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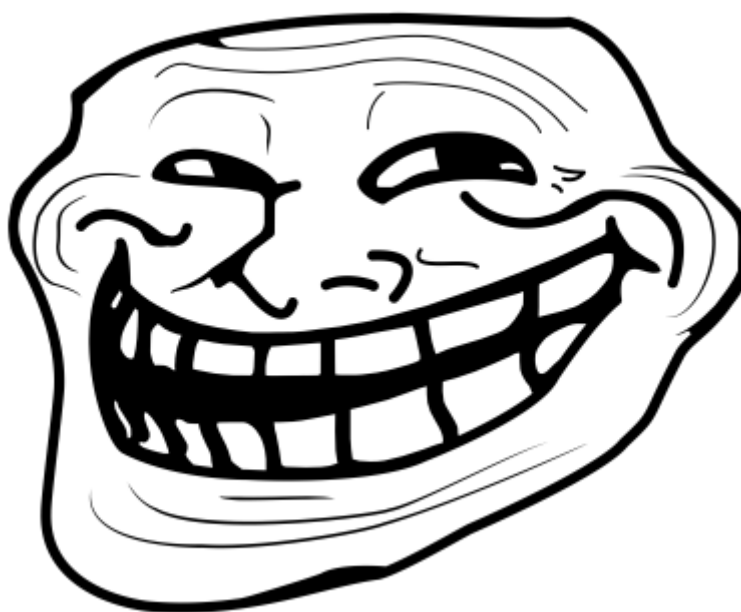
# Trolling for Resurrection: The Death Throes of a Network, or the Success of Science

*Posted on*

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The recent pontification in *Perspectives on Politics* of some of the IR Security trolls ([Desch/Walt](#),) is drawing attention, and though I should not feed the trolls, I can be challenged when it comes to self control.



Dan Drezner [thinks](#) this is useful fodder for discussion.

You should read the whole thing if you're a political scientist or someone who wants to see more political science used in policy discussions. I'm not entirely persuaded by Desch's claim that

political science's emphasis on method has led to marginalization, for [reasons I've outlined before](#). Still, it's a debate worth having.

I disagree. To explain why I make three points.

1. What these trolls want has long existed.
2. The impact of science on policy ain't like they imagine (short or long run).
3. This trolling is part of the death throes of an old elite network, which is being dismantled by science.

### *Engaging the Public*

To begin I must dispense with the falsehood that there is a decline in political scientists's engagement with the public.

Ahhh, the [death of the public intellectual](#) canard.[1]

Desch claims to document a decline "in social scientists' willingness to engage in policy-relevant scholarship over time."

He explains:

My theory is that social science, at least as it has been practiced in the United States since the early twentieth century, has tried to balance two impulses: To be a rigorous science and a relevant social enterprise.

What we apparently have, it seems, is a failure to strike a balance.

So, what's the problem? Is access to outlets that produce content for policy makers drying up? Do [Foreign Policy](#) and [Foreign Affairs](#) still publish? How about the [New York Review of Books](#)? The [London Review of Books](#)? [The New Yorker](#)? Has the [Council on Foreign Relations](#) shuttered its doors? Do major newspapers still publish Op Eds? Have the IR

security folks been shut out of having their work published there?

And thus the first canard is revealed. The IR security folks want to “speak truth to power,” and the institutions that they have used for decades to do so are alive and well.

Yet Desch and other [perestroikans](#) are not only decrying the “death of the public intellectual.” Another complaint, it seems, is that the scientific turn of the discipline (referred to as narrowing by privileging technique, neo-positivism, and so on) produces greater distance between the work done in the discipline and the public sphere. Quoting the lamentations of several scholars, he observes that their

common concern is that a social science guided primarily by internally-oriented research agendas and assessed by self-generated metrics of excellence is not likely to encourage members of the guild to speak to broader audiences nor gauge scholarly excellence by broader relevance criteria of social or political import.

[Here](#) is Rick Wilson on the public accessibility of political science research:

A lot of our best basic research often seems esoteric and is rarely approachable to those outside our own specialization. But this need not be the case. Some disciplines are excellent at promoting their work and getting the word out. Consider the search for the Higgs boson and the hoopla when it was found. Most of us don’t know what the Higgs boson is and why it matters (much less being able to see it). Yet we all know it is important and it was a remarkable scientific achievement. The physics community did a great job making their work accessible.

Rick puts his money where his mouth is, creating engaging

videos on his YouTube channel [Politricks](#) that describe technical research in accessible language, much like Steven Levitt at [Freakonomics](#).<sup>[2]</sup> Daniel Blocq has a [great example](#).

But the key take-away is that scholars like Desch apparently do not understand how science impacts policy. *Hint*: surveying policymakers and asking them how much they value the research published in academic journals provides zero useful information. That's an example of the drunk looking for lost keys under the lamp.

### *How Science Impacts Policy*

Science can impact public policy both in the short run and over the long run. All discussion of this issue I have seen ignores the long run, so I address it momentarily. First, however, the short run.

Wilson's point, above, is wonderful because it both notes how scientific work enters the public sphere *and* observes that our ability to DIY is expanding. The DIY option is new. Scientific disciplines have for decades primarily relied on science reporters to make their work known to the public. I addressed this in my Presidential Address ([preprint PDF](#)) to the [Peace Science Society \(International\)](#).

I have the impression that some (many?) [of us expect policymakers to engage our scholarship directly], but to me this is silly. Has any science become influential due to non-expert consumption of its peer review publications? Of course not. Journals like *Nature*, *Science*, and *The New England Journal of Medicine* have press releases for a reason, and we are starting to see some of that in political science. More generally, we must (find agents to) translate our technical work into publicly digestible form, and in the conclusion I briefly touch on this

issue.

I need here to make a brief aside. In the address I make the controversial claim that those of us who study peace and war must avoid the concepts that politicians, pundits and reporters (whom I call *politicos*) use to engage in public debate about conflicts. In brief, I note that *politicos* use words to mobilize, and thus the terms that they use necessarily become politicized, inseparable from the cleavages in the conflicts they are used to characterize. To the extent that we uncritically use those same terms, we tend to (1) limit generalization and (2) when we then enter the public domain our terms carry that baggage. To resolve this problem I call upon us to self-consciously adopt abstract terms free from political baggage (read the essay [here](#); PDF)

This is what I have to say in that Conclusion.

We are idea-smiths, and the concepts that we employ are central to our craft. Our collective output has a far-reaching impact, but it occurs in the long run. *Politicos*, on the other hand, are exercising power in real time and the short run. Peace scientists should and will engage public debate, conduct research funded by governments, and consult with policy-makers. When we wear that hat it would be counter-productive to employ the specialized language we use to communicate with one another and expect those audiences to follow. Just as we require our students to learn to adopt different definitions of words depending on context, we too must expect it of ourselves. We have invested heavily in intellectual capital and are well overqualified to be able to move back and forth across specialized v. politico discourse. Arguments that if we want our research to be relevant to policymakers we must theorize using the terms used by *politicos* are folly.

Desch and others apparently expect us to build theories using the terms and debates that politicians use. Perhaps these people imagine that we will “define the terms of debate.” What nonsense. It will fail in the short run (do not compete with a politician’s bully pulpit) and likely limits the generality of our theories.

So when I read people decrying the collapse of public engagement and the increasing irrelevance of the type of research peace scientists like myself do, I get more than a bit grumpy. Consider first the short run.

In closing I wish to observe an exciting development that will facilitate our ability to engage and influence policymakers. [The Monkey Cage](#) of *The Washington Post* is edited by political scientists, and publishes content exclusively produced by political scientists and other social scientists who study politics. Two of the contributors at [The Upshot](#) of *The New York Times* are political scientists, and the blog [Political Violence @ a Glance](#) has a wide readership outside of academia. The data journalism site [fivethirtyeight.com](#) got its start producing ensemble forecasts of US Presidential elections. In short, there is considerable reason for optimism that peace [and political] science will increasingly gain relevance in public affairs.

Researchers like Rick Wilson, Erik Voeten (see his [response](#) to Desch), Daniel Blocq and many, many others get it.

Turning to the long run, I am unable to improve upon John Maynard Keynes’s [presentation](#):

the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from

any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas. Not, indeed, immediately, but after a certain interval; for in the field of economic and political philosophy there are not many who are influenced by new theories after they are twenty five or thirty years of age, so that the ideas which civil servants and politicians and even agitators apply to current events are not likely to be the newest. But, soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil.

Our students go out and become decision makers, taking with them the simplified, accessible versions of our abstract theories and, hopefully, an appreciation for the value of scientific research.

Do the “little ideas” produced by “technique oriented” “neo-positivist” peace scientists impact policy? In his [book](#) on the historical decline of violence Steven Pinker’s discussion of the democratic peace includes a 2008 exchange on [The Daily Show](#) during which Jon Stewart tries to persuade Tony Blair that the 1982 UK-Argentine conflict contradicts the democratic peace.

Nope. No policy relevance whatsoever for the “small ideas” that emerge from “technique oriented” peace scientists.

But the key point is that nobody believes that Blair, Clinton, Bush or Stewart have read [Russett & Oneal](#), [Fearon](#), [BdM^2S^2](#), or even [Desch](#) (PDF). The transmission of that research to the public sphere occurred slowly through the myriad diverse processes of public engagement *and teaching* that, apparently, are hidden from the view of perestroikans.



Turning to personal experience, work I published in *JCR* in 1995, and a student I supervised in the early 00s, [played a role](#) in the US government's [ICEWS](#) project, a DARPA initiative that produced what the perestroikans would characterize as a “technically complex” system that is now used on a daily basis by Central Commands in the US military. What’s the “little idea” in that *JCR* article? That understanding the behavior of states and dissidents in conflict requires a shift away from the structures of polities, economies and societies and modeling the interaction of the actors, a la Richardson Arms Race models, and models of verbal interaction from social psychology.

Undergraduate students in my human rights course are exposed to the idea that science can be useful for understanding human rights violations. One such student went on to earn a PhD at Illinois (I served as an external member on his committee), and then became a researcher at Amnesty International. He brought with him the “little idea” that the scientific approach to data collection and analysis was useful to the practice of human rights and ultimately raised the funding to launch, and then managed, AI's [first foray](#) into satellite imagery, a tool that has become, almost 10 years later, standard.

And I am but one “technique oriented,” “irrelevant” peace scientist. Imagine what the policy impact of the full set of our “little ideas” and their impact on our students must look like.

This, then, is the remarkable irony of the drivel from these perestroikans: precisely as the impact of political science is on the rise they are decrying the growing “irrelevance” of contemporary political science.[3]

To review, it is not true that there are few channels by which political scientists can engage the public sphere, nor is it true



that the success of so-called “technique oriented” “neo-positivism” has increasingly made the discipline less policy relevant. How, then, might we explain the bleating of these perestroikans that the sky is falling? Here is Desch:

[My objective is to document how these trends in political science are marginalizing the sub-field of security studies, which has historically sought both scholarly rigor and real-world relevance.

Yet given the continued existence of the standard outlets and institutions these folks have used to influence “the beltway,” what marginalization is he referring to? Reproductive failure.

*When a Network's Offspring don't Thrive*



I am uncertain how much of the broad perestroika movement is a response to poor reproductive success, but I suspect it plays a substantial role. With respect to the IR Security portion of that movement there is no doubt. In October 1993 John Mearsheimer wrote a letter to David Lake decrying UCSD's “hostility to security studies.”[4] Here are the opening two

paragraphs:[5]

I am writing in response to your September 20, 1993 letter asking me for names of scholars who might be suitable for the IR position that UC-San Diego is trying to fill. You write that UCSD is searching for "a specialist in international relations, with an emphasis on international security," although you "are taking an expansive definition of the field."

I believe there are talented international security scholars who would fill the bill. However, after thinking about the matter, I have decided not to provide you with names. My reasoning is simple: I am not convinced UCSD is serious about hiring in the security field. I certainly do not think you are interested in building a program in this area. Outward appearances suggest that your aim is to go through the motions of looking for a security person, hire someone outside of the security mainstream, but then call that person a security expert. To be frank, I do not see the value of participating in such an enterprise.

Mearsheimer asks why UCSD hadn't hired a single "security expert" in the recent past, and opines that "there are two main sources of this hostility, one ideological, the other methodological."

mentioned above -- tend to dislike Realism intensely. I am always amazed at how the mere mention of Ken Waltz's name (or even Joe Grieco's) can make non-Realists visibly agitated. A good part of this antipathy towards Realism is ideological in nature, as Realism is widely -- and incorrectly -- viewed in academia as a conservative or hawkish paradigm, while the political center of gravity in most political science departments is well to the left of center. Thus, political science departments are not going to be terribly receptive to security studies for ideological reasons.

The second source of contempt is methodological. Students of international security pay much attention to history, and often employ the comparative case study method. Political science departments have hired large numbers of formal theorists over the past decade, and they are often skeptical, if not outright hostile, to qualitative social science. From what I gather, this is especially true at UCSD.

Taken together, this combination of ideological and methodological biases constitutes a formidable barrier to security scholars, and one that other subfields of political science do not face.

Mearsheimer closed by asking Lake to share the letter with his UCSD colleagues, and said he would share it with other members of the IR security field. That produced several replies, and back in the day that led to photocopies of the set getting passed around. You can read a collection of many of those letters [here](#) (pdf).

It is worth noting that UCSD interviewed, but did not extend an offer to, Desch (a Mearsheimer student) back in 1990 or 1991, and that Walt is one of those who joined the exchange, defending Mearsheimer's letter.

Desch's and Walt's contributions to the current issue of

[Perspectives on Politics](#) is thus the latest version of a verbal, public objection by IR scholars at famous, influential private universities who cannot fathom that their offspring do not thrive.

The arguments have varied little over the decades, and they are no more likely to change the field today than they have since the 1990s.

Reproductive failure has to suck. I have invested heavily in my [PhD students](#), and been very fortunate. But here's the thing. **It has never occurred to me to consider myself entitled to place my students anywhere. Where does such a sense of entitlement come from?** Is it just something that folks from/at elite universities develop?

The quasi-public attack on hiring at UCSD gave way to raising the ideas bandied about in those letters in articles by Walt, Mearsheimer and Desch, ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#)) among others.

*Yawn.*

As for the "big ideas" canard, here's a thought experiment. Who among them would have recognized the "big idea" in John Nash's highly abstract, "technical" (it was expressed using mathematics!) [breakthrough](#)?

So called "big ideas" turn out to be whatever a given group of High Priests declare them to be. The IR Security perestroikans are fighting to sustain their crumbling status as High Priests.

I guess this is little but the [OxBridge problem](#), USA Stylee. That is, where admittance to the elite OxBridge club remains largely a function of class in the UK, in the US it is largely a function of race (white) and strong academic performance in high school and college along with excellent test scores and the ability to cultivate sponsors to write letters. Graduates of the elite universities understandably expect to have professional

success. After all, they spent most of their intellectual lives among the small set of “smartest in the group” and they did work their butts off. When their professional success falls short of expectations, the status inconsistency must be difficult.

And casual observation demonstrates that those I know among the Perestroikan movement hold PhDs from elite universities.

This casts the movement in a new light: its formation was likely dominated by status-deprived political scientists who reached out to their advisors to sign on to their movement.

Indeed, Desch, was a Lieutenant in the Perestroikan movement (he is interviewed in this 2001 [article](#) in *The Chronicle for Higher Education* <gated>), and Mearsheimer signed on, as did the others who wrote in support of Mearsheimer’s critiques of hiring at UCSD.

The arguments Desch and Walt recycle in the current issue of *Perspectives on Politics*, then, are little more than the self-interested, false narrative about the collapse of “big ideas” and declining public engagement which imagines outlets do not exist for the theoretical output of political scientists to enter the public domain. And that is why I disagree with Drezner that they warrant reading and discussion. Do not feed the trolls.

Science is little more than an agreement among its practitioners to expose all causal claims to logical theorizing, evaluating the resultant implications with relevant evidence, and making publicly available all of the information required to evaluate both the logic and empirical evaluation. It is the best human practice for developing causal explanation, and its ascent in political science needs to be celebrated. Whether one earned their PhD at an elite university or a non-elite public university like myself is not pertinent when it comes to making scientific claims. That

fact undermines a hierarchy that used to return value to those who participate in its reproduction. Not surprisingly, the losers scramble to sustain that status quo.

One issue that seems to me to be missing from much perestroikan discussion is an account of whether they are interested in causal explanation. In the broader field many perestroikans clearly are not, and much of what most perestroikans do strikes me as non-causal critique and analysis.

Speaking personally, I have learned much of value by availing myself of such work. But the IR Security perestroikans seem to want to provide causal explanation. Yet, they decry science. It is truly baffling.

They demand to remain arbiters of “important questions,” “public engagement,” and who knows what else. Members of the community founded *Foreign Policy* and *International Security* to ensure that they have fora in which to practice their craft. As far as I can tell those outlets are alive and well, even if their ability to secure positions in the profession for their students declines.

There is, in fact, no decline in the institutions that permit elite-university trained political scientists to trade on their network with classmates and fellow alums who obtain positions at such institutions to “speak truth to power.” Nor is it true that political science is experiencing a decline in its relevance, much less that “technique oriented” “neo-positivist” political science has little relevance.

It is true, however, that the intellectual off-spring of a number of faculty at elite universities have struggled to earn tenure track positions (or tenure) at PhD granting programs. Whether this pattern is limited to the IR Security perestroikans or generalizes to the whole perestroikan community I cannot say. But as sure

as the sun will rise in the east next year we can anticipate the folks like Desch, Mearsheimer and Walt will periodically troll the discipline in a desperate attempt to reverse their demise.

@WilHMoo

Correction: scrubbed a footnote that relied on dated information.

[1] Here's a question: why should the public pay universities to employ pundits with PhDs? I don't know either.

[2] Wilson has also written several useful posts about political science and the US government [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

[3] Perhaps you are wondering whether I have any sort of track record about such prognostication. I do. Consider the [ICEWS](#) project today in the context of this [piece](#) from 2008.

[4] Back in the day search committee chairs would snail mail a form letter announcing their search to a large swath of faculty who produced students that might make good candidates.

Mearsheimer is responding to such a letter sent to him by Lake.

[5] The ["Batman" framing](#) is unintentional: this was scanned back in the day, and my PDF copy is crooked.