Remembering Robert Jervis

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The passing of Robert Jervis is a devastating loss for the profession and a personal loss for so many of us. Jervis touched everyone he met with his kindness, generosity, integrity, and humor as well as the power of his intellect. I was never Bob's student or close colleague at Columbia, but he shaped my thinking in countless ways. I wanted to offer some thoughts on his scholarly impact.

For the last half century Jervis was one of the most influential scholars in the International Relations field – and for many of us *the* most influential. The breadth of Jervis's contributions to the study of international relations and foreign policy is stunning, ranging across all levels of analysis, from individual psychology to organizational politics and processes to the dynamics of international systems.[1] In this essay I limit myself to brief discussions of the interdisciplinary nature of Jervis's scholarly orientation and influence, his role in the development of the subfield of the political psychology of international relations, and to his often neglected contributions to political methodology.

The scope of Jervis's scholarly contributions extend beyond international relations to other fields of political science and to other disciplines as well. In fact, is hard to think of many political scientists with a stronger interdisciplinary orientation. As Jervis notes in the acknowledgements in his first book, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*, the two greatest influences on that study were the economist Thomas Schelling and the sociologist Erving Goffman. In *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Jervis drew on both a wide range of theoretical and experimental research in social psychology to formulate his theoretical arguments, and an unparalleled familiarity with secondary (and often primary) sources in diplomatic history to illustrate and further refine those arguments. This interdisciplinary breadth is also clear to readers of *System Effects*, which drew upon extensive readings in evolutionary biology, ecology, ethology, sociology, organization theory, and other fields. [2]

Jervis's scholarly work influenced other disciplines as well being informed by them. The important conceptual distinction in *The Logic of Images* between signals (which can easily be manipulated by the sender) and indices (which are not manipulable) was not only central to later work on costly signaling in international relations. It was incorporated by the economist Michael Spence into his formal theory of economic signaling, which led to Spence's 2001 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences.[3] Jervis also interacted on a regular basis with diplomatic historians and published in history journals, particularly on the history of the Cold War but also

[1] Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976; 2nd ed., 2017); Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010); Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[2] Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

[3] Michael Spence, *Market Signaling: Informational Transfer in Hiring and Related Screening Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

on other topics.[4] Over the years I was repeatedly impressed by Jervis's familiarity with details associated with the outbreak and diplomacy of the First World War. Jervis also wrote several articles on the Concert of Europe, engaging the question of the extent to which the Concert constituted traditional balance of power politics or a new kind of security regime.[5] This work reflected an ongoing dialogue with the influential historian Paul Schroeder, and led to Jervis's role as co-editor of a volume of some of Schroeder's most important articles.[6]

The core of *The Logic of Images* involved deductive theorizing about strategic interaction between states in the context of uncertainty and incentives for strategic deceit. The book also included an implicit critique of formal models of signaling, emphasizing that all signals, costly and otherwise, are infused with meaning and interpreted through different analytic lenses by different receivers with different world views and different formative experiences. Jervis developed this line of argument more fully in his subsequent research on the psychology of signaling, beginning with his 1976 book.

Perception and Misperception in International Politics is one of the most influential publications in the International Relations field in the last half century. Before the 1960s, the study of psychology and foreign policy was mainly the province of social psychologists and personality theorists.[7] Jervis's 1976 book synthesized many disparate propositions and findings in social psychology into a more integrated theoretical framework. It marked the birth of the systematic study of the psychology of foreign policy and international relations. *Perception and Misperception* also marked an important advance in the relatively new field of foreign policy analysis, where early efforts to develop theoretical frameworks gave relatively little role to psychological factors.[8] The study of the psychology of foreign policy and international interactions has subsequently occupied an increasingly important place in IR field, accelerating significantly in the last decade. Jervis's theoretical insights continue to be central as research has shifted in a more experimental direction. Jervis contributed further to the broader study of political psychology in both Political Science and Social Psychology through his role as co-editor of the first edition of the *Handbook of Political Psychology*.[9]

Although Jervis is widely regarded as one of the leading theoreticians of international relations, the methodological sophistication of much of his work is often overlooked. Social scientists define methodology in different ways, but if we define the concept broadly to include issues of research design and philosophy of science, Jervis was a political methodologist as well as a theoretician. One of the distinguishing things about *Perception and Misperception* is its explicit

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[4] Robert Jervis, "Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?" *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 3:1 (Winter 2001): 36-60.

[5] Robert Jervis, "A Political Science Perspective on the Balance of Power and the Concert." *American Historical Review*, 97:3 (June 1992): 716-24.

[6] Paul W. Schroeder, *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft: Essays on the International History of Modern Europe*, edited by David Wetzel, Robert Jervis, and Jack S. Levy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

[7] A useful summary that influenced Jervis is Joseph de Rivera, *The Psychological Dimension of Foreign Policy* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1968).

[8] Richard C. Snyder, H.W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin, *Foreign Policy Decision-Making* (New York: Palgrave, 1962); Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971).

[9] David O. Sears, Leonie Huddy, and Robert Jervis, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

recognition of alternative explanations for observed behavior, and its attention to the question of what kinds of evidence were most useful in validating one explanation or interpretation over another. This concern with alternative interpretations runs throughout the book, beginning with Jervis's comment in the Introduction that the neglect of structural explanations leads to "over-psychologizing" behavior that can be better explained by political variables.[10] Chapter 6 on "How Decision-Makers Learn from History" includes several major sections with subheadings of "Alternative Interpretations." In that chapter Jervis also engages the question of how the analyst might empirically distinguish between genuine historical learning, the strategic or rhetorical use of history to bolster one's preexisting policy preferences, and situations in which a third variable shapes both historical lessons and current preferences.

This concern for social science methodology is evident in many of Jervis's other writings. In essays on the different approaches taken by diplomatic historians and international relations scholars in their studies of essentially the same phenomena, Jervis emphasizes themes relating to the importance of negative cases, avoiding selecting on the dependent variable, looking for evidence bearing on the logical implications of theoretical arguments, the advantages and disadvantages of parsimony, and other social science concerns.[11] Jervis also notes particular aspects of historical methodology that IR scholars would do well to emulate. This includes greater attention to the importance of chronology, and particularly the impact of events on subsequent perceptions and events. Jervis contrasts the central role of chronology in historical narratives with the common practice among IR scholars of conducting comparative cases studies based on the assumption that sequential cases are independent.[12] IR scholars need to pay more attention to the interdependence of sequential historical episodes and ask how much one set of events influences subsequent perceptions and behavior, and through what mechanisms.

This commitment to social science methodology is also evident at the more practical level of policy, where Jervis hoped his scholarship would have an impact. Jervis had a more direct involvement in policy through his consulting work with the Central Intelligence Agency, particularly on the question of the sources of intelligence failure. He conducted detailed studies of U.S intelligence failures associated with the 1979 Iranian revolution and the 2003 Iraq War. One of his central conclusions was that a major cause of intelligence failure is that intelligence analysts do not think like social scientists – and that they should be trained to do so. Jervis writes that

> "…intelligence and postmortems on failures can benefit from using standard social science methods…. in many cases both intelligence and criticisms of it have only a weak understanding of the links between evidence and inferences … they do not formulate testable hypotheses and so often rely on beliefs that cannot be falsified, leave crucial assumptions unexplicated and unexamined, fail to ask what evidence should be present if their arguments are correct, ignore the diagnostic value of absent evidence, and fail to employ the comparative method and so assert

[10] Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 4.

[11] Robert Jervis, "International History and International Politics: Why Are They Studied Differently," in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 385-402.

[12] Jervis, "International History and International Politics," 401.

> causation without looking at instances in which the supposed causal factor was absent as well as at cases in which it is present."[13]

With respect to erroneous conclusions regarding the Iraqi development of weapons of mass destruction, Jervis argued that the problem was not so much intelligence analysts' initial estimate that Iraq had an ongoing WMD program, but their failure to ask the question "how would we know if we were wrong," and to actively search for information that might contradict their initial estimate.

One should not infer from Jervis's commitment to social science methodology that he was excessively optimistic that following proper methods would always lead to accurate conclusions about the nature of cause and effect in international politics. The theoretical insights developed in *System Effects*, which Jervis regarded as his most important book,[14] have enormously important methodological implications. Building on theories of complexity, Jervis emphasized that everything is connected to everything else; that "we can never do merely one thing"; that causal relationships are often interactive; that non-linear relationships, third-party behavior, and negative and positive feedback generate unintended consequences; and that actors co-evolve with their environments.[15] All of this can make it difficult to trace causation, especially when actors are guided in part by their own theories of how the world works. These considerations led Jervis to recognize the limitations of knowledge, and to be cautious in his own claims. This epistemological stance, along with personal attributes, helps to explain the quality of humility in Jervis that many have noted in their remembrances.[16]

Let me end on a personal note. My intellectual development as an IR scholar has probably been influenced more by the work of Robert Jervis than by that of any other scholar. To mention a few examples, it was Jervis's occasional references to prospect theory in the early 1980s that initially sparked my research program on that and related topics in behavioral decision theory; his work on learning from history that got me thinking about that subject; and his invitation to participate on a roundtable on the historiography of Paul Schroeder that led to my work on Schroeder. Jervis influenced my career in other ways as well. When I arrived at to Rutgers in 1989 (even before, actually) Jervis invited me to his faculty seminars in IR and also in political psychology. He asked me to teach a Ph.D. seminar in the Department a couple times in the 1990s, which I have

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[13] Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 3.

[14] Robert Jervis, "How I Got Here," *H-Diplo* Essay 198 on Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations, 4 March 2020, 7. https://hdiplo.org/to/E198.

[15] It is worth emphasizing that the recognition that everything is connected to everything else did not push Jervis in the direction of prioritizing a full description of all of these interconnections in particular historical cases. He always maintained what I regard as a balanced view of the costs and benefits of parsimonious theory. As he wrote in the first chapter of his first book, "one of the best routes to international relations theory does not lie in an attempt to deal with all the significant variables operating in any case, but rather in the attempt to see what the world would look like if only a few dominant influences were at work." Jervis, *Logic of Images*, 15-16.

[16] I am struck by Jervis's description of the evolution of his thinking about the deterrence model and the spiral model, in "How I Got Here," 4. Jervis wrote that he began his analysis of the two models as alternative descriptions of and prescriptions for the Cold War "with a strong bias toward deterrence." But after further theoretical refection, writing *Perception and Misperception*, and immersion in many historical cases, he gained "more sympathy for the spiral model." He concluded "In the end, while I continue to study and teach about the Cold War, my conclusions remain fluid." Jervis was always eager to push his arguments as far as theory, logic, and evidence would allow, but not beyond.

recently been doing on a regular basis. This has helped to make me feel more integrated into the IR community at Columbia and has made my intellectual life far more interesting and rewarding. In these and other ways Bob Jervis shaped my intellectual development and career, and I will always be grateful.

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