



How Academia Failed the Nation The Decline of Regional Studies

*Francis Fukuyama**
The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies
Johns Hopkins University

With the decline of regional studies, many U.S. leaders find themselves unprepared for the demands of foreign policy in the new century.

September 11, 2001, was a wake-up call—not just concerning the threat of terrorism, but also regarding the way we educate Americans about the outside world. This event brought home the degree to which events taking place in troubled, obscure places like Afghanistan could have major effects on the United States. It also showed us how poorly prepared we were in our knowledge of the Middle East, Islam and related issues to deal with the world we now face.

At the time of the attacks, the entire U.S. government could call on no more than two or three speakers of Pushto (the dominant language in Afghanistan); only a handful of U.S. diplomats know Arabic well enough to appear on al-Jazeera, the Arabic language channel famous for broadcasting videos of Osama bin Laden, without embarrassing themselves. U.S. forces intervened in Iraq without basic cultural literacy, a problem that consistently hampered our ability to collect intelligence on the growing insurgency there.

The scandal that the media has thus far failed to cover is the utter failure of the American academy to train adequate numbers of people with deep knowledge about the world outside the United States. This failure is linked to the decline of regional studies in American universities over the past generation and the misguided directions being taken by the social sciences in recent years, particularly political science and economics.

The story here is one of colonization of the study of politics by economics. Known as the “queen of the social sciences,” economics is the only discipline that looks like a natural science. Economists are carefully trained to gather data and build causal models that can be rigorously tested empirically. The data that economists work from are quantitative from the start and can be analyzed with a powerful battery of statistical tools.

Economists’ powerful methodology has been a source of envy and emulation on the part of other social scientists. The past two decades have seen the growth of what

** The material presented by the author does not necessarily portray the view point of the editors and the management of Institute of Business and Technology (BIZTEK) as well as the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies.*

is known as “rational choice” political science, in which political scientists seek to model political behavior using the same mathematical tools (game theory, for the most part) used by economists. Economists tend to believe that regularities in human behavior are universal and invariant across different cultures and societies (for example, the law of supply and demand is the same in Japan and Botswana). Similarly, rational choice political science seeks to create broad, universally applicable laws of political behavior by generalizing across large numbers of countries rather than focusing intensively on the history and context of individual countries or regions.

As a result, regional studies fell seriously out of favor in the 1980s and 1990s. Foundations ceased to fund area studies programs, money for language training and fieldwork evaporated and requirements were changed from knowing languages and history to learning quantitative methods.

Regional studies requires a huge personal investment, not just in specialized training but also in having to live in a particular country and building up a network of contacts to keep one’s knowledge fresh throughout a career. Given shifting incentives, it is not surprising that the best and brightest graduate students started shifting into more theoretical or functional types of political science. Area studies programs were closed or merged into other units; on the eve of the September 11 attacks, half of the top political science departments in the United States did not have a Middle East studies program.

It is certainly desirable for a social science to be rigorous, empirical and seek general rules of human behavior. But as Aristotle explained, it should not try to achieve a rigor that goes beyond what is possible given the limitations inherent in the subject matter. In fact, most of what is truly useful for policy is context-specific, culture-bound and non-generalizable. The typical article appearing today in a leading journal like the *American Political Science Review* contains a lot of complex-looking math, whose sole function is often to formalize a behavioral rule that everyone with common sense understands must be true. What is missing is any deep knowledge about the subtleties and nuances of how foreign societies work, knowledge that would help us better predict the behavior of political actors, friendly and hostile, in the broader world.

Examples abound. In trying to understand what kind of political actors might emerge in a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, we don’t need math or game theory; what we need is an up-to-date understanding of the ethnic, religious and tribal structure of the country, knowledge of who the figures of authority are in Iraqi Shiism, how they relate to their Iranian counterparts and how the tribes in the Sunni Triangle are intermarried with one another. Understanding bin Ladenism requires historical knowledge of the development in the 20th century of radical Islamism, from its roots in the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt through the Iranian revolution to the Wahhabi imams, or religious leaders, in Saudi Arabia.

You cannot model European-American differences unless you understand them, which involves, of all things, actually talking to Europeans. Anyone who has thought about great historical events like the outbreak of World War I or the end of the Cold War recognizes the role of historical contingency, accident and personality in the way they eventually played out. If the German General von Kluck had been able to break through the French lines at the first battle of the Marne in September 1914, or if Soviet General Secretary Yuri Andropov had been in better health, the history of both the beginning and the end of the 20th century would have been written very differently.

Regional studies, of course, has its own limitations. Area specialists tend to become parochial and overspecialized; many draw unwarranted general conclusions from their own limited experience or else fail to see their own countries as instances of broader patterns of political behavior. The great sociologist and political scientist

Seymour Martin Lipset was fond of saying that someone “who knows only one country knows no countries.” Americans tend to be particularly guilty of this, believing that the way we organize our institutions constitutes a kind of norm for modern democracies. In fact, American institutions are quite exceptional among those of developed liberal democracies, and it is only through a broadening of one’s horizons that one can come to understand how exceptional—for good and ill—America is.

Perhaps because it is located in Washington, D.C., SAIS always has been a policy-oriented school and has managed to buck many trends in contemporary academia. While not ignoring recent methodological approaches, SAIS has retained a strong commitment to regional studies throughout its six decades. Economics and economic methodology remain central to a SAIS education, but these broad theories must be grounded in knowledge about real places, people and societies.

With the 9/11 attacks and the Iraq War, America has fallen into a deeply troubled relationship with the outside world. We cannot hope to navigate our way through the difficult policy choices in the years ahead unless we have leaders who understand how the world beyond our shores works and who are able to see the United States from the viewpoint of non-Americans. We cannot cooperate or spread our influence around the world unless we are able to train non-Americans to see things from our perspective or help them acquire the intellectual tools by which dispassionate analysis is made possible.

We might have responded to recent events by investing massively in regional studies and language training, just as we invested in scientists and engineers after Sputnik in the 1950s. Since we chose to put our money into baggage screeners instead, we will have to make do with existing educational institutions and schools like SAIS that never lost sight of their original mission.