

Desch, Michael C. *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019, 255 pages. \$35.00.

In numerous academic disciplines, there is often a discussion about the differences between practitioners and academics. These discussions frequently lead to the argument that there needs to be bridges built between practitioners and academics to provide a flow of knowledge and understanding in order to create more solid foundations. In his new book, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security*, political scientist Michael C. Desch notes the importance of these issues, particularly where national security policymaking frameworks and concepts are concerned.

Desch begins his book with the intriguing notion that there is a widening gap between policymakers and political scientists in the realm of statecraft. He writes, “I suggest that this growing scholarly/policy gap is the result of the professionalization of the discipline of political science” (p. 3). He also offers a particularly astute observation noting, “Rigor and relevance are not necessarily incompatible but they are often in tension, which is why social science’s relevance question endures” (p. 3). Desch takes this argument and gives readers a glimpse into his intriguing perspectives which highlight “the changing relationship between the discipline of political science and its subfield of international security from the early years of the twentieth century through the post Cold War era” (p. 6).

Desch’s argument is an intriguing one. He adds to existing scholarship within the realm of political science as he discusses the waxing and waning of policy concepts that numerous other scholars have observed. While this argument is not new to the literature and can be applied to numerous areas of political science and public policy, Desch relates this argument to national security studies. In constructing his framework, Desch touches on other social science scholars

including Durkheim, Weber, Kingdon, and Huntington, firmly placing his assertions within the context of such literature. In doing so, Desch identifies an important point that numerous political scientists can agree on. Further, he provides examples of this through many important historical events that many security studies scholars argue are particularly important..

Cult of the Irrelevant is broken up into nine chapters that go through several important events that shaped national security policy in the United States. Desch discusses World War I and World War II, the Cold War, Vietnam, the events of September 11, 2001, and major economic watersheds. In his concluding chapter, Desch notes important arguments including “policy engagement—particularly offering explicit policy recommendations—is both unwise and unnecessary in the view of many social scientists” (p. 245). Desch also explains that, despite the development of the Internet and blog articles, many policymakers do not use these types of sources for their decision making process (p. 245-246). In short, he argues that the gap between practitioners and scholars remains.

While Desch brings up many important points about these historical events and how they shaped national security policy, he also includes a chapter that highlights the gaps in his own arguments. Doing so ties up any remaining loose ends and demonstrates the intrigue of his assertions. In short, Desch’s book is a particularly fascinating read. He makes important connections and advances academic discussions about national security. This book would be a great read for anyone interested in post-Cold War security studies literature, or for graduate students interested in understanding more about the waxing and waning arguments related to the gap between policymakers and policy academics. *Cult of the Irrelevant: the Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* helps us to contemplate the policymaking process at the federal level.

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