

A Bad Poem for a Great and Good Man: Doggerel for Bob Jervis

By Page Fortna, Columbia University

There is a long tradition in my family of writing doggerel for those we love and respect. I had planned to write such a poem (if one can call it that) for Bob's retirement. But as I should have known, in fact as I always predicted, he never did retire. He was still at work, and still emailing us about intellectual ideas and university politics a week before he died. So I never had a chance to write this and share it with him. I think he'd get a kick out of it. I hope you do too. And remember, bad rhymes are always best read out loud.

There once was a scholar named Jervis
teacher, mentor, and scion of professional service
For years on his advice, we've been reliant
but he's known most of all – though he wasn't that tall
as a true intellectual giant

The weight of his impact on the theory of IR
was massive, sayin' otherwise would make me a liar
For big and important ideas, he had the best antenna
on perceptual defects – and system effects
and not least, the workings of the security dilemma

He loved him some good diplomatic histories
Smiled when the archives yielded up their mysteries
Loved to pore over files of old letters and cables
when a politico flails – or intelligence fails
Didn't love, but would tolerate statistical tables

Bob cared about interesting theoretical prisms
but didn't get mired in the wars of the "isms"
Was open to others' methods, whether qualitative or quant
Even an experiment – he saw as no detriment
If that's what the question might warrant

In the Department, and at Saltzman, he built our community
we could stop by his office anytime with impunity
to discuss new findings, or cases, or a theoretical hunch
And when time to sup – he'd round us all up
Pop his head in our doors with a smile to ask: "Lunch?"

Brown bags at faculty house, then later in thirteen-oh-two
On the politics of the day we'd sit and spew
He'd regale us with tales of Zbigniew Brzezinski

Oh my, oh dear – I’m in a pickle I fear
Any rhyme I make here will be wince-ski

Reading his journals, he’d often be pensive
But I never met a man who was less defensive
What should give us mere mortal academics vertigo
when thinking of Bob – and what he did in his job
is the size of his contribution-to-ego ratio

Bob was mentor to many a colleague and student
To heed his advice, we all knew to be prudent
Grawemeyer winners have a right to be imperious
But in it for the joy – for politics were his toy
he just never took himself that serious

Well known for his humor mischiev-ee-ous
“Jervis plans” could be downright devious
To thin the ranks of senior faculty, by default?
To open up apartments – and slots in departments?
(With more than a wrinkle – he could say with a twinkle)
“Columbia ought to stop spreading its sidewalks with salt!”

He cared more to be known for his decisions editorial
than he did for his daily choices sartorial
To trends of fashion he was definitely no lackey
Ever the same specs – with polos or turtlenecks
and he always wore pants that were khaki

Of the things we love him for, this is a mere sample
I’ll close with a reference to his favorite example
A crisis on the Nile between the Brits and the French
(On the case of Fashoda – he’s kind of a yoda)
But for much more than this, he’ll be sorely missed
For he was the dictionary definition of a mensch

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