

The Return of the Problem-Solvers

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, MAR 19 2014

In the past, I have defended the role of, and need for, expertise in the world because far too often do we see people with little or no clue providing what media outlets deem to be “credible” insights on a given political event. In my defence of expertise, I noted the impact of social media, mass media and the explosion of the blogosphere on perceptions of expertise and the lack of research done in determining whether someone is actually an expert (summary note – they’re usually not).

The other side of this discussion is the assumption people have that those directing foreign policy at the governmental level are qualified, experienced and tested in the difficult issues they will face on a daily basis by being part of a foreign policy establishment. In a recent blog post, Dr. John Schindler forcefully argued that those in the hierarchy of US foreign policy-making and the emerging group of “experts” actually know “nothing”.

Schindler takes direct aim at political science and specifically international relations for having bred a generation of utopian academics that lack courage in dealing with difficult issues and that appear smart on paper but are totally detached from reality, thus leading to his conclusion that they “really don’t know anything.” The most biting aspect of Schindler’s argument comes in his attack on how international relations scholars are educated in the modern academy:

That said, it’s important to note that the ignorance of reality found among our Bright Young Things in DC is hardly their own fault. It can be attributed to their deformed education, especially among those who have studied International Relations, memorizing Game Theory and related unreality when what they needed to be doing was studying languages and history and getting out of the Beltway more. I won’t beat up on IR more than this, since everybody who has encountered IR lately, between zombies and related silliness, already knows how ridiculous it is.

When I first saw his piece, I was quick to assume Schindler was defending himself as an historian and delegitimizing international relations experts for his own ego inflation...until I saw this line in the article’s conclusion:

This diatribe against IR, and more broadly against Political Science, ought not to be taken as a defense of History, my own discipline, since it, too, has become mired in post-modern silliness. Just when its services are needed to help explain the world to decision-makers, History has self-marginalized to an alarming degree. While I would trust the guesses of random people off the street – cabbies, waitresses, bookies – over your average tenured IR guru, I’m under no illusion that your run-of-the-mill History professor is much better.

Schindler is known for being controversial and unafraid of saying what he thinks, which I why I am so fond of his work and commentary on issues, especially his insights on Russia. I have openly disagreed with him on a few issues and in this case, while I want to defend my own field, it is difficult to do.

A caveat here is that I began as a historian and turned into a political scientist, though I have indicted my field in the past for its ignorance of history, especially in theory-building. I have also had the benefit of working in academia, policy, and now in the think-tank world, so I have insights into all three. Schindler is correct to point out that academics typically make lousy policy-makers, especially in modern IR. IR has become a field more focused on sociology and philosophy than one interested in real world events and policy. This has been evident in the current

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crisis in Ukraine when everything the Putin regime has been doing has challenged the predominant assumptions in IR as it currently exists. Imagine the shock of IR scholars when Putin failed to recognize that we live in a “post-sovereign” world where “states don’t invade other states anymore” and “complex interdependence” deters states from that outdated Cold War thinking because of liberal economic links. Oops.

Where I would disagree with Schindler is that I would say not all IR experts, political scientists or historians are meant to be, or want to be, policy-makers. I have not met many postmodern IR scholars itching to write a policy brief on military procurement – for which I am thankful because it would likely be 200 pages of Derridian discourse analysis.

Schindler does have a point in noting those currently making US foreign policy are totally lost. However, I do not believe they “know nothing” – in fact, I think the senior officials in the Obama Administration know a lot. The problem is that what they know is premised on flawed assumptions about the way the world actually works, making them ill-equipped to deal with difficult foreign and defence policy issues.

Appointing a group of utopians who call for humanitarian intervention (or worse yet, R2P) at every turn, who believe democracy can be imposed and grown, who believe war is somehow obsolete, and whose assumptions are premised on cooperation, cosmopolitanism and solidarism is highly problematic. It was equally as problematic during the Bush Administration when foreign policy was being driven by neoconservative beliefs in pre-emptive strikes and American divine superiority. In essence, no foreign policy establishment is ever going to function well, especially in times of crisis, if it is stacked with like-minded political cronies. The most effective groups are those that are comprised of individuals with varying areas of expertise or ideological preference. A good leader wants to hear from realists and liberals, political scientists and historians, etc and make decisions that encompass the best knowledge possible.

When it comes to educating the next generation of policy-makers, there is a problem facing the academy and the crises in Ukraine and Syria demonstrate that. The assumptions that now dominate IR emerged in the unipolar era without seeing major war and the ugly side of great power politics but as the system begins to shift and international politics continue to evolve, those pesky realists need to be dusted off and brought back into the conversation, even if they are not leading the discussions.

I do not believe that every academic needs to do policy-oriented work and that there is a place for what Robert Cox would call “critical theories”. At the same time, I think recent events demonstrate the pressing need for traditional, problem-solving understandings and the less the academy produces experts in those approaches, the more the Putin’s of the world will continue to make the US (and other western states) look as inept as they currently do.

About the author:

Robert W. Murray is Vice-President of Research at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy and an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta. He holds a Senior Research Fellowship at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies and Research Fellowships at the University of Calgary’s Centre for Military and Strategic Studies and University of Alberta’s European Union Centre for Excellence. He is the co-editor of *Libya, the Responsibility to Protect, and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention* with Aidan Hehir (Palgrave, 2013), *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* with Alasdair MacKay (E-International Relations, 2014), and *International Relations and the Arctic: Understanding Policy and Governance* with Anita Dey Nuttall (Cambria, 2014). He is the Editor of the IR Theory and Practice blog on E-IR.