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Policy Organizations: An Insider's View

MICHAEL SCHUYLER is Senior Economist with the Institute for Research on the Economics of Taxation.

Harvard Professor Lawrence Summers insightfully discussed how academic research can influence and hopefully improve public policy ("Bridging the Divide: When Policy Profits from Research," Summer 2006). He mentioned two main avenues: academics who become government policymakers often use their knowledge in trying to shape policy, and nonacademic policymakers in government are sometimes aware of and willing to apply academic findings. Another major conduit from the academy to government action, not explicitly mentioned by Summers, is that many people in government agencies have specialized academic training and knowledge that they frequently put to use in their jobs.

Public policy groups can also provide a link between academic research and public policy. Having worked at a Washington-based public policy institute for many years, I have seen that policymakers are typically forced to juggle many issues. They cannot be experts in all of them. To obtain additional information, policymakers often reach out to academics, government specialists, public policy institutes, business people, and others.

Thus, an important role for public policy organizations is explaining research findings in language accessible to nonspecialists. This democratizes academic research by helping a broader audience better comprehend and evaluate the research. Public policy organizations may also invite academics to speak before audiences in the policy community, commission papers from academics on issues of special policy relevance, and apply and sometimes extend academic research to address specific policy questions and proposals.

For example, why did oil prices jump after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, why have they stayed high since, and would special taxes on US oil companies make matters better or worse? I helped write several papers earlier this year that used core economic principles of supply and demand to examine these questions. Other think tanks also offered analyses guided by principles, as did several government agencies, including the US Federal Trade Commission.

Compared to academic research, the work of public policy organizations is usually more focused on specific policy issues and is more time sensitive. For instance, when the US Congress was considering pension legislation earlier this year, the institute at which I work promptly produced a report using neoclassical economic theory to evaluate

whether several retirement-saving provisions would reduce anti-saving tax biases in the federal income tax system and ultimately concluded that they would.

Public policy organizations sometimes employ cutting-edge academic research to evaluate policy questions, but, as in the above examples, a policy question often involves principles that were once brand new but are now well established. A series of papers I wrote about the US Postal Service illustrate the point. My analyses benefited from the logic and findings of long-since-published but still insightful academic work in areas including public choice and human capital economics.

To his credit, Summers does not pretend that good research always triumphs in the policy arena when it bumps up against politics. In 2004, for instance, another distinguished Harvard economist, Gregory Mankiw, then on leave as Chairman of the US Council of Economic Advisors, was harshly attacked during the US presidential campaign after he made remarks about the benefits of international trade that are fully in accord with theory and evidence and supported by almost all economists. (Yes, economists do agree on some issues.)

Similarly, I have seen many excellent Postal Service-reform proposals, backed by years of solid academic research, nevertheless gather dust because they would not benefit everyone. Those who would not benefit often prefer to retain the status quo. Many factors besides academic research influence public policy.

Not all research, and not all theories, are good guides for policy. Summers notes that sometimes ideas in academia are fashionable but later realized to be wrong or incomplete. A case in point is the Keynesian model that dominated university economics in the 1950s and 1960s, was the lodestone for Washington economic policy in the 1960s and 1970s, and produced the stagflation of the 1970s. Moreover, academicians disagree on many issues, creating uncertainties about which policies are best. Errors and disagreements are, of course, also found in the work of many public policy organizations.

Human nature being what it is, it often happens that supposedly neutral academic and government researchers have preconceptions or political beliefs that color their research results. Public policy organizations often have definite viewpoints too, but are less likely to claim otherwise. Nevertheless, public policy organizations, particularly those with out-of-fashion ideas, can sometimes improve the quality of research by spotlighting problems and suggesting how to correct them.

Ideally, the interplay between academicians and public policy organizations leads to better research and speeds its dissemination to policymakers.

The Blame Game

DANIEL PIPES is *Director of the Middle East Forum* and a prize-winning columnist.

Hussin Mutalib's essay ("Misunderstood: Political Islam in Southeast Asia," Summer 2006) is riddled with errors, but I shall focus on just one: his falling into the too-common pattern of blaming the Muslim world's tribulations on the West. Take for example these passages:

- "The futility of the US-led war in Iraq and the failure of the 'coalition of the willing' to secure UN approval to attack Iraq have heightened Islamic animosity in the region and across the Muslim world."

- "Radical Islam will continue to grow if Muslims, despite being the world's second largest religious community, continue to be treated like pariahs of the international community."

- "The hypocritical US policies in the Middle East generally—and in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine specifically—have caused deep-seated resentment of the West among Muslims."

And so on, and so forth. Have Muslims not made their own fate? For an argument that they have, at least for the Middle East, see the brilliant study by Efraim Karsh and Inari Karsh, *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East, 1789-1923*, Harvard University Press.

So long as this blame-the-West mentality prevails among Muslim intellectual leaders such as Mutalib, what hope is there for Muslims to break out of the extremism, conspiracy theories, and violence that currently wracks their societies? Does he not have a sense of responsibility to adopt a more robust and constructive approach? Has he no faith in Muslims?

Until Mutalib and his colleagues break out of this slough of despair and irresponsibility, Muslims will likely remain in their current self-created predicament.

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