

*“To My Fellow Perceiver”*

By Keren Yarhi-Milo, Columbia University

It goes without saying that Bob Jervis was a giant in the field. He was a one-of-a-kind scholar whose work will forever shape how we think about international politics. But for me, he was a rare gift of a person who changed my life profoundly over the past twenty years. As a freshman at Columbia, I took my very first class in international relations with Bob as my professor. Later on, he became one of my dissertation advisors even though I completed my Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania while he taught at Columbia. Since then, he has read at least one draft of every paper that I have ever published. I even had the rare honor of co-authoring a paper with him shortly before he was diagnosed with cancer. Most recently, he was my colleague at Columbia and a core member of the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies, of which I became the Director in 2020. More than these titles, however, Bob was mentor, advocate, and a second father to me.

I could write a book-length manuscript just on how Bob influenced the field of international relations and my own work in particular. Thomas Christensen and I tried to summarize some of his key contributions in a recent *Foreign Affairs* piece.<sup>1</sup> Instead, in this tribute I would like to highlight the aspects of Bob’s unparalleled personality that I believe will resonate with everyone who was fortunate enough to know him, work with him, and be his student. For the readers who did not have the chance to get to know Bob, I have no doubt that learning about what made him so special as a person will shed light on what made him such a brilliant scholar.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas J. Christensen and Keren Yarhi-Milo, “The Human Factor: How Robert Jervis Reshaped our Understanding of International Politics,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 7, 2022  
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2022-01-07/human-factor>

I'll start at the beginning, which was my first semester as an undergraduate student at Columbia. As I sat in the International Affairs Building, eagerly anticipating the start of my first session of Introduction to International Politics, Bob began the class by going through newspaper articles, one of which was about the Arab-Israeli conflict. Using the article as a launching point, he kicked off a discussion about whether or not the conflict was a security dilemma. Admittedly, at this point in time I had no idea who Bob was, but the way that he spoke about the topic with so much passion and sensitivity, sparked something that made me want to approach him and discuss the subject further. So, although I was only a freshman, I joined the line of students waiting for a chance to chat with him during office hours. When I made it into his office, he asked me about my background. When I told him that I had served in Israeli intelligence, his eyes lit up and he grinned. Intrigued by one another, we started talking about biases in intelligence analysis, the role of intelligence in the Arab-Israeli peace process, and international relations more broadly. I left his office over an hour later and the rest was history. In reflecting back on the treasure trove of conversations that I had with Bob each week during his office hours, I am reminded why I always tell my students to make an effort to get to know their professors.

For the next twenty years, Bob would follow up every conversation we had by sending me something he had found useful or interesting in his prolific reading. I was not the only beneficiary of his rare and immense thoughtfulness. In fact, Bob was known for this: looking through his office, which was filled with piles of books and papers strewn about, and finding something relevant to the topic at hand. Despite the seeming disorganization, he always knew exactly what he was looking for and would scan the document right there and then, handing you a copy at the close of the conversation, or attach it in an email a few days later. Other times, he would send you thoughtful and brilliant emails out of the blue, recalling an old conversation or

referencing your work. How remarkable that in all of his nonstop reading Bob would think not just about his own work but also how what he was reading could help his students, colleagues, and research in general. To take one example, just a week before he passed, Bob sent me an email with a piece about British cabinet deliberations in the interwar period, something that I wrote about extensively in my first book.

Beyond his genuine interest in helping others do their research, Bob's unfailing ability to find something relevant to every conversation was borne out of his voracious reading. Bob was up to date with every journal and every book -- I really do not know any other scholar who read as much as he did. He read anything and everything that he thought could potentially be interesting. He even read articles he suspected to be awful and browsed through journals he did not think very highly of. Bob would carve out time every other day to sit with his legs up on the chair, like a schoolboy, and jot down notes in the margins of whatever book or journal he had set out to read. (His handwriting is nearly impossible to decipher, but having these journals in my office now, I continue trying to figure out what his notes mean, knowing that each annotated scribble is an invaluable gem). Impressively, he would also remember what he read, and was able to recall the exact article and the details of an author's argument up until his very last day.

Though his field was political science, Bob was passionate about diplomatic history as well as work in political science that seriously engaged with historical case studies. In fact, this is one of the interests that the two of us bonded over. In combination with his avid curiosity, it should be no surprise that he loved to talk about the archives. Bob's singular passion for historical documents (at least among political scientists) is also why he agreed to head the CIA declassification board, knowing how important it was for scholars to access files that could enable the building and testing of new theories in IR. He would spend hours listening to students

share about the archival jewels they had found. Any time that a document was declassified, he immediately and eagerly wanted to know everything about it. I will never forget Bob's reaction when I first showed him the documents I collected from Carter's Presidential Library, where one can still see Carter's handwritten notes in the margins on the weekly reports he received from his National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski. Upon seeing the documents, Bob's face lit up like a kid in a candy store and with a huge grin on his face he exclaimed, "This is just marvelous!!!" I hold this memory of Bob most dearly because it captures his fantastic inquisitiveness and unquenchable thirst for knowledge.

Put simply, Bob was unmatched as a mentor. He was there for me during the ups and downs of my career (and they were many of those). When I told him during graduate school that I did not think I was cut out for academia, he unflinchingly sympathized with me, telling me he did not blame me for feeling this way. When I told him that I might have to quit my tenure-track job at Princeton due to my son's developmental delays, he could not have been more compassionate, sensitive, and supportive. At that time, we spoke every week as he helped me navigate the situation. When I decided to return to my work, he threw himself into helping me get back on track professionally. In addition to being an unparalleled advisor, Bob was my number one advocate -- most senior people in the field probably first heard of me or my work thanks to Bob and his many shout outs. There is no doubt in my mind that I would not be where I am today without him having been there every step of the way.

Just before he was diagnosed, I had the rare privilege of coauthoring a piece with him. I call this a rare privilege because you can count on one hand the number of people he coauthored with during his illustrious career. I feel lucky to have written a review piece in *World Politics*

with him and Don Casler<sup>2</sup> precisely because it gave us a glimpse into Bob's unique writing process -- the output of which discerning readers will recognize as the "Jervisian" style -- that was not easily shared. Indeed, part of Bob's aversion to coauthoring stemmed from the difficulty of matching his idiosyncratic habits to others' styles. Thus, Don and I were elated to be invited behind the curtain, and we learned so much from the honor of observing the process up close.

Bob began every piece by collecting newspaper clips on items with a common theme. When a file got thick or heavy enough, he would decide that it was time to write about that topic. For him, these clippings were more than anecdotes -- they were pieces of evidence that together painted a picture and hinted at a larger theoretical or empirical story. After examining his clippings, he would dictate his thoughts, recording himself as he talked through his ideas. The resulting transcript would already contain incredibly rich examples (because he had already collected them and based his argument on them) and a clean, well-articulated argument. That initial draft would then go through a very long process of editing until it was refined into publishable work. It was not just the dictation (rare in and of itself) that made his style so interesting, but also the peculiar way in which his process of research and writing resembled piecing together a jigsaw puzzle.

Considering that his remarkable writing was based on his dictation, it should come as no surprise that Bob was also an exceedingly skilled communicator. Moreover, given his scholarly focus, he was very sensitive to the dynamics of perception and misperception. The way that he carried himself and interacted with others in professional settings reflected this sensitivity. Bob knew that it was not only what you argued for or against, but also how your words or actions

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Jervis, Yarhi-Milo, and Don Casler, "Redefining the Debate Over Reputation and Credibility in International Security: Promises and Limits of New Scholarship," *World Politics* 73:1 (2021): 167-203, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887120000246>.

were perceived (or misperceived) by others that mattered. Whenever Bob spoke, everyone understood exactly the message he intended to get across, because he had already factored in the myriad ways in which others might misunderstand him. Among Bob's superpowers was his uncanny ability and instinct to think critically about his audience (and many times it was not just one audience but multiple audiences). I sat with Bob in countless meetings during which sensitive issues came up, or the audience was especially divided. While always honest and sincere, he knew how to craft an argument diplomatically and sensibly so that no one could possibly take his idea the wrong way. Not too long ago, in a particularly tense Arts and Sciences meeting, Bob raised his hand, and I thought to myself, "what is he doing?" In that environment, I anticipated that there would be a huge blowback to whatever he might say (and especially to the particular suggestion that I suspected he would offer)." Advocating for this bold course of action, Bob spoke elegantly and empathically. Much to my surprise, when he finished speaking every single person in the previously polarized environment was nodding in agreement. Dazzled, I thought to myself, "How brilliant. Watch and learn, Keren." If his scholarship talked the talk about signaling and perception, then in his interpersonal interactions and communications, Bob walked the walk.

As talented a writer as he was a communicator, Bob was also a community builder and expert convener -- he absolutely loved bringing people together in both the field and across the university. Bob did not care about what methodology or subject matter expertise one had -- he was enthusiastic to learn from everybody and saw the value in every piece of good scholarship. It did not matter to him whether you were an international relations scholar, historian, or political theorist; everyone was welcome at the infamous brown bag lunches that he hosted as often as twice a week. For Bob, it was not enough to simply email an invitation. He would go around

collecting faculty members by knocking on their doors and asking them if they were coming to lunch -- no one could or would say no to Bob, and so everyone came. Before the pandemic, room 1302 in IAB would be filled with people from all different backgrounds and subfields discussing current events. During the pandemic, this tradition continued on Zoom all the way up until his very last week.

Bob cared profoundly about the community he helped build at Columbia -- about the Political Science Department, the School of International and Public Affairs, the Saltzman Institute, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, and Columbia University at large. Even as he was undergoing chemotherapy treatments, he was still attending faculty meetings and job talks -- a true testament for how important Columbia was to him. Just as he was an expert in international relations, he was also a connoisseur in everything to do with the university; Bob knew everything one possibly could in terms of budgeting, strategic planning, and internal politics. He put great effort into protecting the faculty and the students by making sure that Columbia maintained a high quality of education. He and I spent hours during his last months talking over Zoom about the university's plans to expand and restructure the college, two issues about which Bob cared deeply and wanted to make sure were done right. He poured similar energy into caregiving for the field of political science as a whole, serving as a leader not just through his writing but also as president of the American Political Science Association, a board member of many journals, founder of the H-Diplo/International Security Studies Section, and editor of the Cornell Studies in Security Affairs at Cornell University Press for many years (to name but a few roles). Most of what he did was to pave the way for younger scholars and give them the opportunity to get their work reviewed. Remarkably, he did it all for free, out of pure passion and devotion. Just as he was always going out of his way to help scholars along with

their research, he also expended immense effort into creating a structural environment that would allow them to thrive.

Bob and I were attracted to the same puzzles and patterns in world politics. Perhaps this was because I was his student after all, or maybe this is what brought us together to begin with. I remember many instances of us sitting at conferences, talks, or faculty meetings when another participant said something that caused us to look at each other and smile, each knowing that the other was thinking the exact same thing in reaction. “To my fellow perceiver,” is how he signed my copy of *Perceptions and Misperception*. In sum, Bob Jervis was my go-to person. He was the first one I called or emailed with everything from a question about research to advice about my career to help with deliberating about what opportunities to say yes to or no to. My biggest joy was coming full circle and joining him at Columbia as a colleague -- if we were not close enough before, this made us closer than ever.

When Bob told me confidentially that he was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer, it was a déjà-vu moment for me, as my father had been diagnosed with cancer eight years ago. It was a truly devastating blow. Bob was generally brutally honest about his prognosis, but despite our own expertise on biases, we were both a bit guilty of false optimism at times. Knowing I only had a limited time left to enjoy Bob’s brilliance, wisdom, humor, and advice, I cherished every Zoom call and email correspondence, and I was delighted to see him in person when it was safe. He celebrated what turned out to be his last birthday in Central Park during spring 2021, surrounded by colleagues who adored him. I looked at him and how happy he was. I then turned to look around at the many faces that surrounded him, all of them filled with immense admiration layered with tears of both joy and sadness. On December 9th, 2021, the world lost its



biggest mensch and the most astute observer of world politics. I lost a rare mentor and a father figure who profoundly shaped, and will forever continue to influence, my life and career.

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