

Bob Jervis

Essay by Michael Doyle, Columbia University

It is widely agreed in the field of international relations that Bob Jervis was a giant. But views on what made him so may differ amongst us. I think all can agree that he established the study of cognitive psychology as an integral part of foreign policy. But I do not plan to say anything more on that; others are in a better position to weigh in with authority.

I should mention at the outset of this appreciation that he and I differed intellectually more than we cohered. We were at different ends of the world politics “elephant.” He focused on decisions and psychology; I, on domestic structural determinants and political philosophy. Which end of the elephant was which we can leave open.

What made him a giant to me were his practices as a student-focused teacher and as a colleague-focused departmental citizen and his insights into what could make structural realism realistic.

I first met Bob almost fifty years ago when he and Stanley Hoffmann were recruited by the Harvard Government Department to teach an introductory course in international relations. Such a course for some reason had not previously been thought to be an integral part of the international relations curriculum. In his lectures, Stanley invited the students to share the highest reaches of sophisticated global savoir faire. With beautifully crafted, truly inspiring rhetoric he invited students to appreciate a world of primary, secondary, and tertiary forces shaping the changing dynamics of the Cold War and alliance politics. A few weeks into the semester Bob gathered the bewildered “section persons” (teaching assistants, of whom I was one) who were attempting to keep up with Stanley for a locker-room pep talk directed toward how we could fall back on teaching the reading list – since, after all, we were going to test the students on it at the end of the semester.

I observed these practical talents again in the vital role he played in the Columbia Political Science Department, which I joined in 2004. Bob was our unofficial, academic shop steward. He built bridges and opened channels of communication and organized solidarity every week by assembling colleagues to go to lunch. When a community needs to communicate, nothing beats eating and talking. Bob made sure that happened, regularly across fields and with ever-changing combinations of colleagues. Mostly as a result, intellectual diversity became one of Columbia’s academic strong suits.¹

But my most significant engagement with Bob was through his scholarship. Year after year I included Bob’s article “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma” as essential reading for IR students at Johns Hopkins and Princeton in the 1980s and 1990s.² The value, for me, of structural realism was established by the insights of Hobbesian anarchy and its “state of war.” But I don’t think we would have paid as much attention as we did were it not for Waltz’s extension

¹ One of my Columbia colleagues and a former student of Bob’s, Alex Cooley, suggested to me that in addition to believing in diversity for its own sake, Bob may have thought of its beneficial “systems effects.”

² Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30:2 (January 1978):167-214.

explaining bipolar stability³ and Jervis's explanation of how cooperation could vary while still operating under the core assumptions of the paradigm. Both were remarkably progressive advances in the paradigm, not only for the powerful insights they offered, but also for building so directly on the core assumptions of the paradigm: the number, relative power, and material circumstances of unitary states in systemic anarchy.

Bob's exploration of cooperation theory stood out for the breadth of the examples it drew upon. They ranged from accounts of Austrian diplomat Klemens von Metternich's diplomacy to remarks from a nineteenth century Philadelphia newspaper on the non-defensive character of knives and sword canes (which can be so easily used for surprise and are not much use in defense). It also reflected a true depth of analysis in discussions of the dilemmas of 1920s and 1930s naval and military strategy and the distinctive implications of ICBMs and SLBMs.

He opened the article, fittingly, with the core, tragic insight of structural realist anarchy:

“The lack of an international sovereign not only permits wars to occur, but also makes it difficult for states that are satisfied with the status quo to arrive at goals that they recognize as being in their common interest. Because there are no institutions or authorities that can make and enforce international laws, the policies of cooperation that will bring mutual rewards if others cooperate may bring disaster if they do not. Because states are aware of this, anarchy encourages behavior that leaves all concerned worse off than they could be, even in the extreme case in which all states would like to freeze the status quo” (167).

The absence of an international sovereign then makes stag dilemmas effectively similar to prisoner's dilemmas. In the prisoner's dilemma the felons have an incentive to defect from cooperation (DC) in their hope of cutting a favorable plea bargain with the court. When both do so, both suffer the full weight of conviction (DD) with the incrimination each provided for the other. Rousseau's stag dilemma parable is different. It assumes that the hunters can attain the mutually preferred share of the stag they can capture if all of them remain rationally steadfast in cooperation (CC). In Bob's lucid interpretation of Rousseau's parable, the hunters may share a preference for an equal share of the stag, but, if they cannot trust and be assured of the commitments of the other hunters, they will nonetheless succumb to the temptation of catching the (much less desirable) hare that each can catch on his own (DC). When all then dash for the hare, all wind up with nothing or a small share of the much less meaty hare (DD). Under these circumstances, the security dilemma arises when even efforts to cooperate (improve hunting skills) have the effects of making others less secure (when they are all seizing the hare).

He acknowledged that he has drawn a “gloomy picture, [and] the obvious question is, why are we not all dead? Or, to put it less starkly, what kinds of variables ameliorate the impact of anarchy and the security dilemma?” (170). Rather than a static picture, he next shows how factors can alter the payoffs and thus make the outcomes less preordained. Increasing the value of cooperation (CD and CC) or reducing the value of defection (DC) or communicating accurate

³ Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World.” *Daedalus* 93:3 (1964): 881–909.

intentions in the stag dilemma or iterating the prisoner's dilemma such that the prisoners learn to punish defection as a way to incentivize cooperation: all these can make a difference.

Moreover, understanding the variables that alter incentives become essential determinants of changing the "games" that shape world politics. He argued that "situations vary in the ease or difficulty with which all states can simultaneously achieve a high degree of security. ...[they include] the impact of beliefs, geography, and commitments (many of which can be considered to be modifications of geography, since they bind states to defend areas outside their homelands" (183). Before World War I, Germany was nearly forced to adopt something like the Schlieffen Plan (which presupposed preemption or at least a quick victory over one rival) because of its central position and the hostility it faced from Russia and France. Defending the empire in India embroiled Britain in defending Egypt or South Africa in order to maintain trade and communications. The two oceans spared the US an extra-"continental commitment" until the Cold War made the security of Western Europe a vital interest.

He concluded with the two additional variables that made the article famous: "Two crucial variables are involved: whether defensive weapons and policies can be distinguished from offensive ones, and whether the offense or the defense has the advantage" (186).

Whether the offense or the defense has the advantage is a matter mostly of geography, technology, and cost. Some terrains are difficult to cross (mountains, thick forests, desserts) and cannons overcame castles in early modern Europe. When it is much more costly to buy the weapons to conquer than to defend against those weapons, defense predominates; and vice versa.

Distinguishing offense from defensive weapons and postures can be more difficult. Bob acknowledges the issue raised by Salvador de Madariaga, the Spanish statesman active in the disarmament negotiations of the interwar years: "A weapon is either offensive or defensive according to which end of it you are looking at" (201). Yet, with cautions, distinctions can be drawn and are acted upon; though not always wisely. The statesman of 1914 anticipated a quick offensive-dominant war led by industrial mobilization and the railroad. Instead, they got the trenches and stalemate. Nuclear weapons overcome any defense, but stability comes from deterrence that is, ironically, most threatened by attempts at defense.

Bob wrapped up the rich argument with a powerfully evocative two-by-two table. It contains a happy quadrant in which weapons are distinguishable and the defense is dominant and a "doubly dangerous" quadrant in which the weapons are not distinguishable and the offense predominates. Then there are two more ambiguous quadrants in which the defense predominates but weapons are not distinguishable leading to a security dilemma mitigated by the capacity to defend and incentives for arms control and then a quadrant in which the offense is superior but weapons are distinguishable, allowing for the identification of aggressors by the weapons they choose.

Altogether, the article is one of the stars in the firmament of international relations scholarship. It neither invented the security dilemma nor the offense-defense balance, but it combined them in a thoroughly coherent manner, explored their implications when combined and demonstrated their powers of insight—and their limitations -- across a truly impressive range of international history.

To say that we will miss his qualities of teaching, citizenship, and scholarship is an understatement.

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