

***Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security.* Desch, Michael C. Princeton University Press, 2019, 368.**

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Do foreign policymakers pay attention to scholarship on foreign policy and national security issues? If not, then who is to blame - scholars who produce scholarship, or policy-makers? These questions are at the core of a new book, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security*, authored by Michael C. Desch, political science professor at the University of Notre Dame. He explores the extent to which academics have been inclined to produce policy-relevant research and argues that it is the duty of scholars to do so. He contends that the field of political science and its sub-fields, international relations and international security, have prioritised complex methods and models over problem-driven research and in the process, scholarship became irrelevant for the policy-makers. Even this preference for models and methods is the result of the quest of political scientists to be considered as engaged in undertaking scientific work.

The book is a study of the rise of the field of political science in the US as a discipline from the early 1900s to the present. At times, the author widens the scope across disciplinary divides and at others, the focus is solely on the scholarship of foreign policy and security studies. The central problem, according to Desch is: gradually scholars have moved towards methodological rigour over policy relevance and it has led to an imbalance. Departments of political sciences across the US prefer rigour i.e., applying methods derived from natural sciences and mathematics to gain relevance in the world of academe. Desch aptly traces the history of this push for rigour through the era of Progressive movement of the 1920s to Behavioral revolution of 1950s and post-modern debates of recent decades.

The focus on rigour has led to ‘professionalisation’ of social sciences and by extension field of political science. According to Desch, this professionalisation is a double-edged sword: it advances scientific

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contribution in the field and also leads to the irrelevance of the same scholarship for policymakers. This was particularly evident during the 1950s and 1960s when basic research, aimed at increasing knowledge, was preferred over applied research directed at problem-solving. Scholars tended to be increasingly scientific in a bid to be more rigorous and objective.

Desch, through meticulous sourcing highlights, detailed the rise of many political science departments and centres for the study of international affairs across universities in the US during the 1950s and 1960s. These departments and centres were supported by grants from the US federal government agencies and military. In parallel, private foundations also supported research projects. Despite funding from public and non-profit organisations, academia moved towards professionalisation and prioritised scientific research over policy-oriented scholarship.

Interestingly, this was also the time of the Cold War, when policy-makers were looking for area specialists for historical, cultural and linguistic expertise and universities were producing scholars trained in methods and models. Few exceptions like Henry Kissinger, Thomas Schelling, and Zbigniew Brzezinski did navigate the policy-academy world in that era and produced policy-relevant scholarship. Desch traces career trajectories of these influential social scientists turned policy-makers and argues that they produced policy-relevant scholarship because they did not focus on rigor. In the case of Kissinger and Brzezinski, Desch highlights that they permanently left the academy for policy world.

On the other hand, the academy-policy relationship was vibrant during wartime or when an external threat environment was heightened. In those years, the academics showed a willingness to undertake policy-oriented research and interdisciplinary work to answer the questions raised by policymakers. Peacetime, however, saw the return of academics to their narrowly focused scientific scholarship and competition with peers within the discipline. The era of peace, thus, led to gradual irrelevance of political science scholarship for the policy-makers. Even scholars prided themselves at maintaining a distance from policymakers to insulate their work from political biases. This leads to a corollary: the greater the threat facing a nation, the more relevant scholarship will be produced

Meanwhile, the post-9/11 era experienced varied engagements between the academy and policy worlds. Universities undertook extensive research to study terrorism and counter-terrorism. Policy-makers made funds available for research projects. It was the product of a mixed threat environment. But as the years passed, policy-makers also discarded the advice of scholars. For instance, the Obama administration did not give due consideration to voluminous scholarship cautioning against that intervention in Libya.

Yet, Desch contends, it is a moral obligation of scholars of foreign policy and national security to pursue relevance of their discipline. To do so, the author offers numerous recommendations, which include: write concisely and avoid jargon, employ problem-driven research agenda, balance demands of theory and over-simplification of issues, provide policy implications of the research, understand politics of policy-making process, offer concrete policy-recommendations for future rather than only criticising existing policy.

Despite the discussion of scholarship not being relevant, a key limitation of the book is a narrow definition of ‘relevance’ employed by Desch. He is mostly concerned with the research work that can influence the US policymakers in taking decision relating to the use of force and waging war. This narrow scope leads to a discussion limited towards the threat environment of a state and leaves out other scholarly debates in national security and foreign policy scholarship that might have influenced policy-makers over the years.

Similarly, the data Desch uses to demonstrate variation in policy-centric scholarship over the years also needs another look. He relies extensively on a percentage of peer-reviewed research articles with a “policy-recommendations” section. Increasingly, the scholars are publishing policy-relevant sections of their research work in other publications such as *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *War on the Rocks*, and blogs like *The Interpreter* (*New York Times*) and *Monkey Cage* (*Washington Post*) among others. Often a 12000-word journal article is accompanied by a 2000-word essay in a leading policy-relevant magazine or newspaper. Granted that, the readers of 12000-word articles will be less in number than of 2000-word essay. Yet the short-version is meant to influence policy due to publications in places which are readily available to policy-makers.

Even if a scholar produces policy-relevant research, what is the guarantee that it will influence policy? A pattern visible through the book is: when scholars agree with a certain policy, they become relevant. When scholars disagree with a policy, they become irrelevant. This is linked with the realities of two different worlds that policy-makers and scholars inhabit. Policy-making is the outcome of the political process and a policy-maker has to consider one's constituency and pulls of coalition building. A scholar might not appreciate these limitations when offering policy recommendations. These dynamics can potentially place some distance between scholars and policy-makers. Desch is silent on recognising and bridging this gap.

Since policy-making is a political process, the policy-makers also tend to seek support for policies rather than insights that could inform policy. It is also a reason behind the rise of think-tanks in recent decades. Policy-makers have looked more towards think-tanks in Washington than to university campuses across the US. The operational methodology of the US think-tanks also has to do with the subtle shift which is: advocate a particular position and give it credibility by referring to their own reports. These reports and accompanying events, at times, also include factors that policy-makers in Washington tend to manipulate.

Ultimately, Desch makes the reader think: should academics engage in policy-relevant research and influence policy-makers or undertake scholarship detached from the world outside the academy? The answer to this question is relevant not only for scholars and policy-makers in the US but across the world. The policy-makers, particularly, those dealing with foreign policy and national security will gain from research and interaction with scholars. An informed policy-making should be the goal in all states. To this end, *Cult of the Irrelevant* opens a much-needed debate and offers concise recommendations for scholars to capture the attention of those who make policy.