theory, for instance—tends to be impenetrable for most people, and too remote from the real world to have much of an effect on policy.¹ In fact, you even have to wonder about the real intellectual value of that kind of work. Thomas Schelling, as we all know, was awarded the Nobel Prize a few years ago (in the words of the Swedish Academy’s press release) “for having enhanced our understanding of conflict and cooperation through game-theory analysis”; but Schelling himself by that time had come to have a very dim view of the value of game theory in this area. Commenting on a survey of the field of strategic studies by Robert Jervis, Schelling wrote: “Finally, I’m happy that Jervis made no mention of game theory. . . . I do not believe that any theoretical contributions to security studies has been the least dependent on ‘game theory.’ . . . I believe game theory got, in Jervis’s survey, just the recognition it deserves.”²

What we’re really interested in are ideas that we can think of as scientific in a much broader sense of the term—serious ideas, powerful ideas, ideas that can make you think about the world in a different way. But to identify those sorts of ideas, we have to make certain judgments about how important they are in intellectual terms—about how deep they are, about how much insight they give us, about the kind of thought process that generated them, and about how close they lie to the core of field—that is, to what defines international relations as a field with a distinct intellectual

¹ See Richard Betts, “Should Strategic Studies Survive?” *World Politics* 50, no. 1 (1997), pp. 9-11. The general point here has in fact been widely noted in the literature on the subject. “The professional gap between academics and practitioners,” Joseph Lepgold and Miroslav Nincic note, has widened in recent years. Many scholars no longer try to reach beyond the Ivory Tower, and officials seem increasingly content to ignore it.” J. Lepgold and M. Nincic, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: International Relations Theory and the Issue of Policy Relevance*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, p. 3. Or as Bruce Jentleson puts it: “the problem is not just the gap between theory and policy but its chasmlike widening in recent years.” Bruce Jentleson, “The Need for Praxis - Bringing Policy Relevance Back In,” *International Security* 26, no. 4 (2002), p. 169. Both comments were quoted in Joseph Nye, “Bridging the Gap between Theory and Policy,” *Political Psychology* 29, no. 4 (2008), p. 594. Stephen Walt, in his survey of the subject, quotes the former diplomat David Newsom: “much of today’s scholarship [on international issues] is either irrelevant or inaccessible to policymakers . . . much remains locked within the circle of esoteric scholarly discussions.” David Newsom, “Foreign Policy and Academia,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 101 (1995-96), p. 66, quoted in Stephen Walt, “The Relationship Between Theory and Policy in International Relations,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005), p. 24. The change is hard to miss: just compare the sort of thing published in *World Politics* today with the kind of thing published in that journal fifty years ago. On this general issue, see Ian Shapiro, *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

² Schelling comment in [Edward Mansfield and Richard Sisson, *The Evolution of Political Knowledge* \(2004\), pp. 138-139.](#)

personality of its own. We're not particularly interested in whether the people who played the key role in developing those ideas are card-carrying members of a particular guild: we're interested, for example, in the concepts we associate with Clausewitz, or with the balance of power theorists of the 18th century, or with people like George Kennan, none of whom were social scientists by profession. But ideas that have no real depth, ideas that simply express the personal views of those who purvey them, are not of really fundamental importance for these purposes, no matter how much attention they get at the time, even if they come from prominent political scientists or economists.

With those criteria, then, we can identify the key ideas that lie at the heart of the field—ideas which are quite impressive intellectually and which have a direct bearing on fundamental issues of policy. I think, for example, of the sort of thinking associated with the notion of the balance of power as it took shape above all in the 18th century—the idea of the state system as a “sort of republic” was members were tied together by a common interest in the “maintenance of order and the preservation of liberty” and thus by a common acceptance of the principle that power needed to be balanced and aims needed to be limited.³ I think of the realist critique of U.S. foreign policy and the basic political philosophy that it rested on—a set of ideas I associate above all with George Kennan and Hans Morgenthau. I think also of the very important arguments about the relationship between the military and the political spheres which we associate with Clausewitz and the related arguments about how international politics works in a nuclear world and about how nuclear issues should be approached which were developed during the Cold War period by people like Bernard Brodie and Thomas Schelling.

These are, to my mind at least, the sorts of ideas that in some sense should have had a deep impact on how policy was conducted. But I am struck, as I look back over the last two centuries, that their impact has not been nearly as great as—to my mind at least—it should have been. I don't mean to imply that the effect of such ideas has been negligible. The balance of power philosophy,

³ See the well-known extracts from Fénelon (c. 1700) and Vattel (1758) in *Theory and Practice of the Balance of Power, 1486–1914*, ed. Moorhead Wright (London: Dent, 1975), pp. 39, 41, 71–72; and the quotations from Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Voltaire in F. H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace: Theory and Practice in the History of Relations between States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), pp. 57–58, 162, 163.

for example, played a key role in the fashioning of the Vienna settlement in 1814-1815; one is struck by the fact that Nicolaus Vogt, an important balance of power theorist, had been Metternich's teacher at the University of Mainz.⁴ And although the whole approach to policy associated with that philosophy—the approach associated with Metternich and Castlereagh and the Concert of Europe—went into decline after 1848, it never quite died out completely. Lord Salisbury, perhaps the greatest diplomatist of the late 19th century, was still talking about the “great international republic” in an article he wrote about the Franco-Prussian War in 1871.⁵

But when you look at the larger picture, you're struck by how limited the impact of those ideas was—by how difficult it was over the long haul for states to think in balance of power terms. The classical balance of power theorist Fénelon talked, for example, about how important it was “not to reduce your enemy too low”; the idea—and you could see this in action at Vienna after the Napoleonic Wars—was that today's enemy might in the future serve as a counterweight to today's ally. But the Vienna system was something of an anomaly in international politics. The kinds of policies you see a century later were much more common: during the First World War, and before it as well, Britain and France were not interested in balancing between Germany and Russia—in maintaining German power at a certain level as a counterweight to Russia. Instead you find them reaching for total victory, almost without regard to consequence.

What can we say about the impact of the realist philosophy in general? When policy issues are discussed, realist arguments are generally not hard to find, and policy makers often (although by no means always) tend to think in realist terms—perhaps to a much greater degree, as a general rule, than the average citizen. But that's not quite the same as saying that the ideas developed by realist thinkers have played a major role in shaping the kinds of policies that are adopted. Realist arguments might be heard, but that doesn't mean they are accepted. And to the extent that the policies that are

⁴ Vogt, the author of the 5-volume work *Über die europäische Republik* (Frankfurt: Varrentrapp und Wenner, 1787-1792), was a major influence on Metternich's political thinking. See Heinrich Ritter von Srbik, *Metternich: Der Staatsmann und der Mensch*, vol. 1 (Munich: Bruckmann, 1925), pp. 91-94, and Viktor Bibl, *Metternich: Der Dämon Österreichs* (Leipzig and Vienna: Günther, 1936), pp. 31-32.

⁵ Lord Salisbury, “The Terms of Peace,” *Quarterly Review* 129 (October 1870), p. 556.

actually pursued make sense in realist terms, that might be because many policy makers take naturally to a realist understanding of the world. This might have to do with the fact that in practically any political system, those individuals with a feel for power and for how it works tend to rise to the top. Or it might have to do with the fact that they tend to live in the world of international politics in a more direct way than most of their fellow citizens do, and direct exposure to that world shapes the way they think about it. In any event, a realist philosophy might come naturally to them, and the arguments of the theorists might play a very minor role in determining how they approach policy issues. And this might be true even when they were exposed to, and deeply admired, the writings of particular theorists. Eisenhower, for example, had a great respect for Clausewitz, whose work he had studied with some care; Clausewitz's *On War*, he said, was one of the two books (aside from the Bible) that had had the greatest impact on his life.⁶ But when you read the documents from the Eisenhower period, it is hard to see what difference that exposure to Clausewitz actually made.⁷

What about more modern thinkers—people like Brodie and Schelling? It is commonly assumed that their work had a major impact on U.S. national security policy, especially during the Kennedy period.⁸ It is thanks in large measure to people like Brodie, Schelling and a handful of other intellectuals, the argument runs, that the American government learned to think in terms of limited war. They helped the government think of an armed conflict with its principal rival as a bargaining process—to base its strategy on the idea that one couldn't strive for total victory, that the goal therefore was not so much to destroy the enemy's military forces as to influence his thinking, his sense for the risks he was running, in order to bring about an end to the fighting on tolerable terms.

⁶ See, for example, Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America, 1815-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 160-162.

⁷ Lenin also had a deep respect for Clausewitz; his notes on *On War* can be found in Berthold Friedl, *Les Fondements théoriques de la guerre et de la paix en URSS, suivi du cahier de Lénine sur Clausewitz* (Paris: Editions Médicis, 1945). My sense is that Clausewitz's thinking had a much greater impact on Lenin (and on Soviet policy in general) than it did on Eisenhower (and on American policy).

⁸ See, for example, Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 11: "this small group of theorists would devise and help implement a set of ideas that would change the shape of American defense policy, that could someday mean the difference between peace and total war." See also Betts, "Should Strategic Studies Survive?" p. 14: Betts writes that the work of the civilian strategists "had a profound influence on political leaders."

They helped the government develop a strategy for fighting a war—even a general nuclear war—in a more controlled and discriminate way than had been the case in the 1950s. And by developing the concept of “strategic stability”—the idea, that is, that the “best of all possible nuclear worlds” was one in which both sides had survivable nuclear forces and in which neither side had any incentive to go first in a crisis—they laid the basis for the strategic arms control agreements that were reached in the early 1970s.

These arguments, it turns out, are somewhat overdrawn. The “limited war” arguments did have a certain impact on policy, but the effect was not nearly as great as we had been led to think. It was quite clear, even in the 1950s, that the Soviets would in the near future develop a survivable nuclear capability, and that when they did a policy of massive retaliation would no longer be viable; the United States obviously needed the ability to use force in a more limited way. Eisenhower thought it was “ridiculous” to think that America could do without general purpose forces.⁹ In the case of Berlin, in particular, conventional forces played a key role in the contingency plans. The plan was never to launch a full-scale nuclear attack as soon as a couple of jeeps were stopped on the Autobahn. The West would escalate up to the level of a full division before launching an all-out attack. Under Kennedy, the plan was to go a little further—up to three divisions—but the fundamental strategy was the same.¹⁰ Neither Kennedy nor Eisenhower ever accepted the basic idea, pushed by many of the defense intellectuals, that NATO needed to build a strong non-nuclear defense in Europe; if it were not for the problem of Berlin, they both felt, there would be no need for strong conventional forces; the American nuclear forces in Europe could easily deter a Soviet attack on NATO.¹¹ This, incidentally, was the sort of strategy Brodie himself endorsed¹²—but that

⁹ Eisenhower in NSC meeting, June 24, 1954, quoted in Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 151.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 257, 287-289, 287 n. 9.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 288-289.

¹² See Bernard Brodie, *Escalation and the Nuclear Option* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

does not mean that his views had any real impact on the thinking of either of those presidents. They were perfectly capable of reaching their own conclusions on these issues.

But wasn't it true that Schelling had a major impact on policy during the Kennedy period? Schelling's paper on "Nuclear Strategy in the Berlin Crisis," McGeorge Bundy wrote at the time, had made a "deep impression" on the president. (Bundy was then Kennedy's National Security Advisor.) Schelling's basic point in that paper was that nuclear weapons should "be used—if they are used at all in Europe—not mainly to destroy tactical targets" but to influence the Soviet leadership; their use was to be thought of not in military but in essentially political terms. "We should plan," he wrote, "for a war of nerve, of demonstration, and of bargaining, not of tactical target destruction."¹³ And the basic Berlin crisis strategy document, NSAM 109, adopted a few months later, did to a certain extent reflect this kind of thinking.¹⁴ On the other hand, it does seem that the people working on Berlin contingency planning within the government, people like Paul Nitze, were independently thinking along similar lines. After all, the basic point that when one is thinking about the possible use of nuclear weapons, the political effects—the fear of escalation that the actual use of those weapons would trigger—vastly outweigh the local military effects, is fairly obvious. And I think it's also pretty clear that no American government ever really accepted Schelling's arguments about the "manipulation of risk," the "controlled loss of control," the exploitation of the "threat that leaves something to chance," and the need to be ready to engage in "contests in risk-taking." No one in power had the stomach for that kind of policy; given what was at stake, that sort of approach must have seemed utterly irresponsible—a "doomsday machine linked to a roulette wheel," to use Morton Halperin's phrase.¹⁵

And in fact the Kennedy administration and its successors never really accepted the basic idea that nuclear war could be fought in a "controlled and discriminate" way. That idea served to

¹³ FRUS 1961-63, 14:170-172; Bundy's comment is quoted in the note on the bottom of p. 170.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 521-523

¹⁵ Morton Halperin, *Nuclear Fallacy: Dispelling the Myth of Nuclear Strategy* (Cambridge: Ballinger, 1987), pp. 85, 113.

rationalize a policy of centralizing control over nuclear forces in American hands, but the rhetoric is simply not to be taken at face value. Neither Kennedy nor his key associates ever took the idea that a general war could be fought in that way very seriously, and that same basic point applies to the countervailing strategy of the 1970s.¹⁶

In fact, as a general rule, the ideas that intellectuals come up with are not taken too seriously by policy makers; they're adopted—that is, used in official discourse—for essentially instrumental purposes: to dress up the policies, to make them more palatable, more intellectually and thus politically respectable. I think this is true, for example, of the stability doctrine: it was not the driving force behind the SALT agreements. It is quite clear, in fact, that if the cost-exchange ratio had been different—if defense had been more or even as cost-effective than offense—then both sides would have gone for strategic defenses, and there would have been no ABM treaty—Nixon, for example, simply did not believe that strategic defenses were intrinsically undesirable.¹⁷ It's true also of the bureaucratic politics theory: policy makers, and former policy makers, are attracted to it because it provides a convenient excuse for whatever goes wrong.¹⁸ And it's true of the democratic

¹⁶ See Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, pp. 315-320 and especially p. 319 n. 125; and also Francis Gavin, “The Myth of Flexible Response: United States Strategy in Europe during the 1960s,” *International History Review* 23, no. 4 (December 2001). Kennedy, in fact, told the French a month before his death that it was “absurd to maintain such large forces in Europe in anticipation of a conventional war which will never occur,” and that the only reason the U.S. presence could not be scaled down was that withdrawals would upset the Germans. Kennedy-Couve meeting, October 7, 1963, *Documents diplomatiques français* 1963, 2:357. (The corresponding passage in the U.S. record in FRUS 1961-63, 13:785 is much weaker—the State Department notetaker evidently chose not to record the full comment.) For the point about the 1970s, note General William Odom’s comment in *Military Planning for European Theatre Conflict during the Cold War: An Oral History Roundtable, Stockholm, 24- 25 April 2006*, Zürcher Beiträge zur Sicherheitspolitik, no. 79 (Zurich: ETH Zürich, 2007), p. 132, available online at http://www.php.isn.ethz.ch/documents/ZB79_000.pdf. General Odom had learned a good deal about these issues when he was on the NSC staff during from 1977 to 1980. See also Terry Terriff, *The Nixon Administration and the Making of U.S. Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 237-241. Terriff’s discussion of the implementation issue in chapter 7 of his book is more restrained, but a careful reading suggests that viable nuclear war-fighting options were not really developed.

¹⁷ See Francis Gavin, “Nuclear Nixon: Ironies, Puzzles, and the Triumph of Realpolitik,” in Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, eds., *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 129-134.

¹⁸ See Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 162-164, 167-170. Note also then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice’s emphasis on “bureaucratic impediments” and “structural problems” in her testimony before 9/11 Commission, <http://edition.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/04/08/rice.transcript/>. As Fred Kaplan noted, “this is the analysis of a political scientist, not a policymaker.” “Condi Lousy: Why Rice is a Bad National Security Adviser,” Slate.com, April 8, 2004, <http://www.slate.com/id/2098499/>

peace literature, which was taken up by political leaders (indeed, by U.S. presidents from both parties) because they find its arguments congenial.¹⁹ It's even true, at times, of realism: Kissinger and Nixon used realist ideas to dress up their policy—to make it seem that they were pursuing a sophisticated strategy of balancing between Russia and China, a policy that looked toward the establishment of a stable international equilibrium, whereas in reality their policy was cut from a very different (and much more anti-Soviet) cloth.²⁰ (I have to say that I was a little shocked when I realized this was the case; at the time, I had tended to take the realist rhetoric at face value.)

So what conclusions are to be drawn from all this? Does it mean that you can't expect serious academic work in this area to have much of an effect on policy? It's not hard to find people who've had some experience in this area arguing along those lines. Stephen Krasner, for example, having worked in Washington for a few years, wrote that his government experience had "only reinforced [his] conviction that the 'gap' between academia and the policy world" was "unbridgeable." "Academics," he thought, "may lob ideas across the gap and sometimes, if a policy window" was open, they might count for something. But no one was "going to build a bridge between the two worlds"—those two worlds were just too different from each other.²¹ But I wonder whether that's the right way to approach the issue. Having an impact doesn't really boil down to "lobbing" ideas across the divide and hoping that there's someone on the other side to catch them. The more important channels of influence are more subtle, more indirect. They have to

¹⁹ U.S. leaders began to pick up on standard "democratic peace" arguments well after they had actually opted for a policy of promoting democracy abroad. "Ultimately, the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace," President Clinton, for example, said in his January 25, 1994, State of the Union Speech, "is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere. Democracies don't attack each other" (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/states/docs/sou94.htm>). And President George W. Bush took much the same line a decade later: "And the reason why I'm so strong on democracy is democracies don't go to war with each other. And the reason why is the people of most societies don't like war, and they understand what war means.... I've got great faith in democracies to promote peace. And that's why I'm such a strong believer that the way forward in the Middle East, the broader Middle East, is to promote democracy." "President and Prime Minister Blair Discussed Iraq, Middle East," November 12, 2004, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/11/20041112-5.html>

²⁰ See Marc Trachtenberg, "The Structure of Great Power Politics, 1963-1975," pp. 18-21, [http://www.polisci.ucla.edu/faculty/trachtenberg/cv/chcw\(long\).doc](http://www.polisci.ucla.edu/faculty/trachtenberg/cv/chcw(long).doc).

²¹ Stephen Krasner, "Government and Academia: Never the Twain Shall Meet, Well Almost Never," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 22, no. 1 (March 2009), p. 116.

do with affecting the way people think about problems at a fairly basic level. It's in that sense that the kinds of arguments that people like Kennan and Morgenthau made after World War II had real political importance—that sort of thinking really did affect the way a lot of people in the United States approached foreign policy issues.

The effect, to be sure, has not been been as far-reaching as some of us would have liked, and I have the impression that it's not as strong now as it was in the past. A few months ago, for example, I saw a newspaper article with the headline: "Biden Says Weakened Russia Will Bend to U.S."²² When I read things like that, and I see how little criticism that kind of attitude gets, it makes me wonder why the best academic thinking in this area has had such a modest impact on policy making. And if this situation is viewed as a problem—and I personally think that it is—this sort of thing also makes me wonder about what, if anything, can be done about it. I'm not quite sure what the answers are. But I do think that these are the sorts of questions we should be focusing on.

²² "Biden Says Weakened Russia Will Bend to U.S.," Wall Street Journal Online, July 25, 2009, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124848246032580581.html?mod=google_wsj_gadgv1#mod=whats_news_free. The article reported some remarks the Vice President made in an interview he had given at the end of a trip to Ukraine and Georgia, in which he had pledged that the United States would "stand by" those countries, had reaffirmed America's "commitment" to their independence, and had rejected the idea that they were in anyone's "sphere of influence." Remarks by Vice President Biden in Ukraine, July 22, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-Vice-President-Biden-In-Ukraine; and Remarks by the Vice President to the Georgian Parliament, July 23, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-The-Vice-President-To-The-Georgian-Parliament

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