



Michael C. Desch. *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 368 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-18121-9.

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“Scholars cannot simply sit back and wait for their results to sprinkle down on policymakers like rain from the clouds,” writes Michael C. Desch in *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* (p. 41). Instead, Desch contends, it is past time for scholars of national security to actively pursue the discipline’s “moral obligation to answer its enduring relevance question” (p. 255). Desch does not only argue that social scientists ought to connect with policymakers through their research, but more crucially, that they are currently failing to do this, spiraling into a cult of the irrelevant. Desch argues that the professionalization of social science—its attempt to mirror the natural sciences as a field driven by dispassionate and replicable quantitative analysis—has led to its demise, measured by policy relevance in the realm of national security. Through an extensive intellectual history from World War I to the contemporary post-9/11 state of strategic studies, Desch shows that social scientists—most frequently economists and political scientists—have enjoyed moments of influence in policymaking, particularly during times of war, but said influence was usually short-lived and is frequently overstated. Desch contends that, just as it does today, rigor has often trumped relevance throughout the century-old history of international relations, widening the rift between the aca-

demics in their ivory tower and the policymakers in the Beltway.

Cult of the Irrelevant sends a clear message to social scientists at various levels—individual security studies academics, journal editors, department chairs, and promotion/tenure committees—that it is the onus of academics in each of these positions to produce and incentivize applied policy-relevant research that is driven by problems that policymakers themselves face, rather than by a desire to employ highly technical “scientific” methods. The book falls within the larger discipline-wide effort of international relations to “bridge the gap” between the academy and policy, which has included creating new platforms for scholars to disseminate their policy-relevant research, establishing networks between academics and the relevant policymakers, and providing scholars with the rhetorical tools to address not only their peers, but also policymakers and the broader public.[1]

Desch offers a number of recommendations to scholars to this end, which include: write succinctly and without jargon, employ problem- and not method-driven research agendas, strike a balance between good theory and oversimplification, specify the concrete policy implications of the research, consider the politics involved in the policymaking process, and offer a positive policy

agenda, rather than only criticize an existing policy. These recommendations are carefully validated by the intellectual history Desch provides, showing how the discipline's failures and successes to meet these criteria have resulted in the waxing and waning of its policy influence. These historically well-supported recommendations are ultimately the strength of *Cult of the Irrelevant*, despite the limitations detailed below.

Desch's central argument is that the professionalization of security studies has hampered its usefulness in influencing national security policy. Desch argues, "the tragedy of the professionalization of social science is that it is both the engine of scientific progress but also contains the seeds of its own irrelevance" (p. 12). Specifically, Desch criticizes the "increasing tendency of many social scientists to embrace methods and models for their own sake rather than because they can help us answer substantively important questions" (p. 241). Desch argues that social science's relevance in national security policy declined in the 1950s and 60s when it chose basic research, designed to increase knowledge, over applied research, designed to solve a specific problem, and became increasingly scientific in an effort to become more rigorous and objective (p. 66). Specifically, Desch argues, in the second half of the twentieth century, when policymakers needed area specialists for historical, cultural, and linguistic expertise, universities instead succumbed to the "dominance of 'scientific impulses'" (p. 211). Through this history, Desch tells the stories of influential social scientists like Henry Kissinger, Thomas Schelling, and Walt Rostow, showing how they uniquely navigated the academy-policy relationship by focusing on the same issues that faced policymakers and avoiding highly abstruse mathematical methods, enabling them to develop theory with direct policy applications.

It is important to clarify the scope of Desch's definition of relevance, as it provides the grounds on which it can be legitimately critiqued; Desch

focuses on academic research, putting aside teaching courses and graduate student mentoring, two seemingly important sources of influence that academics have on potential future policymakers. When asked a question related to this critique in a debate with George Washington University professor and editor of the Washington Post blog *Monkey Cage* Henry Farrell, Desch remarked that one of his prior surveys of policymakers concluded that they only obtained about 30 percent of their important day-to-day knowledge from formal academic training.[2] Desch also seems to limit his focus to civilian policymakers in the Beltway, most notably excluding military officials who also craft national security policy that may value the work of strategic studies scholars. For example, recent programs like the Chief of Staff of the Air Force Captains Prestigious PhD Program demonstrate a desire of other branches of the military to bridge the gap between the military and the academy.[3]

Desch will inevitably be criticized by quantitative security studies scholars who interpret the linkage between the methodological professionalization of the discipline and its increasing irrelevance as an attack on quantitative methods. However, the issue for Desch seems not to be directly with quantitative methods, but instead with the relationship between theory and method, as he argues that "political science is most useful to policymakers when it takes a problem-, rather than method-driven, approach to setting the scholarly agenda for academic security specialists" (p. 207). While Desch's argument that social scientists' irrelevance is a function of their use of methods and models for their own sake seems logical, it is empirically untestable. It seems plausible that such a problem exists, given that the academy incentivizes peer-reviewed publications in top journals, and these top journals appear to often favor cutting-edge methodology, but there is no real way to distinguish between quantitative research that is problem-driven and quantitative research that is method-driven and uses these complex

tools for their own sake. It is therefore difficult to reconcile Desch's argument that there are inherent tensions between rigor and relevance (p. 77) with his qualification that formal/quantitative research is not by definition irrelevant (p. 240). The line between problem- and method-driven research is much fuzzier in practice than in theory.

Additionally, the causal mechanism that links rigor to irrelevance is at times unclear. Drawing on a survey of national security policymakers, Desch observes that "policymakers continue to prefer qualitative models of political behavior, which seem more intuitive, more adaptable, and more compatible with the intelligence community's traditional strength in area studies" (p. 229). Desch also notes, "even when the results of these approaches are relevant to policy questions, they are often not accessible to policymakers or the broader public" (p. 4). From these statements, it is unclear whether policymakers' alleged discomfort with quantitative social science research is a result of the methodology itself or, rather, inaccessible presentation of the methodology. That is, highlighting complex statistical models is likely a suggestion that a scholar is targeting their research toward their peers, whereas a quantitative scholar seeking policy relevance is tasked with articulating their methods and outputs in a more clear and concise fashion. If the irrelevance problem can be significantly mitigated through simply moving the complex equations and technical language to the appendix or supplementary materials, this suggests that the problem is hardly a methodological one but instead an issue of accessible writing.

One can reasonably take a more optimistic view than Desch and argue that he understates the influence of the academy on national security policymaking. Desch can be criticized for the scope of the argument, which discounts the roles academics play beyond their own research, namely mentoring graduate students and teaching, influencing the worldview and problem-solving of

students who may conceivably influence policy in the future. Additionally, Desch has been criticized by scholars like Henry Farrell for downplaying the success of blogs like *Monkey Cage*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and *War on the Rocks*, to name a few, in connecting social scientists to policymaking by requiring brief and jargon-free policy-relevant arguments.[4] Nonetheless, *Cult of the Irrelevant* should improve the national security scholarship in its ability to make clear and concise policy recommendations, as well as spearhead a future research program examining how social scientists can best capture the attention of those crafting policy. Scholars who seek to have policy relevance should heed Desch's advice and not merely assume that their research will get the governmental attention it deserves, but should instead write with the policymakers' needs in mind, explaining why their policy prescriptions are not only optimal but also politically viable.

Notes

[1]. For a prominent example of one of the organizations spearheading this movement, see Bridging the Gap's website: <http://bridgingthegap-project.org/>.

[2]. Michael Desch and Henry Farrell, "A Debate: Political Science Is Lapsing into Irrelevance," Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, May 31, 2019, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhuRZDbu0nw>. For a complete transcript of the debate, see: <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20190531-debate-political-science-irrelevance-michael-desch-henry-farrell>.

[3]. Richard Salomon, "Air Force Officials Select Three Captains for PhD Program," US Air Force website, September 11, 2018, <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1627456/air-force-officials-select-three-captains-for-phd-program/>.

[4]. Henry Farrell and Jack Knight, "How Political Science Can Be Most Useful," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 10, 2019, <https://>

www.chronicle.com/article/How-Political-Science-Can-Be/245852.

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