

# Been There But Going Where?: Assessing Old and New Agendas in Security Research and Study

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Essays in this collection are focused on assessing the developments in research and study in the past 20 years. They will likely provoke some new thoughts about what we believe we have accomplished so that we can have markers for our forward progress. By design, the authors can afford to contribute only general perspectives since space is limited. The exercise is a welcome opportunity to summarize perspectives from folks who have laboured to push the field to back up its self-provided label of ‘profession’ with a commitment to and fulfilment of a key ingredient in the label: research and study based on scientific methods. True professional status cannot be invoked in the security field until evidence-based decision-making is fully accepted and practiced by the vast majority of the field’s practitioners.

The questions addressed to authors immediately bring to mind two particular interests. First, can we accurately summarize the pathways that have brought us to this point in security’s evolution toward true professionalism? Second, what dreams do we have to fire the imaginations of practitioners and budding scholars? This discussion should be anchored, therefore, in visions about new agendas that are built on the successes and distractions of the past. On one level, then, this essay serves as one observer’s mere accounting. On another level, it is intentionally provocative. By itself, mere accounting rarely stimulates new pathways. Provocations springing from evidence of past misadventures may, however, invite challenges and thereby encourage imaginative thinking beyond defenses of the status quo.

## What have we learned by study and practice in the last 20 years?

By the mid-1980s the domestic or internal aspects of security (by contrast to international or external security) had essentially achieved a clean break from two particular previous conditions: first, the condition in which security was regarded as a separate and limited guardian of private property protection;<sup>1</sup> and second, the condition of separate-but-equal status in terms of its role relationships in business and criminal justice. Briefly, the condition of separation began with the “mean years” of private security development, essentially from 1865 until just before World War II; the condition of separate-but-equal began during World War II

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<sup>1</sup> Through the 19th and most of the 20th centuries, security in all its forms was regarded as a agent solely of private property interests, largely cut off from any larger political or social role, and always viewed as an overhead expense with few verifiable contributions to an organization’s fundamental mission.

and lasted until the 1980s when internal civil disorders and public sector resource limitations demanded a new era of cooperation and interaction with public law enforcement and crime prevention initiatives. In the era of separation, it was impossible for the security field to have any higher value than guardian at the gates. Separate-but-equal was an era of accommodating the only marginal responses to crime by corporate and criminal justice organizations that could not seem to join forces across arbitrary lines of territorial definition. We have largely succeeded in breaking away from the conditions of mere separation and from mere separate-but-equal. We now live in a new era of security in which we are compelled to work in a cooperative, distinctive, and interactive fashion. We are now recognized for what we do best, but we are also accountable for results in ways that we were not in earlier times when we were ignored and when we were not full participants in all aspects of society's security objectives.

Secondly, in the last 20 years we have begun to account for our evolutionary development. No profession worth its label lacks a history. Consider the evolutionary phases of medicine, law, and the criminal justice system (policing, prosecution-defence bars, and corrections). Medicine stumbled and bumbled its way into the 20th century, and with the exceptions of scattered autobiographies and a few anatomical treatises, the field ignored its roots until the last 75 years. Medicine progressed, however, by connecting medical science to the needs of ordinary people. Part of that connection stemmed from a heavy investment in research, speeding discoveries in pharmaceuticals and environmental and systemic epidemiology, and, most importantly, convincing the world of the value of its work to improve the human condition. It built teaching hospitals and research labs. It produced a consistently reliable cadre of bright young people who wanted a place in the medical profession. Law was a little more sensitive to documenting its foundations, mainly because it had always valued precedent. Criminal justice components recorded their histories in disparate and disorganized ways, but in the past 50 years the roots of American and European police and correctional services have been deeply investigated and documented. The security field has begun to appreciate the need for a history. It has begun to round up a few artifacts of that history and it will soon come to recognizing the people and circumstances who have contributed to its evolution. The work associated with researching and writing security history has not yet become a valued commodity, but rather than fret about this outcome, we should assemble what we have and determine to complete the record through new research. We can begin to account for our evolutionary development because we now have one to write about. We have learned that a history is important, but we may not have learned what the next steps should be.

Thirdly, we have begun the process of subjecting what we believe to testing and evaluation. The security field has benefited from the training that its small cadre of scholars received in a diverse assortment of traditional disciplines employing a range of methodologies. Most were trained in the social and behavioural sciences but some of came from earth, information, life, and physical sciences. Added to this factor, the field has been afforded a virtual sea of un-researched questions and propositions, despite the fact that it still lacks a theory base in which it can ground research questions. The field, quite simply, has limped along in the haze of myth and supposition and it can be assumed that preliminary theories can evolve from this abyss. With few exceptions, resource commitments have not been forthcoming from major security interests in both government and private sectors. The field

can borrow from a full range of statistical tools developed in such as criminology, economics, engineering, history, life sciences, physics, political science, sociology. We have learned in the past 20 years that we can and must draw on these disciplinary approaches to build research experience and sophistication, although we have not resolved a strategy for prioritizing our research objectives. We have learned that we can build bridges to the wide spectrum of disciplinary approaches on which we must rely, but we have not yet considered how to mine their strengths in the study of specific security concerns. If nothing else, we are now substantially more aware that our ventures into advanced research protocols will require creativity in the ways we further mine what other disciplines have already developed.

### **Most important trends or innovations influencing the study and practice of security**

Reflecting on the distant past, the story of security has largely been told in a litany of crisis responses. In most cases significant time was available to plan responses even though other defensive elements in the security arsenal failed. We have learned from modern terror attacks that security can no longer depend on incremental reaction strategies. By definition, terrorism occurs most often under the radar of ordinary security practices and systems and normally with zero time to react. In the last 20 years, we have learned to consider simultaneously multiple threat factors, including time, the relationships between particular risks and particular security responses, and the use significantly more information to assess vulnerabilities. Not many years ago, rarely was security an important element in strategic or tactical decision-making in ordinary business and government organizations. That circumstance has changed dramatically in recent years although security planning processes can be criticized for frequently overlooking the risks of simultaneous threat scenarios. In simple terms, the security field, in both its pragmatic and thoughtful endeavours, has evolved in helter-skelter fashion. Although the pace of innovation and application can be viewed as a constructive sign of progress, an argument can also be made for misplaced priorities, wastefulness, and an incessant, economically driven quest for technological cure-alls.

In the spirit of acknowledging some specific advances made in the study and practice of security, a brief summation must suffice. This writer argues that the security field is substantially better positioned to address problems in the next 20 years because we have:

- Invested in college and university degree programs at all levels of academic instruction thereby raising the educational levels of security professionals.
- Added to professional accountability through certification standards.
- Published peer-reviewed research.
- Built bridges to other academic disciplines and invited their contributions to broad areas of security research.
- Diversified our research interests and subject matter beyond descriptive characterizations of the field.
- Penetrated the research awareness at executive levels of public and private organizations.
- Become recognized as a critical element in the global climate of economic and political development.

- Taken a seat at the boardroom table as an equal and respected participant in strategic decision-making.
- Become accepted in the political and popular cultures as contributors to the quality of democratic life.

The field should not ignore the persistence of international struggles between oppressive state regimes and how these struggles intensify threats to our own democratic principles. Likewise, the field should support checks and balances on its own practices through law, reasonable regulations, insurance standards, and legislative oversight to invite more, not less, accountability. The field has learned a lot about itself in the past two decades. It must be willing to continue a critical dialogue about the implications of close and sometimes transparent interactions between public and private sectors of social control. We are no longer a field that can easily opt out of the influences of public interest and the obligations of social responsibility when lives are at stake.

### **The research agenda for the next 10 years**

It is relatively easy to list the field's immediate research needs. To any close observer, they are so plainly obvious. The field, for example, will not move forward until it constructs a strong base in security theory to guide research questions and to stimulate debate. The field must recognize its dependence on interdisciplinary research participation by inviting the established disciplines to define their contributions to elements of security. Sociologists could be invited to develop theories of group influences on adherence to security policies in organizations. Political scientists could translate the research they have already done on regime support factors and processes by which governments build or weaken internal stability, and how such factors contribute to instabilities in other parts of the world. Scientists in bio and nuclear research should be encouraged to translate for security researchers the threats we currently face from the wider dissemination of technical knowledge and the practical limitations on security defenses. To take great leaps forward in the research agenda, it seems that taxonomies of the intellectual contributors to a broad study of security must be assembled along with a compendium of relevant literature associated with each contributing discipline.

But this author's pragmatism reaches for an even more fundamental objective. The field requires, and should work toward, construction of a dedicated institute for security research on a scale analogous to organizations like Rand Corporation, Sandia National Laboratories, or the Hudson Institute. Any casual examination of web pages belonging to these research centers reveals the thrust of what is suggested here. Rand's page, for example, declares that it is a think tank dedicated to improving policy and decision-making through objective research and analysis. The mission statement of Sandia National Laboratories acknowledges the organization's stewardship of the nuclear weapons stockpile but extending to matters relating to domestic and international security, including homeland security, protection of military organizations, and issues linked to terrorism and natural disasters. The Hudson Institute, established in 1961 in Washington, DC by renowned thinker Herman Kahn, is one of the oldest think tanks in the US and it is engaged in many areas of research related to

security. A step in the intended direction has already been taken by the US Naval Post-Graduate School in the formation of its Center for Homeland Defense and Security. Each of these institutes, think tanks, or research centers is broadly conceived. They can serve as models for conceptualizing a suitable organizational design to address issues across various domestic and international sub-disciplines of security. They have laboured to collect and make available relevant research products. They have institutionalized interdisciplinary research collaborations. They have shared their findings with public and private consumers. They have achieved high esteem in the policy community, and they have become lightning rods for advancing the research agenda.

Following are the basic characteristics of a dedicated security research center:

- Diverse representation of practitioners and scholars across all the major academic disciplines. The main mission of this group is to define the research agenda of the center or institute.
- Minimize organizational boundaries between disciplines to encourage interdisciplinary team research endeavours.
- Apply the best science we have in all areas of security subject matter.
- Incorporate a self-supporting academic instruction and training element, including opportunities for advanced placement internships.
- Insist that part of the mission statement capture the notion that research, instruction, and policy guidance are principally intended to aid the fulfilment of security's role in improving the quality of human life domestically and internationally.
- Install an operating administrative climate that recognizes that creative organizations survive through constant inspiration and progressive thinking of their leaders, avoidance of micro-management, and regular infusions of new talent.
- Introduce a beginning top-level organizational structure to lead research projects in such areas as community security and crime prevention; national security threats and domestic protection; security technology and advanced technical research, and transnational security and nation-state stability.
- Invest heavily in producing a specially trained cohort of young scholars who are dedicated to the study of new security problems.
- Build and sustain a library containing a critical mass of information resources and the most advanced information retrieval systems.
- Be prepared to fund this enterprise the way serious think tanks and research centers fund their organizations. Medicine, law, and all other professions did not arrive at their current levels of professionalism on the cheap.

## **Closing observations**

In 2007, the world's security environment is dramatically different from the climate just 20 years ago. At all levels and in all types of organizations the security field has been asked to quickly muster what it already knows, to define what it does not know, to build a critical mass of new knowledge, and to actively infuse decision-making processes with relevant findings. The era of gradualism is gone. Bold ventures must be undertaken to ensure that

research and study become fundamental tools to fight against what Herman Kahn once labelled “educated incapacity.”<sup>2</sup> One can only fear how these questions will be answered in twenty more years if the security profession fails to underwrite a new era of security grounded in evidence-based decision-making.

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<sup>2</sup> “Educated incapacity... refers to an acquired or learned inability to understand or even perceive a problem, much less a solution,” argued Herman Kahn. He borrowed the concept for this term from economist Thorsten Veblen who had had observed the narrowing effects of training of the well educated on narrowing perspectives on the real world. <http://www.hudson.org/index.cfm>