

“Cult of the Irrelevant” with Michael C. Desch

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There was a time when it was commonplace for individuals in academia to bring their expertise to the federal government to help address the national security issues. In addition, research from the Ivy Tower quite often produced policy recommendations to those working in the foreign policy establishment. Prof. Desch points to a study done by the American Political Science Review that examined the one hundred year period between 1906 to 2006 to measure the percentage of scholarly journal articles that offered policy prescriptions. The number peaked during World War Two and then began to decline. By the early 1960s, as Prof. Desch explains, articles offering recommendations essentially vanished.

In present times, the unfortunate divide between the two worlds of policymakers and academics continues. Joseph Nye, the political scientist who co-founded the theory of neo-liberalism and former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, famously said upon returning to Harvard that “the walls surrounding the Ivy Tower have never seemed so high.” What explains why the two worlds are so divided? Professor Desch offers a few possible explanations.

First, the university world is dominated by disciplinary departments who produce doctoral graduates that define the scholarly research and debate. There are two types of research a scholar can pursue. One is applied research which serves to solve specific problems confronting society. The other is basic research, which is the pursuit of increasing knowledge for its own sake. Those in the academic world overwhelmingly choose to pursue basic research, which has the potential to help policymakers address the issues they struggle with, but is not designed with policy relevance as the main goal. Related to this point is the growing emphasis of research methods. Since the 1980s, the political science field has become ever more dominated by the idea that the methods of research, especially those of a quantitative nature, are more important in producing new knowledge than the research question itself. This movement further distances the field from addressing potentially relevant policy research questions.

Another explanation, according to Prof. Desch, can be explained by the division of labor. The political science field has become increasingly specialized thanks to developments in technology and narrower focuses of scholars. While beneficial for the university world, less policy-relevant recommendations are coming from narrower research topics.

A final reason posited by Prof. Desch is hiring and tenure committees, as well as academic publishing groups across the university system, are heavily skewed

towards disciplinary political scientists versus ones who pursue research for the benefit of policymakers. If a young academic wants to be hired after finishing their doctoral program, have their works published in a respectable academic journal, or receive tenure, it is very much to their benefit to pursue research that is appealing to these disciplinary social scientists.

In response to Prof. Desch's talk, Prof. Fuhrmann offered rebuttals to a couple of claims. First, he disagreed with Prof. Desch that as the professionalization and increased focus on statistical methods has increased, the field has become less interested in contributing to policy matters. He notes that many academics of his generation have been very active in the policy world, including writing op-eds in major news sources, appearing as guests on television broadcasts, making speeches in Washington D.C., consulting with government agencies, and even serving within the government itself. Dr. Desch responded that this was a phenomenon primarily associated with the post 9/11 generation of scholars.

Second, Prof. Fuhrmann acknowledged that while it is certainly true some in the political science discipline are heavily focused on methods in research, it is not true that very few focus on trying to answer a specific question or address a specific problem. He argued that many have provided basic research for policymakers directly focused on contributing to specific problems. He cited work done in the field of well-known democratic peace theory. Originally a basic research question developed by Immanuel Kant in researching perpetual peace centuries ago, the topic has been built upon over the years by succeeding scholars. Democratic peace theory has been a feature in American foreign policy for several presidential administrations and was even cited specifically in one of President Bill Clinton's State of the Union addresses.

Prof. Fuhrmann did, however, recognize common ground between him and Prof. Desch. Both believe in 'Methodological Pluralism', which is the idea that a scholar should use all research tools at their disposal to address a question. Further, he agrees with Prof. Desch that methods should not drive one's research project.

They both also agree that incentives should be re-aligned in regards to scholars' research. While emphasis on publishing peer-reviewed books and journals should remain a staple in the hiring of junior faculty and those in tenure-track positions, credit should also be given to those who produce pieces that are relevant to policymakers in the international security field and propose solutions to the problems that confront those working in the government halls of Washington D.C.