

SCIENCE AND FOREIGN POLICY

Ernest W. Lefever

With the publication of Hans J. Morgenthau's *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* more than two decades ago, one might have thought that the dragon of creeping scientism would have been laid to rest by now. But Scientific Man, self-confident and potentially omnipotent, dies hard.

Last December, for example, Donald F. Horning, President Johnson's science advisor, urged the creation of a Cabinet-level Department of Science with a starting budget of at least \$2 billion. He was referring, of course, to the physical or "hard" sciences. On the "soft" side, President Johnson reportedly had privately criticized the "kooks and sociologists" who used the War on Poverty as a living laboratory for their research experiments. I don't know if Mr. Johnson said this, but as a "soft" scientist, I kind of wish he had.

Comforted by the classic assumption that politics is more an art than a science, I am prepared to make an unscientific and perhaps unartful assertion: the attempt to apply "scientific" techniques (designed to achieve the coveted goals of quantification and prediction) directly to foreign policy is an exercise in futility and self-deception, PPBS notwithstanding. The Planning-Programming-Budgeting System developed by RAND can, of course, be applied with happy results to defense procurement, and probably to the evaluation of alternative economic development projects in India, but does anyone believe that these quantifiable, cost-accounting techniques are of any real value to President Nixon in issuing instructions to our negotiators at the Paris peace talks?

The Trivial Impact of Technology. To paraphrase a statement by the late Karl Barth on the absence of significant novelty in history, the impact of technology—including nuclear energy, missiles, and lasers—on the fundamental task of politics has been *trivial*. The task of statecraft—to defend the state against internal and external adversaries—has not changed. Today interstate politics is what it has always been—a

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struggle of power and purpose between sovereign political communities, whether they be tribes, city states, nation states, or empire states. (The vague and confused term "international relations" should speedily be replaced by interstate politics if interstate politics is in fact what is meant.) The state, more precisely the government of the state, is the primary actor in the interstate drama. The existence of many kinds of states—big and small, powerful and weak, cohesive and fragmented, revolutionary and status quo—does not change the fundamental character of the drama, but it does affect the modalities of statecraft, the art of pursuing the interests of the state by strategies of cooperation, accommodation, or conflict.

The stage is the world arena, the geo-political-economic environment in which the endless drama of power and purpose unfolds. Galloping technology has had a significant impact on this area, but technology is not an actor. It has no independent dynamic of its own, no autonomous existence. Like oceans, mountains, and rivers, technology is a part of the topography, but unlike these natural phenomena, technology is far more subject to manipulation by the human mind and will. Like the wheel or the man-made wedge, modern technology is a consequential instrument in interstate politics.

The quantum jump between TNT and the hydrogen bomb has not been and cannot be matched by a quantum jump in political behavior or organization because man, not matter, is the raw stuff of politics. And man, as Dean Acheson has pointed out, has demonstrated a stubborn resistance to drastic reconstruction. Man, whose intriguing blend of original sin and original righteousness has shown no signs of fundamental change since the Stone Age, determines the upper and lower limits of political achievement.

While technology does not change the character of the plot—each actor pursuing his interests as he perceives them—it may affect the style of the drama and the outcome of a particular act. The impact of technology on world politics is trivial because the revolution in energy, speed, and communication has not altered the responsibility of statesmen to the people from whom they draw their power or to the larger world. Technology may make the burden of the

statesman heavier or lighter, but it does not relieve him of his fundamental task or render statesmanship irrelevant.

Speed, like power itself, is amoral and nonpolitical because politics is a creature of human motivation. Technology may speed up the action, but significant accomplishments like developing a nation or a system of justice still take time. You can't get a baby in one month by making nine women pregnant. By the same token, satellite communication may greatly multiply the volume of information available. But the net effect of the information explosion may be to make wise foreign policy decisions more difficult because too many people have too much information and too little perspective.

Technically induced "interdependence" (a phenomenon that needs rigorous definition and qualification) has altered the environment of the interstate drama, but the consequential decisions are still made by politicians who are obliged to defend their people in a "shrinking globe" rather than in its predecessor, however defined.

The medium is not the message, the stage is not the actor, and the scientist is not the statesman. And I prefer it that way. I have more confidence in the political wisdom of the Trumans, Johnsons, and Nixons than in the political judgment of the Einsteins, Tellers, or Paulings. There is a profound vocational difference between the scholar (hard or soft) and the statesman. The statesman is responsible for the security of his people. The scholar has a responsibility to "truth." As citizens of the same state, they share a common destiny, and if each understands the uniqueness of his role, that destiny may be less unhappy than it might otherwise be.

The Limits of Technical Advice. As a "soft" policy researcher I have great esteem for my "hard" counterparts. I envy them. They can sometimes come up with final answers to specific technical questions. They have sent three men around the moon (although they have not perfected an economical, leak-proof faucet). They have vastly increased the physical force available to the President and have refined the ways it can be applied. Along with engineers, workers, a sophisticated industrial system, and the military establishment, the physical scientists have provided the United States with a responsive and flexible military capability.

It is the duty of the politicians, with the aid of their advisors, to use and control the technical instruments of coercion in the interests of the American people and in the larger interests of peace. In this political-moral task the scientist as scientist can be of little help.

Take the A.B.M. debate for example. Whether or not to deploy a thin or thick A.B.M. system is primarily a political question, and only secondarily a technical one. Scientists should be fully consulted in assessing the probable technical performance of the Sentinel and Russian systems, but they have no special insight into Soviet intentions or the political factors that motivate either Russian or American leaders.

Perhaps out of a misplaced sense of guilt for their involvement in the successful Manhattan Project, many scientists, particularly nuclear physicists, have had a compulsion to make judgment in the foreign policy realm. This practice has been a source of confusion because mechanistic technical training tends to be a negative asset in the art of politics. The norms of certainty and verification, to say nothing of quantification and prediction, are not directly applicable to foreign policy questions. Scientists, like any other citizens, have a right to express their views on current issues, but it is a serious mistake for the press, the politicians, or the public to pay any more attention to their political opinions than those of a football coach or a butterfly collector with an equivalent exposure to the perplexities of interstate politics.

How can the President's scientific advisor be prevented from giving political advice? He can't. But we can hope that the President will ignore or downgrade his political observations unless they are based upon relevant academic training or experience. The physical scientist should be on tap for technical expertise, but never at the top for political advice.

Policy Research Is More Relevant. Relevant policy research, by definition, is more directly related to foreign policy than is technical research, but the policy contribution of the "soft" sciences is also limited. Economics (if one includes it among the policy disciplines) is more like a "hard" science than the other policy "sciences" or the humanities. On certain kinds of problems economists can qualify and predict.

In contrast to economics, political science is inescapably interdisciplinary and inexact, except in its more bizarre and mechanistic manifestations. The more a political scientist apes the physical sciences and the more "exact" he becomes, the less relevant he is to the policy maker—except in a very few areas where mass statistics, such as those on voting behavior, are politically significant. It is important to note that in interstate politics there is no body of politically relevant data comparable to voting statistics in the United States. Trade statistics, while significant, do not have the impact on foreign policy that voting statistics have on domestic policy. If one doubts this, let him ask Hubert Humphrey.

The most inexact social science, of course, is the

study of interstate politics which embraces a dozen disciplines ranging from law, economics, and history to psychology, philosophy, and military science. The study of interstate politics should never aspire to be a "pure science" any more than history, philosophy, or theology, though all of these more inclusive disciplines should obviously be instructed by a mood of skepticism and should observe rigorous standards of self-criticism and verification where verification is possible. The humanities and the disciplines of interstate politics should eschew quantification and prediction.

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What contribution can the policy sciences or humanities make to the harassed President or lesser policy maker? On specific questions of fact, particular disciplines or research efforts can be helpful. Even intangible factors, such as the political and psychological predispositions of a particular ruling elite, can sometimes be empirically ascertained. But no conclusive answers can be given, no sure advice, because in a grave crisis the President will always be confronted by a number of indeterminate factors.

In the Cuba missile crisis, how many dependable facts did President Kennedy have on the important questions? Very few. Like all statesmen, he made educated guesses and took educated risks. Perhaps the most important factor was the unquantifiable and unpredictable behavior of a handful of men in Moscow who had the capacity to visit catastrophic destruction upon the United States. What the President needed most was political wisdom. And research—soft or hard—cannot provide this. He talked to trusted persons. He consulted scientists, military men, intelligence specialists, lawyers, and Soviet experts. All this to inform his judgment.

As far as I know, President Kennedy did not consult any member of the decision-making cult, i.e., one who believes that with further research, scholars will eventually be able to predict the behavior of statesmen in crises if all the relevant facts are known and properly assessed. The assumption that all relevant factors can be known and given their proper weight is arrogant nonsense. A crisis is a crisis precisely because all relevant factors cannot be known, and if they could, who but Almighty God could "properly" assess them?

Perhaps the two most relevant disciplines to the art of politics are history and philosophy—philosophy in the classic sense of Plato, Aristotle, and St. Augustine, where politics and ethics are joined along with a shrewd understanding of the moral ambiguity of man. Our Founding Fathers got along quite well

because they were steeped in the humanities and James Madison, at least, was influenced by John Calvin. Has the wisdom of the *Federalist Papers* been surpassed in recent American political writing?

To assert the primacy of political wisdom in politics, specifically in national security policy, is not to demand or degrade technical or policy research, both of which have an important role in informing the "attentive public," including "men of affairs" and men in government, and hence have a long-range effect upon the direction and quality of foreign policy. Occasionally research may bear directly and constructively on a serious crisis, but this is not likely. More often research can be drawn upon to help solve a specific problem before it reaches the crisis stage. But even here, the facts and insights of the scholar are only a part of the data the policy maker must take into account.

For the most part, sound research will contribute to that reservoir of knowledge and insight upon which all responsible statesmen draw when they make the momentous decisions of war and peace.

correspondence

"Old Year Out, New Year In"

New York, N. Y.

Dear Sir: In the issue of *worldview* of January, 1969, which came belatedly to my attention, Mr. Edmund Stillman writes:

"After all, it was not so long ago that serious political critics of official policy (among them Hans Morgenthau and the editorial board of the *New York Times*) held that the real folly of the Vietnam war was not that it involved the United States in an unwinnable contest in which its real interests were only problematically engaged, but that it risked escalating to an ultimate nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union."

I have long since been inured to misrepresentations of my point of view, but this account is so utterly and obviously false that I must set the record straight. From the moment I first warned against our involvement in Vietnam ("Asia: The American Algeria," July, 1961); ("Vietnam: Another Korea," May, 1962); to this day ("Bundy's Doctrine of War Without End," November, 1968) I have consistently taken the position which Mr. Stillman says I have not taken, i.e., that the Vietnam war is militarily unwinnable, politically aimless and morally dubious and that the issues at stake do not bear on the vital interest of the United States.

Hans J. Morgenthau