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Book Review

Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 252 pp.

Damon Coletta

*This review is dedicated to Lt Gen (ret.) Brent Scowcroft, twice National Security Advisor and one-time head of the Department of Political Science, U.S. Air Force Academy. If he is looking down on our work today, we hope he liked this book, *Death of Expertise*, by a much admired Naval War College professor and enjoyed our department's enthusiasm for participating in the conversation. Thank you, Gen Scowcroft (1925-2020).*

Naval War College professor Tom Nichols built upon his popular essay in the *Atlantic* to deliver a blunt warning.¹ After a venomous election in 2016 that swept the incumbent party from power, American democracy was in for a rough go. Sir Lawrence Freedman (Emeritus, King's College, London) employed the term "polemic" to characterize *Death of Expertise*, and Nichols did take shots at certain celebrities professing bizarre, defiantly unscientific, nostrums for better health. Yet, Nichols, the strategist and foreign policy expert, had a loftier aim and a deeper message in mind than disarming the army of nattering nabobs on American social media.

Expertise is also a eulogy for a young and strong United States in geopolitical terms, for a period, a lifetime ago, when Americans from all walks attentively tuned the radio to absorb learned rhetoric of the Commander-in-Chief and earnestly assume their civic obligations as ordinary citizens in time of world war. Nichols' framing of the problem is at once profoundly conservative and anti-Trump, at least the popular Trumpism in 2016-2017 that pilloried expert professionals

from doctors to diplomats, then ran them out on a rail from positions of influence on America's future.

For the long decline of American democracy, Nichols located the mortal wound in the decade of the 1970s. Failed intervention in Southeast Asia and the frustrated civil rights movement at home culminated in violent protest, riots, and proliferation of crimes—kidnappings, assassinations, bombings, and a White House scandal—splashed across national media. America appeared to recover from the discord at first, claiming victory in the Cold War and achieving a long sail of peace and economic growth during the 1990s. Nichols explained, though, how new factors such as emergence of the Internet, customer-oriented concessions in higher education, and fragmentation of the media into cult punditry accelerated internal bleeding, cementing then spreading as a cancer popular skepticism of professional expertise.

If Nichols' diagnosis is correct, the American experiment is in trouble. Nichols' anchoring chapter on "Death of Expertise and Democracy" pointed out that experts across

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Foundation for a Second American Century (Stanford, 2016), and coeditor of this journal.

the professions are losing patience with the public and, for their part, regular citizens are in no mood to grant credentialed pontificators the benefit of the doubt. With general breakdown of communications between the professions and society, Nichols wrote, “all things are possible,” including “the end of democracy,” either by foreign intrigue or policy paralysis of republican government. These were the very threats to the American experiment George Washington spotlighted as he bequeathed the presidency in his classic 1796 Farewell Address.

Nichols, though, offers a fresh twist on the *Washington Post*'s latest motto, “Democracy dies in darkness.” For Nichols, the looming darkness is not what most Americans would fear at onset, say, sudden suppression by a man on horseback or a popular fascist crushing the minority's capacity to see or seek. Rather, the darkness is insidious. There is too much light at first, too much access, so many choices that free citizens lose their way. Anyone can become informed. Every citizen's judgment counts as good as the next opinion—on health, justice, science, or public policy.

In his telling, Nichols approached the nineteenth century aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Freedom and democracy do not actually suffocate in pitch darkness. They drown in blooming, buzzing confusion—restless citizens chasing every which way an unholy Grail of universal equality. Such rigid uniformity in tackling the world's problems precludes specialization and excellence in the professions, undermines a key principle of social cohesion, and dashes hopes for a great, diverse Union that can be a beacon of human liberty as John Winthrop's City on a Hill.

To this point, Nichols trod on familiar ground, but he also wanted to argue that this time is

different. If expertise can die only once, the American people have only one shot. Once they kill philosophy by arresting its seers who profess truths just beyond the ken of ordinary folk, once they tear down talented specialists and lock them away from societal influence, there is no going back to science based policy. Once unmoored from expertise, the free polity cuts its engines, adrift forever.

Here, Nichols may have exaggerated his indictment, with the result that the death of expertise appears a most urgent threat to democracy's survival, but the obligation of experts to do something about it is practically set aside. Sure, educated professionals must remain cognizant of limits of their discipline and graciously accept defeat when politicians or layperson clients decide to reject best advice. Nichols reserved the real task, though, for citizens, who *en masse* must find the wherewithal to look up from their daily cares and restore national faith in scientific elements of liberal education—that this process will produce experts who want to do good *and* know what they are talking about.

The great twentieth century (expert) political scientist Samuel Huntington thought differently, that is, in terms of cycles or what he called creedal passion periods. The American Revolution and struggle to ratify the United States Constitution represented the first such period. Every sixty years or so, a generation would rise to challenge established ways of the democratic Republic, in short, to tear down old expertise and construct new institutions to shoulder the nation closer toward its founding ideals. American democracy, Huntington wrote, was a “disappointment only because it is also a hope.” The latter half of the American cycle, the recovery or upswing, is absent from Nichols' account, and this omission changes everything.

The American people are not killing expertise or the possibility of creative specialization in society. In their freedom, they are alert—not confused—when creaking social structures no longer keep pace with demand for prosperity and greater justice under liberal democracy. Once the old towers have fallen, there will come a historic moment, a Bretton Woods convocation or a Sputnik imperative, when expertise attuned to contemporary challenges is called back to life in service to the national experiment. The upshot of Huntington’s theory of the case, as opposed to Nichols’, is the public will probably follow their usual cycle. It is the *experts* who need to be prepared to act well when their moment arrives.

While both Nichols and Huntington would be cautious about predicting just where democracy is in a political cycle while relations with science are in flux, the 2016 election surprised most experts. Three years later, President Trump was impeached by the House and soon thereafter acquitted by the Senate on contradictory, partisan votes. The tumult in Washington may turn out to be symptomatic, announcing an unusual dearth of trust in expertise or professional staffs that ought to bring warring factions together and set a wise course for the country. The COVID-19 pandemic may have hit too soon in the cycle for expert professionals to slip into place and ferry elected politicians expeditiously through twin health and economic crises.

Experts, nevertheless, are on the case, and there may yet be an opening with the American people to help political leaders, divided across federal branches and individual state governments, in record time implement science based policy tied to COVID vaccines.

Closer to the substantive focus of this journal, year 2019 also saw the inauguration of the

U.S. Space Force (USSF), a separate service under the department and civilian secretary of the Air Force. The birth of USSF manifests a stunningly swift shift in political headwinds against its creation a few short years before. Many defense policy experts counseled *against* the move.

Rather than the death of expertise, though, USSF coming into being presents an opportunity, albeit on a different plane from COVID—one of those moments at the upswing of Huntington’s passion periods for another epistemic community to apply its specialized knowledge in service to the greater good.

Talented members of the professional classes, meanwhile, have no time to wait for a positive swing in the public mood. They will come around, according to the existing pattern, the cyclical relationship between democracy and the professions. Still, military officers and civilian defense experts have immediate social responsibility to help their political masters, representatives accountable to the people, lead public opinion toward workable solutions for the new Space Force as well as the current pandemic.

Expertise is not dying. Contemporary politicians merely sent its purveyors back to the woodshed to work a bit harder, to sharpen their skills and knowledge for success against novel national challenges. Adapting and applying expertise within a democratic political context will soon be the sacred labor of educated elites on space, health, the environment, education, and the economy.

Nichols’ recommendations in his book for today’s experts unfortunately languished at second-priority status. The best professionals *already* recall, always remember, that they are the advisers not the deciders, the servants not

the masters, of democratic society and republican government.

Today's experts have multiple jobs to do. Politicians backed by the public are requesting help on a variety of national issues that cut across academic disciplines and tap a mix of professions. These will not always see eye-to-eye on the way forward. Informed voices will not always cohere. Nevertheless, public clamor for genuine expertise is likely to mount, not die away, after the 2020 election.

Expert professionals will abandon their duty if they shrink from the kind of politicized popular criticism that so exasperated Nichols. If the current creedal passion period will soon end, as in past cycles, the professional response to enormous national challenges has to be sober recognition of false starts, clear explanations of lessons learned from hard-won experience, and steady, confident management of accountable government in a great democracy.