

Robert Jervis: Scholarly Silverback

By Rose McDermott, Brown University

This is a tribute that I desperately hoped I would never have to write. I am heartbroken over the loss of my mentor, Bob Jervis. In a world driven by social media, grief too often feels performative, displaying a theatricality so at odds with the feeling of authentic loss. By contrast, the experience of real grief, however painful, constitutes a kind of sacred honor, proof of a relationship of real depth, value, and meaning in a world captivated by trivial shiny things. Robert Jervis forged me; he so deeply formed my intellect, and in many ways my character, that I would have to forget my very self in order to overlook his formative impact on me.

Bob Jervis was the first one to bring me to H-Diplo, as he invited me to so many other things, offering articles in journals that came with stipends when he knew I needed “real money,” as well as introductions to other communities such as the STTL list administered by his friend Bob Art. As a published but admittedly armchair anthropologist (albeit of the biological persuasion), I often noticed the interactions on that list to follow a certain pattern: more often than not, Bob Jervis would start a thread, throwing a shot across the bow to see what others thought or how they might react. Frequently, it seemed like the responses were designed as much to get his attention and validation as to actually discuss the substance of the issue.

Among those who study primates, an individual like this in the gorilla community is called a “silverback.” This is usually an older gorilla who manages to keep everyone else in line. The silverback organizes a given group; he is the one who protects the group, even if he is killed in the process. The silverback naturally captures everyone’s attention, but his role is much larger and wider than being the organizing force of a group. He helps resolve conflicts among members of the troop, dictates movement and provides guidance and direction to feeding sites,

and is the one designated to ensure the welfare of every member of the group. In the area of international relations, and particularly in the subfield of security studies, Bob was a silverback in all the ways that count.

Bob functioned as a silverback for the wider international relations community in myriad ways. He created community by bringing together people who might not otherwise have spent time together. In this way, he provided the cement by which everyone remained connected to others through their mutual attachment to him. Over the course of the last 14 months, he organized weekly Zoom lunches that brought together a disparate group of individuals from different backgrounds to talk about current events. In this, as in so many other ways, he was the glue that held the group together.

Bob's reach was much broader than his immediate students and colleagues; he had widespread connections in the intelligence, government, and military communities. Bob did not just create community. He established an entire field of study, and the depth and quality of his work in the area of political psychology gave it legitimacy.¹ Without question, he shaped the direction of the field in powerful ways, most significantly by giving credibility to the study of the role individuals play in directing large-scale outcomes. He taught, and offered advice and guidance, both intellectual and professional, to generations of students, who themselves have gone on to pass his lessons on to their students. In addition, he protected junior scholars, helping them with their work, passing along opportunities for jobs and fellowships, offering advice and guidance, and providing reassurance and encouragement. I admit I feel very sad for the students

¹ There are many examples of this but perhaps the most influential was Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

to come who will only know of Bob through his written work and videos of his presentations on YouTube. Yet his incredible support was not restricted only to junior scholars.

Rather, his advice and support came with a lifetime guarantee. Long after I finished my degree, and even after I got tenure, I relied on Bob for help and advice. Indeed, although I originally felt a bit embarrassed at doing so, every time I had a problem I couldn't figure out or solve, particularly hard ethical quandaries (and this would happen at least two or three times a year for the last 25 years), I would call him up and ask for his help. Without fail, Bob would provide unique insight as well as comfort and help me figure out what to do to or how to begin to address the concern. Remarkably, he never once led me astray. This is not to say that I never disagreed with him; I continue to think there was more motivated bias in the George W. Bush administration's assessment of weapons of mass destruction going into the war in Iraq than Bob believed. But it is to say that his professional advice never steered me wrong. The one time I went against his advice (and he understood why and accepted it without question or argument) was a disaster and I never did it again. I admit I now feel like a bit of an orphan, having nowhere to turn when presented with challenges I am not able to resolve. Above and beyond the call of any reasonable expectation, Bob Jervis remained my dependable lender of last resort until the day he died. I remain bereft.

In all these kinds of ways, Bob Jervis was a true silverback: strong, protective, loyal, dependable, and possessing flawless instincts. In nature, once a silverback dies, the group tends to break up, with individuals going their own way, dissipating into smaller collectives. Significantly, it raises the rate of infanticide as in-group members kill their young. It is incumbent on all of us, as a community, to make sure that Jervis's legacy includes the kind of

decency and kindness to each other and our students that he embodied throughout his long and influential career.

One of the first posts to STTL after Jervis died was appropriately titled “WWJD: What would Jervis do?” And, indeed, now without him, each of us has to make our own decisions about what to think and how to manage our careers without his sage advice and encouragement, although luckily we can still be inspired by his writings and talks on YouTube.

Bob was not one given to sentiment, but my primary, and often overwhelming, feeling since Bob died is one of profound, even breathtaking, gratitude. There really are no words adequate to describe the depth of my gratitude to him and for him. I am so grateful I knew him, so grateful I was able to study with him and benefit from his wisdom and generosity for so many years. I feel so privileged and so fortunate to have crossed his orbit; the trajectory of my own career in political psychology would simply not have been possible without his.

In short, there is absolutely no way I would be the person I am now without his work, influence, and mentorship. It is not an overstatement to say that he not only pioneered but also legitimated the use of psychology in the study of politics. While others before him used psychology to understand mass political behavior, Bob was really the first one to systematically extract theories and ideas from psychology to help illuminate leader behavior, judgment, and decision making in an integrated deductive fashion. Earlier work that relied on psychology to help explain political outcomes tended either to rely on case studies from a psychoanalytic perspective, such as Alexander and Juliette George’s magisterial *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House*,² or they focused primarily on the study of mass political behavior, such as the work of

² Alexander L. George and Juliette L. George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study* (Lexington, MA: Plunkett Lake Press, 2019).

Lazarsfeld.³ Bob was among the first to provide a more systematic deductive application of models of social and cognitive psychology to international politics.

When I started graduate school, every single person I spoke to in the field told me I would be “crazy” to do political psychology; I was repeatedly told that there was no future in the field. As an aside, those same people would point to Jervis as the exception that proved the rule, but each one made clear that the field only had room for one person doing psychology. Anyone else would be superfluous. But Bob himself was more inclusive, welcoming, and hopeful, believing that political science in general, and political psychology in particular, could become a bigger tent, encompassing work on individuals and elites as readily as research on mass public opinion, and examining judgment and decision making as well as regime type or other structural factors.

When my other dissertation adviser, Amos Tversky, died in 1996, a number of us asked him before he died, “what will we do without you?” His answer was as simple as it was eloquent and instructive: “Trust your memory of me.” And so it is with Bob Jervis; we will have to trust our memory of him, which is decidedly poorer than his actual presence. One of the things that I noticed about this tendency with Amos is how tricky memory can be. It elides and transforms over time, shifting shape as the edges meld with our own thoughts and experiences that occur afterwards until it is not entirely clear what we actually remember and what thoughts we have infused with the power of reflection and the weight of emotion. But this is also the beauty and genius of Amos’s instruction: he knew that. He knew that part of what memory is, and part of what it does, is to integrate what we know with what we want. It is not, indeed, that time heals all

³ Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and Robert King Merton. *Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, College Division, 1948).

wounds, for it most definitely does not always do that. Rather, time softens memory so that the associations between thoughts and feelings and experiences broaden and deepen, and it becomes more difficult to know where the memory ends and where it simply becomes inextricably interwoven into the fabric of our consciousness. The memory of the other becomes less distinct as it becomes incorporated into how we think about and approach the world. In this way, the other simply becomes part of who we are over time.

I am not sure I was ever able to trust my memory of Amos, but what I have been able to do, and which I still often do, is ask myself how Amos would have approached a particular question or problem. Just shifting that perspective often opens new ideas and avenues of inquiry for me. Similarly, I am sure I will not be able to trust my memory of Bob because he was so much more than my experience of him. I always felt like I was trying to understand the next version of the software but I hadn't quite gotten the necessary upgrade yet. So at windows X, I was not fully capable of understanding Windows X + 1. Indeed, part of what is so ineffably sad about Bob's loss is how much knowledge went with him. Ironically, what I do feel I can trust is not so much the thoughts and ideas that Bob so continually and seemingly effortlessly generated, but the feeling his work has always given me. For someone whose early work almost completely eschewed emotion, I nonetheless always found his work exciting, inspiring, and motivating. Bob always provided a unique and interesting take on whatever he was working on, even if it appeared to be well trodden ground. Without ego, he remained well aware of the importance his work might have in the wider world, whether through policy circles or as a result his critical work with the Historical Review Committee for the CIA. The sense of passion, devotion, and commitment to issues that matter, as well as the work itself, remain central to my sense of Bob's character.

Bob is the last person who would have wanted a hagiographic remembrance. Like any other human, he was not perfect. He could be socially awkward and he did not suffer fools lightly, if at all. He applied his high standards to others as well as himself, and it was an impossible order to strive to achieve such heights of productivity, much less quality. But he provided an exemplary model of how to live a life of authenticity, serving others while following his own interests. He taught me a great deal about how to think, how to work, and how to treat others. One of the things he modeled was the importance of honesty, even when the information may not be positive or pleasant. In that regard, I feel very fortunate that I was not left with important things unsaid; he knew how grateful I was to him for all he did for me. What I did not tell him, but what I suspect he knew, is how much I will miss him for the rest of my life.

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