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America's 'intellectual' diplomacy

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Abstract

Historians and journalists such as Richard Hofstadter and Susan Jacoby have decried the reality 'of anti-intellectualism' in American society, culture, and politics. Yet intellectuals have played a vital role in shaping US diplomacy—from Alfred Thayer Mahan to Paul Wolfowitz. This article explores the

varied reasons why the US government has proved so amenable to input from academia, think-tanks and freelance intellectuals. It first discusses the varying ways in which 'the intellectual' has been defined, and proposes criteria that allow us to identify the foreign policy intellectual. Second, the article examines the historical circumstances that have allowed intellectuals—broadly conceived—to influence US diplomacy from 1890 to the present; focusing on the proliferation of US colleges through the nineteenth century, pioneering attempts to utilize the academy such as Robert La Follette's 'Wisconsin Idea', the professionalization of US higher education inspired by the achievements of Germany's research universities and the strong links forged between academia, think-tanks and government through the progressive era, two world wars, and into the Cold War and beyond. Third, the article compares the US experience of welcoming intellectuals into policy-making with that of the United Kingdom and France, the two democracies that have displayed a global ambition comparable to the United States in recent history. The article concludes with a discussion of the intellectual types—historian or IR scholar, generalist or specialist, fox or hedgehog—that are best suited to dispensing foreign policy advice. It warns that those intellectuals with theories to prove often lack the cognitive flexibility required when making diplomacy.

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