



MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

Foreign Policy Put to the Test

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, we aim to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Amy Tarr (atarr@mit.edu, 617.253.1965).

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Introducing a Series

MIT Center for International Studies

INTRODUCTION

Politics and public policy, like every walk of life, are fraught with “conventional wisdom”—the folk axioms, bromides, platitudes, and generally superficial explanations that, once entrenched, go unchallenged. Academics, journalists, activists, business leaders and just about everyone else in the chattering classes—right, left, and center—are guilty parties. All of us use conventional wisdom as a shortcut—as a handy way to “know” something about which we have not invested the time and trouble to study closely and understand fully.

Of course, not everything that is widely accepted is wrong. But we now see many past instances as nearly laughable: “A woman’s place is in the home,” or “the armed forces cannot be integrated” are just two of many possible examples. It may be less easy to recognize similarly misleading shibboleths today, yet they surely exist and can lead to costly oversights and lasting blunders when used to inform public policy.

There are many reasons why ill-defined conventional wisdom can dominate intellectual discourse, especially in the world of public policy where excessive complexity is unwelcome. Ideas generated inside universities and think tanks by an unordained ministry of pundits are selectively picked up by journalists and lobbyists and then adopted and enshrined by political groups. Policymakers and politicians are constrained by multiple demands for their attention and operate in a context where a premium is placed on simplicity. They consequently find it easier to act on spurious ideas that are simple, than to use correct formulations that are difficult to sort out and sell to supporters. In foreign policy, the impact of conventional wisdom is especially pernicious, given the power and scope of the United States worldwide.

In this series of “audits,” MIT’s Center for International Studies will tour the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and then put them to the test of data and history. We will provide the scrutiny that unchallenged ideas deserve—especially those inform policy choice without examination—and we will explore their manifold effects on American policy.

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Axiom of the Conventional Wisdom

Our criticism of conventional wisdom is not meant to be ironic or clever; we take these ideas seriously, and do not always disagree entirely with their premises or prescriptions.

The ways and means of conventional wisdom

How some shreds of ideas become so embedded as normative rules of social and political life has long been a puzzle for social science. It remains unclear why some ideas are stillborn while others escape close scrutiny, though we do have a clear sense of how old ideas are defended.¹ The Washington policy world processes information across a range of substantive issues—foreign affairs, trade, health care, economics, the environment, and so on—by framing, filtering, referring, and organizing new information against past experience or according to pre-existing sets of ideas. In the small and relatively stable group of experts who influence policy decisions, it sometimes is too easy to agree on how to frame information, and to arrive at a consensus judgment on how to understand and deploy it. Most conventional wisdom is, as a result, either a variation on earlier truisms or a direct attack on the truisms of political opponents that can be designated as failures. Everyone, and every institution, engages in similar behavior—academics not least of all. But in Washington, of course, this way to manage knowledge has enormous consequences.

Consider, for example, proposals for universal, government-managed health care. Today such proposals are scarcely mentioned, because conventional wisdom holds that “socialized medicine” would be too expensive (due to bureaucratic inefficiencies) and health care would decline in quality. Evidence that government-managed programs (Medicare and Medicaid) deliver more care per dollar spent, or that the American system is not providing better quality care (regardless of the patient’s economic status, or the cost of the health system) as France or Germany or Canada, has not broken into the frame of conventional wisdom.²

Another example is that the dire, 1970s predictions of dangerously depleting world oil stocks have been proven false and therefore policies like efficiency standards or increased taxes are unnecessary. In fact, there is fresh evidence of troubling limits to world oil production,³ and while price-induced conservation is a well-established standard of economics, the consuming behavior of Americans is also influenced by how they perceive the global oil situation, and by what products and information they are offered.⁴

Similarly, for many years it was held to be self-evident that university-based programs of “affirmative action” and programs of public school busing would close the racial gap in educational and economic performance in the United States. Instead, we saw how the preferential treatment inherent in affirmative action stirred resentment among white students and generated doubts among their black peers. And, while it seems clear that diversity improves the educational experience, there is limited evidence that the overall quality of urban education improved when students were bused long distances from their neighborhood schools.⁵

Foreign policy is just as susceptible to conventional thinking. There is much that has been axiomatic in the long history of U.S. foreign policy. In the nineteenth century, America had a largely uncontested “manifest destiny” which, paired with “progressive imperialism,” justified an extraordinary land grab and established the United States as a world power.⁶ Since the First World War, U.S. foreign policy has had another great, broadly accepted mission: a moral obligation to nurture democratic practice abroad. A new conventional wisdom seems to have been born from the marriage of George W. Bush’s neo-conservatives to Woodrow Wilson’s liberal internationalists.⁷ Who in Washington today argues against the propriety of establishing democracy abroad?

For decades, the notion that the Soviet Union could be reformed, that it would voluntarily retreat from the Warsaw Pact countries, or that it was anything less than a military colossus, were virtual heresies in American political discourse. Despite the pervasive errors of this conventional wisdom then, the same notions are enshrined in a new conventional wisdom about the lessons of the Cold War (i.e., that America “won” as a result of President Reagan’s military and moral rearmament). A more complex explanation focuses not only on military power (developed by all U.S. presidents), but on diplomacy, the creation of norms like human rights, and the roles of other actors—smaller powers and civil society—that challenged Moscow and helped expose and exploit its own internal weaknesses.⁸

Another striking example is the economic policies fostered by the United States globally—the insistence on “free markets” above all else—which have even earned the ironic sobriquet, the

“Washington Consensus.” Yet, numerous economists, many of them once the decision makers promoting these policies, point out that “structural adjustment” and similar marketization schemes have failed time and again to alleviate the problems of low or no growth in the developing world.⁹

The frames themselves are sometimes the objects of contention. Look at the global warming debate. This remains an open contest—there isn’t yet a conventional wisdom. The scientific evidence is increasingly clear that warming and climate change are occurring at historically unique and worrisome rates.¹⁰ In workaday Washington, the industries most affected by policies that would address warming—autos, petroleum, utilities, etc.—have tried to challenge the agreement among independent scientists by breaking the frame that those scientists and their environmentalist allies have been constructing. Like the tobacco industry before them, they cite uncertainty in the science and find a few skeptics within the scientific community¹¹ to support their position. Then they change the topic from long-term environmental impacts to costs to consumers, an unfair burden placed on the United States by the Kyoto Treaty, and so on.¹²

With issues that are technically complex and have high stakes for powerful industries—like climate change—the frames that the public uses to understand what’s at stake can be easily damaged and rebuilt. The “Star Wars” missile-defense debate of the 1980s followed a similar contour: Nobel Laureates like Hans Bethe of Cornell University and Henry Kendall of MIT had shown in detail why missile defense was a bad bet. Twenty years and many billions of dollars later, the modest missile-defense systems being deployed cannot pass simple feasibility tests, yet the program moves forward because the frame for understanding it has also been modified—from making “nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete” to being a “hedge” against rogue states.

Most pillars of conventional wisdom are braced by durable, ideological predispositions, and parties with pecuniary interests can often be found as bulwarks of a useful piece of conventional wisdom. But whatever the source and whomever the supporters, when conventional wisdom in foreign policy is mistaken, it can be just as often damaging to U.S. interests and to global peace and stability.

A responsible approach to criticism

What we bring to this task is a reputation as a respected center of thinking and policy-relevant research. The Center for International Studies, founded in 1952 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, now houses several major programs relevant to U.S. foreign policy, with leading scholars at the forefront of these initiatives, which include programs on national security, human rights, migration, humanitarian intervention, international economics, globalization, and several countries and regions.¹³

Center-affiliated scholars’ research appears regularly in books and in prominent journals, such as *International Security* or *Foreign Affairs*, and at professional conferences, but too little has been made available to the interested public, the news media, and policy makers. This series, the *Audit of the Conventional Wisdom*, brings the insights and knowledge of these scholars to a more general audience, on topics of obvious importance and urgency.

The authors will be featured in public forums and are available to the press and policy community as well.

Our criticism of conventional wisdom is not meant to be ironic or clever; we take these ideas seriously, and do not always disagree entirely with their premises or prescriptions. Indeed, we have some arguments among ourselves about their significance and impact, and we expect that some of our readers will disagree with our characterization of what is and is not “conventional.” So be it. Our aim in this series is straightforward: by subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, we hope to start an argument, or to re-engage policy and opinion leaders, on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We do so as academics, rather than as policymakers, by accepting complexity, marshaling historical evidence, offering new or overlooked data, and providing fresh analysis. We hope and trust this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world.

¹ Albert O. Hirschman. *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.

² On U.S. system and others: Elizabeth A. McGlynn, et al, “The Quality of Health Care Delivered to Adults in the United States,” *New England Journal of Medicine* (June 26, 2003); Elizabeth A. McGlynn, “There Is No Perfect Health System,” *Health Affairs*, vol. 23, no. 3 (May/June 2004); Ceci Connolly, “U.S. Patients Spend More but Don’t Get More, Study Finds; Even in Advantaged Areas, Americans Often Receive Inadequate Health Care,” *Washington Post* (May 5, 2004). On Medicare comparison: Karen Davis, Cathy Schoen, Michelle Doty, and Katie Tenney, “Medicare Versus Private Insurance: Rhetoric And Reality,” *Health Affairs* (October 9, 2002); Board on Health Care Services (HCS), *Institute of Medicine, Insuring America’s Health: Principles and Recommendations* (Washington: National Academies Press, 2004).

³ Bentley, R.W. “Global Oil & Gas Depletion: An Overview”. *Energy Policy* 30 (2002) 189-205

⁴ On information and consumer choice: N. Banks, *Cultural Values and the Adoption of Energy Efficient Technologies*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oxford, 1999; James Wetzel and George Hoffer, “Consumer Demand for Automobiles: A Disaggregated Market Approach,” *The Journal of Consumer Research* v. 9 no. 2 (Sept 1982); David L. Kaserman and John W. Mayo, “Advertising and the Residential Demand for Electricity,” *The Journal of Business* v. 58 no. 4 (1985).

⁵ Stephen L. Carter *Reflections Of An Affirmative Action Baby*. New York: Basic Books, 1991. Gary Orfield and Edward Miller. *Chilling Admissions: The Affirmative Action Crisis and the Search for Alternatives*. Cambridge: Harvard Civil Rights Project, 1998.

⁶ Walter A. MacDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.

⁷ Walter Russell Mead. *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

⁸ Mathew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Leon V. Sigal, *Hang Separately: Cooperative Security between the United States and Russia, 1985-1944* (New York: Century Foundation, 2001); Raymond Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1994); Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton, 2001).

⁹ Joseph E. Stiglitz. *Globalization and its Discontents*. New York: Norton, 2003.

¹⁰ J. T. Houghton, Y. Ding, D.J. Griggs, M. Noguer, P. J. van der Linden and D. Xiaosu (Eds.). *Climate Change 2001: The Scientific Basis: Contribution of Working Group I to the Third Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)*; Cambridge University Press, 2001

¹¹ Singer, Fred S. *Hot Talk Cold Science: Global Warming’s Unfinished Debate*. The Independent Institute, 1997; Christy, John R. “The Global Warming Fiasco” in: Baily, Ronald (ed.). *Global Warming and other Eco-Myths: How the environmental movement uses false science to scare us to death*. Forum, 2002

¹² Economics Committee of the Global Climate Coalition. *The Impacts of the Kyoto Protocol*. Global Climate Coalition, May 2000. [The Global Climate Coalition is “an organization of trade associations that coordinates business participation in the international policy debate on the issue of global climate change and global warming.”]

¹³ For the early history of the MIT Center for International Studies see: Donald L.M. Blackmer. *The Founding Years: 1951-1969*. Cambridge: Center for International Studies. For a current snapshot of the Center’s activities and a list of affiliated scholars, visit our website at: <http://web.mit.edu/cis/>



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