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Author's Response to H-Diplo | ISSF Article Review 14

Response to **H-Diplo | ISSF Article Review by Robert Vitalis of David Ekbladh. "Present at the Creation: Edward Mead Earle and the Depression-Era Origins of Security Studies."** *International Security* 36:3 (Winter 2011/12): 107-141. DOI: 10.1162/ISEC_a_00067. http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00067

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Prompted by a couple of colleagues who suggested that I put the forum component of this listserv to work, I would like to offer a response to Robert Vitalis' review of my piece, "Present at the Creation: Edward Mead Earle and the Depression Era Origins of Security Studies." First and foremost I would like to thank Vitalis for taking the time to write such a detailed critique.¹

Vitalis has labored on the turf of international relations (IR) scholarship for some time and has much to say. But, in a rush to get at Earle the scholar (an individual who did not always cut the most sympathetic figure), Vitalis misses texture and crucial substance in the article's argument.

In his comments he calls the piece an intellectual history and wants it to be a part of the evolution of grand narratives in IR. It is not wholly that. Intellectual history there undoubtedly is but the article is also an exploration of how institutional and individual actors can influence larger discussions and policy on vital issues.

¹ My thanks to Robert Vitalis and Sean Lynn-Jones for their emailed thoughts and suggestions.

Vitalis seemingly falls into a perpetually alluring trap for academics. It is solely scholarship—the production of a specific type of research and analysis—that matters and, by extension, moves debate and understanding of issues in IR. He sees Earle’s importance as fundamentally linked to the monograph he did not produce. Vitalis seems to demand that Earle should have written *the* defining book on strategy to earn an enduring seat at the historical table.

However, there is a bias in this view against those who shift debate and policy in other manners by building institutional and professional supports for others who help promote a particular vision or agenda. It is not hard to think of numerous figures in the past and present university world that may not have written the definitive volume on their subject but have shaped a field (and policy) by cultivating a slew of other talented and productive people. Yet these academic entrepreneurs are never wholly independent actors. They are tied to the demands of funders, host institutions, and, often, the prevailing winds of the scholarly community. In other words, no one can really make a profound change to an area of inquiry entirely on his or her own. They need support (107-109). Earle was one of these people who could mobilize these various constituencies, which had their own agendas, in the service of a particular agenda. He was specifically creating an area of study centered on questions of security and strategy. The primary means to promote this was a seminar he ran at the Institute of Advanced Study (IAS)

By primarily engaging Earle the scholar, Vitalis misses this fundamental point. That Earle was not the sole factor in the rise of a proto-security studies field is a given (a fact that is stressed several times in the article). Others were involved, indeed they had to be as Earle’s program was one of changing the academy, policy, and public debate. It was quite dependent on others coming to the support of Earle. Critical among these were a set of foundations, particularly the Carnegie Corporation of New York. These influential institutions came to agree with his formulations on strategy and the need for a specific program to reshape the American approach to security in a world besieged by ‘totalitarians.’

Although Vitalis diminishes the importance of Earle’s written contribution to a major outcome of collaborative efforts within the IAS seminar, *The Makers of Modern Strategy*, the book was largely hatched and carried forward by Earle. Its concept was in line with the larger agenda of the seminar: to inform academic discussion while shaping the public perception for the need for a clearly defined American grand strategy.

It may not be the single-author monograph that a tenure committee would value but it was, in the initial form Earle and his collaborators gave it, a powerfully influential book that did achieve its goals, at least in part. It remains so in altered form. I suspect there are more than a few scholars today who would like their volumes, even those compiled as editors, to have similar endurance. In fact, *Makers* was one reason that George F. Kennan, when he arrived at the IAS, sought out Earle as his guide to the world of history of strategy.²

By fixating on on academic debates in IR, Vitalis’ commentary obscures the fact that Earle was focused on creating a distinct subfield centered on questions of security and strategy. He

² John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), pp. 420-421.

conceptualized the study of strategy as not a single “*project* but *subject*.”³ (emphasis original) This is a way the issue is still approached today. Vitalis lets us know that there were others whose work touched on strategy. The article never disputes this. As I note, there were plenty of others beavering away on topics of war and peace in the period. It was the emphasis and particular influence of Earle that make his efforts worthy of attention and recovery.

Just noting all the scribbling would miss the import of the IAS seminar. At one point Vitalis dismisses it as merely a “two hour” meeting. There were, of course, workshops and symposia but Vitalis seems to have overlooked the fact that Earle’s IAS fiefdom was, in action, an institute. It attracted a revolving selection of promising scholars (unlike other international studies programs at Yale, Johns Hopkins, and Tufts, which had more traditional undergraduate and graduate educational missions, the IAS program focused exclusively on high-level, post-graduate research). Participants did not just stop in for a brown-bag at the IAS; they spent extended periods of time there at Earle’s invitation. Many were funded through grants from the Carnegie Corporation or the Rockefeller Foundation. They completed or worked up some rather influential projects in the New Jersey countryside.

Vitalis has a point when he states reinterpretations of the past are influenced by the present. However, those Cold War interpreters of the rise of ‘national security’ that Vitalis presents to question the impact of the IAS seminar seem to be immune from this concern. By adopting their views, he apparently accepts their assumption of 1945 as a great divide and begins to fall into the pattern of understanding that disavowed the important shifts of the 1930s and 1940s.

Vitalis uses Gene Lyons’s very interesting 1963 article in *The Journal of Politics* a cudgel against the IAS seminar. Yet, swinging Lyons actually helps make the case for the Princeton gathering. Lyons is one of those Cold War scholars who saw a profound transformation in the field coming after 1945. He did note the activity on ‘national security’ before and during the war and sees Earle’s efforts as important and as a complement to others laboring in IR on issues related to security.

Lyons did see ‘national security’ scholarship as suffering a decline immediately following World War II that lasted through the start of the Korean War.⁴ If this is correct, doesn’t it underline an important point made in the article? Earle’s seminar continued to function at a very high pitch through the late 1940s and early 1950s, when, according to Lyons, the field was moribund. It provided a prominent forum that brought renowned scholars like Arnold Toynbee and Edward Hallett Carr to continue discussion (often with high-level members of the U.S. academic community and government) and research on what many still saw as a vital area of study. It helped carry ideas that were forged in the response to a global crisis brought by the Depression into the Cold War.

³ Edward Mead Earle, “Military Policy and Statecraft: A Proposed Field of Study in International Relations,” n.d. [November 1937], box 6, Earle Faculty File, Institute of Advanced Studies Archives.

⁴ Gene Lyons, “The Growth of National Security Research,” *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Aug., 1963), pp. 489-508.

What is more, this was all well-known and valued. It may not have been an academic credential but the in 1950 the *New York Times* praised Earle's seminar as one of the jewels in the crown of the IAS.⁵

When he criticizes the fact that the 'seminar' went to Washington (in other words, that its members insinuated themselves into the official world of government) Vitalis is again missing the forest for the trees. Is he right that myriad other scholars went to Washington during World War II? Yes, obviously. And saying that the IAS Seminar sent so many of its members into the government and military in no way suggests that others did not join the ranks or that wartime work was not influential.

It is telling that this little corner of New Jersey sent so many of its members and alumni into important sectors of government and military service. Vitalis is skeptical of that there was any agenda, dismissing goals of getting into positions of influence in government and shaping policy as merely "putative." But this a goal of directing policy and working with the government, something Earle sketched out in black and white, in memos and grant proposals. So this relationship with centers of power was not entirely accidental or just a wartime imperative, rather it was actively planned and sought. Like so many other patterns of interaction the IAS seminar sketched out, this sort of collaboration remains commonplace today in the world of security studies.

The larger point of this discussion is to draw out the fact that a particular relationship with power, particularly government power, was there from the start as scholars began to build up a field of study around questions of strategy. A primary goal of the IAS seminar was not simply producing works that would loom large in the IR canon or satisfy scholars in another century but to actively create a cadre who would shape discourse and policy in Washington at a critical historical moment.

I am not entirely clear on Vitalis' emphasis on the Yale Institute for International Studies. As the article discusses, YIIS hosted a number of leading scholars that worked on strategy, but as part of a wider exploration of international relations. Yale's was not a program *specifically* focused on security questions and the application of strategy.

By focusing on YIIS, Vitalis again supports part of my argument that Earle's agenda was to influence aspects of academic discussion that the research and individuals the seminar cultivated. He drives home the fact that key members of Earle's shop in Princeton (William Fox and Bernard Brodie) were recruited by the Yale center as it grappled with international questions in an emerging Cold War.

One element that Vitalis does not consider is that the support given by others to Earle was actually a judgment on the work being done in the collection of IR programs, including YIIS, as the world rushed to war. Earle could make an effective argument to funders that no other body was devoted to the pressing question of how to utilize scholarship to advocate for an American grand strategy to face a world in crisis. Foundations and others offered their support because they believed this view was correct. There was no single program *explicitly* devoted to the exploration and explication of strategy in the U.S. context.

⁵ Gertrude Samuels, "Where Einstein Surveys the Cosmos," *New York Times*, November 19, 1950.

Vitalis obscures this strong and central plank of the argument, namely that contemporaries—and these were leading figures, scholars, academic institutions, and foundations—in the 1930s and 1940s saw the uniqueness and importance of what Earle and his collaborators were doing. Many also shared his perception of the threat presented by totalitarian states as one directly linked to the international upheaval caused by the Depression (something Vitalis does not dispute).

Regardless of what scholars would say in the 1960s and later, what Earle and his compatriots did mattered to a slew of important actors in the years following 1939.

The instrumentalist vision of the study of strategy and security at the core of the IAS seminar is another critical point of the argument, not just that of how Earle influenced later scholarly debates. It is a vision embraced by many groups focused on security studies in the postwar years and down to today. This instrumental essence and its relation to an important moment of origin for security studies escapes Vitalis' notice.

If these and other points made about Earle seem merely 'idiosyncratic' this is caused by the fact that Earle was a man who changed in the course of his career often in response to what he and others saw as changing world conditions.

I will also offer a few quick corrections. At one point Vitalis brings up the American Council for International Studies and the Social Science Research Council and suggests that funding for the seminar went through these bodies. This is incorrect; the Carnegie Corporation made its supporting grants for the seminar directly to the IAS (although some of these were made under its national war preparedness program, the "National Emergency Program"). Also, Vitalis misidentifies the Carnegie Corporation of New York as the "Carnegie Foundation" which is an organization founded in 1905 to advance teaching and learning. At one point Vitalis quotes me as seeing Earle as a "prophet." This was not the intent. When I identify Earle as "the prophet" (119) I was connecting him to a quote in the preceding sentence where he, somewhat dramatically, credited himself with "prophecy." It may make me a tad flip but not an acolyte of Earle's.

Vitalis portrays the article as fighting a conspiracy against Earle. There was nothing so grand as a conspiracy. Earle and the programs he tended were overlooked as other imperatives structured inquiry in an evolving field. By the 1960s many commentators were reworking their own understanding of IR and security to match a Cold War world. It is a reminder that even historically-minded scholars can forget.

Oddly, in his conclusion Vitalis serves up a counterfactual: what if Earle had remained an "isolationist?" In essence, he floats the idea that evolution within those academic communities dealing with security and strategy would have continued, onward and upward, without Earle's input.

It's a dubious question and one that cannot be formally answered, at least not historically. Earle and the IAS seminar cannot be disentangled from the story of security studies, particularly its impact at the decisive juncture of world depression and world war. What can be said is that for fifteen years at the IAS seminar, major work was done, policies justified, and careers made. If this is arbitrarily removed you have a parlor game based on guesswork. The article was not about guessing.

When we allow influential elements to vanish from the longer history of security studies it is difficult to understand not just academic debates but the crucial relationships with the policy world, foundations, and other institutions that have sustained the field over time. The field became too dependent on stories that emerged during the Cold War. The story is deeper. In fact, the disappearance of Earle and some significant achievements from the narrative (an action Vitalis' parting question inadvertently and awkwardly asks the reader to repeat) is one reason the article was written.

Vitalis' comments miss major points of the article. Did Earle and his IAS colleagues modulate every voice that had something to say on war, peace, or strategy in the era the article discusses and beyond? Hardly. Earle was a central figure in the rise of significant concepts, institutions, and relationships during the 1930s and 1940s that would inform and structure the evolution of the field. It is something we should remember not merely to be honest about the shape of security studies as a field but also to understand how the United States changed its engagement in international affairs at a decisive historical juncture.

David Ekbladh is assistant professor of history at Tufts University. His current book project is *Look at the World: The Origins of an American Globalism in the 1930s*.

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