
The Great Illusion: Foreign Policy Advocacy and the Problem of Knowledge

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An odd-sounding title? Bewildering, no doubt, to foreign-policy scholars and activists used to the nomenclature and intellectual emphases of their fields and subfields. But life defies academic and professional boundaries, as does the subject of this article. The following inter-disciplinary examination of a dubious but common notion of persuasion could not be more germane to the study of foreign policy, and yet the problem in question is not being addressed by those most directly concerned. This article will, after introducing the topic of advocacy—specifically, in an area of foreign affairs—give reasons why a widely shared understanding of knowledge and persuasion needs to be reconsidered.

If we use measures of quantity and financial expenditure, a very large and important role is being played in American public life by intellectual activism intended to influence public debate and government policy. The vast array of advocacy organizations in the nation's capital is merely the tip of an iceberg. Enormous sums are spent in what may be called the persuasion or advocacy business. Funders act on the assumption that target audiences can be affected through position papers, policy studies, public events, op-eds, and similar agitation. Flooding public discussion with arguments and supporting evidence is expected to persuade the other side of its errors or at least win over the undecided. As the wrong-headed are argued down, people with the right views will be able to

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seize the initiative and move society in the right direction. Having only vague ideas about how to persuade, donors hire as advocates people who seem to know something about advocacy, who seem to share their policy preferences, and who can help distribute funds. These helpers typically offer some intellectual and rhetorical fluency and a fondness for the limelight—traits suited to the advocacy business as currently conceived.

Despite the high intelligence and education of many engaged in the persuasion business, the rationale behind its work rests on an almost naïve view of what makes human beings tick. Few policy activists have reflected deeply on how human beings form opinions. They have simply fallen into long-existing patterns of advocacy, adding some putatively clever twist to their messaging. One of the reasons the persuasion business is so expensive is that its nearsighted emphasis on policy questions makes it ineffective.

When, after years of energetic effort, advocates look back on what they accomplished, most of them are likely, if honest with themselves, to be disappointed at having made so little difference. Their opponents have been strangely unaffected, and the detested policy preferences against which they argued so strenuously are still being advanced. When on occasion they gained some real ground it was not chiefly because of the arguments and evidence that they heaped on opponents and prospective recruits but because favorable circumstances such as an election outcome made their advocacy seem apposite.

Is there, then, some other more persuasive kind of argumentation? This article will suggest as much. A kind of reasoning is needed that challenges basic assumptions—not assumptions specific to particular policies merely but ones behind the general view of life that made the policies seem appealing in the first place. Only systematic, penetrating inquiry that goes to the depths can set the stage for a genuine change in policy preferences.

But the normal thrust of the advocacy business is different. The predominant intellectual strategy may be called the Great Illusion.

Advocacy organizations obviously differ in that they can be more or less narrow, strident, or partisan. Some of their studies resemble policy-oriented scholarship in the universities, and some of them may even contain historical-theoretical reflection. Quite often advocates in the persuasion business interact with professors in related fields. Yet, because of deeply ingrained habits and, importantly, the expectations of donors, the overall intellectual dynamic of the advocacy networks

tends to be strongly biased in favor of promoting specific policies. Some organizations are rather obviously aligned with a political party. If more basic ideas are discussed, it is not to assess their intrinsic merit, but to bring them to bear on a particular policy preference. What organizations in the persuasion business have in common is that they have a preset policy agenda and focus heavily on influencing government.

The intellectual myopia that characterizes most of this activism does not mean that all the money spent is wasted. Some work of lasting value is produced. It is also evident that large amounts of money can buy public attention and create some momentum for a cause. Here and there partial, at least momentary, victories can be won. An important question is whether such victories are due to the intellectual activism itself. Or has the activism gained traction because it could take advantage of dissatisfaction or demand in the general public? Another possibility, which will receive attention here, is that successful activism was guided and informed by intellectual work previously done elsewhere that addressed more basic questions and disputed assumptions that were hiding behind the criticized policies.

This article will explore the shortcomings of the persuasion business with special reference to activism in international relations, foreign policy, and national security—in “foreign policy” for short. In particular, it will discuss advocacy directed against the idea, long embraced by the American foreign policy establishment, that America must be the global hegemon, the architect and protector of world order. The thesis to be argued is that the activism native to the persuasion business is strongly affected by the mentioned illusion and that really to dislodge the views currently dominating American foreign-policy discussion inside and outside of government it is necessary to examine and refute the most basic and general assumptions of hegemonist thinking. The needed change in intellectual emphasis involves a marked shift in the direction of more historical and philosophical study.

This article will address an epistemological problem that is by no means pertinent to policy activism alone. The problem has been pervasive in the intellectual life of the Western world for the last two centuries. What follows is, in effect, a case study of that larger problem, which is to say that conclusions reached will have implications far beyond the study of international relations, national security, and foreign policy.

Rationalist Illusions

Out of place though it may seem to students of foreign policy, it is not possible to get to the bottom of the generic weakness of policy activism without exploring at some length the central question of the dreaded subject of epistemology: "How do we know what we know?" It is an inadequate answer to that question that accounts for the strategy of policy activism in general and anti-interventionist advocacy in particular. Foreign policy activism exhibits and intensifies a rationalist tendency that it shares with foreign policy thinking in general and modern Western academia at large.

Because great philosophers have struggled over the centuries to define the source of knowledge and understanding, it may seem presumptuous to try to address the question within the scope of an article that is not even exclusively devoted to the question. Yet if the limitations of activism as ordinarily conceived are to be demonstrated there is no avoiding the subject. Also, the purpose here is not to present a full-bodied case for an alternative to what is being questioned; it is to explain the nature of the weakness of current assumptions.

Most policy advocacy derives its strategy from a view of reason and knowledge that came into prominence with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. It profoundly affected the intellectual life of the West. It is often called rationalism. It assumes that human beings are rational actors and that reason accords, in general, with what is so regarded in the natural sciences. According to rationalism, once religious and other superstitions have been pushed to the side and old authorities have been dethroned, enlightened rationality will give us a valid picture of the world and will guide behavior. Rationalism came to dominate, for example, the study of economics, which assumed that human beings are rational actors pursuing self-interest. Rationalists range from those who advocate a small state and maximum individual freedom to those, a steadily growing number, who advocate a large state and social engineering. What they agree on is that rationality produces knowledge and should govern action.

If rationality is the kind of clinical, dispassionate, clear-sighted function that rationalism takes it to be, the only explanation for disagreement among people is that they are not all fully utilizing their rational capacity or do not have access to the same information. The remedy is to make sure that they are exposed to arguments and evidence that they have missed and that facts be correctly analyzed.

But contrary to rationalist assumptions, formal brilliance does not

by itself impart a well-rounded, realistic view of life. Scientifically very creative people, including Nobel Prize winners, have shown that having “brains” is no protection against superficiality, narrow-mindedness, or crankishness in other areas, such as politics or economics.

Yet rationalists tend to view the world in something like this way: There is the self of the rational individual, which is in one location, and there is the outside world and other people, which are in different locations. The world is envisioned as consisting of discrete entities. Phenomena in experience are a type of objects, external “things.” Disputes regarding reality are resolved by scrutinizing the outer world and establishing facts. Rationalism has long been closely associated with so-called logical positivism, according to which no statements are meaningful that cannot be verified by empirical means. Rationalists do not deny that irrationality plays a role in human affairs—indeed, they may stress it—but the way to persuade others of a more truthful view of reality is to demonstrate inaccuracies in perceptions and ideas. The weakness of foreign-policy activism is derived in no small measure from the rationalistic bias of more academic and theoretical approaches, a bias that they mimic and exaggerate.

The Hidden Assumptions of Interventionism

A brief review of how rationalists are attempting to refute hegemonic thinking will help define the epistemological problem. It will also show that dealing inadequately with the problem directly affects political practice.

Rationalists assume that the problem with interventionism is that it is based on faulty or missing information and/or insufficient analysis. The remedy, they think, is to marshal evidence and sharpen arguments against the policies in question. Rationalists put the spotlight on what these policies have wrought: on all the deaths and the maiming, the enormous physical destruction, the dislocation of entire populations, the terrorist backlash, the gigantic expenditures, the deleterious effects on American traditional liberties, etc. A barrage of such criticism will, the rationalist thinks, surely put the interventionists on the defensive and create an opening for alternative policies. Surely, this is irrefutable evidence, and, surely, it will at some point even shame members of the foreign-policy establishment into changing their minds.

This is the general assumption on which anti-interventionist advocacy has operated in the last few decades. The evidence presented would seem to have been overwhelming. Have, then, the intervention-

ists recanted? They have at most adjusted their rhetoric. They have, on the whole, *retained* their policy preferences.

What rationalists fail to understand is that the evidence and the accompanying analysis will be persuasive *only to people with open minds*.

A debilitating weakness of rationalism is to ignore the often prominent role of willfulness in the intellectual life. People tend to believe only what they *want* to believe. What has to be recognized about hegemonists in particular is that their central objective was never to limit deaths, destruction, and expenditures. Their goal was always *to have America be the dominant power in the world*. This is why the hegemonists have been telling themselves and keep telling themselves that America is, as Madeleine Albright and others claimed, “the indispensable nation.” Their deepest motivation is that they want America, with people like them as foreign policy practitioners or advisors, to call the shots. They love power and influence, knowing that other countries have to be subservient and deferential, that America and Americans are admired and feared. Interventionists who are themselves not directly involved in policy-making enjoy being aligned in the imagination with those who actually wield the levers of American power.

Needless to say, the military-industrial complex with its elaborate system of incentives and rewards has taken full advantage of and encouraged these psychological mechanisms. Even when, as is often the case, the deepest motive for intervention is sheer unadulterated greed, virtue-signaling sentiment helps to facilitate it.

Those who, for whatever reason, feel the allure of great power and want the envy and respect of others will of course not admit any such thing to anybody, including self. Their imperial aspirations have enlightened, even morally noble motives and are obviously not for personal gratification, they tell themselves.¹ These aspirations are merely incidental to protecting “world order,” or human rights, or humanity’s general well-being. Their rhetoric and self-understanding assume as obvious that America is always a force for good. America really *is* indispensable. Many interventionists have adopted over the years the ideological cover that America is “exceptional.” It is founded on universal principles and therefore must lead the world. These principles belong to all humanity, and America is uniquely equipped to implement them around the globe. Caring deeply for the world’s unfortunate, America should dislodge ruthless dictators, oppose “rogue” states, and counter any others who

¹ On the close connection between idealistic benevolence and the will to power, see Claes G. Ryn, “Power Without Limits,” *Humanitas*, Vol. XXVI, Nos. 1 & 2 (2013).

oppose American primacy. The will to power presents itself as benevolence. The virtue-signaling for which Rousseau and his Jacobin followers provide the archetype is here most helpful, as will be discussed below. What simply cannot be questioned is the intrinsic superiority of America and its right to be world umpire.

But, anti-interventionists protest, what *about* all the killing, the devastation, the money wasted, the disruption, and the deleterious effects on American republicanism? Look—*look* at all this empirical proof that interventionist policy has disastrous results! The anti-interventionist persuasion business kicks into overdrive, but, again, with little long-term effect. Personally shielded from the mentioned costs, the interventionists hear these arguments—they have heard them for years—but they shrug their shoulders. The reason is that all the evidence and analysis question what cannot, *must* not, be questioned: their own desire for power—which, in their minds, is not a desire for power at all but a will to do good. The interventionists tell themselves that they see more deeply, or realistically, or virtuously than others. Yes, advancing a great cause will inevitably bring some suffering, destruction, and financial expense. When was anything great ever achieved without cost? Military action is harsh but often necessary, and are not those bombed by America enemies of humanity? Referring to American military action in Kosovo, President Clinton coined a useful term, “humanitarian bombing.”

But has not criticism of interventionism gained some traction in recent years? Is opposition to interventionism not growing? Are not plenty of young intellectuals now questioning America’s imperial demeanor? Is this not a sign that rationalist anti-interventionist policy advocacy is finally paying off?

It would be strange if great expenditure on policy activism did not leave any traces, and anti-interventionism does today seem to be making headway among pundits and other public intellectuals, young academics, and even foreign-policy practitioners. But is the change attributable to the activism? It might be due instead to grassroots popular disgruntlement with U.S. foreign policy and the election of Donald Trump. Another possible explanation for views shifting is that prior intellectual developments outside of the persuasion business had made anti-interventionism less near-sighted, more incisive, and more persuasive. That there had in fact been significant such developments will be discussed later. But first it should be explained further how a rationalistic understanding of the nature of knowledge undermined and is still undermining a sound intellectual strategy.

The Intricacy of Experience

Truth-seeking and refutation of error are far more complex than rationalism recognizes. Identifying the simplifications and misconceptions at the root of the Great Illusion will help demonstrate the need for a different approach to persuasion. It is not possible adequately to demonstrate the deficiencies in question without going into them in some depth, but doing so within the confines of an article means trying to compress and abbreviate arguments.² It also has to be kept in mind that these philosophical issues are not familiar ground for most foreign policy experts. If the following analysis of the epistemological predicament of human beings seems off-topic in foreign-policy discussion, it may be further proof that the field needs to expand its range.

Contrary to the rationalist notion of persuasion, there is in immediate, living human experience no fixed, incontestable external world that can be clinically and dispassionately observed from the outside. There are in the world we apprehend no incontrovertible facts that can be cited to refute misunderstanding. What we experience is full of our intuitions and preconceptions. All phenomena, inner or outer, are set in a comprehensive, overarching, always-present consciousness. The particulars are what they are in relation to this continuous, familiar, ordering whole, which makes them understandable by arranging them. Spontaneously, without our making any deliberate effort, particular phenomena and accompanying moods are perceived as "routine," "exceptional," "intriguing," "typical," "beautiful," "repulsive," "threatening," "boring," etc., in varying combinations or as having a more neutral feel. How a person classifies phenomena reflects the person's accumulated experience.

For their own pragmatic purposes, the natural sciences deliberately drain the world of such supposed intangibles and sharply limit the variables to be examined. The sciences proceed by methodological reduction, excluding from consideration whatever is not captured by the chosen method. This conscious limiting of evidence and variables has proven very useful for the limited purposes of science, but natural scientists

² This writer has dealt with the subject systematically and in depth in books and articles. See, in particular, *Will, Imagination and Reason* (1986; exp. ed. 1997), which attempts to reconstitute the epistemology of the humanities and social sciences. The book draws especially on Benedetto Croce and Irving Babbitt to show that philosophical reason is historical rather than abstract, that the imagination, which is pre-conceptual, orients reason, for good or ill, and that only will of a special type will tolerate realistic insight. The various points on epistemology made in this article are discussed more fully in this book and other writings by the author.

do not claim to have a monopoly on understanding human existence.³ Rationalists, too, like to think of themselves as having a scientific temperament, as always basing their opinions on “the facts,” but they make more sweeping claims than most natural scientists in that they give monopoly to an abstract rationality that ignores the complexities and subtleties of actual consciousness. An example is how it deals with the moral-spiritual dimension that profoundly affected the old Western consciousness and that has had a prominent counterpart in other civilizations. Although over the centuries moral-spiritual experience has played a major role in shaping the sense of reality, rationalism does not regard it as a source of knowledge. To see clearly, the enlightened, rational human mind must avoid mystifying factors.

Leaving aside the issue of what is and is not a valid source of knowledge, that which human beings observe cannot be separated from the continuous, encompassing, intuitive consciousness of the observer. In the very moment that particular phenomena are perceived they are categorized, *interpreted*. What is crucial to understand is that inevitably our personality shades or colors what we apprehend. Often strong desires make us see experience in relation to them. We tend to look away from what interferes with our prejudices and desires and to notice what advances them. In the intellectual life we neglect unpalatable arguments and pick up on those that reinforce what we like to believe. We *want* the evidence to be this rather than that. If we are not careful to check our willfulness, we develop an outlook on the world that keeps drawing us into self-serving delusion. If such a habit becomes deeply rooted, no amount of argumentation will rebut our basic view of the world.

Strictly speaking, then, human beings cannot base their view of life or specific opinions on a rational examination of neutral empirical evidence. To a lesser or greater extent we bring to the apprehension of the world our own preconceptions of what the world is like. Deep within the personality long experience has shaped our basic perspective on life. Specific opinions, tastes, and actions emerge from core traits and sensibilities. As for preferences on issues of public policy, they form on the outskirts of more basic general predispositions. The policy preferences

³ On the subject of the pragmatic nature of scientific reason and how it is different from philosophical reason, see, in particular, the ground-breaking work of Benedetto Croce, esp. *Logic as the Science of the Pure Concept* (English transl. 1917; original Italian ed. 1909). In America the pragmatic nature of thought would become the central theme in the work of John Dewey, for example, *How We Think* (1933). Unlike Croce, Dewey does not explicitly recognize, but seems to deny, the existence of a non-pragmatic, more truly philosophical rationality.

are in a sense ancillary or epiphenomenal. Because fundamental perspectives on life precede and shape more specific views, policy advocacy, by itself, will be minimally effective in attempting to alter opinion. A deeper and more personal change must prepare the ground for intellectual openness.

The philosophers have identified an element of sameness, a universal structure, in how human beings view the world. Still, no two people can experience life in the same way—something that German and Italian philosophers have long known but that postmodernist “historicists” have taken to an absurd extreme. For example, men and women think of people of the opposite sex as being their “type,” but no two of them will have quite the same qualities in mind.

More needs to be said about what explains differences in outlook. Over time countless influences impact the imagination and sensibility of a person, starting early with the role of parents, the imagery and morale of children’s stories, happy or traumatic events, etc. An outlook on life slowly takes shape, far less in the form of well-defined ideas than in the form of intuitions, impressions, hopes, longings, fears, and anxieties. An infinitude of large and small experiences affects the person’s sense of reality, proportion, important or unimportant, pleasant and unpleasant. A comprehensive, intuitive sense of reality evolves that permeates all of what the person thinks or does. Whether that sense is realistic or not depends on the particular consciousness.

All individuals can identify poignant memories that are etched in their consciousness: that shattering event in high school, that haunting story grandmother told, that novel you never forget, that incredible victory you won, that great injustice you suffered, that movie that keeps running in your mind, those lines of poetry that keep echoing, that music that keeps pulling you back. These influences are not merely in the past. They affect how you experience the present. Together they and countless others define a basic intuition of what life is like. That view is by no means univocal. It is full of dissonances and tensions that can cause the person great distress. The lens through which we view the world is clouded, polished, or warped by our past.

Disagreements between people are inevitable for this reason alone, that they have apprehensions of the world that are different, partly incompatible. In propitious circumstances disputes can be at least partially settled, but not, as assumed by rationalists, by means of astute, clinical analysis of empirical evidence.

Our Outlook on the World: Both Personal and Social

It is important to add that what is distinctive to an individual's view of the world is both deeply personal and strongly influenced by the cultural and intellectual trends that dominate his or her society. They are the trends that made certain pioneering figures famous. "The culture" in the broad sense profoundly impacts the inner life of persons, shading, and embroidering it. The arts and entertainment may seem to be mere interruptions of life in the real world, but they affect the self deeply and continuously and sometimes cause shifts in the person's overall sense of reality.⁴

No one who knows the main works of Shakespeare can help but view human life under their influence. No one who has truly absorbed the works of the impressionist painters can ever see rivers, fields, and skies in quite the same way as before. Imaginative masterminds—poets, novelists, composers, dramatists, painters, etc.—have put their imprint on how people in the Western world think and behave. Great artists are never mere propagandists and are often only vaguely alert to the socio-political import of their works. Even semi-propagandistic popular art at its best—*Les Mis* comes to mind—can shape people's outlook on the world. Creative imagination is a breeding ground for intellectual and social and political change. Ideas in the narrow definitional, conceptual sense, including political ideas, tend to form in the wake of more or less artistic vision.

Because of a lack of preparation or natural ability, most people are not directly affected by the truly outstanding works of art, but most are eventually exposed to them, however indirectly, through artists of lesser rank who transmit the sensibility of these works in more popular, watered-down versions. Millions are exposed to and captivated by film music that, unbeknownst to them, carries the echoes of musical masterworks. Large artistic-cultural movements, combining works of many types, sweep through societies without their ultimate origins being familiar to most of those who are affected by them. These currents breed not only more of the same, but, by orienting the imagination of many people, also generate intellectual and socio-political impulses.

⁴ Benedetto Croce showed the fundamental and active role of the imagination (intuition) in constituting human consciousness. See his *Aesthetic* (English ed. 1909; first Italian edition 1902). A path-breaking figure in demonstrating the decisive power of the imagination in directing human conduct, and its intimate connection with will, is Irving Babbitt (1865-1933), author of such works as *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919) and *Democracy and Leadership* (1924). Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason* synthesizes and supplements the insights of Croce and Babbitt.

A few representative examples may be helpful. In America, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* gave many Americans a new way of looking at slavery and may indeed, as Abraham Lincoln surmised, have played a major role in moving America to civil war. Music may look particularly distant from public policy, but among the many musical works in the twentieth century that incorporated black sensibility into the American consciousness *Porgy and Bess* is, though created by whites, a prominent example. That during World War II Hollywood played a large role in forming the American imagination and thus also socio-political attitudes should be obvious. Later *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, and many other movies affected Americans in ways that would strengthen the civil rights movement. Movies in general have powerfully impacted the outlook and self-understanding of Americans. The same is true of entertainment in general.

Much could be added about the effects on Americans of what can be called the Hollywood-New York axis and the Boston-Berkeley axis, the overlapping elites in the arts, entertainment, media, book publishing, and academia. The two have for many decades had a discernible predominant, if not uniform, orientation and have reinforced each other. The mass media represent a downstream, lower-grade version of the perspectives and tastes of the most sophisticated members of these elites. News programs reflect a sense of what is newsworthy and not, what is acceptable and unacceptable, admirable and despicable. Another significant influence is television comedy, which teaches what to laugh and not to laugh at and with whom to join in laughter.

A field that knows much about the imagination's power to shape attitudes is advertising. Rarely does it merely sell a "product." It does not offer utilitarian conveniences to rational actors pursuing their self-interest. Advertising is primarily in the dream business. Advertisements for cars promise not "transportation" but to lift the buyer out of the doldrums and on to a more deeply satisfying plane of life. Advertising is no different from other forms of persuasion in that, to be successful, it must play upon the prospective customer's basic beliefs, vexations, and dreams and offer intriguing possibilities. Political advertising is an example of relying on highly compressed imagery and subliminal signals. Another profession that knows something about what it takes to persuade is trial advocacy.

Policy activism has its own precincts and goals, but here, too, real persuasion, as distinguished from achieving a transitory superficial coincidence of views, requires reaching into the innermost self of persons

and capturing their attention, either by playing upon existing tastes and inclinations or upon dissatisfactions and a budding desire for something fresh. The emphasis in the persuasion business is on advancing policy views, but here too real persuasion must if it is to be effective involve a rousing of the entire personality. When new ideas form they are articulating, confirming, nailing down an already existing hunch.

The Non-Conceptual Origins of Ideas

A major weakness of the belief that people are rational agents pursuing self-interest is that self-interest is much more faceted and deeply personal than rationalists realize. The failure to appreciate the complexity and scope of the process through which opinions are formed helps explain the limited efficacy of policy activism.

Human beings usually have deep investments in their picture of reality and their current commitments. This view is not only habitual, but is tied up with the person's sense of self-worth. To question the validity of that view is to imply that the person's judgment and taste are deficient and even that the person is living a lie. Human beings strongly resist being diminished, especially in their own eyes. A person may hear, but will not really listen to, arguments that fly in the face of what the person has long considered wise and noble. The challenge may produce a flood of counterarguments. What is more persuasive to the person are arguments that corroborate existing opinions.

Are then all attempts at persuasion futile? All depends on the approach and the circumstances. Convincing a true believer that he is mistaken might appear to be wasted effort, but fervor and dogmatism are often indications that a person is trying to stifle doubts about basic beliefs.⁵ To identify and address these doubts may weaken willful resistance. In general, attempts to change particular opinions, such as policy preferences, without questioning the worldview that connects them will produce no more than weak, partial, and transitory agreement, sufficient perhaps for an ad hoc political alliance but insufficient for transforming beliefs. It is when arguments create doubts about basic assumptions that opinions on more specific issues can begin to shift in earnest. Addressing basic existential questions is as important when trying to influence

⁵ On the sources of dogmatism, see Peter Viereck, esp. *Shame and Glory of the Intellectuals* (1953; 1965), esp. 46. Viereck draws heavily on Irving Babbitt, who sees a close connection between dogmatism, on the one hand, and inner doubt and vacillation, on the other. See, in particular, Babbitt's *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919; 1991), 263, where he writes of "the affinity . . . of the jelly-fish for the rock."

fairly open-minded, perhaps younger, persons. Besides being prone to deal with policy views outside of their context in the belief system of the person, rationalism has a narrow conception of facts and evidence.

More needs to be said about the origin of ideas. Briefly put, all ideas float on and express imaginative/emotional states.⁶ Before conceptual, ideational articulation there is intuitive apprehension of the world that orients the mind. Before Greek philosophy there was Homer and Greek general culture. Before Christian theology there was the life of Jesus and his followers and the life of the early Christian communities. Before the ideas of the French Revolution there was Jean-Jacques Rousseau with his dream of human existence transformed.

Rousseau is particularly relevant to this article because he is paradigmatic for most post-Christian views of morality and culture as well as for such views within the Christian churches themselves. He had ideas, to be sure, but what gave them such appeal and made them so influential was that they expressed an enchanting and far-reaching new way of imagining human existence. Rebellious against an imaginatively weakened Western tradition, Rousseau promised humanity something wonderful—liberation from all outer authority and imposed structures. Virtue would no longer involve a hard and endless struggle with sin in self and cumbersome efforts to do right by “neighbor,” that is, those within the immediate reach of the person. Virtue was turned into pity for no one in particular, into having warm feelings for suffering collectives somewhere at a distance. The old Western idea of character and love of neighbor as the crux of personal life and of social improvement was replaced with the idea of liberating humanity and letting man’s natural goodness rule. The traditional notions of love and responsibility were made to look cramped, niggardly, nay, perverse and based on a profound misunderstanding of the human condition. This radical redefinition of morality—letting sentimental love of mankind replace the character-dependent love of neighbor—became the dominant moral sensibility of modern Western man. What Irving Babbitt later called “sentimental humanitarianism” would in one form or another inspire virtually all major political movements in the modern Western world.⁷

The key point being made is that when ideologies or less comprehensive ideas were put forth they gave theoretical expression to an already formed way of envisioning the world. The ideas conceptualized,

⁶ For substantiation of the view that ideas have a pre-conceptual, intuitive-imaginative basis, see Croce, *Logic and Rhythm, Will, Imagination and Reason*.

⁷ See, in particular, Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College* (1908; 1986).

detailed, extended, and systematized a sense of what the world was and ought to be that had already captured the imagination. According to Rousseau himself, his arguments regarding human existence and politics could all be traced back to an overwhelming revelation that he had experienced during a walk in a forest. It had transformed his view of existence. His ideas worked out the implications of his original reimagining of the world. His ideas were in that sense arguments toward a preconceived conclusion.

Dream and reality mix in the human consciousness in such a way that they cannot easily be told apart. This is not to say that some views of the world are realistic because they have no imaginative component. There are no such views. The point is that there are types of imagination and corresponding ideas that flagrantly disregard the world in which human beings actually live—the world in which they perform practical actions, face obstacles and disappointments, and struggle to make the best of sometimes very difficult circumstances—what is usually called the “historical” world. All thought—even mathematics—has an imaginative-intuitive component, but some thought is more reliable, more realistic, because the imaginative component, rather than consisting of escapist dreaming, is anchored in the world of action.

Before Rousseau, John Locke had advocated a liberal vision of freedom, putting individual rights and private property at the center. But few people became liberals by reading John Locke’s *Second Treatise* in the intellectual abstract. His political ideas derived most of their appeal from the imaginative vision that was discernible between the lines. It was the vision of a society that let individuals live free, be themselves, be secure in their property, and be minimally restricted. This vision suffused and gave a lift to the prosaic, almost lawyerly theoretical arguments in the *Treatise*. The “theory” became persuasive in large part because it expressed an underlying imaginative vision. The main reason why liberalism evolved in a collectivist direction was that its original vision struck many as being too economic and socially atomistic. It was overwhelmed by the kind of longing for equality, brotherhood, and general enchantment that Rousseau pioneered.

Not many people became socialists by studying Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* or a similar work. The primary appeal of Marxism was that it channeled indignation at oppression and promised a new world without exploitation where all could develop their full potential. It was that general vision rather than ideas formulating particular aspects of Marxism that pulled people in. Explaining the cruelty of inherited social ar-

rangements and why they would give way to liberation, Marxism put an economic twist on the Rousseauistic dream of a tensionless, harmonious society. The ideas defended by Marxist theoreticians are of course an integral part of Marxism, but their persuasive power cannot be fully understood without considering the vision of a terrible present and a glorious future that animates them. Ideas are, so to speak, icing on a cake, the theoretical-conceptual articulation of what has already been seen in a pre-conceptual manner.

In the last century and a half, economists, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, and others subjected Marxism to an enormous amount of criticism. You might think that, with the exception of a few of its ideas in revised form, Marxism would no longer be credible, and yet Marxists of various types are still very common in American and European universities. In view of what has been argued here, this should come as no surprise. Supposed idea systems do not stand or fall with reasoning and evidence *as rationalism understands them*. Some idea systems are capable of withstanding even withering intellectual assaults because, as far as the adherents are concerned, the assaults are shallow and leave the underlying vision untouched. Deep personal need and longing make it possible for the theory to stage repeated comebacks. It is especially important to understand that, for Marxists and other socialists, demanding “social justice” is a sign of great moral nobility.

By the 1930s it may have seemed to many that Marxism had been intellectually wholly discredited, but this is when it experienced a kind of Golden Age. It has been called the Red Decade. For example, five students at Cambridge, including one named Kim Philby, became ideologically committed communists. Intellectually brilliant, they also believed that communism was the wave of the future. The “Cambridge spies” rose very high in the British establishment, where they were agents for the Soviet Union. Disillusionment came a decade or so later, at which time most of them filled the void with drink, drugs, and sexual promiscuity. Many other communists would not give up the dream that had won them for communism. They refused to see Stalin and the Soviet Union as true expressions of the noble cause. The element of sheer willfulness in either adopting or retaining a supposedly beautiful dream must not be underestimated.

In the American Democratic party primaries in 2020, Bernie Sanders, a self-professed socialist, showed great strength, gaining support not least from young people. Was the reason that socialist professors had exposed these young people to works of socialist ideology? Except for

a tiny minority, supporters of Sanders would undoubtedly have failed a test on the tenets of socialism. What moved them to support Sanders, other than opposition to America's financial and corporate elites and the military-industrial complex, was the longing for social justice and a tensionless existence that always buttresses socialist ideas.

The reason for discussing at such length what rationalist epistemology overlooks has been to explain why the persuasion business in general and foreign-policy advocacy in particular have been ineffective. It is crucial to understand that ideas always have a visionary element and that, when ideas catch on, the intuitive view of the world from which they are indistinguishable is a part of what gives them momentum. It also must be understood that the pre-conceptual element is often rather willfully warped, which builds distortion into the ideas. Finally, specific opinions such as policy ideas cannot be really refuted unless the underlying, orienting vision is questioned. People with strong policy preferences will shrug off challenges unless doubts are created about the deeper personal affirmations that hold the preferences together and that gave rise to them in the first place. To sum up, the notion of overwhelming others with policy advocacy is—simplistic. There are no shortcuts to real persuasion.

None of what has been argued here should be construed as criticism of the view that ideas can be powerful directive forces in their own right. The argument has been directed only against a narrow, simplifying understanding of ideas. The criticism of rationalism may have seemed to belittle the role of rationality, but the objective has been just the opposite, to show that the rationality of rationalism is an abstract, narrowly cerebral, and reductionistic distortion of reason. There is a different kind of rationality that is more attuned to the full range of human consciousness and that is more historical, more sensitive to the concrete particulars and complexities of human life. It recognizes the close connection between ideas and imagination and the resulting preconditions for genuine open-mindedness. Instead of sharpening our sense of what is required to persuade others, rationalism ignores or glosses over aspects of human consciousness that are central to the formation of opinions.

Anti-Interventionism in a New Vein

It is time to relate these extended epistemological observations more directly to the question of intellectual strategy in foreign-policy thinking.

It was argued above that groundbreaking creativity in the arts blazes new trails and inspires new cultural trends. Something analogous happens in the intellectual life when works of originality, breadth, and

depth come into being. They eventually generate broad intellectual change. Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Hegel, or Kant are only conspicuous examples. Over the centuries numerous intellectual figures in different fields have initiated new intellectual currents. Having at first engaged only a discerning, sophisticated few, ideas of this path-breaking type seeped down to intellectuals in general and, in simplified form, finally reached even the educated general public. As the ground was fertilized, ideas that were initially dismissed by the reigning intellectual authorities started to germinate and soon undermined those same authorities.

In America, the post-World War II era saw a surge of historical and philosophical interest in the origins and meaning of traditional Western and American civilization, notably of American constitutionalism. Scholars revisited classical and Christian basic beliefs, including the ancient view that the lower nature of man needs to be tamed and that moral and institutional restraints have to be placed on power. These scholars questioned the progressive, largely anti-traditional views that were setting the tone in academia.⁸ While rife with potential for undermining imperial, hegemonic foreign policy thinking, these scholarly challenges to the American intellectual establishment had implications for the study of many areas of life. They sowed doubts also about the *domestic* version of imperial, interventionist ambition—the desire to have government be deeply involved in social life.

Generated upstream, these new ideas, which were seemingly distant from politics in the narrow sense and from the persuasion business with its position papers and op-eds, would in time spread outside of academia and inspire a rethinking of the practical issues of the day, including those of foreign affairs. They would at length influence even the persuasion business, although anti-interventionist activists themselves might not realize that earlier intellectual developments at a different level were having ripple effects in their sphere.

Historians will eventually map how upstream intellectual efforts began to affect policy discussion. Here a broad-brush sketch of what

⁸ A notable example of a thinker in the post-war era who revisited and assessed the meaning of the American political tradition and traced its origins in classical and Christian civilization was Russell Kirk (1918-1994), author of books like *The Conservative Mind* and *The Roots of American Order*. He and other leading intellectuals with similar interests were strongly influenced by earlier American thinkers. One such thinker was Irving Babbitt, perhaps the most incisive and creative commentator on America and the modern Western world in the twentieth century. A major thinker in the preceding century who had raised similar questions was Orestes Brownson (1803-1876), author of *The American Republic*.

happened will have to suffice.⁹ Scholarship especially from the 1980s forward, but with deep roots in the mentioned older work, revealed the relationship between interventionism and historical trends in how Americans behaved and understood themselves. The desire for armed American hegemony could be traced back to certain emerging American personality traits and suppositions, importantly, to a form of conceit and corresponding ideological orientation very different from that of the Framers of the U.S. Constitution. Scholars examined ideas, sensibilities, and attitudes that subverted the Framers' desire to check and defuse the will to power. It was demonstrated that the Constitution with its emphasis on restraint, compromise, deliberation, and respect for minorities embodied a temperament radically different from that of imperial ambition. Willful, ideological reinterpretations of the American tradition had had the effect of unleashing, not containing, the desire to dominate. Wilsonianism, with its belief that America had a moral duty to improve the world and promote democracy, was shown to grow out of a mixture of moral arrogance and utopianism, as was the case with the related twin forces of the Social Gospel and Progressivism. Liberal humanitarianism and internationalism similarly stimulated the will to power. From the 1970s forward, so-called neoconservatism greatly reinforced the interventionist impulse. It repurposed Cold-War hawkishness, putting it in the service of achieving armed American global hegemony. The old notion of American Puritans that others were watching so that they needed to live up to the highest moral-spiritual standards was transformed into an interventionist doctrine. America, it was now argued, was "exceptional," uniquely founded on universal principles, and called to promote

⁹ In the last quarter century a number of academics started examining the deeper sources of American imperial ambition. The most penetrating studies questioned dubious basic assumptions about human nature, morality, and the American political tradition. They were predominantly philosophical and historical. The following alphabetical list, which is merely suggestive, contains only books that non-philosophical readers can readily see are directly relevant to foreign affairs: Richard Gamble (*The War for Righteousness*, 2003, and *In Search of the City on a Hill*, 2012), Justin Garrison ('*An Empire of Ideals*,' 2013), Paul Gottfried (*War and Democracy*, 2012), David Hendrickson (*The Imperial Temptation*, co-authored with Robert Tucker, 1991 and *Republic in Peril*, 2018), Samuel Huntington (*The Clash of Civilizations*, 1996 and *Who Are We?*, 2004), James Kurth (*The American Way of Empire*, 2019), Justin Litke (*Twilight of the Republic*, 2013), Walter McDougall (*Promised Land, Crusader State*, 1996 and *The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy*, 2016), David W. Noble (*The Death of the Nation*, 2002), and Claes Ryn (*The New Jacobinism*, 1991, *America the Virtuous*, 2003, and *A Common Human Ground*, 2003), Ernest Lee Tuveson (*Redeemer Nation*, 1968). Jacob Heilbrunn (*They Knew They Were Right*, 2008) and Patrick Buchanan (*The Death of the West*, 2002, *Suicide of a Superpower*, 2011) were not academics but intellectuals creating major doubts about the interventionist foreign-policy consensus.

those principles in the world. America was the indispensable global leader. Historical and philosophical scholarship demonstrated that neo-conservatism was very similar to French Jacobinism, which animated the French Revolution. Both movements mobilized what they considered morally virtuous power in pursuit of a better world. Scrutiny of each of the mentioned currents and other influences disclosed how highly questionable moral and intellectual suppositions combined with sheer nationalist hawkishness and plutocratic-financial designs to produce the imperial attitudes of the American foreign-policy establishment.

The most incisive critiques of the deeper origins of American interventionism originated outside of the academic limelight, to say nothing of the media limelight, and they were up against deeply entrenched academic forces that ignored or treated them dismissively. Like other human beings, intellectuals have deeply rooted likes and dislikes. The interventionists were firmly set in their ways, and they had heavy career investments in their view of America's role. No amount of policy argumentation would by itself dislodge their basic general beliefs. The lack of self-criticism among policymakers was due in part to their not being personally impacted by the pain and destruction wrought by their theories and policies. This was the case even more among interventionist academics.

But over time the new intellectual impulses had an effect. Having originated upstream in more historical and philosophical work, they found their way, if initially only partially and indirectly, to young intellectuals, who started to question the assumptions of the foreign-policy establishment in academia, think tanks, and government. To widening circles, conventional foreign-policy thinking began to look, well—counter-productive, utopian, and morally suspect. The new thinking started to modify the myopia native to policy activism. The ground was prepared for a more penetrating and persuasive kind of advocacy.

That the military-industrial complex and big finance have been playing a large role in promoting an hegemonist foreign policy has been obvious to all but the most willful idealist interventionists. Now it could be more clearly seen that a certain view of the world and of America's role—an entire American self-understanding—had long been generating and fanning imperial ambitions, whatever other sources they may have had. This self-aggrandizing understanding had been breaking down traditional American moral-spiritual and institutional restraints and given idealistic-sounding sanction to whatever forces wanted assertiveness abroad.

As students of foreign policy, international relations, and national security became able to discern sources of interventionism deep in the American psyche, they could understand better how basic assumptions about life engendered specific hegemonist policy prescriptions. These preferences formed part of a general personality and mind-set. Individual policies that might have looked plausible when considered in isolation now could be seen as being held together by a self-applauding, dreamy, utopian worldview that often masked other motives. It was becoming increasingly apparent that this drive to dominate was especially hard to reconcile with the Framers' desire to check the will to power.

Key to the critical reassessment of the imperial outlook was the realization that the latter had moral-cultural origins as well as more narrowly political content. Fully to understand and refute interventionism it was necessary to broaden conventional disciplinary boundaries. This awareness raised questions even about prominent scholars who had a more realistic, restrictive view of the use of American power and who stressed power-balancing. Was their view of the interactions of states not almost mechanistic, as if derived from a branch of engineering rather than from a well-rounded view of human beings? And did not they too have primacist proclivities as well as rationalistic and empiricistic biases that limited their criticism of interventionism?

Young people interested in foreign policy who became alert to the dubious visionary element of interventionism could no longer unquestioningly adopt the thought-patterns of the dominant academic authorities and the larger foreign-policy establishment. What had once appeared to be a virtually self-evident general policy preference could now be seen as neglecting too many opposing arguments, as reflecting a quasi-utopian worldview, and as involving an unstated but no less real desire to dominate.

Foreign-policy activists with rationalistic inclinations who are also most comfortable with policy debates are, almost by definition, not as interested in exploring in depth the kind of historical and philosophical work here described or in exploring how in the long run such work might favorably affect public discussion. Ideas of this kind seem too distant from policy debate. Precisely because rationalist policy activists are not spontaneously attuned to historical and philosophical ideas, they may be among the last to understand what their own advocacy and possible "wins" owe to work done earlier and elsewhere. It seems built into the mind-set of the rationalist policy activists to underestimate the importance of just the kind of intellectual developments that can give

momentum and vitality to anti-interventionism. The only way really to turn the tide of policy preferences in foreign and domestic affairs may be for sustained, penetrating intellectual effort of the type described above to continue and to expand. To hope that policy activism of the rationalist kind will change America's course is to remain under the sway of the Great Illusion.

No Substitute for Going Upstream

It does not follow from the arguments in this article that policy activism should be abandoned in favor of high-level historical and philosophical study. Efforts of different types and at different levels are needed to change opinions. A division of labor is appropriate and necessary. What needs to be understood is that genuinely to persuade others is not primarily a matter of mobilizing empirical evidence and offering astute analysis of the evidence, as rationalists assume. It requires a more comprehensive and subtle approach to knowledge. Sound intellectual work depends for a sound sense of proportion and direction on work of greater scope and depth.

While criticizing the myopia that is native to the persuasion business in general and anti-primacist advocacy in particular, this article has indicated the kind of intellectual strategy that may make anti-interventionist policy advocacy more efficacious. This advocacy needs to be guided by work that goes to the bottom of foreign-policy thinking, examining its general assumptions about life. The most fruitful, least ephemeral, work produced by the advocacy business has in fact been influenced by or even exhibited some of the depth of the upstream intellectual efforts discussed above.

While it is true that millions and millions of dollars can put a particular policy in the public eye for a while and, in favorable circumstances, affect public opinion, it does not follow that the sponsored ideas will really dispel and replace the disapproved general policy preference. Dubious foreign-policy thinking can be truly refuted only to the extent that unease is created about its basic assumptions and prompts openness to new thinking. Persuasion that counts in the long run always shifts fundamental beliefs and perspectives.

Interventionist politicians and their intellectual supporters have not had to suffer the consequences of their policies because their wars and other interventions have been geographically distant and have had limited direct impact on voters. Members of the foreign-policy establishment have also been shielded by the benevolent-sounding, reassuring

rhetoric justifying their policies. They have been able to excuse great foreign-policy failures by claiming that the problem was not with the policy or the cited rationale but with faulty execution. But when, as a result of a broadened and deepened foreign-policy debate, the range of interventionist conceit, intellectual shoddiness, ignorance, and recklessness begins to dawn on the more discerning members of the general public, the day of reckoning may finally be at hand.

Although politicians have far less power than most people assume, nobody will dispute that they exert much influence on public affairs and world events. They can certainly do great damage. That policy activists will try to influence government officials and members of Congress is only to be expected. But politicians have very limited freedom of movement. It must be understood that they do not independently generate their own power. To gain or retain popular support they must maneuver within a range of acceptability defined by public consciousness. To reiterate, people have dreams, fears, and views of what gives life meaning. The origins of such propensities have been discussed here at some length. People will spurn or favor politicians according to whether they offend or cater to cherished beliefs and sensibilities. Leaders will derive some freedom to improvise from the inevitable tensions within public consciousness, but what people in general will tolerate by way of new thinking will depend on what has been foreshadowed or seeded in the life of the mind and the imagination. Major changes in policy and the unsettling of reigning elites presupposes a looming tectonic shift among those who influence public consciousness. Pioneering efforts in the intellectual and cultural life will have had to prepare the ground. To be effective, policy advocacy directed at politicians has to resonate with something already stirring in the general public. Disturbing social and political developments will in such circumstances help discredit old beliefs.

If the American foreign-policy establishment is to be undermined and replaced, there is no avoiding going upstream and challenging basic assumptions that relate to more than foreign policy. A wise alternative can emerge only from penetrating criticism and a superior overarching vision, rooted not in utopian, self-deluding dreaming, but in historically informed, uncompromising realism.