

## Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security

By Michael C. Desch  
Princeton University Press, 2019  
368 pp. \$35.00  
ISBN: 978-0691181219

Reviewed by Paula G. Thornhill

Can the policy and academic communities work together more effectively to address America's toughest national security problems? In *Cult of the Irrelevant*, Michael Desch takes readers on a 100-year examination of the relationship between national security practitioners and social scientists in an effort to answer this question. Desch, an international relations professor at Notre Dame University, captures the ebb and flow in this relationship by examining the rise of think tanks, the emergence (and disappearance) of university-based national security programs, the extent of Federal funding, and the appearance of policy recommendations in scholarly journals.

Not surprisingly, Desch finds that more cooperation exists between academics and practitioners during wartime. In particular, World War II and the Cold

War produced enduring, substantive cooperation in areas such as arms control and strategic stability. This cooperation also gave rise to new institutions—for example, federally funded research and development centers such as RAND—in an attempt to further strengthen ties between the academic and policy communities.

Desch goes on to argue that despite these temporary peaks in cooperation, the social sciences are increasingly irrelevant to policymakers. He places the blame for this slow, sporadic, yet relentless slide into irrelevance squarely on the shoulders of social scientists themselves. These academics, he asserts, increasingly insist on asking non-policy relevant questions and then rigidly adhering to strict methodological approaches to address them. The academy's waning influence continues despite America's involvement in two wars since September 11, 2001. Desch contends that even the most noteworthy post-9/11 example of cooperation, the Department of Defense-sponsored Minerva Research Initiative, experienced only marginal success in bringing the academy's expertise to bear on policy problems.

Desch offers an important argument, however, and it would resonate more with the practitioner if, first, it looked less at the impact of individuals (for example, Bernard Brodie, Walt Rostow, Thomas Schelling) and more into where, when, and how scholarly work best insinuates itself into the policy process. Second, surprisingly, his argument excludes major international programs in security and strategic studies, especially those in the United Kingdom. These international programs offer a different and perhaps more compelling example for how to merge academic rigor and policy relevance. Anecdotally, from my years in the Pentagon and professional military education, scholars such as Michael Howard, Lawrence Freedman, Hew Strachan, and Colin Gray have had a profound, albeit unquantifiable, influence on American national security policy. Finally, Desch's work would find a warmer welcome in the policy community if he offered specific recommendations on how to bridge

the policy-academy divide beyond a plea for more policy-oriented research.

For those serving in America's joint force, then, the most important question is should I add *Cult of the Irrelevant* to my "must-read" list of books. The answer is largely no, with a few important exceptions. First, Desch's book is useful to U.S. defense personnel heading to civilian master's degree programs in security or strategic studies. These interdisciplinary programs are popular in the national security community precisely because they are policy- and practitioner-focused. For that reason, the academy is not especially keen on them, except, unfortunately, as potential revenue sources. But Desch's book would help explain where these programs fit in the larger academic universe. Moreover, if defense policy personnel are tackling a Ph.D., Desch's book provides context for the challenges of finding an advisor willing to take on a student interested in policy-relevant research.

Second, for individuals in the policy realm, it helps to explain why the academy is largely irrelevant to so many policy debates. The incentive structure, including pay, promotions, and prestige, largely encourages social scientists to veer away from policy issues. In short, why should social scientists focus on policy issues when their peers disdain such an undertaking? It also provides some context for the complicated relationship among the policy community, the academy, and the think tank world. As Desch points out, the latter emerged to provide policy relevance and academic rigor. The extent to which the think tank community accomplishes this is continually debated.

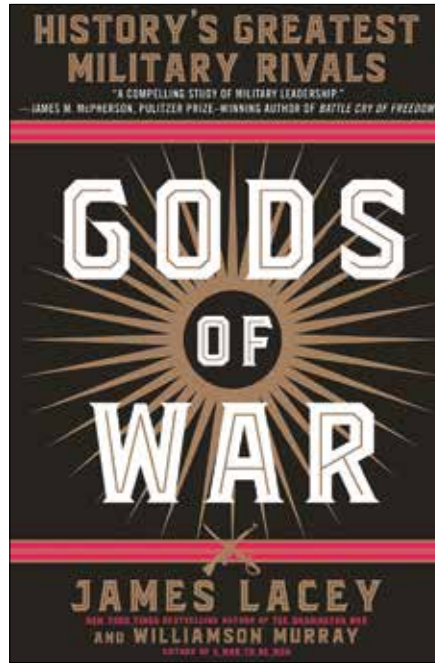
Finally, those in command action groups or their equivalents might want to read Desch's book before their principals host an academic. They will find insights in *Cult of the Irrelevant*, especially in chapters 1 and 9, that will help their principal engage their visitor on a more substantive, realistic level. Especially when it comes to the latter, it prepares their principal for the likelihood that a visiting academic would neither be able to nor even care about answering key policy-relevant questions such as "So

what?” and “What’s next?” Recognizing that a social scientist would likely steer away from the policy realm allows staff to calibrate their principals’ expectations, and thus, paradoxically, create a better opportunity to gain useful insights. Given this tradeoff, it also raises the possibility that turning to a practitioner-scholar in the first place, the kind the academy eschews, might ultimately be more useful.

In *Cult of the Irrelevant*, Desch does an admirable job exploring the gap between the policy community and the social sciences. Perhaps because he is an academic himself, however, the enduring relevance of his book rests solely with the academy, not with policy practitioners. Does the academy feel a need to leave its ivory tower to reinvigorate its policy relevance? Absent significant change, Desch leads the reader to a resounding “no.” While the book will be interesting to policymakers and their staffs, Servicemembers’ reading time is better spent on works that help them understand and solve policy problems, rather than on academic programs and individuals irrelevant to their solutions. JFQ

---

Brigadier General Paula G. Thornhill, USAF (Ret.), Ph.D., is the Associate Director of Strategic Studies at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, and the author of *Demystifying the American Military* (Naval Institute Press, 2019).



### Gods of War: History's Greatest Military Rivals

By James Lacey and Williamson Murray  
New York: Bantam Books, 2020  
402 pp. \$32.00  
ISBN: 978-0345547552

Reviewed by Jon Mikolashek

Since humanity has waged war, scholars have debated the greatest captains, commanders, and warriors. Continuing this long tradition of friendly and sometimes competitive discussion is James Lacey and Williamson Murray’s *Gods of War*. In this highly accessible book, both esteemed historians take the reader through the millennia to examine not only the greatest commanders in military history but also the greatest rivalries. The book focuses on contests between peers because they often are the greatest rivals. *Gods of War* does not examine one-off battles, but focuses instead on campaigns in which either side shared victories and defeats. Those expecting more on figures such as Gustavus Adolphus and Alexander the Great will be slightly disappointed that their favorite commander did not make the cut, but the focus of *Gods of War* is about the

greatest rivalries, and it overwhelmingly succeeds.

*Gods of War* highlights six rivalries between some of the most revered and studied military figures. The book is evenly divided between war in the ancient world, the Middle Ages, and the modern era. There are two chapters that introduce the concept and a conclusion, and the first rivalry considers Hannibal versus Scipio Africanus during the transformation of Rome into a Mediterranean power. The succeeding chapters follow in chronological order: The political and military rivalry between Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great. The Middle Ages get attention with the rivalry between King Richard I and Saladin during the Third Crusade. The modern era begins with the Napoleonic Wars and the multiple conflicts between Napoleon and the Duke of Wellington, followed by the bloody contest between Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee in the American Civil War. The discussion of World War II shifts gears and focuses on the rivalry between Erwin Rommel, Bernard Montgomery, and George S. Patton.

There is no discussion of rivalries in World War I or conflicts post-1945, but the theme of the book is to examine the rivalries between equally great commanders. To put it in a sports context, this is akin to Larry Bird versus Earvin “Magic” Johnson, Tom Brady versus Payton Manning, and Roger Federer versus Rafael Nadal. There are plenty of great athletes, but not all great athletes had peers they competed with equally, and more than once. So while great military commanders such as Alexander and Gustavus Adolphus are indeed “great,” they had no near peers to repeatedly compete with over the ages.

Despite the emphasis on rivalries and commanders, *Gods of War* offers some depth to strategic thought and planning. While there is a focus on tactics and tactical outcomes, the two authors discuss the idea of “master strategists” and how even the greatest commanders often lacked strategic thinking. Lacey and Murray conclude that out of all the commanders covered in *Gods of War*, only Saladin and Grant possessed a strategic vision and won. Renowned figures such