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Democratizing U.S. Foreign Policy

Bringing Experts and the Public Back Together

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In August 2016, 50 Republican U.S. national security officials published a letter opposing [Donald Trump's bid for the presidency](#) <sup>[3]</sup>. This group, which included such well-known experts as Aaron Friedberg, Dov Zakheim, and Philip Zelikow, declared in no uncertain terms that, if elected, Trump "would put at risk our country's national security and well-being."

The letter sank without a trace within days of its release. The public had no desire to heed the so-called experts. On the Fox News website, where one might expect Republicans to receive a fair hearing, commentators [lambasted the signatories](#) <sup>[4]</sup> as members of a disgraced "establishment" in which they had no trust.

Such vitriol affirms what [Tom Nichols recently argued in these pages](#) <sup>[5]</sup>—that Americans have "lost faith in expertise"—and suggests that foreign policy expertise is facing particular discredit. This diagnosis raises two critical questions. Why has the public spurned the experts when it comes to foreign affairs? And how can experts restore the public's trust?

## THE MAKING OF A CRISIS

The most important reason that foreign policy experts have lost legitimacy is their support for the Iraq war, in which the United States suffered tens of thousands of casualties and spent trillions of dollars in pursuit of aggressive and unattainable aims. During his primary campaign, [Trump stood out from a crowded Republican field](#) <sup>[6]</sup> by excoriating the war, and he repeated his criticism in every general-election debate. Then, as president-elect, he discredited the expertise of U.S. intelligence agencies by stating, "These are the same people who said Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction." Trump realized, more acutely than the experts who pronounced him unfit for office, that the American public has neither forgiven nor forgotten experts' role in initiating one of the longest and most fruitless wars in U.S. history.

But another source of the present legitimacy crisis has been overlooked. For too long, foreign policy experts have isolated themselves from the public. Confined to the coastal cities, experts have failed to engage citizens where they live and work. Worse, experts typically tell the public what must be done instead of presenting multiple options from which the public can choose. They thereby [deny ordinary people their due](#) <sup>[7]</sup> as the ultimate decision-makers in a democracy. No wonder the public is showing the back of its hand, refusing to take experts seriously.

In order to restore public trust, foreign policy experts must engage citizens in different, more democratic ways. Fortunately, American history offers guidance for bringing experts and the public back together.

## A DEMOCRATIC ELITE

In the early twentieth century, experts formed the first professional organizations dedicated to improving American foreign policy. From the start, they were animated by two rival intellectual strands: one elitist and the other democratic. The positions were set forth in the 1920s by the journalist Walter Lippmann <sup>[8]</sup> and the philosopher John Dewey <sup>[9]</sup>. On the elitist side, Lippmann asserted that in modern society, ordinary people were too ignorant to make wise political decisions. For this reason, in his book *Public Opinion*, Lippmann insisted that decisions should be guided by an elite, housed in “independent, expert organization[s]” shielded from the public. On the democratic side, Dewey argued in *The Public and Its Problems* that democracy without demos was no democracy at all. Although he affirmed the importance of experts, Dewey claimed that their role was to assist the public, not replace it. Through expert guidance and community discussion, citizens would become enlightened and empowered to act politically.

From the vantage point of 2017, it is striking how Deweyan the United States’ first foreign policy experts were. They aimed to educate citizens no less than to advise policymakers. Consider the three most influential organizations established in the wake of World War I: the Foreign Policy Association, the Institute of Pacific Relations, and the Council on Foreign Relations. The FPA set out to make information and discussion “readily available to an ever-widening public,” as it explained in 1943. The IPR went so far as to bar government officials from its meetings until World War II. It sought to cultivate “the relations of man to man and nation to nation,” in the words of one of its founders, Frank Atherton, a businessman from Hawaii who believed that mutual understanding was the route to peace. Even CFR, the group most oriented toward government officials, devoted significant resources to adult education, for example by publishing the magazine *Foreign Affairs*.

Far from cloistering themselves in Boston, New York, and Washington, D.C., American foreign policy experts formed local branches throughout the country to host discussions of pressing geopolitical issues. By World War II, the FPA estimated that public meetings in its 19 branches had drawn 726,138 attendees. IPR chapters dotted the West Coast, connecting Americans with experts across the Pacific Ocean. Similarly, in the lead-up to World War II <sup>[10]</sup>, CFR formed regional councils based in cities such as Des Moines, Houston, and Louisville. As their organizer, Francis Miller, observed in his memoirs, the councils provided the New York headquarters with “listening posts to sense the mood of the country,” and they proved an important source of information for foreign policy analysts.

Crucially, the experts who worked for these organizations between the 1920s and the 1940s often approached citizens with respect and a desire to help them think for themselves. The FPA required its meetings to feature two speakers who would debate each other. In 1944, the State Department established <sup>[11]</sup> the Division of Public Liaison, which aimed to foster two-way exchanges between government officials and citizens. Whereas today experts tend to push particular agendas on the public, they originally made efforts to help citizens weigh competing policy alternatives.

The difference becomes apparent when one compares the Brookings Institution’s 2017 report <sup>[12]</sup> “Building ‘Situations of Strength’: A National Security Strategy for the United States” with the 1942 report from which it claims to take inspiration. The new report, endorsed by ten bipartisan experts, recommends a single “national security strategy for the 45th U.S. president.” Its authors, who “all come from the internationalist school,” explain that “general agreement ... is a necessary precondition of writing a meaningful report.” In fact, the opposite is true: expert uniformity dulls any sense of possibility or choice. The report is unlikely to circulate beyond Washington, where it was announced to the public—in reality, a room full of policy wonks.

Back in 1942, Brookings took a very different view. Titled “Peace Plans and American Choices,” its report from that year <sup>[13]</sup> presented the pros and cons of about a dozen alternative policy positions for the United States, ranging from unilateral world mastery to multilateral cooperation to federal union with the British Commonwealth. As Brookings’ first president, Harold Moulton, maintained, “Each one of us has the responsibility as a citizen to make up his mind which of these various proposals, singly or in combination, he believes to be the best.” Even as the United States entered World War II and faced an uncertain future, experts addressed the American people as the rightful arbiters of their country’s foreign policy.

To be sure, hopes of engaging the masses often remained just that—hopes, dashed by public apathy and experts’ willingness to claim public support for their own preferences. Experts respected the public in part because they invested excessive faith in it. Believing that war arose from misunderstanding, many assumed that peace would result from the promulgation of scientific facts. In addition, experts of this time possessed forms of knowledge that citizens could understand, making public engagement possible. Not yet siloed in their ivory towers, or enamored of mathematical formulas, they offered insights from history, geography, and anthropology that were comprehensible to general readers. Before long, however, these conditions gave way.

## THE ELITE BECOMES ELITIST

Although democratic and elitist attitudes had always competed for influence, it was not until the Cold War <sup>[14]</sup> that Lippmannite elitism decisively triumphed. With the United States facing an atomic standoff with another superpower, the Soviet Union, experts from across the emerging “military-industrial complex” determined that the perils of international politics were too dire to be left in the hands of ordinary people. What’s more, the rise of Nazi and then Soviet totalitarianism seemed to show that publics were prone to manipulation and belligerence—a lesson also applied to the American public, which in the 1930s had responded to Hitler with calls for neutrality.

Hans Speier, who directed social science research for the newly founded RAND Corporation, encapsulated the elitist consensus. Rejecting Deweyan optimism as naive moralism, Speier wrote in a 1954 report to his superiors that political decisions must rest with “those who carry political responsibility.” It was up to these experts to “peer into the uncertain future and to care as best they can for the others who have no such responsibilities.” The public was on its way to becoming the object, rather than the subject, of U.S. foreign-policy making.

The elitist faith was quickly institutionalized. In 1947, Congress created the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency, two powerful organizations subject to scant public oversight. Experts either entered the burgeoning state or formed institutions to serve it. They flourished in new think tanks, such as RAND and the Institute for Defense Analyses, which catered to the military. Meanwhile, their older, more democratic counterparts languished. The IPR fell victim to McCarthyism in the 1950s <sup>[15]</sup>. The FPA lost influence and funding in the 1960s. Part of the problem was that high-level officials lost interest in meeting with citizens from across the country. During the Eisenhower administration, the State Department dropped even the pretense of seeking public input, preferring to sell its policies through the mass media. The community of foreign policy experts grew insular, concerned more with exerting influence in Washington and less with helping build a broadly engaged public.

Yet in a sense, the system worked. Experts enjoyed public credibility in the context of the nation’s existential struggle against Soviet communism. The Cold War provided a rationale for U.S. foreign policy that commanded both popular and elite legitimacy, in part because the country confronted an adversary with the capability and avowed intention to bury the liberal, capitalist West. Just about every U.S. action could be justified as a response to the Soviet threat, albeit with varying degrees of plausibility. The superpower standoff, particularly its nuclear dimension, granted experts broad authority to act in the name of ordinary citizens.

Even after foreign policy experts came under popular attack during the Vietnam War <sup>[16]</sup>, they managed to emerge with their legitimacy intact. True, changes were made. Military recruiters and certain research institutes were pushed off university campuses. Amnesty International and other groups promoted the new principles of human rights, and Congress asserted itself against the presidency. In retrospect, these changes look impressive compared with the inertia that followed the unpopular wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Still, it was clear by the 1980s that Dewey's democratic ideal had not prevailed. If Vietnam damaged the credibility of experts, experts were no more inclined to value the democratic potentialities of the public. In some cases, expertise became even less democratic than before. Many university researchers, for example, escaped scrutiny by becoming private consultants, detaching themselves from their former academic colleagues as well as the public.

As a result, although the landscape of foreign policy expertise in 2017 is recognizable as the ground tilled in 1947, today the system is not working. With the end of the Cold War, experts and the public lost a shared rationale for U.S. foreign policy. A chasm has opened up between the relatively minor security threats the nation faces and the massive scale of U.S. political and military commitments abroad. This disparity has exerted persistent pressure either to inflate threats—as President George W. Bush did and now Trump is doing—or to downsize the United States' role in the world. In short, the Cold War logic that granted experts legitimacy has broken down, and no one has developed a replacement. It is no surprise that the disregarded public has begun to resist experts' claims to authority.

## BRINGING THE PUBLIC BACK IN

Today, many think tanks make a concerted effort to engage the public. They publish online reports, proceedings, and speeches and connect their analysts with students and scholars in universities. But despite these positive developments, the American foreign policy establishment remains structurally undemocratic. The same experts who laud the value of face-to-face international diplomacy scarcely interact with American citizens outside the Northeast, relying on digital communication instead. They conceive their role narrowly—first and foremost, to offer the best recommendations to policymakers. If ordinary citizens happen to listen, so much the better, but reaching them is incidental. In effect, the public is asked to receive and assent, not empowered to choose and direct.

This structure is no longer viable, especially since some of the worst foreign policy errors in recent years have come from experts themselves, who either supported or weakly opposed the Iraq war. As a candidate, Trump acknowledged this reality when he gave his first major address on foreign policy, in April 2016. "It's time to invite new voices and new visions into the fold," he declared <sup>[17]</sup>. Trump hardly dismissed the utility of expertise. To the contrary, he pledged to seek out "talented experts with approaches and practical ideas, rather than surrounding myself with those who have perfect resumés but very little to brag about except responsibility for a long history of failed policies and continued losses at war." Trump called for new and better experts and demanded accountability for those who had failed. That it fell to a real estate developer and reality-TV star to take such a position proved how dire the situation had become: experts were too insulated to face up to their crisis of legitimacy and change themselves.

As president, however, Trump has drawn on alternative networks of interlocutors whose claims to expertise are thin. He has given key national security positions to Islamophobes <sup>[18]</sup> such as Stev <sup>[19]</sup>e <sup>[19]</sup>Bannon <sup>[19]</sup>, a former screenwriter and executive chair of the right-wing nationalist website Breitbart, and Sebastian Gorka <sup>[20]</sup>, who styles himself a terrorism expert after having written a shoddy dissertation at the Corvinus University of Budapest. To prevent these alternative experts from reaching the heights of power in the future, mainstream experts must restore Americans' confidence in foreign policy expertise. They can do so by taking five essential, if difficult, measures.

First, expert institutions and networks should become facilitators of democratic deliberation. Appeals to authority and meritocracy proved effective during the Cold War, but they no longer suffice. Going forward, foreign policy experts should interact with an array of citizens when developing major recommendations. Rather than advocate a single course of action, they should present the costs and benefits of alternative policies that are either intellectually plausible or command popular support. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee should resume its Cold War practice of holding public hearings outside Washington. Through these actions, experts may well benefit from learning how ordinary Americans define their interests and that of the nation.

Second, think tanks should create local branches that extend beyond the cities of the Northeast. This will show ordinary citizens that foreign policy experts respect and desire to engage with them. Those local branches should organize talks, discussions, and debates that welcome diverse segments of local communities. Through such public events, experts can learn to appreciate how foreign policies affect different demographic groups. At the least, experts who land in “flyover country” should not be blindsided by the next insurgent campaign like Trump’s.

Third, foreign policy experts would do well to frequent the nontraditional media outlets through which large communities of Americans discuss politics. Right now, experts gain professional recognition for appearing on CNN or in *The New York Times* or the like, or on panels run and attended by other experts. They get less credit for venturing onto right- or left-wing radio shows or niche websites and podcasts. But these venues matter to a variety of constituencies and possess outsize power in today’s polarized era. Experts ought not to cede this terrain to ideologues.

Fourth, it is in the interest of experts and the public alike to support a stronger role <sup>[21]</sup> for Congress in the foreign-policy-making process. Since the 1990s, Congress has yielded authority and initiative to the executive branch. It has lost war-making powers and allowed committee investigations and hearings to slip into irrelevance. If this trend continues, the public will lose its best channel for influencing foreign policy. Citizens will have little reason to develop informed views on international issues or to take expert advice seriously.

Finally, foreign policy experts should build a culture of accountability. Citizens deserve to know that individuals who contribute to disastrous foreign policy decisions will no longer be welcome in think tanks or similar organs. Although experts are entitled to defend their records, they should face significant professional costs for supporting unwise policies. A culture of accountability will rebuild citizens’ confidence in experts and, in turn, incentivize experts to give judicious advice in the future.

## THE NECESSITY OF EXPERTISE

These are only first steps on a long path to restoring public trust in expertise. However difficult, this task is essential for the sake of expertise and democracy alike. Respected experts are indispensable to the functioning of a knowledge-driven, postindustrial society. As the historian Bruce Kuklick writes in his book *Blind Oracles*, “If we give up on knowledge ... 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?”

Kuklick is right. But experts need to appreciate that the reverse is also true: if experts give up on the public, then they abandon self-government for rule by an unaccountable and unrepresentative few. For this reason, foreign policy experts must reengage with the public and encourage the participation of ordinary people in world affairs. Otherwise, the populist groundswell that enabled Trump’s victory will grow ever more suspicious of an inward-looking elite.

For decades, American policymakers debated how to use foreign policy to promote democracy around the world. The urgent task now is to democratize foreign policy at home.

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