

INTRODUCTION

The Social Role of the Man of Knowledge

AT THE END OF 1961 John Kennedy appointed Walt Whitman Rostow head of the Policy Planning Staff in the State Department. Almost fifteen years before, George Kennan had held the same job and provided intellectual leadership for the Truman administration after publishing the famous X-article, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct.” From this position Rostow, an MIT economist and the celebrated author of *The Stages of Economic Growth* (1960), wrote a paper, “Basic National Security Policy,” that tried simultaneously to elaborate a vision of America’s role in the world and to guide decisions. Rostow circulated it among Kennedy’s advisors on foreign affairs—preeminently former Harvard dean and then assistant for national security McGeorge Bundy and his staff; Robert McNamara and the “Whiz Kids” in the Department of Defense; and Kennan himself, serving briefly as ambassador to Yugoslavia.

During this period, “the best and the brightest” made learned discussion the common currency of Washington politics, and intellectuals and their ideas stepped from the academy onto a world stage. But the times were rife with ironic tales, one of which was Rostow’s. His associates reacted strongly to his essay. Rostow believed that a nuclear war was winnable, but Kennan wrote to him that he would “rather see my children dead” than have them experience such a thing. More important, Kennan told Rostow, the emphasis on economic development was “irresponsible,” “reckless[ly] plundering,” and “vulgar.” McNamara’s staff of civilian strategic thinkers did not bother to take issue with the substance but simply said that Rostow’s work “should be . . . thrown away.” McNamara shared this opinion less openly. The text needed extensive and time-consuming editing, which the secretary of defense did not consider “remunerative.” The men around Bundy also doubted that the ideas were “worth the trouble.” His deputy, Carl Kaysen, called Rostow’s document “bean soup,” “blah, blah, blah, blah,” “silly,” “a lot of nonsense” in which the president “just wasn’t interested.”¹ In a memo to Rostow, Kaysen mocked the ideas of *The Stages of Economic Growth* that permeated the text of the proposed national security document. Bundy, the most significant critic, persistently objected to the idea that Rostow could write down “doctrine” for the United

¹ Kaysen, Oral History (July 1966), pp. 99–102, JFK Library.

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States. It was foolish to think a strategy existed distinct from the decisions of the president and the people around him like Bundy.²

IDEAS AND POLITICS IN AMERICA

This book examines questions of ideas and foreign affairs on which the Rostow episode touches. What is the role of knowledge in politics? What should learning offer public life? How do political and learned culture contrast? This case study gives limited answers to these questions and others like them by exploring what occurred in the United States from World War II to Vietnam, when men interested in applying scholarly concepts to international policy obtained a distinctive voice in the counsels of state.

Over the course of American history, diplomacy has attracted many thoughtful people. In the nineteenth century we can look to Jefferson, Madison, John Quincy Adams, William Seward, and Richard Olney. In the twentieth century, in addition to the people I will talk about in some detail, there are, for example, Elihu Root, Henry Stimson, Herbert Hoover, James Schlesinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Cyrus Vance, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Richard Perle, and Paul Wolfowitz. International affairs beguile contemplative people concerned with civic life. Diplomacy is often separated from the hurly-burly of domestic politics, and secrecy surrounds it. Questions about the nature of a polity, sovereignty, the role of force in human endeavors, and deep issues of *patria* never need be far from the thoughts of the policymaker. An aura of experience and dignity sets the world of the statesman off from that of the politician.

When we say that a decision was “political,” or that something happened “because of politics” or was resolved “on political grounds,” we mean to say that even if a good decision was made, it was not made on the basis of the merits. We often assume that there *is* such a basis, though it may be indeterminate. The contesting parties in the disputed election of 2000 sometimes resembled two packs of animals fighting over a piece of meat. Their spokespeople, however, constantly tried to provide legitimacy for the actions of whichever group they represented, despite the fact that they were partisans. Their inability to ratify the behavior of either side was not surprising. Metaphorically, they had a ten-foot ladder with which they were attempting to span a twelve-foot crevasse, and only miraculous or illusory techniques could be successful. There was an unbridgeable gap between the struggle of interests and the laudable. Even when the winner of the election was determined, the victory lacked

² The dispute over Rostow makes fascinating reading in FRUS 1961–63, vol. 8, *National Security Policy*. For Bundy and staff, pp. 243, 263, 538; for McNamara and staff, pp. 267n, 268ff., 329, 489. Kennan’s criticism is found on pp. 285ff.

authority for many. “Politics” had resolved the conflict—not justice but the structure of power, which might be cultural, military, or intellectual.

THE HISTORICAL SETTING

People who think about civic life worry about this disjuncture between politics and merit. If politics were rational, decisions would be uncontested, and in the twentieth century American thinkers on war and peace emphasized that knowledge and science might leverage politics into the realm of the right. Within the profession of political science itself an ideal occupation was to sit for a time at the side of leaders, and the prerogatives of thinkers in international affairs were emphasized. But commentators brought both historical and contemporary approaches to bear in the hope of creating a more reasoned foreign policy. From the Greeks to the present, historians of political ideas told college-trained Americans, good leaders had had the assistance of experts.³

The Greek Plato headed an institute for statesmen, the Academy. In *The Republic* Plato analogized the harmonious state to the harmonious soul. The just polity and the just individual were for him structurally identical, because reason ruled in each. In the book he outlined the contours of the perfect city led by a class of guardians schooled in Platonic thought. For Plato genuine political understanding was a special sort of knowledge. The guardian-kings would be philosophers, those who studied the nature of life and governance. The guardians would know what was right and good, and would rule their city accordingly. Plato said that the human race would not advance until those who studied philosophy acquired power, or those who had political control became philosophers.

In early-modern and modern Europe, whose traditions were thought to derive from those of the Greeks, political thinkers were also involved in contemporary politics. Niccolò Machiavelli had a minor political career in the small Italian states during the Renaissance. His classic text, *The Prince* (1513), showed how rulers everywhere should use reason and enlightened self-interest

³ In the following account, I have drawn on George H. Sabine’s *A History of Political Theory* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1938), but this text, though the most accomplished work, formulates arguments that can be found in many other texts and contexts; see also Siep Sturman, “The Canon of the History of Political Thought: Its Critique and a Proposed Alternative,” *History and Theory* 39 (2000): 147–66; John G. Gunnell, “Philosophy and Political Theory,” *Government and Opposition* 14 (1979): 199–203, and Gunnell, *The Descent of Political Theory: The Genealogy of an American Vocation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 60–145. Herbert Goldhamer’s *The Advisor* (New York: Elsevier, 1978) is a descriptive summary of these ideas written by a RAND employee. Another account is in Roman Kolkowicz, “Intellectuals and the Nuclear Deterrence System,” in *The Logic of Nuclear Terror*, ed. Kolkowicz (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987), pp. 19–29.

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to preserve their power. According to the canonical wisdom, *The Prince* began the modern, realistic period of political thought, because Machiavelli was concerned with the statesman's effectiveness. He was ambiguous about whether the model statesman should pursue just policies or should merely be, in the standard phrase, Machiavellian.

One hundred and fifty years after Machiavelli, John Locke and his followers, on the contrary, expounded the essentials of democracy. In addition to drawing up the constitution for the Carolina colony in British North America, Locke wrote his *Second Treatise of Government* (1690). He began a tradition of liberal thought, and his successors spoke for the sane impulses of modernizing Britain, which envisioned that politics would purge itself of the irrational. This became the modest equivalent of Plato's hope that one could square the circle of power and knowledge.

A subsidiary current of the late eighteenth century flowing from Locke—the political development that led to revolution in the British colonies—was particularly interesting in the United States. The American Founding Fathers defended a mixed form of popular government. In the *Federalist Papers* three of these men—Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay—pondered the historical experience of the ancient world. They used a rough-and-ready empiricism and common sense of a high order to comment on the Constitution, which had safely navigated the American people thereafter.

By the late nineteenth century, according to accepted views, the social order might pervert the political thinker. Karl Marx indicted Western economic and political life in *Das Kapital* (1867–94). His followers also theorized about society but, by the early twentieth century, showed that the Marxist tradition was equally adept in the world of politics. Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin brought Communist rule to Russia in the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and created the Soviet Union. Although they demonstrated how powerful ideas could be in the real world, as antidemocratic philosophers, these Marxists were, for Americans, crooked instances of Plato's philosopher-kings.

A comparatively mild set of prescriptions about the role of knowledge in politics in the United States paralleled the European developments that gave rise to the Communist state. After the Civil War, a generation of well-to-do citizens advocated the efficient rule of "the best men," devoted to honest government and motivated by the common good.⁴ Political machines in American cities, which immigrants and their slightly more Americanized urban leadership dominated, underscored the need for such governance. Its rationale was elaborated by later university-trained generations skilled in new sciences of society. Reformers brought into government individuals who emphasized

⁴ See John G. Sproat, *"The Best Men": Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

scholarship about administration that managers would carry out impartially. The progressive president Woodrow Wilson, himself one of the first generation of American doctorates in the social study of politics, was prepared at the graduate school at Johns Hopkins and called, ultimately, to the presidency of Princeton. Wilson imbibed common ideas of a neutral commitment to advancing public life. In 1912 his future assistant for both domestic and foreign policies, Edward House, wrote a novel, *Philip Dru: Administrator*. In this fantasy set in the 1920s and 1930s, Dru, a former West Pointer who has won a national prize for strategic thinking in war, leads a successful revolution against a corrupted American government. As a dictator, “panoplied in justice and with the light of reason in his eyes,” he proclaims himself “Administrator of the Republic,” and solves all of the country’s domestic problems. Shortly before giving up power and sailing off with his beloved, the Administrator deftly and efficiently establishes a new international order to “bring about the comity of nations.”⁵

The closest Wilson himself came to this sort of viewpoint was to create a group of university-based advisors, “The Inquiry,” who prepared reports at the Versailles Conference after successful American participation in World War I. This group exemplified the president’s idea of the relation between expertise and foreign policy. For the president and these men, the American program formulated at the end of World War I properly fell within the province of scholarship. *Wilsonianism* was “a scientific peace,” based on “the disinterested finding of specialists.” Wilson famously told a group of these academics: “Tell me what’s right and I’ll fight for it. Give me a guaranteed position.”⁶

The advice of scholars about the virtues of administrative science was vague and talismanic up through World War II. However, after 1945 the discipline changed and so did the goals of the learned involved in politics. Universities emerged from the war with a sense of their scientific character. More hard-headed appraisals for taming the irrationality of politics would replace old nostrums of administrative reorganization. Certainly these ideas antedated World War II, and older students of administration and newer experts on policy shared many beliefs. Nonetheless, a young generation of Ph.D.s argued that real progress warranted innovative claims to authority. Rostow’s essay was only one of many such claims, but just as the responses to it suggest the essay’s tortured history, so the stories of other brainy attempts to get a purchase on global affairs are similarly convoluted.

⁵ Edward M. House, *Philip Dru, Administrator; a Story of Tomorrow, 1920–1935* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1912), pp. 46, 95, 148, 153, 181, 297.

⁶ I have here relied on Lawrence E. Gelfand’s careful work, *The Inquiry: American Preparations for Peace, 1917–1919* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), esp. pp. 16, 33, 328, 330–31.

INTELLECTUALS AND WAR

The “intellectuals” in my title comprise three overlapping circles of scholars and writers thinking about war from 1945 to 1975. The first is a scientifically oriented cadre of experts, usually working in or close to the collegiate world. These men often had a significant association with the RAND Corporation, the think-tank run by the air force. I look at RAND’s organizational theory, ideas of scientific management, and forms of economic analysis; and its impact on social science in traditional centers of higher education. I gauge the bearing of RAND’s theories on diplomatic practice, and vice versa. Influential economists and political scientists from the university world studied war at RAND, or consulted for it, but of particular importance are the essays of Bernard Brodie in the late 1940s, the reports on strategic “vulnerability” identified with Albert Wohlstetter in the 1950s, and the work of Thomas Schelling on deterrence in early 1960s.

This first circle connected professionally to a second: the foreign-policy academics who were allies of the political scientist Richard Neustadt and the historian Ernest May, particularly in “the May Group” at Harvard and the Kennedy School of Government. My account explores the less formal and more historically grounded social science formulated in Neustadt’s *Presidential Power* (1960) and the way the May Group offered advice to those in power. Two events that this circle studied receive detailed attention: the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, and the conflict with the British later that same year over the Skybolt missile.

Third, I emphasize as a separate circle those individuals who had bases in the university and who achieved the highest positions of influence from 1947 to 1969. The narrative focuses on George Kennan, Paul Nitze, Dean Rusk, McGeorge Bundy, Rostow, and Henry Kissinger. The discussion converges on events that committed the United States to the fight in Vietnam.

Overall, the men who actually made decisions were least concerned with *scientific* ideas of any sort, and had a multifaceted view of the application of intelligence to society. Kennan and Kissinger, who eschewed much American policy science, were more central than Rostow, who embraced it. Yet all of them interacted with members of the other two circles, and most had close ties to RAND or Harvard. In looking at this third circle, defined by both position and intellect, I scrutinize how the assumptions of the more social scientific strategists affected the truly powerful who had ties to the academy. The question is: how does political practice, for intellectuals, modify theory? I am concerned not so much with the policies that they carried out, as with the fit of these policies to the mind-set of the policymakers.

The book concludes with a twofold analysis. First there is an intellectual history of what came to be known as *The Pentagon Papers*—the huge secret

document collection of American involvement in Southeast Asia leaked to journalists in 1971. Rather than focusing on the unauthorized release of *The Pentagon Papers* or on the details of the war that this report revealed, I consider it as a collective enterprise undertaken by men with backgrounds at RAND and the Kennedy School. This multiauthored, forty-seven-volume “book” can be read to uncover the academic presuppositions about war and history governing the thinking of the men whose careers my study traces. Second, and in closing, I examine how policymakers came to perceive their role in the postmortem about Vietnam conducted from the mid-1970s until the end of the century. In writing their memoirs, many policymakers with ties to the intellectuals assisted in the construction of a dominant view of the foreign policy of the United States since World War II. I want to place the historical work of people like former defense secretary Robert McNamara in *In Retrospect* (1995) and *Argument Without End* (1999) in the context of ideas that policy scientists and reflective policymakers created.

The three circles, in my estimation, contain the leading men of intellect who were both interested in war and influential in government from 1945 to 1975. They are the experts or theorists or civilian strategists to whom I refer more generally throughout these pages. My intellectuals were not humanists known for their reading in literature and history, or leaders of popular social science—people more likely to be considered intellectuals in the twenty-first century. Nor were they critics like Linus Pauling or Noam Chomsky, or opinion makers like Reinhold Niebuhr. The aim is only to explicate the views of policy intellectuals in the shadow of the White House. After World War II my students of war brought into existence many organizations for the examination of global politics and fields of inquiry such as international relations and security studies, and carved out new niches in older academic disciplines such as economics and political science. These intellectuals finally transformed some dimensions of institutional life in the most prestigious universities in the United States.

No distinctive style of thought about war was unique to Harvard. Scholars of world conflict at Columbia, Chicago, Hopkins, MIT, Yale, and Princeton often shared the same ideas, which also prevailed at RAND, in the military, and among government-employed doctorates. But while many schools of higher learning contributed to the strategic dialogue, Harvard was still foremost, and its organizational nexus deserves special mention. Its products cast a long shadow over this volume. They were, however, not always the men of the old Harvard that Boston Brahmins dominated, but of the cosmopolitan Harvard that flowered after World War II. Cambridge accepted into its midst Jews, the middle class, the able and meritorious. These intellectuals defined Harvard’s commanding position.

THEIR INTELLECTUAL MILIEU

Although the three groups of men complexly acted together, and differed among themselves, they were all part of an educated milieu that needs to be made explicit. A patron saint of American thinkers was the philosopher John Dewey, who taught for ten years at the University of Chicago and then from 1904 to 1929 at Columbia University in New York City. His work that bore fruit in the 1920s and 1930s gave a new flavor to the interest in a reasoned politics and, in the eyes of many followers, a revolutionary justification for their ideas.

Knowledge for Dewey was never an inert relation in which a disembodied mind knew the external world. His “instrumental” theory of truth urged that scientific knowledge integrated present experience with guided activity to deliver desired future experiences. Dewey and his successors—loosely known as pragmatists—presumed that the twentieth century should apply to the human world this experimental method that had advanced understanding of the natural.

Dewey made the argument many times but most compellingly in one essay that became required reading for generations of students, “The Construction of Good,” chapter 10 of *The Quest for Certainty* (1929). Dewey eloquently called for the “method of intelligence” in human affairs. Earlier philosophy had abdicated responsibility. The intelligentsia articulated the “purely compensatory” to console them “for the actual and social impotency of the calling of thought to which they are devoted.” Philosophers had sought “a refuge of complacency in the notion that knowledge is something too sublime to be contaminated by contact with things of change and practice.” Philosophy had made knowledge “a morally irresponsible estheticism.” Again and again Dewey exclaimed that knowledge must be “active and operative.” Only reorganizing the environment, scientifically removing specific troubles and perplexities, would procure human goods. When met with skepticism about the application of “funded experience” and “contriving intelligence” to social life, Dewey contended that if instrumentalism were disallowed in the public arena, the sole options were “routine, the force of some personality, strong leadership or . . . the pressure of momentary circumstances.” *The Quest for Certainty* argued against the distinction between (scientific) fact and (social) value, “is” and “ought.” Ethical judgments were about the consequences of behavior that people desired. But, for Dewey, people could gauge the outcomes of certain kinds of behavior and attribute causality correctly and, in such rehearsals, would figure out what they wanted. Experience verified the essence of morality. The human sciences could provide us the wherewithal for making more adequate judgments. Dewey assumed that what ought to be desired was no

more than what people actually desired when they were clear about what they wanted and how they could get what they wanted.⁷

In a series of short works written in the late 1920s and 1930s Dewey formulated the relevance of instrumentalism to politics in the United States. Of particular importance was *The Public and Its Problems* of 1927. Dewey debated the interest in propaganda among social scientists that World War I had made prominent. The efficacy of democracy depended on a public reared to make decisions about policy. But the Great War had demonstrated to social scientists that deception might sway the people's deliberations from the correct path. Bureaucrats might manipulate information and, as with advertising, appeal to motives that were less than conscious. The political thinker and journalist Walter Lippmann and Harold Lasswell, the political sociologist, captured the contours of these concerns, respectively, in *The Phantom Public* (1925) and *Psychopathology and Politics* (1930). Both men mistrusted the public and, with a bow to the need for the forms of democracy, advocated placing power in the hands of an administrative elite. It would make national policy and, in effect, lead the public for its own good. In addition to Lippmann and Lasswell, a number of thinkers who wrote for journals such as the *New Republic*, the *Nation*, *Common Sense*, and *Plan Age* claimed inspiration from Dewey. They wanted to reconstruct if not abandon democracy in an age of complexity. An educated public, making rational decisions, was a myth. Instead American society must have experts who would act in the name of the public but with access to Dewey's sort of social knowledge.

Dewey did not side with this privileged managerialism even if his ideas were often opaque enough to prop up its prejudices. *The Public and its Problems* argued that America *needed* an articulate public to use pragmatic social knowledge legitimately. Admitting that the United States did not have such a public, Dewey nonetheless insisted that a class of mandarins was not an acceptable substitute. Without an effective democracy to make choices about social issues, experts were "an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few." A public was a precondition to making the scientific method effective in cultural life. Experts gained knowledge, but the public must determine what they investigated and how they employed the results. "The improvement of the methods and conditions of [public] debate, discussion, and persuasion" was mandatory. The technocratic managerial class discovered and made known the facts and experimental knowledge on which policy depended. But democratic debate did the job of the framing and executing courses of action.⁸

⁷ See Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1929), esp. chap. 10.

⁸ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt, 1927), pp. 116–17, 123–25, 196–97, 202–8, quote at p. 209. Robert Westbrook's *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) takes up these issues carefully, making the strongest case for the interpretation of Dewey as an antitechnocratic liberal.

Many versions of Dewey's instrumentalism flowered across the United States.⁹ As we have seen, some who claimed to follow Dewey believed that scientific administrators ought to direct the culture. Other followers were ardent reformers and placed a compassionate human understanding at the heart of their lives. Still other "scientific naturalists" downplayed reform, stressed the impartial nature of social investigation, and gave priority to the quantifiable aspects of study. A European movement centered in Vienna in the 1920s and 1930s influenced the strictest scientific naturalists. When Hitler came to power in Germany in the 1930s, members of the Wiener Kreis—the Vienna Circle—and their adherents emigrated to the United States and established logical positivism—or just positivism—as an important school of thought. Positivists explored the foundations of the physical sciences and argued that the sort of empirical knowledge that the physical sciences embodied was the only sort. Using the tools of mathematical logic, they set out clear-cut criteria concerning the form of knowledge, and the appropriate techniques for obtaining it.

Dewey and his many adherents ritualistically invoked the scientific method as the means to obtain social knowledge. But whereas they were fuzzy about the precise nature of scientific reasoning, the positivists were not. They looked at the hard sciences and their theoretical underpinnings and urged that a single method dominated all legitimate investigation. Two philosophers, Carl Hempel at Princeton and Ernest Nagel at Columbia, were the leading postwar positivists. Nagel had studied with the naturalist philosopher Morris Cohen of City College and Dewey himself at Columbia. Cohen and Nagel together authored a textbook that showed the spiritual closeness of many pragmatists and positivists, *An Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method* (1934).¹⁰ Nagel's career extended well into the postwar period, however, and reached its height in 1961 with the publication of *The Structure of Science*.¹¹ Hempel's most significant writings were collected in a work of 1965, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation*.¹²

Dewey and the positivists famously differed about the widely known positivist argument that science was value-free, and that there was a cleavage between facts and values, the world of the scientist and that of the moralist. Positivists then made the denigrating corollary that the empirical meaning of science contrasted to the emotive meaning of nonscientific language, which was strictly *meaningless*. This position conflicted with that of the instrumentalists who refused to distinguish between value and fact and who believed that

⁹ Varied appraisals of Dewey's influence on political science may be found in the symposium "Dewey's Pragmatism, Social Inquiry, and Democracy," *American Journal of Political Science* 43 (1999): 518–647.

¹⁰ New York: Harcourt, Brace.

¹¹ *The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961).

¹² *Aspects of Scientific Explanation, and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

morality was being made experimental. But the identical emphasis on the one experimental method that promised to give us a purchase over nature minimized these differences, especially among the educated readers of philosophy. Positivists and pragmatists often united in disdain for soft, humanistic inquiry, and in their respect for methodological precision and statistics.

My foreign policy intellectuals were steeped in these writings. Both of my first two groups of intellectuals—the more mathematically oriented RAND theorists of war and the more historically oriented scholars influenced by Neustadt—largely agreed with the dominant credo of their time. Views about the need for advanced training in economics, political science, or sociology and the challenge of using it in a democratic polity were boilerplate in the literature of the postwar period. As one statement of principles put it, Washington officials, “the collective modern prince,” “obviously require[d]” social science, which was reason “in its modern dress.” Few policy scientists, said a second, “would dispute that decision-makers are in need of assistance from policy science.” “No sensible person,” wrote the scientific philosopher-strategist Morton Kaplan, “would want . . . a president of the United States unable to understand the restrictions placed upon his possible decisions by correct strategic choice and analysis.” But, argued Richard Solomon, a government official and social scientist Ph.D., the decision-making “consumers” often lacked the training necessary to “absorb the insights of the analyst.” Max Millikan, who had an illustrious career going back and forth between government and university, nonetheless allowed that if the diplomat had the “intellectual curiosity and persistence” to explore social science tools, he could “substantially improve the wisdom of his own practical judgments.” The famous MIT social scientist Daniel Lerner argued that while democratic politics might seem to compromise expertise, social science had to prove “worthy of its mission” by demonstrating the connection between knowledge and democracy. It was, John Steinbruner insisted, a “hard task” to integrate “the abstract paradigms of decision theory into the realities of political life.”¹³

¹³ These rhetorical expressions were conventional and common in the literature and can be found everywhere. In order, Pio D. Uliassi, “Government Sponsored Research on International and Foreign Affairs,” in *The Use and Abuse of Social Science: Behavioral Research and Policy Making*, ed. Irving Louis Horowitz (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1971), p. 287; Richard Smoke and Alexander George, “Theory for Policy in International Affairs,” *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973): 410 (the end of the sentence reads, “in coping with the long time horizon”); Kaplan, *On Historical and Political Knowing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 49; Solomon, “Political Culture and Diplomacy in the Twenty-first Century,” in *The Political Culture of Foreign Area and International Studies: Essays in Honor of Lucian W. Pye*, ed. Richard J. Samuels and Myron Wiener (Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s, 1992), p. 152; Millikan, “Inquiry and Policy: The Relation of Knowledge to Action,” in *The Human Meanings of the Social Sciences*, ed. Daniel Lerner (New York: Meridian, 1959), p. 179; Lerner, “Social Science: Whence and Whither?” in Lerner, *Human Meaning*, pp. 29–32; Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision: New Dimensions of Political Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 342.

At the same time, in the thirty years after 1945, and not least in foreign-policy circles, a countertradition hostile to Dewey grew up. It especially disparaged the technocratic aspects of his thought, the “scientism” of university learning, and social-science positivism. But in the American context, this countertradition was a subsidiary current and never fully worked out as a position in the human sciences. It did obtain a hold on some of my intellectuals who achieved positions of power, notably George Kennan and Henry Kissinger, and might serve to focus disagreement. For example, Kennan’s outraged response to Rostow’s paper “Basic National Security Policy” revealed Kennan’s distaste for the social science position Rostow embodied. But it is unclear that this dialogue between supporters and critics of instrumentalist ideas led to consistently different policy prescriptions.

THEIR HISTORICAL ASSUMPTIONS

In addition to this conversation about the character of social knowledge, my intellectuals all shared important substantive assumptions about the recent past. The first concerned Woodrow Wilson and World War I. The United States joined the Allied Powers to defeat Germany in 1917 and 1918, and then Wilson presided over the Versailles peace conference, on which he imposed his new League of Nations, an organization of states that would band together to prevent war. Despite Wilson’s sponsorship, the United States rejected the Treaty of Versailles and did not join the League. Twenty-five years later, commentators believed that the harsh peace imposed on Germany and the American retreat from the world had contributed to the collapse of the state system and had led to World War II. Opinion divided over whether Wilson’s political ineptness was responsible for the isolationism in the United States, or whether the domestic opponents who outmaneuvered Wilson must accept the blame. Nonetheless, a consensus existed that the United States was called upon to enter the Great War and that Wilson was central to its outcome. Wilson was a tragic hero for some commentators, while others dismissed his high-flown sensibility as moralistic and naive.

No one gave much thought to the context in which Wilson developed his peace plan—the collapse of Russia, the rise of Bolshevism there, and the public repudiation of European colonialism. Communism and imperialism propelled Wilson’s formulations, and appropriate deliberation about them might have made his later critics more sympathetic to his alternative to Leninist revolution and empire. The later critics, too, insufficiently appreciated the impact, on many thoughtful observers, of the trench warfare on the western front. Wilson’s concept of world order—even if that of an innocent—can be seen as a reasoned response to the unprecedented failure of traditional diplomacy that World War I represented. Debating the role of Wilson, policy intellectuals assumed by the

1940s that the United States must pursue an internationalist and interventionist role but that the tough-minded must overrule the high-minded.

The second assumption concerned the American entry into World War II. While the rise of an avenging Germany in the late 1930s focused American policy, events in the Far East brought the United States into the conflict. There, most clearly, the Americans resisted the Japanese war against China. From 1937 onwards, and particularly after 1939, the United States opposed Japanese expansionism. Believing for a long time that the Japanese would not go to war against them, the Americans pressured Japan economically. In a strike against American military installations at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, at the end of 1941, Japan broke out of a system of international politics in Asia that the United States dominated. Following the “sneak attack,” the United States was brought into the war against Hitler when, allied to Japan, Germany declared war on the United States.

The specialists of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s discounted the context of political strife that formed the background to Pearl Harbor. They paid little attention to the economic competition in the Far East, or the economic diplomacy that the United States used to mold international politics in Asia. With the experts, as for many Americans, the only issue was deceit. Without disputing the American response to the Japanese in World War II—including the use of two atomic bombs at its end—one needs to recognize that students of strategy in the United States had no interest in the role that America played in bringing on the Far Eastern war, or even in the history of the tensions that had led up to the fighting. In the postwar period scholars of strategic studies would assume that war came through malevolent surprise.

The last assumption I call the World War II syndrome. When John Kennedy was inaugurated in 1961, the world learned that the torch had been passed to a new generation of Americans. Those who set the tone of much public life in the 1960s had been, like Kennedy, junior officers in the war. Unlike Kennedy, most had not seen combat, but more articulate than many who had, the new leaders found issues of war and peace unambiguous. They had opposed the Nazis in Germany and the Japanese who had launched the attack at Pearl Harbor. Throughout the “hard and bitter peace” that Kennedy said followed the war a different enemy had emerged in global communism. In a long and furious contest of interest and ideology, the Soviet Union and its allies were assimilated to Nazism under the rubric of totalitarianism. The issues in the struggle against Germany (and Japan) were ethically compelling. The proud sense of being on the side of the righteous in the late 1940s and beyond in the Cold War was continuous with the equivalent sense that had emerged in the late 1930s and early 1940s. My intellectuals *knew* that when the crunch came, America was right and its enemies wrong. They assumed that global politics held little nuance.

As the conflict with the Soviet Union evolved after 1945, the authorities only had to choose between an assertive response to the Russian threat, and an aggressive response. They had few second thoughts, and hardly any agonized about the possibility of American aggrandizement. Defense intellectuals were simplistic in their assessment of Russian strength in Eastern Europe after the war, complementing that of the United States in Western Europe; in their assessment of the extension of Soviet power around the world, again complementing that of the United States; and in their assessment of the emergence of a nuclear arsenal in the USSR, finally complementing that in America. This judgment is not meant to deny the superiority of Western values over those of the communists in the long competition, or to imply that the Russians had a less distorted view of American diplomacy. Rather, it highlights a lasting aspect of the American approach—the lack of complication in the imagination of men who could make complex appraisals in other spheres.¹⁴

The nature of their reflection about the basic issue of the Cold War had one crucial consequence for most of the period I have considered. The civilian strategists regularly overestimated the power and malignity of their Soviet adversary. After World War II the United States was the most formidable nation in the world. The war had invigorated the American economy, while it had devastated that of other nations. The United States' population was intact, and its technological superiority overwhelming. As the various nations rebuilt after the war, however, American hegemony would undoubtedly lessen. This basic fact underlay America's relations with its European allies in the war, with Germany and Japan, and with the Soviet Union. But however much more powerful the United States was than the USSR, the American policymakers saw the continuing comparative growth of Russian strength as almost fatally compromising their polity. Henry Kissinger's famous book of 1961, *The Necessity for Choice*, began with the flat statement that the United States could "not afford another decline like that which has characterized the past decade and a half," a further "deterioration of our position."¹⁵ The appropriate measure was the supremacy of 1945.

FINDINGS

This book examines the origins and social locus of expert thinking on defense, the trajectory of this thought, its influence on policy, and its grip on political

¹⁴ The same kind of balanced point is made by Matthew Evangelista, "Second-Guessing the Experts: Citizens' Group Criticisms of the Central Intelligence Agency's Estimates of Soviet Military Policy," *International History Review* 19 (1997): 593.

¹⁵ Kissinger, *The Necessity for Choice: Prospects of an American Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 1.

reality. I direct attention to the truth-value of the ideas but also to the culture of the scholars, and the demands that their training, ambition, sense of public service, and the state placed on them. I am interested in foreign policy itself, but more in what my intellectuals made of it. The emphasis is on words more than actions. I am not unconcerned with doing and deserving, but emphasize thinking *about* war. I study the decisions of the powerful, but more closely the ideas of the intellectuals among them and the concepts of scholars close to power. The story begins with the rise of men of knowledge to positions of authority after World War II, and charts the development of more formal concepts during the 1950s when a mentally conservative administration thwarted intellectuals. The history continues with an elaboration of various modes of social science understanding that had become self-congratulatory by the early 1960s, and moves toward the uncomfortable resolution of Vietnam. The book concludes with the perceived discrediting of both scientific and nonscientific visions in the persons of Robert McNamara and Henry Kissinger, but finds that the intellectuals found a new role for themselves conjuring up formulas of expiation.

Nonetheless, the study is more than a history of American knowledge about statecraft, for the text joins narrative with an analysis of the adequacy of our social understanding. My intellectuals include a broad range of thinkers who held a variety of views on an array of topics. Although oversimplification is a danger, some limited generalizations are warranted, and some striking characteristics stand out.

The evidence requires that we be skeptical about the knowledge that all of these men declared to have. While they professed deep understanding, they actually groped in the dark. Much of the time fashion was more important than validity. At the same time, irrespective of the quality of their knowledge, in the usual case the ideas of the cerebral strategists had little causal impact. They served to legitimate but not to energize policies. Intellectuals were most effective when they showed, after the fact, that some endeavors had been desirable. Or they articulated schema that exculpated policymakers—or themselves—from responsibility for action later identified as bad. The basic though not the only function of strategic ideas was to provide politicians with the fictions used to give meaning to policies for the public.¹⁶

Decision makers often wanted impartial advice from experts, but the notions that had currency frequently only burnished the reputations of statesmen. Scholars wanted to assist leadership in both a realistic and an ethical fashion, but they only credited selected conceptualizations, and government service required constraints on thinking.

¹⁶ I use the term *fictions* in the sense of Edmund Morgan, in *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: Norton, 1988).

A final finding is that many of the strategists I have examined were essentially apolitical, in that they lacked what I must call for want of a better phrase *elemental political sense*. It is almost as if they sought to learn in a seminar room or from cogitation what only instinct, experience, and savvy could teach. They frequently showed themselves blind to the jugular of international affairs. This stance often accompanied a distrust of democratic impulses in foreign affairs and a need to engage in a simplified public information program, or a fear of what a poorly guided polity might do. This collection of traits and beliefs might characterize both social scientists and members of the countertradition.

I have chosen a number of very difficult examples—those concerning destruction and killing—to suggest the irony at the heart of modern political studies. The edifice of social knowledge in the United States presupposes that it can offer something to politics and better lead us to public goods. Statecraft demands knowledge. Yet my philosophers in government knew and understood little, and had little influence qua intellectuals, except to perform feats of ventriloquy. But whatever distortions attached to their commitments and to unyielding attempts to bend the world to their purposes, they seized on a reality that is hard to dislodge. If we give up on knowledge and thus, to some degree, social science as even a partial guide in human affairs, we leave decisions to habit, authority, or chance. What alternatives do we have to the patient and systematic investigation of phenomena and the exploration of causes and consequences? That is, what alternatives do we have to the sort of reasoning in which the theorists of conflict engaged?

Overall, American culture paid a high price for a product of dubious value. But that does not mean that the price was too high. For me the hard lesson is that we do not have any good alternatives to the constricted thinking dominant from the 1940s through the 1970s; and that we cannot do without thinking. The accepted wisdom of the era fell short of what we might want, but I have been hard pressed to offer alternatives. My conclusions are more a meditation than a call for radical change.