# Scholars and Security

*Paul Bracken*

Michael Mosser's essay presents a strong brief for a constructive relationship between the academy and military and security institutions. Unless scholars join the security debate they won't have much of a voice in it. Much of the concern in the academy about being used or corrupted by the military is based on a misconception. Let's call it by its name: a prejudice. Too many academics think that senior military people are hawks, and not particularly smart or thoughtful ones. But this stereotype more often fits the civilians in the national security institutions than the military. And it's exactly those civilians who will dominate the idea market of national security and international order if academics withdraw from it.

The issue of scholars and their relationship to the defense establishment is a perennial one. The locus of new ideas in US foreign and defense policy goes back a long way. But it's an especially timely one now when we are facing a turn in the global environment arising from a confluence of political and technological factors. The current debate in the US focuses on terrorism, COIN (counterinsurgency), and failed states. If in a few years these are still our top worries I think we will have achieved a great success. These are things we can more or less manage. The downside risks are limited.

But I don't think we'll be that lucky. The basic international order is changing away from "the 1945 system" and a triumphant post-Cold War era dominated by western democracies. The rise of new powers, economic reordering, and the spread of military technology, especially the atom bomb and advanced conventional weapons, promises to remake the international security landscape.

The level of risk is going to increase—a lot. The security debate will get more serious than it is now. This is what happened in the lead up to World War II and in the Cold War, as some examples will show. As the environment changed, the debate became more responsible and realistic. If I'm right, this is a major conclusion. It's difficult for me to believe that the academy won't play a role in this debate, and that role will, broadly speaking, be a useful and critical one. This is what has happened in the past.

The contributions of academics may even be decisive, as they have been in the past. It should be noted that unlike the World War II and the Cold War periods, the academy had little or no role in the debate about America's response to 9/11. The decision to invade and occupy two Muslim countries, and to declare a "global war on terror," came from inside the beltway, the loose association of the Pentagon, the intelligence community, Washington think tanks, Congressional staffers, and contractors. This suggests an important aspect of academic involvement in the security debate. Staying out of it doesn't lead to improvement. It doesn't, in particular, lead to a sweeping rejection of the whole national security ethos, as many academic critics wish. What academics often forget is that there is a competitive market of ideas. There's an idea market, just like there is for everything else. You can pick and choose your own "content providers," on the Washington idea circuit, just as you can in a media company. What's taken place in recent years is an increased concentration of the idea market for foreign and defense affairs to the Washington, DC area.

This trend reinforces the monopoly on policy development by individuals and institutions inside the Washington beltway. In recent years the "performance" of this arrangement speaks for itself. There's no need for me to throw more gasoline on this fire. But it does suggest that more academic inputs to the idea market for national security are needed.

## The Issue Is Not the Issue

Some critics of academic involvement with the Department of Defense (DoD) describe the issue as one of the US needing technical help in its quest for global hegemony. Global rule is difficult. So Washington needs anthropologists, political scientists, and subject matter experts to map the terrain, so to speak. This, essentially is for targeting purposes, not academic understanding. Looked at this way, the issue of the relationship of the academy to the

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doi:10.1017/S153759271000321X



https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759271000321X Published online by Cambridge University Press

military has a long history. The overthrow of Sukarno in Indonesia, Project Camelot in Vietnam, and terrain teams in Afghanistan are all part of the same pattern.

Let's step back from the extreme critics in order to make my point a little differently. Imagine a one-dimensional spectrum of academic involvement with DoD. There are two endpoints. At one end is "tool of the ruling class." Put this one on the right. On the left put complete disengagement between the two institutions. The debate, then, is where on this spectrum the university and its scholars should be. Different people will draw the line at different places. There are arguments about the disadvantages of being too close. Objectivity is lost. Shills and opportunists may get supported simply to give credibility to otherwise unjustifiable DoD programs. Or relations can be too distant. Academic truth and honor are preserved. But the government has no one who will speak truth to power. The academy stays pure, but is a monument to irrelevance.

My view is altogether different from this conceptualization. As was said in the 1960s, the issue is not the issue. I do not believe that the issue of university involvement with the DoD is most usefully considered along an "agent of the ruling class"—"scholarly isolation" continuum. For this leaves out too many important factors and vital dynamics.

## Scholar/Security Relations

My view can be made clearer if we examine some actual cases of academics and US security policy. In business school we often use cases, not to predict what will or should happen, but to discover important issues and vital dynamics that have been overlooked. Three cases will be considered here to illustrate different issues.

President Woodrow Wilson put together a group of advisors to help him plan the post-World War I international order. Wilson asked for help in thinking through a strategy for the economic, political, and social reforms to prevent Europe from plunging the world into another conflict. Among these advisors were Professors Charles Seymour of Yale, James Shotwell of Columbia, and Archibald Coolidge of Harvard. Along with 150 other scholars, this group was called "The Inquiry." Wilson took part of this group with him to the Versailles Peace Conference.

After Versailles, and with Wilson's blessing, The Inquiry held a public forum in Philadelphia. The purpose was to raise the level of public understanding of the U.S. role in Europe and the world. Contributors to this 1920 lecture series included academics from Yale, Harvard, Columbia, and Cornell, as well as future president Herbert Hoover, labor leader Samuel Gompers, the Commander of the US Atlantic Fleet, and Colonel Edward House (President Wilson's top confidential advisor). They spoke to a packed house at the Philadelphia Academy of Music and their talks were published.[1]

Concerned about rising opposition in the US to any foreign entanglements, the group decided to establish a more permanent institution. So in 1921 they met at the home of industrialist Harold Pratt on E. 68th Street in New York City to found The Council on Foreign Relations. It was a lobby for an active American role in the world.

The group failed to win support for the League of Nations. But the story doesn't end there. The Council took on another mission: to warn of what was coming if the power grabs of Italy, Japan, and Germany went unchecked in the 1930s. The Council on Foreign Relations was the decisive voice for the US to take the rising war clouds seriously. At the time few Americans wanted to hear about this. It wasn't a popular position—far from it. There was bitter opposition from Charles Lindbergh and the America First movement. But the Council on Foreign Relations mustered enough elite and popular support to tip the balance on key programs in the Congress. It facilitated FDR's passage of Lend-Lease and other critical aid programs at a time when Britain's fate quite literally hung in the balance. World War II might have gone quite differently absent the Council's actions before Pearl Harbor.

This case raises a number of issues. One is my earlier point: as the security environment got worse, the Council's influence grew. It became a lobby for a particular future. Other institutions—the Navy, the Congress, and the media—couldn't do this in the same way. The Council's membership of business leaders and academics gave the debate, certainly FDR's version of it, a legitimacy that no other institution could furnish. It also had an affirming role. Military and War Department leaders came to New York to talk about the world situation and they were validated in their views by a prestigious, elite, and powerful audience.

Something else was going on here, too. Real strategy tends to evolve as internal decisions meet external events. In challenges with any complexity, this necessarily will involve different "subsystems." Understanding these subsystems and their interactions with each other is often critical to mapping out the strategic dynamics of change. In the 1930s the Council on Foreign Relations was operating in a strategy and diplomacy subsystem. The Naval War College at Newport was working in a military subsystem. It had been war-gaming operations against Japan in a way that turned out to be prescient. Virtually everything the Japanese did was anticipated in the gaming room at Newport, except the kamikaze attacks late in the war.

Successful strategy involves linking and bringing together a series of processes and decisions spanning years. This necessarily involves many institutions, or what are here called subsystems. The US strategy for winning World War II came out of these processes and decisions. Actions were incremental, but nonetheless extraordinarily important. Before



https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759271000321X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Pearl Harbor, bold political or military action just wasn't feasible. But incremental actions were. The Council's lobbying for aid kept Britain in the war. The Navy's operational planning allowed them to turn the Pearl Harbor disaster around in five months, in the Battle of Midway in May 1942.

The total, integrated US strategy, then, involved cross linkages among several key subsystems, two of which are mentioned here. What didn't happen was for someone in Washington to posit a grand strategy and then recruit experts to execute it.

This is a complex picture, much more so than the one-dimensional continuum. But it isn't so complex that it can't be managed. Major subsystems, and institutions, can be identified. Their dynamics can be mapped using scenarios techniques. Today, the trend in the better management schools is very much in exactly this direction. There is less emphasis on learning narrow skills (like discounting a cash flow) that a computer can do better than a person. There is more emphasis on seeing how different business factors relate to each other. Apple's iPod and iPhone, for example, involve global linkages in subsystems of production, marketing, and operations. Other methodological frameworks, like net assessment, also aim to do this.[2]

A second case of scholar/security linkages shows how outsiders reinvented strategy. Many of the scholars in this example worked in think tanks rather than universities. But they had advanced degrees and worked closely with their academic colleagues.

In the 1950s the US government had a lock on anything nuclear. The political climate of the day created a situation where those working on nuclear matters were afraid to write anything that might open them to the charge of spilling national secrets. This created a problem for analysts at the Rand Corporation.

They had the security clearances, and the domain knowledge, and they saw how dangerous US nuclear strategy was. US deterrent forces were vulnerable. Almost no thought had been given to their command and control, making it by far the weakest point in the system. There was no deliberated war plan, but rather a giant "wargasm" of firing everything in the house after even a small provocation. Political-military nuclear coordination was almost nonexistent.

But Rand strategists couldn't openly talk about this, or enter a public debate. They sent reports to the Pentagon to which no one listened.

Then a few of them went public. This story has been described in several journalistic accounts. But the problem I have with these accounts is that they get almost everything wrong. The journalists wanted to pin blame for the Cold War on certain personalities, bad ogres if you will. In most accounts it's Herman Kahn, Albert Wohlstetter, Henry Kissinger, and a few others who are tagged as crazed Dr. Strangeloves. They're depicted as nuclear zealots lost in game theory models, risking the world with their lunatic ideas.

The problem with this view is that it gets almost everything backwards. The nuclear strategists had an extraordinary role, but not in the way described by journalistic reportage. Their work had a decisive impact both on the strategic debate, and the operation of US nuclear forces.

With a monopoly on the conversation the government would continue sloppy, dangerous practices. As the Soviets built up their arsenal, the preconditions for catastrophe were set in motion. What the nuclear strategists did was to *break the monopoly the government had on thinking about nuclear war*. It was a major achievement. It made the world safer because complicated issues could be openly discussed for the first time by a broader audience, including the public. What kind of missiles should the US have? How many were enough? What was the most likely path to nuclear war, and how could it be closed off? These were some of the questions that could be discussed—but only after the basics of the subject were publicly raised. And that's what Kahn, Schelling, Wohlstetter, and Kissinger did. The government never had done this.

Even more, the profound moral aspects of nuclear weapons could be debated, as they were by individuals like Thomas Merton, Reinhold Niebuhr, Jesuit John Courtney Murray, and others. Far from being the nuclear ogres they were portrayed to be, the Cold War nuclear strategists paved the way for a national debate on managing our way through the first nuclear age more safely than would otherwise have been the case.

The strategists themselves were often detested by the Pentagon. They raised questions. They upset budgets and routine. Some of them had their security clearances stripped or contracts terminated to shut them up. They stood between a bureaucracy incapable of facing dangerous issues, and military services seeking more nuclear weapons with little idea of how this might tilt the arms race to uncontrollable levels.

Herman Kahn often pointed out to me that there was one set of problems coming from what the Pentagon did. But there were other problems coming from what it didn't do. Almost all attention, for example, was devoted to the danger of a bolt from the blue surprise attack by the Soviets. Very little attention was given to how small wars could escalate, and how actions at a lower level could break the upward spiral. Call it de-escalation. At the time, the Pentagon had zero interest in it. Here's another example: how to end a nuclear war that's already started. Somehow this problem just "slipped through the cracks." Yet how a nuclear war ended might be more important than how it began.

In this case outsiders, academics and think tank strategists, transformed the way the US government thought about nuclear weapons. Again, I believe one reason for this was the degree of danger, which was high. It disciplined the debate.



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Finally, there's a case which I modestly offer from my own work. In the late 1970s a group of political analysts held the idea that the United States was facing a greatly increased first-strike threat from the Soviet Union. This was confidently declared to be the greatest security challenge facing the United States in the 1980s. The responses called for included shifting to a launch on warning policy for US nuclear forces, to vast new missile deployment schemes. About half of Utah was to be covered in mobile race track and other missile configurations. This would have sharply accelerated the arms race. The Soviets would have put a second shift on their missile factories, which were already up and running. This was a field where Moscow held the comparative advantage.

Now, it was true that Moscow deployed a huge missile force. What wasn't true was that they could use it to launch a first strike. Other evidence has come in since the end of the Cold War to support my conclusion here, but let's stick to what information was available at the time. Back then, I was in transition from the senior staff of the Hudson Institute to the Yale faculty. I'd decided to work on the problem of managing nuclear forces, command and control.[3]

What irritated me was that the most hawkish alarmists of a Soviet nuclear first strike were social scientists with no background whatever in physics or operations research, which was exactly my background, having majored in both. They couldn't tell a linear program from a television program. But this had no restraining effect on their confident advice about new deployments and basing schemes.

My studies showed that this was nonsense, that no matter how warped any Soviet decision-maker was, no degree of ideological conviction would lead him to a belief that he could hit the US and avoid a massive retaliatory strike. The uncertainties of a first strike were multiple and enormous. Unless a Soviet leader was clinically insane, he would see this. The US could respond massively. Indeed, it would be far worse than that posited by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara twenty years earlier because the US had a lot more warheads by the early 1980s. MIRVs (multiple independently-targeted reentry vehicles) spread the blast around. Instead of one big overkill blast, there would be multiple blasts over a wide geographic region. MIRVs had a lot more killing power than the old missiles.

But my work also showed something else. Mutually reinforcing alerts, especially in Europe, could drive both sides to a level of super vigilant brinkmanship that was dangerous. By this I mean that by the 1980s the two superpowers couldn't go on alert safely. They hadn't gone on high alert since 1962, in the Cuban Missile Crisis. And it was a damn good thing they hadn't, because they didn't understand the dynamics in their own forces.

At about the same time, other scholars were reaching a similar conclusion. The previous debate dealt with targeting and rational nuclear war strategies. But this assumed that a stable management structure existed, one that could impose political and moral agency on these forces in all circumstances. In the early 1980s there was a shift of frameworks. Managing the forces was central to any conception of stability. Interestingly, I think the same conclusion is true for the second nuclear age we are now entering. But that's another story.[4]

I briefed my conclusions about command instability to senior officials in the Reagan Administration. Thoughtful individuals like Eugene Rostow (head of the Arms Control Agency at the time) had me come in and talk for hours about this with others from the Pentagon and CIA. I like to think I had some impact, both for discounting the imminence of any Soviet first strike, and for pointing out the larger issue that these forces were now so big and complex that no one understood how to manage them in a crisis. Of course, none of us can be certain about policy impact. The Reagan administration shifted from its inclination toward provocative nuclear challenges (like launch on warning), to political ones ("Mr. Gorbachev tear down this wall"). It pressed the Soviet Union, for sure. But it's worth remembering that Reagan's DoD never went on nuclear alert. Even its Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) program was really a long-term techno-economic and political challenge more than it was a dangerous crisis provocation.

The lesson I take from this experience is one that's been relearned time and again. An agency in charge doesn't have the independence to investigate itself, for its own performance lapses or its future design. Three Mile Island, the Catholic Church and charges of widespread child abuse, the intelligence community in 9/11—take your pick. It's a general lesson. But if such institutions can't monitor themselves, then who should do it? One answer, I suggest, is the academy.

Another lesson for me was that if you explore one policy area, you open up the doorway to potentially many more that are fruitful in their own right. The policy process isn't narrowly defined, even if bureaucracies are. I started out curious to learn if the Soviets were developing a first-strike potential. They weren't. But I found something else: Alerts and other dynamics were a lot more dangerous than people realized.

People will listen to well-developed arguments. They're intellectually curious, and capable of being intellectually surprised.

In any case, no one-dimensional continuum comes close to capturing the dynamics outlined in these three cases. I believe that national security and international order were improved, in some cases greatly, by academics who played a role in formulating the debates.

## In Conclusion

My view is that several factors are now converging to increase the academic contribution to national security



https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759271000321X Published online by Cambridge University Press

and international order. While there should be concerns about how close academia gets to power, there are other, equally valid concerns as outlined in the cases already discussed. Pulling out of the debate, drawing up the moat, isn't going to make things better.

A "withdrawal strategy" for academia will only make things worse. It leaves the field open to others who are only too happy to shape the public debate. There is already too much content that comes unfiltered from inside the Washington beltway. A kind of auto-stimulation occurs. Yes, there are sharp political and policy differences among those inside the beltway. I'm not saying that there is homogeneity. But the basic frameworks used in the debate are pretty much the same. The debate is self-referential, as people square off each other in one conference after another, oblivious to larger considerations. I've attended meetings where panelists advocate attacking Iran to disarm her, and in the next breath say that we also might have to move in to Pakistan to protect the nuclear weapons if things fall apart there. When I point out that this means the US Army occupying *four* Islamic countries simultaneously, I get a quizzical look as if I don't understand how the policy process works.

Perhaps I don't. But to quote David Brooks, there's not much thinking going on in the think tanks nowadays. There are myriad reasons for this. But the point I emphasize here is that this creates an opportunity for academia to enter the debate. If we don't, others will.

Finally, the security environment is likely to become more dangerous and this should drive demand for more serious public discussion. That's been the pattern historically. The growth of military-industrial complexes in so many countries, and the increase in the number of nations (and possibly groups) with the atomic bomb will have a large-scale impact on the power structure of international relations. It is changing for other reasons as well, mainly economic. But now geostrategic change has a nuclear context. This isn't the time for the academy to withdraw to an isolated sanctuary. It's just too dangerous for that.

## Notes

1 House and Seymour 1921.
2 Bracken 2006.
3 Bracken 1983.
4 Bracken forthcoming.

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