

## *Remembrance of Bob Jervis*

By Tonya L. Putnam, Columbia University

Many contributors to this forum will undoubtedly detail Bob Jervis's profound and wide-ranging contributions to international relations theory, signals and intelligence theory and policy, diplomatic history, and related areas of security studies. I would like to reflect instead on one of Bob's contributions that is perhaps less well known outside Columbia and its neighboring institutions—his decades-long practice of using lunch hours to bring together, and build community, among scholars with a wide range of interests in political science, public policy, and related fields. The hundreds of hours I spent with Bob in these settings contain some of the best memories I have of my time at Columbia. And I am far from alone in this sentiment, as several colleagues have indicated, both directly with me, and on social media.

The more organized of these gatherings was an "IR reading group" that Bob convened three or four times each semester. He would select two recent or forthcoming journal articles or book chapters that were linked in some way, and everyone would come prepared to discuss them over catered sandwiches and cookies. These meetings drew a mainly IR crowd of scholars from Columbia and Barnard, but also from other political science departments in the New York/New Jersey area. These were occasions to dig deep as a peer group into cutting-edge research on a variety of security-related topics. The discussions combined critical evaluation of the qualitative and historical elements of the pieces Bob selected, together with discussion of social science methods. Bob frequently chose at least one piece each meeting that used methods outside his own wheelhouse. He was keen to hear the opinions of more formally, quantitatively, and (increasingly) experimentally-trained colleagues about specific multi-method research designs. He was likewise curious about possible quirks and embedded biases of applied statistical models and datasets, and pushed to know what the group considered to be best practices.

This past fall, Keren Yarhi-Milo, the Director of the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies (SIWPS), petitioned to have Bob's IR reading group designated a University Seminar at Columbia to be led, going forward, by a committee of senior IR faculty members. Bob was able to participate in two of these seminars. At the beginning of the first, Bob recounted to attendees that this reading group was one of long line that he started back when he was a junior faculty member at UCLA. During that time, and for years thereafter, Bob convened several such reading groups simultaneously -- not just with IR scholars, but also with historians and with specialists in cognitive and political psychology. In short, this was one of the ways he engaged in active reading and stretching the boundaries of his own training and knowledge while also building collegial relationships. That his last long-running group is now formally institutionalized at Columbia is thus a fitting tribute.

Bob's more frequent, and less formal, lunchtime gatherings were 'brown bag' affairs known locally as "Jervis lunches." These lunches became a Columbia institution in the 1980s during Bob's first decade on the faculty. For those of us lucky enough to have been proximate colleagues of Bob's (which I was from 2007 to 2019), these lunches were occasions to collectively hash over events pulled from the day's news headlines, to dissect important new

academic findings, and to hear informed opinions on arts and cultural events in New York. Jervis lunches were also a setting where one could raise questions about university-related policies and processes. In this regard they served as a site for mentoring junior colleagues and new arrivals at Columbia, and as a clearinghouse of institutional history and guidance about how to navigate university politics and the discipline more generally.

Importantly, all faculty and senior scholars -- not just experts on IR and diplomacy -- were welcome at Jervis lunches. Among the regular and periodically cycling attendees in my era were several American politics faculty members, a few political theorists and comparativists, and several professors of practice from the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia. Former students and colleagues of Bob's who had stopped by to visit would occasionally also be invited. Some years a baby or toddler might show up from time to time—and leave behind less mess than some of the participants. The main tickets for entry were, to borrow an apt phrase from Nolan McCarty,<sup>1</sup> “intellectual curiosity and epistemological modesty,” as well as a willingness to check any inflated sense of hierarchy at the door.

There were few major developments in international affairs or US and New York politics that were not thoroughly dissected and debated at Jervis lunches. Whatever the main topic of the day ended up being – a newly reported political maneuver on the part of the Russia or China, the debatable wisdom of a planned military surge in Iraq or Afghanistan, the failings of public opinion polling in a recent election, revelations from a new presidential biography, the historical accuracy of a popular new spy movie, or the expected highs and lows of the Met's (or the Mets') upcoming season – chances were good that there were experts in the room. And, failing this, there was a seemingly bottomless supply of social science theory and historical analogy to help bridge any substantive gaps.

Bob clearly thrived on these interactions with colleagues. Jervis lunches were generally lively. Occasionally they were outright jocular, producing roars of laughter that would elicit questioning looks from Institute RAs when the conference room door opened and everyone spilled out to return to their offices. On rare occasions discussions could become a bit heated – though Bob himself was never a protagonist in such instances. Indeed, he was a master at pushing back on ideas he disagreed with without triggering defensiveness in others, and adept at defusing tensions among colleagues. He was kind but far from uncritical. He was wry and pointedly funny without being malicious. Although Bob was always among the smartest, most well-informed people in any discussion, he never came across as overbearing or paternalistic. Indeed, it was Bob's intellect, wit, and the instinctive collegiality that he cultivated that prompted so many of us to make time for so many of these conversations.

During especially busy parts of the academic year, Jervis lunches might happen only once every two weeks or so. On semester breaks and in the summer weeks when Bob wasn't in D.C., or in Colorado, or traveling in Europe, he would gather a group almost daily. With these informal lunches, there was generally little outward sign of prior scheduling. At some point during the morning, if Bob had no meetings, or if there were no conflicting Institute or department events,

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Dod Brown Professor of Politics and Public Affairs Princeton School of Public and International Affairs Princeton University,  
[https://twitter.com/Nolan\\_Mc/status/1469489384705642502?cxt=HHwWjMCyiemz1uQoAAAA](https://twitter.com/Nolan_Mc/status/1469489384705642502?cxt=HHwWjMCyiemz1uQoAAAA).

he would walk around SIWPS knocking on everyone's door with the one-word query: "Lunch?" Thus, plans were set. (In recent decades Bob used an email notification list for faculty whose offices were on different floors of the International Affairs Building, but he maintained the ritual of the in-person survey for those of us at SIWPS.) After COVID-related university closures started, Jervis lunches moved to Zoom. Although shifting things online had clear drawbacks, this venue also allowed Bob to widen the lunch circle to include a few additional non-Columbia colleagues from time to time. It also permitted Bob to continue to participate from his apartment study until almost the very end.

Jervis lunches were not only a unique and nerdy brand of fun, they were a public service to Columbia and to the discipline. Regular attendees were richly rewarded by getting to know Bob – through his questions, insights, and countless anecdotes from his storied life and career – and likewise one another. Over the decades, these interactions enabled ties across subfields and specializations with people whom we otherwise might not have gotten to know well, either as scholars or as individuals. Not only did Bob's gatherings make us more knowledgeable and open-minded political scientists, they also undoubtedly made us better colleagues, teachers, and mentors. Their legacy will continue every time one of the scholars who participated, for example, pauses to listen – I mean really *listen* – to an unconventional argument from a colleague (especially a junior one), or whenever a healthy skepticism kicks in about the purportedly unprecedented nature of some new finding of one's own, or of another scholar.

On a more personal note, over the years I knew Bob he and I had many discussions about international law and other legal topics – sometimes in the context of these lunchtime gatherings, and at other times when he would come by my office to chat about an issue that had caught his eye that he thought I might have some insight about. This continued occasionally by email after I left Columbia. My last round of correspondence with Bob was in late November concerning questions he had about the wording of jury instructions in the trial of Kyle Rittenhouse in Wisconsin, and of the three men charged with killing Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia. He was curious about the nature of the reasonableness standard(s) in play in legal claims of self-defense, and in my and another colleague's take how defendants' own assessments of threat are evaluated, especially where there is evidence that a defendant directly contributed to manufacturing a deadly confrontation. It was (as one would expect from Bob) an interesting and incisive question -- and one with clear through lines to his own career-spanning intellectual preoccupation with threat perception and misperception.

The fact that Bob was still so engaged with unlocking the operative logics of the world around him, even as his prognosis dimmed and his treatments were leaving him increasingly weak, struck me as both inspiring and deeply endearing. Like so many others, I will immensely miss Bob's inquisitiveness, generous spirit, and brilliance.

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