

# The Ivory Tower Disconnect: Going Beyond Terrorism Experts Out of Academe

Written by Dan G. Cox

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DAN G. COX, AUG 21 2013

Lawrence Mead argued in 2010 there was a disconnect between political science research in academia and practical policy outcomes. He noted, "Today's political scientists often address very narrow questions and they are often preoccupied with method and past literature. Scholars are focusing more on themselves, less on the real world." [1] This criticism of political science and academia is not new. In a recent article in the *Chronicle for Higher Education*, Beth McMurtrie asserted that terrorism experts, whether or not they have accredited Ph.Ds and a relevant publishing track record, are being denied entry or re-entry into the academic fold. This assertion backed by her evidence is a profound indictment of the ivory tower construct but as will be shown in this essay, it is only a partial accounting for the current state of ill-will between *certain* academic departments, universities, and fields and the community of practitioners.

If I may expand the scope of the debate beyond academe's apparent rejection of terrorist practitioners to the academic repulsion with almost anything practical, I believe the force of my argument will increase. I want to be clear that not all departments or universities are created equally when it comes to an aversion to the practical. My father is a retired professor of criminal justice from Illinois State University and his experience as a psychologist in the federal prison system made him an invaluable hire for that program. His experience is not unique in the field of criminal justice. In many Business departments, experience is also highly prized.

But McMurtrie is absolutely on solid ground when she asserts that many social science departments eschew practical experience as being a waste of time at best. McMurtrie identifies political science as possibly being the friendliest to those with practical expertise in the field of terrorism but even here the bias is strong. McMurtrie notes that "political science has its own biases, favoring scholars who take a quantitative approach to terrorism research, using models and simulations to categorize and predict terrorist behavior." [2] I can recall my first experience with this bias in my own Ph.D. program when I was informed I had to take a fifteen hour block of theory courses in order to graduate. I was a double major as an undergraduate in political science and philosophy so I was especially excited to hear that there was an emphasis on political philosophy. Imagine my surprise when I sat through my first "theory" class filled not with Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Plato, or even Foucault, but instead crammed with Greek symbols, statistical jargon, and mathematical proofs. By the time my Ph.D. was conferred, the department, which, when I began my program, had two full-time and one part-time political philosophers, had dwindled to only a single political philosopher. Philosophy was being edged out by statistics and practical studies were frowned upon from the beginning as being not academic enough. If anything, the field has moved even more toward a statistical, anti-practical bent in the intervening fifteen years since I graduated.

I want to warn the reader at this point that I am not anti-statistical. I have used statistics myself in my own research but I find that statistical analysis works best when it is placed in deep context (usually within or juxtaposed against case studies), it is predicated on theory (real theory and philosophical thought not the previously existing statistical literature on the thought), and is aimed at producing practical solutions or policy recommendations. Stephen Biddle's examination of the United States military, *Military Power*, and Stathis Kalyvas' seminal, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, come readily to mind as examples of this hybrid model using statistical and qualitative analyses.

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At least political science is not as bad as anthropology. No other single field has been so antagonistic against the practical, especially as it relates to issues of defense, than anthropology. Much of the recent animus from anthropologists is aimed at the U. S. Army's Human Terrain Systems (HTS) program which was formulated to leverage civilian academic expertise in order to create more efficient, culturally sensitive, and culturally astute interaction between U.S. and allied armed forces and local populations in foreign nations.[3] The field of cultural anthropology became so incensed that some of their fold might work for the U.S. Army HTS program that the American Anthropological Association passed a resolution which made it clear that any anthropologist working for HTS would be shunned. The employment implications this undemocratic coercion represents are self-evident. At least one critic of HTS and the U.S. Army had the guts to explain exactly why this particular practical experience was so reviled amongst the majority of anthropologists. Hugh Gusterson describes his own field as "the academy's most left-leaning discipline...many people become anthropologists out of a visceral sympathy for the kinds of people who all too often show up as war's collateral damage." [4]

While anthropology may be alone as a field that has so viscerally, illogically, and ideologically rejected certain practical experiences, most major university social science programs do not embrace them as beneficial. But this is another nuance that is lost in McMurtrie's article. It is generally major, Ph.D. granting programs that are so averse to practical expertise and terrorism research. Smaller social science programs at mid to smaller universities tend to embrace practical experience as those with outside experience are viewed as potentially more valuable in educating students for the "real world." At the very least, smaller universities tend not to form impenetrable ivory towers that look down on research with practical applications. Many of the graduate programs and especially certificate granting programs on specialized issues of terrorism, homeland security, and weapons of mass destruction have found their homes at smaller, non-Ph.D. granting programs.

Larger Ph.D. granting programs could learn from this. In a competitive market would not a political scientist with a doctoral degree seeking to teach local politics have a natural advantage if he or she had worked for a time in the mayor's office? How about an international relations professor with actual experience working for the World Bank or the United Nations? For all of the professions by various professors that the interdisciplinary approach is better in explaining and teaching complex phenomenon and for all the practical experts that have been and will continue to be paraded in front of graduate and undergraduate students, there is no real movement to break the stove piped and isolated nature of academic departments nor the elitist nature of ivory towers. Statistics will still remain supreme in my field of political science for the foreseeable future but those walking the edge of theory and practice will actually have the greatest impact on the world and perhaps that is just fine by the academics.

[1] Lawrence Mead, "Scholasticism in Political Science," *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 2 (June 2010).

[2] Beth McMurtrie, "Terrorism Experts Are Sought by the Public but Not by Academe," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 24, 2013).

[3] Dan G. Cox, "Human Terrain Systems and the Moral Prosecution of Warfare," *Parameters*, vol. XLI, no. 3 (Autumn 2011).

[4] Hugh Gusterson, "When Professors Go to War: Why the Ivory Tower and the Pentagon Don't Mix," *Foreign Policy*, online edition (21 July 2008).

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## About the author:

**Dan G. Cox** is a professor of political science at the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies. He is interested in systems thinking, operational art, strategy, and anticipating the future of conflict. He is currently working on a book anticipating future pandemic shocks and their implications tentatively entitled *Breaking Point*.

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