Ideas are Weapons

On the Academic Legacy of Professor David F. Schmitz

ABSTRACT This essay is part of a roundtable titled “The Scholarship, Influence, and Legacy of David F. Schmitz.” The roundtable includes an introduction from Andrew L. Johns; essays by Vanessa Walker, Steven J. Brady, Kimber M. Quinney, and Kathryn C. Statler; and a response from David F. Schmitz. KEYWORDS U.S. foreign relations, Cold War, historiography, David F. Schmitz

“Ideas are necessarily weapons. But they will be effective as weapons only if the uses to which they are put are life-affirming. If the craftsmen in ideas have a belief in the possibilities of human society and a sense of the dignity of ordinary people, that will be the best safeguard of those ultimate standards of validity that we call science and truth.”

—Max Lerner, refugee scholar, 1939

The word legacy has multiple meanings. Even within academia, it is a versatile term. Rich people sometimes leave a legacy of money or property to a university that earns them the temporary immortality of their name engraved on a campus building. Like politicians, some university chancellors and other administrative bigwigs strive to leave a legacy in terms of setting agendas and introducing policies that will shape the future; and, again, like politicians, some do not always leave a positive one and others’ legacies become oddly vulnerable to critique. In a college setting, legacy can also mean privilege or

preference; when a prospective student applies to their parents’ alma mater, for example, the student is more likely to be admitted on the grounds of legacy admission. In this century, legacy has also come to describe computer hardware or software that is obsolete, but still in use—and scholars encounter plenty of that.

The academic legacy of Professor David F. Schmitz can be measured in many ways, but not in terms of obsolescence! One of his most enduring and still evolving legacies can be measured by his commitment to and impact on Whitman College and its faculty and students. He taught there from 1985 until 2018, when he retired. Schmitz still holds the title of Robert Allen Skotheim Chair of History, served as chair of the faculty, participated in a presidential search for the College, and is currently writing the third volume of the history of Whitman College. When Schmitz was not in the classroom teaching courses on subjects as varied as U.S. Foreign Policy, America in Vietnam, Twentieth-Century U.S. History, the History and Sociology of Rock ‘n’ Roll, the 1960s, and the Origins of American Nationalism in the 18th and 19th Centuries, he regularly gave lectures to the wider Whitman community. He was also frequently consulted by regional and national news media. David was even the Whitman men’s lacrosse coach for twenty-five years—that is a legacy (a bruising one) in and of itself!

For those of us who did not have the good fortune to be taught by or work alongside Schmitz, his academic legacy is less personal but no less profound. The root of the word legacy comes from the Latin verb legare, which means to appoint by a last will. But it also means to send as an ambassador. Originally, in fact, the word legacy meant ambassador or envoy. Schmitz’s academic legacy can certainly be found in the ways in which his ideas—his potent, provocative, and influential ideas—have been conveyed (carried, if you will) by the “envoys” of his books and articles, his public talks, and collegial conversations.

In many respects, Schmitz’s ideas with regard to the misguided intentions and consequences of American foreign policy might be perceived as “dangerous” or at

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least “provocative.” Indeed, some have categorized Schmitz’s scholarship as “radical history.” But it is exactly for this reason that David embodies an authentic academic legacy. He does not shy away from speaking truth, from an effort to reveal the ways in which the policies and actions of the United States have served to both stabilize and destabilize the international system.

For example, in the Encyclopedia of American Foreign Relations, Schmitz is cited in two major entries—“Human Rights” and “Ideology”—and is the author of another, “Dictatorships.” This is entirely fitting. Schmitz has been exploring the relationship between dictatorships, human rights, and ideology in American foreign relations throughout his career. He has grappled with the paradox of the United States professing its commitment to spreading liberalism and internationalism while supporting dictatorships, undermining human rights, and prioritizing stability abroad and a strong American economy over liberal democratic principles. David has explored not only the ways in which successive U.S. administrations have pursued these contradictory goals but also why they have done so.

Here, it seems appropriate to ask not only what Schmitz’s intellectual legacy is but also why it has had, and almost certainly will continue to have, such a significant impact on our field. I would point to three qualities of his scholarship that leave a lasting impression. First, Schmitz possesses a long and wide view of history that never suffers from lack of depth. In contrast to many scholars who have chosen to focus on narrow research topics and short

time frames, Schmitz has consistently displayed a remarkable breadth of interest and knowledge, all the while providing painstaking detail and thorough documentation. He has written about the entirety of the twentieth century, covering U.S. policymakers as varied as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Henry Stimson, Richard Nixon, and Brent Scowcroft; regions as varied as Europe, Asia, and Latin America; and ideologies as varied as communism, fascism, liberalism, and internationalism.

Second, David’s timing is impeccable. Not only has he sought to explore pivotal moments in twentieth-century U.S. history—focusing on the after-maths of America’s four greatest international conflicts of that century: World War I, World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War—but also, by accident or design, he has timed his contributions to historical debates in ways that have enabled him to shift the direction of those debates. For example, David’s book about U.S. support for Italian fascism was published in 1988, just as the Cold War was coming to an end and many scholars were celebrating that victory and characterizing the United States as a freedom-loving power in the world. Schmitz later would write about U.S. support of authoritarian regimes and the post–Vietnam War era in a new world order of U.S. foreign policy, when once again the United States seemed to be grappling to define its role in the world.

Third, Schmitz’s academic legacy is characterized by his academic truth-saying. Throughout his career, he has sought to explain not just the strengths and weaknesses of American foreign policy, but also to reveal the saints and the sinners in what can be both a glorious and a sordid history. He has explored major contradictions in the history of American foreign relations, exposing the often irreconcilable goals between national security, international stability, and national interest on the one hand, and democracy on the other. David has been willing to identify and describe with abundant evidence the failures of American foreign policy, while at the same time reminding readers of individual heroes and the potential (even if unfulfilled) for the United States to have a constructive impact in the world. His analyses are brutally honest, but he is not obsessed with picking at the scars of American foreign policy, for he also has turned the spotlight on the wisdom of policymakers to remind us that sound judgement can prevail.8

8. See, for example, Schmitz, Brent Scowcroft; Schmitz, Henry L. Stimson; and David F. Schmitz and Vanessa Walker, “Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy,” Diplomatic History 28, no. 1 (January 2004): 113–44.
In historiographical debates about U.S. foreign relations, this is a rare quality indeed.

Schmitz’s work to unravel the relationship between dictatorships, human rights, and ideology has profoundly affected my own scholarship. So, at the risk of making this tribute to David all about me, I hope you will allow me to share three short but illustrative anecdotes about Schmitz’s academic legacy in the life of one aspiring scholar—me.

The first of this short trilogy took place some twenty-five years ago, when I was a second-year graduate student at the University of California, Santa Barbara. I wrote a research paper that asserted that the United States was vulnerable to an American version of fascism, as evidenced by Father Charles Coughlin’s Union Party for Social Justice movement of the mid-1930s. Although Coughlin and the Union Party denied affiliation with other fascist parties, both domestic and foreign, and although the Union Party did not openly identify itself as fascist, I asserted that “Coughlin’s movement was significantly similar in both ideas and action to the European fascist movements of the period.” Indeed, in the concluding paragraph of the paper, I contended that the politics and practices of Coughlin’s Union Party amounted to “an incipient American fascism.” I also argued that the American middle class was essential to the rise of Coughlin’s movement. This was a bold conclusion (at the time). But I was confident that the evidence warranted the assertion.

I did just fine on the paper, but before the term was over, my professor (a European historian of socialism and antisemitism) asked me to come see him to discuss my findings. I was, of course, very nervous. Had I overstepped boundaries? Was he troubled—even offended—by my conclusions? Was my academic career about to come to an abrupt end? Once I was nervously seated across from him in his office, however, the professor asked a simple and very direct question: how was it, he wondered, that middle-class Americans in the 1930s were “suddenly” attracted to Coughlin’s message? What evidence was there to suggest any U.S. tendencies or affinities for fascism prior to the 1930s?

And this is when—and I am not making this up—I reached down into my book bag to pull out the only book that was in there: a tattered, dog-eared, marked-up version of Schmitz’s *The United States and Fascist Italy, 1922–1940*. I was intimately familiar with every chapter in the book (more on that below), and thus I was calmly able to make the case that Americans—including the U.S. government no less—had demonstrated an acceptance, if
not overt support, for Mussolini’s fascism a decade before the 1936 Coughlin movement. To the surprise of my professor, I rattled off specific aspects of Italian fascism that were especially attractive to middle-class Americans in the 1920s and the 1930s, and I made the case that middle-class America was similarly a factor in the rise of Coughlin’s popular message. The professor listened intently, nodding his head in acknowledgement of a new appreciation for this particular moment in U.S. history. For me, this exchange represents Schmitz’s academic legacy—his first book served as an “envoy” of ideas to which I could then add and defend my own.

My second anecdote goes back even further, back to my years as an undergraduate. As a senior in college, I had read David’s article, “‘A Fine Young Revolution’: The United States and the Fascist Revolution in Italy, 1919–1925,” which had preceded publication of his book The United States and Fascist Italy, 1922–1940. In the article, he asserts a thesis that would form the basis for the book:

The American response to events in Italy between 1919 and 1925 and to the emergence of Fascism marked the first time U.S. policymakers had developed the logic and rationale for actively supporting a right-wing dictatorship in the modern era. . . . The perceived threat of Bolshevism was central to the rationalization of supporting Mussolini, along with the idea that Italy was not prepared or developed enough for democracy.

I did not study history as an undergraduate; but as an international relations major at a liberal arts college in Portland, Oregon, I was drawn to “critiques” of American foreign policy. The tendency in U.S. foreign policy to deny or actively undermine liberal democracy in the name of advancing American liberalism became a tenet of my undergraduate senior thesis, which addressed the role of ethics and morality in international relations. I used Schmitz’s article and U.S. policy toward fascist Italy as a case study.

The third anecdote is sandwiched between my undergraduate studies and my doctoral program. In 1988, when I was completing an M.A. in international relations at Johns Hopkins University, Schmitz’s book on Italian fascism was published. It is not an overstatement to say that his book changed both my professional (and personal) course. David’s book and the way in which it was received at the time changed everything for me. The book

10. Ibid.
received mixed critiques. One reviewer acknowledged Schmitz’s contribution to the study of U.S. relations with post–World War I Italy but suggested that he should have accessed Italian archives.11 Another reviewer was yet more critical: “in the final analysis, Schmitz has uncovered little that is likely to change our understanding of events, and his attempt to make attitudes toward Mussolini’s Italy into central and even causative elements of the ultimate failure of United States policy in Europe stretches a not very good thing much too far.”12 And Alan Cassels, author of Mussolini’s Early Diplomacy (1970) and Fascist Italy (1969), lauded Schmitz for his “meticulous” use of the documentary evidence but concluded in the end, “That the United States indulged in appeasement of Fascist Italy for most of two decades [was] not exactly news.”13

But a review by John Lamberton Harper, professor of American foreign policy at the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Bologna, Italy, was especially influential for me. In 1988, I was a student at SAIS in Bologna and was studying under Harper, the author of the recently published America and the Reconstruction of Italy, 1945–1948 (among other books about U.S. foreign policy).14 Harper wrote a rather critical review of Schmitz’s The United States and Fascist Italy in the American Historical Review. According to Harper, David was so intent on advancing an ideological critique of the Roosevelt administration’s penchant for Mussolini that he had ultimately overstated and oversold his case.15 Harper rejected Schmitz’s thesis that the Italian case revealed how long-term U.S. foreign policy objectives could be achieved by working with a right-wing dictatorship. Harper characterized David’s central argument as representative of a “rather limited understanding of U.S. policy toward Italy after 1943.”16

As much as I respected Harper, I happened to disagree profoundly with his assessment of Schmitz’s argument. In fact, in my reading of The United

16. Ibid.
States and Fascist Italy, David’s assertion that the U.S. objective to maintain an anti-Bolshevik (and, later, anti-communist) Italy by bolstering Mussolini was an accurate interpretation, if not prescient understanding, of U.S. policy toward Italy after 1943—let alone of U.S. foreign policy for most of the twentieth century in other areas of the world.

Moreover, David’s argument that the United States was prepared to support Mussolini’s authoritarian regime in order to advance U.S. interests implied that the United States itself was thus vulnerable to authoritarian tendencies. If the United States was willing to sacrifice democracy, how democratic was it, really? Indeed, I would argue that The United States and Fascist Italy, 1922–1940 has been largely underappreciated in this regard. Only in recent years, with the publication of a handful of books warning of the U.S. vulnerability to authoritarianism and the potential for the development of an American version of fascism, has David’s contribution to the scholarship finally begun to earn its due as a book that was ahead of its time by thirty years.17

I intentionally sought to pick up the story where Schmitz had left off in The United States and Fascist Italy, 1922–1940. As a doctoral student at U.C. Santa Barbara, I researched and documented Anglo-American efforts to eliminate fascism in wartime Italy and to stave off the threat of communism in early Cold War Italy from 1943 to 1948. I sought to understand the ways in which the United States and Britain sought to democratize Italy by purging fascists from the Italian government and then working to ensure that anti-fascist communists did not fill the power vacuum. I showed that, ultimately, the arduous bureaucratic process of epurazione—the systemic defascistization of the nation—was not nearly as successful in Italy as it had been in Germany and Vichy France, and to some extent that could be explained by an Allied (and by 1947, a strictly American) preference for lingering fascist officers and civil servants to stand as guard against a growing communist threat.

My current scholarship is similarly inspired by the kinds of questions Schmitz has explored with regard to democracy and U.S. foreign policy. Because of my focus on the ideas and actions that threatened Italy’s democratic

system, I am keenly interested in identifying factors and conditions that constitute a healthy democracy. I continue to grapple with the ways in which the United States is vulnerable to illiberal tendencies and the relationship between American foreign relations and democracy, all the while relying on the history of U.S. relations with Italy to help me tell that story.

History reminds us not only of the power of ideas, but that ideas are weapons. Whereas illiberal regimes consistently target ideas that are deemed threatening, resisters consistently respond with more ideas. In Fascist Italy, for example, liberal intellectuals posed a direct threat to Benito Mussolini’s regime. Government censorship came in different forms, but by 1931, academic freedom at Italian universities was denied. By the following year, Mussolini’s regime was explicit in describing the role it envisioned for intellectuals in the state. In October 1932, Mussolini gave a speech in which he explained that he “despised” the term “intellectual” because it was a product of liberalism. Italian intellectuals responded by disseminating anti-fascist ideas in pamphlets and articles and books; when they were eventually forced to flee Italy, they continued to publish their ideas as refugee scholars.

My current scholarship focuses on two such refugee scholars—Max Ascoli and Gaetano Salvemini—who immigrated to the United States and who were publicly active in shaping U.S. wartime and postwar policies toward Italy. In public talks, newspaper editorials, and other published writings, they describe a close correlation between the emergence of Italian fascism and the steady elimination of intellectuals as a reliable source of information and ideas in Italian society. They also cautioned Americans about the vulnerability of the United States to illiberal tendencies. “The instruments of democracy,” Ascoli warned, “can be so used to multiply the power of the tyrannical state. This constitutes the essence of fascism, that is democracy without freedom.” For both Ascoli and Salvemini, fascism “was the product of democratic decay.” A sure sign of the decay, they explained, was the erosion of free thinking. Italian fascism thrived on—indeed, was dependent upon—the elimination of intellectuals and free thinking. But the refugee scholars also insisted that ideas could be used in defense of democracy.

In 1942, in response to and in condemnation of the book burning campaign by the Nazis, the Roosevelt administration issued a propaganda

poster. The poster features an image of a Nazi burning a book and a quote from Franklin D. Roosevelt that reads, “Books cannot be killed by fire. People die, but books never die. No man and no force can put thought in a concentration camp forever. No man and no force can take from the world the books that embody man’s eternal fight against tyranny. In this war, we know, books are weapons.”\textsuperscript{20}

And here is where I would like to circle back to the meaning of academic legacy. For me, Schmitz’s academic legacy is much more than a list of ISBNs or titles on a CV. It was not merely that David inspired a particular topic of study, although that was indeed true in my case. But it was the ideological and ethical (and to a large extent philosophical) arguments that Schmitz has made throughout his career, and the challenge that those ideas pose to the status quo that is such a hallmark of his academic legacy. David’s scholarship epitomizes the ways in which ideas can be wielded as weapons to advance democratic ideals. From scrupulous scholarship and intellectual incisiveness, Schmitz has fashioned a sharp sword that he has used with great dexterity and inspiring confidence to challenge U.S. policymakers who have sacrificed American principles in the name of stability abroad and prosperity at home, and who have consequently sometimes led U.S. foreign policy to do more harm than good in the world.

A few years ago, Schmitz was interviewed by the Whitman College newspaper, the \textit{Whitman Wire}. He was asked what advice he would give students for finding “purpose and direction” after college. His response captures the ways in which sharing ideas, being thinkers and learners, translates into an engaged citizenry:

\begin{quote}
When you’re going to take on new sorts of responsibilities and obligations, be they work or further schooling or family, how do you construct that world, your world, and how do you engage with the wider world? I think that first and foremost you build on what you’ve learned here, which is to be lifelong learners, thinkers [and] engaged people. And to understand that you [were] given something that is quite valuable, which was the opportunity to spend this time learning, thinking, developing. You find meaningful ways to use that in your community and larger society. If that becomes central to how you want to define the
\end{quote}

meaning in your life, you’ll find the ways without knowing what they are right now.21

And even though his retirement means that David will no longer be teaching in the classroom (and, ideally, that he will be watching more baseball!), he will still be inspiring us to forge brave arguments, to challenge the status quo, and to wield our ideas in the cause of better understanding the history of American foreign relations and of making the world a better place in the process.

According to an article in *Harvard Business Review*, the three pillars to being fulfilled at work are *legacy*, *mastery*, and *freedom*—in that order.22 In the context of enjoying a happy work life, *legacy* is all-important; in fact, it is most important. *Legacy* in this regard is defined as “A higher purpose, a mission, a cause. This means knowing that in some way—large or small—the world will be a better place after you’ve done your work.”23 When it comes right down to it, the academic legacy of David F. Schmitz is that he has always sought to make the world a better place. Not necessarily in an egoless, selfless way, but rather with an aim to call out misguided or downright damaging American policies, to right wrongs, to reveal truth.

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22. *Mastery* refers to “the art of getting better and better at skills and talents that you enjoy using, to the extent that they become intertwined with your identity.” *Freedom* is the “ability to choose who you work with, what projects you work on, where and when you work each day, and getting paid enough to responsibly support the lifestyle that you want.” Nathaniel Koloc, “Build a Career Worth Having,” *Harvard Business Review*, August 5, 2013, https://hbr.org/2013/08/build-a-career-worth-having.