Robert Jervis: A Much Beloved "Giant Gadfly"

Essay by Thomas J. Christensen, Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs

I am grateful to Richard Immerman, Diane Labrosse, and Marc Trachtenberg for asking me to contribute to this collection of essays about my mentor, colleague, and friend, Bob Jervis. They approached me just after I agreed to write an essay for *Foreign Affairs* with Keren Yarhi-Milo, who is also Bob's former student, current Columbia colleague, and friend.[1] But I still wanted to participate here as I know how important H-Diplo was to Bob and I could not pass up an opportunity to honor a wonderful person with an amazing career.

My solution was to rework an earlier essay that I wrote in 2017 as the chair of an H-Diplo roundtable review on two of his books. One of those was the new edition of his classic *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* and the other was a collection of his essays under the very appropriate title *How Statesmen Think*, the question that motivated Bob's work for six decades. I started that piece by calling Robert Jervis "both a giant and a gadfly" in the field of International Relations. In responding to my essay in the roundtable discussion Bob humorously thanked me for branding him "a giant gadfly."[2] This is why I use that phrase in the title here.

Before I turn to his many professional contributions, however, I wanted to share a story that I believe partially captures Bob's generous, humble, and humorous personality. I told this story several years ago when I spoke at a session in his honor at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. Here goes.

I was a graduate student at Columbia University in the late 1980s, and one year I was lucky enough to secure an outside grant that provided funds for a small office in what is now the Saltzman Institute for War and Peace Studies. This placed me just a few doors from Professor Robert Jervis, who had taught two of my classes, was my boss when I was a teaching assistant, and had joined my dissertation committee.

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[1] 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

[2] See the H-Diplo Roundtable Review of Jervis's *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017) and *How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics*. (Princeton University Press, 2017), H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable 10-4, ed. Diane Labrosse, 8 December 2017 https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-10-4.pdf.

It was in this time period that Bob received the Grawemeyer Award for his book, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, a prestigious honor that includes a substantial monetary prize.[3] In his generosity, he decided to share the wealth by providing an unlimited supply of gourmet ground coffee and a coffee machine in a public space in the Institute. For a struggling graduate student in the pre-Starbucks era this meant a lot. No more trips to the local Greek diner to get weak coffee in smallish blue paper cups decorated with the Parthenon. What was much more important than the coffee, however, is that the coffee machine provided multiple opportunities for me as a student to chat with Prof. Jervis and other members of the very busy faculty (note: we never referred to him as Bob until we defended our dissertations).

On one such occasion, Prof. Jervis approached me at the machine with an opened envelope and a letter. (This was also the pre-email era!) Prof. Jervis had a quizzical look on his face. He handed me the letter and said, "Tom. I do not know how I should feel about this letter. Is it an insult or a compliment?" The letter was from a refereed publication rejecting something he had submitted. He was asking me about how to react to one of the referee's comments, which read: "in this piece, the author is trying hard to be Bob Jervis. But this author is no Bob Jervis." I laughed very hard then and still laugh now as I write this. Prof. Jervis was free of an inflated ego and full of humor, so he laughed along with me. When I composed myself, I told him that I found this to be a great compliment to him as a scholar, however insulting it was to the piece in question.

At the APSA meeting at which I presented this story, I hoped that the many young scholars in the audience would take heart in it. Even the great Bob Jervis, who was receiving a lifetime achievement award that day, could have his work be summarily rejected by an academic publisher and could still find that an occasion for laughter and affirmation.

I now turn to a discussion of Jervis's path-breaking work.

An Appreciation of Robert Jervis's Work

Robert Jervis was at the same time a giant and a gadfly, a leader and a subversive in the field of international relations. In his career, Jervis often was very much a theorist in the mainstream political science tradition. In some of his most famous works—including "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma" and *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*—Jervis showed his skill at creating

[3] Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

deductively derived theories about how states should respond to structural and technological changes in international security affairs.[4]

Those works are extraordinary and made an enormous contribution to the literature. But Jervis often noted with frustration that actual policy makers often diverged from the expectations and prescriptions of his theories. He lamented that, despite the inescapable background condition of mutual nuclear vulnerability, the two Cold-War superpowers still developed destabilizing offensive nuclear weapons designed to target their enemies' arsenals, planned to fight 'limited' nuclear wars of various levels of intensity, and obsessed about local conventional balances of power around the world. Jervis thought it would have been safer and less fiscally burdensome if Washington and Moscow had fully accepted the condition of mutually assured destruction and properly understood the stabilizing effects that condition should produce at all levels of potential military conflict.[5]

Jervis was, however, much more than a mainstream IR theorist. He was also an honorary diplomatic historian (and not coincidentally, he was a major force in both creating and sustaining H-Diplo/ISSF, the sister website of H-Diplo). Especially in books like *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* and *How Statesman Think*, Jervis was interested in explaining how leaders actually behaved, rather than how they should have behaved according to a pure, context-free theoretical logic. His real rebellion against mainstream political science was his insistence that decision makers, at the end of the day, are human: they suffer from cognitive limitations, biases, and personality quirks. Those individual characteristics often make them poor subjects for deductively derived, structural explanations for how rational actors *should* interact under assumptions about their motivations assigned to them by scholars and in the face of objective changes in the environment in which they operate. In the preface of the revised edition of *Perception and Misperception* Jervis states that the book itself does not have a single clear theoretical take. This is true, unless, of course, one considers intelligent and historically rooted skepticism about clear theoretical takes themselves to be a strong theoretical position.

How Statesman Think, an updated compilation of previously published works, continued in this tradition. In a very real sense the book brings together Jervis's two skills as a deductively oriented social-science theorist and an inductive

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[4] Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30:2 (January 1978): 167-214.

[5] For Jervis's complaints about U.S. military doctrine under conditions of mutually assured destructions, see Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*; and Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984). In *How Statesmen Think*, 186-187. Jervis recognizes that there was a long overdue acceptance of "security dilemma thinking" under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's rule, which did not begin until 1985.

diplomatic historian. Jervis was enamored of general theories of coercive diplomacy, like Thomas Schelling's Nobel Prize–winning game theories of conflict, and general theories of human psychology, like Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman's Nobel Prize–winning work on prospect theory.[6] But Jervis was a master at demonstrating that while the theories themselves may be general, it takes a tremendous amount of detective work to apply them to real-world cases. To illuminate the parsimonious power of the elegant theories, we need to get into the particular psychological makeup and perceptions of the leaders in question.

In Schelling's theoretical work on coercive diplomacy, a core concept is the perceived status quo that can either be preserved through deterrence or changed through compellence. Since Schelling deems compellence much more difficult to achieve than deterrence, the distinction could hardly be more important. So the need to understand leaders' varying perceptions of the status quo is built into the theory in a way that strongly privileges scholars like Jervis, who are steeped in diplomatic history, over the vast majority of game theorists in political science, who have focused almost exclusively on mathematics in their intellectual training and simply assume as given many things that in the real world vary wildly and consequentially.

The same can be said for one of the most important lessons of Schelling's game theoretic work, which is repeated often in the essays in *How Statesmen Think*: successful deterrence requires credible threats of punishment if proscribed behavior is adopted; but it also requires credible assurances that the punishment will be withheld if the perceived status quo is preserved. Without such assurances, the target has no reason to comply with the demands attached to the threat. There is always tension between these two equally important missions in coercive diplomacy, and that tension is captured by the concept of the security dilemma: a country's individual efforts to secure itself through defense buildups and deterrence can be misread by another state as fundamentally hostile and aggressive, leading to a countering effort that leaves both sides less secure.

To understand successful and failed instances of deterrence (or compellence), we need to comprehend not only the threatening and reassuring signals sent but how those signals are perceived by the target. In his qualitative research, Jervis was therefore careful and rigorous to show what leaders actually were thinking. Such care, however, is rarely reflected in the coding of cases for

[6] Representative examples of their work include: Thomas Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963); Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Pres, 1967); and Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica* 47:2 (March 1979), 263-291.

large n databases in the mainstream security studies literature, which ironically prides itself on superior scientific rigor.

Just as Schelling's theories are broadly applicable but difficult to apply in every case, so is Tversky and Kahneman's prospect theory. Since humans behave very differently when protecting what they have than they do when gaining new things, how issues are framed by individuals as being in the realm of gains or the realm of losses is all important. We need to know a lot about the psychology of individual actors in the political world to determine what they themselves would consider a gain from the perceived pre-crisis status quo and what they would consider a loss. We can do so only through careful empirical research into leaders' psychology in every case.

Bob Jervis applied these analytic skills not only as a scholar and teacher but as a public servant. He served an advisor to the intelligence community in order to both help officials there understand the causes of catastrophic intelligence failures and to decide what documents could be safely declassified and released to the general public. In my years interacting with people from that community I have heard nothing but praise for Bob both as a keen but fair critic, but also as a generous and empathetic fellow traveler who understood how difficult it is to draw accurate conclusions from a world of imperfect information and, sometimes, intentional deception by foreign governments.

Scholars who are former foreign policy practitioners, like James Steinberg and Phillip Zelikow, have praised Bob Jervis's work as useful tool in both policymaking and intelligence analysis.[7] As a former official myself, I agree with them. Jervis's theoretical toolbox is much more useful to policy makers than most theories in international relations because contingency is built into his generalizable approaches. There is plenty of room to allow for consideration of what policy makers know from experience to be important: individual leaders matter; context matters; diplomatic signals need to be crafted carefully to demonstrate both resolve and restraint; and how the other side thinks about an international crisis or problem is as important, and sometimes more important, than how one's own side thinks about such issues.

Bob Jervis published *How Statesman Think* and a new edition of *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* in 2017, the same year that Richard Thaler won the Nobel Prize for his work in behavioral economics, which, like the work of Jervis and Tversky and Kahneman, treats economic actors as full humans, rather than robotic utility maximizers. It may be fitting that the books were also

[7] See their comments in the H-Diplo Roundtable Review of Jervis's *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* and *How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics*, https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-10-4.pdf.

published in the first year that President Donald J. Trump was in office. Trump's election demonstrated the importance of the individual leader and his or her psychology in international politics in ways that Jervis's work captures so well. And in an indirect and unintended way, Trump's Presidency validated Jervis's subversive arguments about the need to consider such particularistic variables in social science.[8] Many scholars who take a very different approach and suggest in their work that what really matters in domestic and international politics are broad structural pressures on political actors, and not those actors' individual personalities, had their theoretical convictions tested by Trump's election. Many expressed uncharacteristic worry over this particular individual's presence in the Oval Office. Perhaps deep down, they think more like Robert Jervis than their published works might suggest.

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[8] See Jervis's thoughts on Trump's election and presidency in Jervis, "President Trump and IR Theory," H-Diplo/ISSF Policy series 1–6 (2017), " Diane Labrosse, ed., January 2, 2017, https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5B.pdf ; and "President Trump and IR Theory," in Robert Jervis, Francis J. Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse, eds., *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018): 3-7; as well as Jervis, "The Trump Experiment Revisited," Labrosse, ed., 11 February 2021, https://issforum.org/essays/ps2021-7, and "The Trump Experiment Revisited," in Jervis, Labrosse, Stacie Goddard, and Joshua Rovner, eds., *The Liberal Order Strikes Back? Donald Trump, Joe Biden, and the Future of International Politics* (Columbia University Press, forthcoming).