ORIGINS OF THE CENTER

The MIT Center for International Studies was founded in 1952 as a direct result of the Cold War struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Max F. Millikan, a young MIT economist, urged the eclectic faculty he assembled at the Center to become “social science entrepreneurs”—to use scholarship to help policymakers better understand and respond to international events, and to further the cause of the social sciences at MIT.

During Millikan’s long tenure (1952-1969), the Center’s sociologists, economists, anthropologists, political scientists, and historians studied communist societies and movements, the economic and political development of industrializing countries, and communication systems in both East and West. They published influential articles and more than 100 books, and contributed to the expansion of the social sciences at MIT—including the founding in 1965 of the Department of Political Science around a core of CIS faculty.

And while the Center has shifted focus through the decades, as dictated by world events, its commitment to research in the national interest has remained constant.

Funding

The Central Intelligence Agency was the primary funding source for the Center for the next two years, and a sponsor of various research projects until 1966. The Ford Foundation was CIS’s principal supporter through the 1960s. It provided general support for the Center, funded projects in several fields, and endowed funds for faculty appointments. Numerous other foundations and government agencies also have funded CIS activities.

Max F. Millikan, CIS foundling director.

Walt W. Rostow, left, left CIS to join the Kennedy administration. William O. Millikan became director in 1962 and led the Center for more than 20 years until his death in 1984.

Ithiel de Sola Pool was the major figure behind communications research at CIS. Like Max Millikan, he was an outspoken proponent of social science research on important issues of public policy.

“The only hope for humane government in the future is through the extreme use of power by a government… I am not in favor of an extreme effort of this effect at knowledge of the outside world.”

—Ithiel de Sola Pool, “The Importance of the Social Scientists’ Crisis Relevance for Government”

World War II laid the foundation for the formation of academic research centers like CIS. Physical and social scientists from MIT and elsewhere made critical contributions to the war effort, and policymakers concluded that academic research would be important after the war as well.

In 1950, as war raged in Korea and the U.S.S.R. tested its atomic bombs, the Soviets were jamming Voice of America (VOA) radio propaganda broadcasts. Undersecretary of State James Webb asked MIT President James Killian to assemble a team to solve the jamming problem.

Killian and Humanties and Social Studies Dean John Burchard assembled a diverse group (including professors from Harvard and other universities) to address not only the technical issues but also matters of political warfare: what the VOA should broadcast, to whom, and with what effect, once the jamming was circumvented. This State Department project, code-named “Troy” (after the hollow wooden horse in which the Greeks were said to have hidden their army in order to secretly gain entrance to Troy) led in 1951 to a report, some of which remains classified a half-century later.

Project Troy resulted in the establishment of a research center at MIT funded by the CIA and located in a warehouse on Albany Street. Its first study, “Soviet Vulnerability,” was conducted by Walt Rostow, the MIT economic historian who later served as national security advisor to presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

In 1952, this group moved to the Sian Building as the Center for International Studies. Project Troy had not only led to a solution of the jamming problem, but also to the creation of an interdisciplinary center where scholarly expertise would be applied to foreign policy issues.

CIS RESEARCH PROGRAMS

CIS initially pursued three major research initiatives: international communication, economic and political development, and communist bloc studies.

International Communication

The International Communication Program examined how elites shape foreign policy preferences, and how communications influence modernization in democratic and communist societies. This program was perhaps the clearest intellectual descendant of Project Troy, and was led by Ithiel de Sola Pool throughout its 30-year lifetime.

Economic and Political Development

The program on Economic and Political Development initially focused on Cold War concerns about nuclear power and the arms race. It eventually broadened to study international development, and eventually merged with the politically more sensitive Cold War program on Economic and Political Development. CIS produced numerous books and papers on Communist systems and parties in the U.S.S.R., China, and Europe.

Communist Studies

Communist Studies analyzed communist societies as a whole, as well as communist movements, intra-bloc tensions, and technical matters of propaganda. When the Space Race began, Professor Walt Rostow led CIS to join the Kennedy administration. William O. Millikan became director in 1962 and led the Center for more than 20 years until his death in 1984.

This chart, created for a presentation at the Center during the final years of the Cold War, reflects perfectly Cold War concern about Soviet capabilities in science and technology.

A 1960 International Communications seminar led by Ithiel de Sola Pool (head of table), and sociologist Daniel Lerner (right, arms folded).