

Associate Professor Kurt Campbell teaches "The Uses of History for Analysis and Management," a course designed by Professors Richard Neustadt and Ernest May. Campbell recently spent a year working with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He and Philip Cantelon, president of History Associates, an historical services firm, made their remarks in a panel discussion held in Washington, D.C., on May 20, 1991, co-sponsored by the local Kennedy School Alumni Council and the Harvard Club. Stuart Eizenstat, former domestic policy advisor to President Carter and a Kennedy School adjunct lecturer, and Richard Baker, U.S. Senate historian, joined the discussion.

History and Public Policy: Do They Go Together?

by Henry Butterfield Ryan, MPA '72

When Philip Cantelon was writing a commissioned history of Three Mile Island, Department of Energy managers told him, "if we can't use it, it's no good to us." A group of managers had requested an historical study, not for public relations or self-congratulations, but to help them run a major government department.

Many, if not most, government agencies, however, seldom consider historical analysis in making decisions. In fact, Kurt Campbell pointed out that if anyone at an interagency policy session began talking about precedents from 1952, for example, he probably would never be invited back.

Campbell painted a discouraging picture for historians, highlighted with a telling Gulf War anecdote. During those critical events, he reported, Richard Neustadt and Ernest May had lunch with a former student, now a key government official involved in Middle Eastern affairs. Eagerly, they asked if he had been applying the principles of their well-known course. Sheepishly, he said no, he had been too busy!

Historians, especially contract historians, do not make policies, nor should they try. They provide, however, important and specialized data which policymakers should consider when they make decisions, according to Cantelon.

Eizenstat bolstered that point with striking examples of a prevalent non-historical, if not anti-historical, attitude. A new President and his staff come into what Eizenstat called an "eerily empty" west wing of the White House. Not only are all the pictures gone, but all the records are gone, too—into storage somewhere waiting to be placed in a "soon-to-be-built" presidential library. Nearly 100 percent of the staff also depart with the out-going President, leaving Navy waiters at the mess to provide the main continuity. Imagine, Eizenstat said, a major manufacturing firm in which a new CEO asks for information on a key company product only to discover that

his aides know nothing about it because they are as new as he, and the files contain no records on the item.

Eizenstat argued for a small professional White House staff charged with keeping a record of executive decisions and actions. His proposal, some thought, resembled DOE's historic incidents database, maintained to aid management's decision making. He admitted that federal departments and agencies should be able to provide a new White House staff with the memory it needs, but retrieving historical information from the "bowels of the bureaucracies" to the White House is far too cumbersome to be effective, even if the information exists in the bureaucracies. Furthermore, institutional memory, he said, sinks ever lower as administrations increasingly load departments with political appointees, now numbering some 4,000. Eizenstat's irritation with the government's historical ignorance stems from more than theory. He has seen administrations, including the one in which he served, stumble time and again from lack of information about their own past.

U.S. Persian Gulf policy suffered, Campbell claimed, because busy administration officials had little time for careful historical analysis. Furthermore, such history as was brought to bear was careless and misleading. For example, the Bush administration, Campbell said, thought Saddam Hussein would not take all of Kuwait, overlooking both Iraq's growth in power and its real grievances compared with its earlier threats. Meanwhile, Bush's team spent a great deal of energy ensuring the country that this would not be another Vietnam, apparently without realizing that it could never be, not with a "central-casting villain," and a totally different kind of warfare imposed by desert geography.

Congress, particularly the Senate, has a better record of using historical data than other parts of the government. Baker said it relies on precedent



Henry Ryan

consistently to help handle sensitive institutional issues, if not in legislating. Expulsion of members, disputed elections, censure, ethical standards, controversial nominations, and treaty ratification are among the issues in which historical precedents have played a major role.

In sharp contrast to their civilian counterparts, the armed forces rely on history constantly, panelists agreed, interpreting it very carefully in matters of both strategy and tactics. Believing major battles back to antiquity worthy of study, faculties at the academies and other training centers review them carefully. Why the difference? Perhaps tradition, but perhaps also the military define their particular problems more clearly than do civilian policymakers.

Baker believes there may be an evolutionary process in which institutional history must first become established before policy history can take root. Most government historians, now writing histories of their agencies, hope Baker's bureaucratic Darwinism soon will prove accurate, taking the profession quickly to its next evolutionary stage.

Henry Ryan, MPA '72, who organized and contributed to this panel, is a visiting scholar at Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies, a senior historian with History Associates, and author of The Vision of Anglo-America: The US-UK Alliance and the Emerging Cold War, 1943-46, plus numerous articles and reviews.