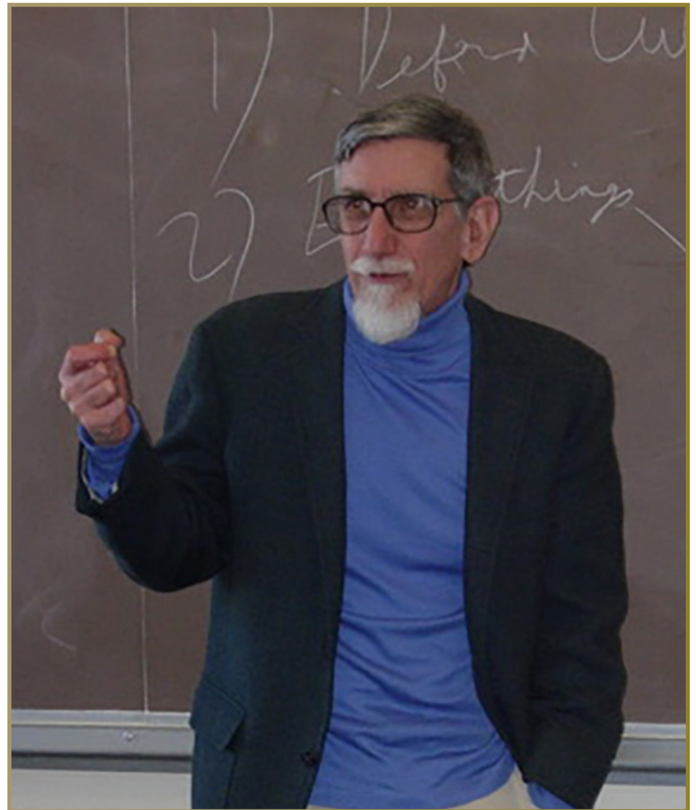
Robert Jervis

April 30, 1940–December 9, 2021
Elected to NAS, 2021

A Biographical Memoir by Rose McDermott

Robert Jervis created, essentially single-handedly, the field of political psychology in international relations, which seeks to understand how human nature can inform our understanding of international politics. I am one of his many proud disciples. He was my professor, adviser, and mentor for thirty-six years and became a close and valued friend. Although others who came before, most notably Harold Lasswell, introduced psychological notions into the study of political science, Jervis's exploration took at least two dramatic turns that changed the nature and direction of the field. First, he applied systemic theories from social psychology in ways that went beyond the idiosyncratic insights suggested by earlier Freudian notions obsessed with sex and death. This allowed him to develop testable hypotheses that permitted prediction as well as explanation. Second, he employed these notions beyond the mass political behavior that fascinated previous scholars, combining rich psychological theory with deep historical knowledge to enlighten our understanding of leaders, as well as followers, and their behavior. Prior scholarly perspectives from more established traditions assumed that individuals didn't matter and could not make a difference on the world stage, or, if they did play a role, these models emphasized the personal virtues of "great men" rather than a systematic exploration of generalizable psychological processes. Much as he eschewed the idea of "great men," Robert Jervis was one, in intellect as well as character, suffusing his life and his scholarship with brilliance, humor, and integrity. Before Robert Jervis's contributions, scholars of international relations regularly argued that any leader plunked into Germany in 1933 would have behaved just like Hitler because of external constraints and incentives. In ways that may seem obvious now in the wake of a leader like Donald Trump, Jervis showed that individual differences can prove decisive in ways previously not considered. He demonstrated how individual leaders can overcome systems in ways that are both predictable and profoundly influential.



Robert Jervis in the classroom. *Photo courtesy of Kathe Jervis.*

Early Life, Education, and Career Overview

Robert Jervis was born on April 30, 1940, in New York City to Herman, a lawyer, and Dorothy (née Bing), a potter. He grew up in a post-war environment suffused by the

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Cold War, and the "red scare." Friends of his parents were investigated by various congressional committees, so politics were always personal to Bob. He attended the Ethical Culture Fieldston School, where his interest in politics became evident as early as fifth grade after he corralled his classmates into writing a current events newsletter. He often claimed that his respect for coercive force grew out of being beaten up by his older brother, Steven, with whom he later became quite close. This experience may have also motivated his clear-eyed perspective that "one of the good things about studying international relations is that it is hard to get worked up over anything that doesn't leave any real blood on the floor!"

He attended Oberlin College, where he first encountered the writings of Thomas Schelling and Glenn Snyder, both of whom came to influence his life and intellectual development. In 1962, Jervis proceeded to graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley, where the Free Speech Movement gave him a forum to practice debating his politics. In 1966, Thomas Schelling had a profound effect on Jervis's career when he hired him for a research position at Harvard University's Center for International Studies (now the Center for Government and International Studies) after Bob sent him his dissertation draft out of the blue. This first job was transformative for Bob, not least because he had the good fortune to be placed in an office next to Kenneth Waltz, who fast became an influential colleague and friend for life. Waltz helped create one of the most influential theories in international relations, structural realism, and spent the majority of his career at Berkeley, coming to join Bob at Columbia University in his final years. In 1967, Bob married a fellow student Kathe (née Weil), whom he met while on a 1961 student exchange trip to the then-Soviet Union. Their daughters, Alexa and Lisa, were born during the time Jervis began his academic career as an assistant professor at Harvard. Bob moved to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1974 and returned east to Columbia in 1980, happily occupying the Adlai E. Stevenson chair until his death. Kathe, Alexa, Lisa, and three grandsons survive him.

Academic Contributions

Robert Jervis's written work remains iconic in academic political science in general and international relations in particular. His intellectual contributions began with his dissertation, which became his first book, *The Logic of Images,* in 1970 and remains in print. He claimed that this study built on earlier scholarship by both Thomas Schelling and sociologist Erving Goffman, but its contribution around the role of deception in signaling was entirely unique. Drawing on rational choice notions of strategic interaction derived from Schelling, Jervis foreshadowed constructivism by examining the ways that diplomatic leaders could shift the way others view them short of military intervention, thus saving countless amounts of blood and treasure. This work served to foreground the important role of individual skill and talent in leadership. Jervis's most famous book, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (1976), was written while he was at UCLA at the apex of the cognitive revolution in psychology in the late 1970s. Jervis's fascination with the role and functioning of signals drew him to read widely within social psychology to further explore the nature of perception. At the time, in the early 1970s, Jervis was able to read through all the major journals in social psychology and apply this research in a systematic way to international politics, offering major insights that include the tendency of leaders to assume that others see and respond to things the way they do, a tendency that came to be known as mirror-imaging, as well as emphasizing the role of historical analogy in driving current decision-making. In many ways, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* constituted a bookend to the *Logic of Images* in that it focused not on how people can manipulate the way a state is viewed, as was the focus of the *Logic of Imag*es, but rather on how such attempts are received and interpreted by receivers.

When I invited Jervis to give a talk at Brown University in 2012, he decided to examine an aspect of psychology that had not been central to his earlier research in *Perception and Misperception*: the role of emotion in decision making. At the time of his thesis research, not much investigation was being done on affect in psychology because emotion was seen to be associated with the instinctual drives put forward in Freudian psychodynamics, and later in humanistic perspectives motivated in part by opposition to the war in Vietnam. By the time Jervis came to re-examine *Perception and Misperception in International Politics,* new scholarship focused on emotion within psychology based on the increasing technological advances in brain imaging, such as the MRI. After undertaking a re-evaluation *Perception and Misperception* in light of these more recent experiments in psychology, Jervis concluded that although his earlier exploration had indeed underestimated the role of emotion, this neglect did not change its major political findings or implications. Nonetheless, his incorporation of the new hypotheses regarding the role of emotion in politics opened up the possibility for future work that could be leveraged from the integration of emotional processing into political decision making. He also noted that in the interim, the field had grown so much that it was no longer possible for a single person to read all the articles in the major journals in a reasonable period of time, as he had been able to do in the 1970s. His reanalysis became the new extended introduction to the second edition of *Perception and Misperceptio*n that came out in 2017.

This experience illustrates so much that was typical of Jervis's intellectual style: his boundless and enthusiastic curiosity and his constant delight in learning and discovery. Even more, it demonstrated his own ability to overcome a challenge that his own research determined was exceedingly difficult, particularly for those in a position of power: that of holding two contradictory ideas simultaneously. In this example, Jervis was both fully aware of his stature and the influence of his scholarship on the field, but also deeply humble about what was missing from his earlier examinations and strongly motivated to continually improve it where possible.

Some of Jervis's most theoretically influential work excavated the role of nuclear weapons and the stability of deterrence. Concerned about the deficient quality of the government work on nuclear strategy, he examined the fundamental questions underlying the value of nuclear superiority. He often told students to watch one of his favorite movies, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, as a "not terribly wrong" illustration of the "ridiculous" nature of the way nuclear strategy had developed within the American government. Jervis's more systematic theoretical exploration of the meaning of nuclear weapons began with his 1979 article, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," and continued through two influential books. The first, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (1984), provided a compelling criticism of American nuclear strategy, highlighting the inherent internal inconsistency of building more weapons in order to deter their use, and skewered the inaccuracy of treating nuclear weapons as just bigger bombs rather than qualitatively different weapons. His second, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (1989), further recognized the "revolution" that nuclear weapons represented for military strategy and foreign policy. This book received the 1990 Grawemeyer Award for Ideas Improving World Order. In 2006, the National Academy of Sciences honored him with an award for Behavior Research Relevant to the Prevention of Nuclear War (later the William and Katherine Estes Award) for work that showed, as the citation read, "scientifically and in policy terms, how cognitive psychology, politically contextualized, can illuminate strategies for the avoidance of nuclear war."

Another award-winning masterwork was *Systems Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (1997). Originally designed as part of a festschrift for Thomas Schelling, this exploration offers a nuanced integration of psychology, ecology, evolution, and politics. In this book, Jervis examines the emergence and effects of unintended consequences that can occur when many individuals simultaneously consider others' intentions and behaviors in making their own choices; in the aggregate, the collective action that results may not reflect either any given individual's choice nor produce an optimal result for the larger group. Moreover, the inability to predict such large effects increases the risk of unexpected threats.

Bob Jervis conducted his psychological investigations of decision making as an academic, but also as someone operating inside government, specifically the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), illustrating the sheer breadth of his different strands of intellectual engagement and inquiry. He began consulting for the CIA in the 1970s and, under their auspices, undertook a postmortem on the Iranian revolution, investigating why the United States intelligence community failed to see it coming. Jervis went on to chair the agency's Historical Review Program, which oversees the declassification of sensitive documents. His involvement with the CIA led to academic work on the role of intelligence in shaping national security policy, aggregated in *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (2010). This book explores biases that can lead to systematic and predictable errors and failures in intelligence work, both in collection and analysis.

Institutional Contributions

Bob established academic structures that served to benefit those who came after him. He encouraged pluralism in the discipline by nurturing generations of students with wide interests, both intellectual and professional. He was always willing to approach topics from a multidisciplinary, pluralistic perspective that welcomed various ideas, methods, and endeavors. This allowed students to pursue diverse topics, a tendency he encouraged and one that contrasted with so many of his generation who were prone to recreating themselves through the replication of tight and narrow hegemonic paradigms. Bob's mentorship went beyond mere intellectual instruction, however; he helped build character in his colleagues and students by modeling a strong moral compass. Whenever I had a tricky ethical problem, I consulted Bob because I knew he would know the right thing to do. For example, I once asked him about how to handle a colleague who demanded co-authorship but had only contributed funding. He foreshadowed future policy changes by telling me that this request was clearly unethical and should not be accommodated. Two years later, the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* prohibited the previously common practice.

Jervis and Robert Art of Brandeis University initiated the Cornell Studies in Security Affairs series with Cornell University Press that would serve to launch young scholars in the field. In addition, Jervis helped create H-Diplo, the H-Net network on Diplomatic History and International Affairs, which provides an online forum for discussions, book reviews, and roundtables on current topics, both academic and in public affairs. This group specifically incorporated diplomatic historians, bringing them into more direct and

frequent contact with scholars of international relations. To be clear, Jervis did not simply set up these institutions and walk away. Rather, he actively participated in them, invited others to join, and encouraged discussion and debate. He inspired others with his infectious joy and his eternal fascination with current events, challenges confronting the field, and the overwhelming problems facing the real world. Bob Jervis was an institution builder even within organizations that already existed. In 2000–01, he served as president of the American Political Science Association. He built bridges between the academic and policy worlds, as well as across disciplinary boundaries, helping to break down artificial distinctions in both camps. He served as a consultant across both Democratic and Republican administrations; many of his students chose to work in government, including Dennis Ross, Thomas Christensen, Victor Cha, Colin Kahl, and Mira Rapp-Hooper. He loved contact with his former students for the opportunity it offered to collect relevant gossip as well as substantive information, though because his work was primarily classified, he was very careful to keep that information to himself.

This tendency to foster and nurture talent undergirded Jervis's ability to build bridges among and across people, including mentors, colleagues, students, and staff. In the literature, we would say he had a high "betweenness" score, because he was the hub of a large and diverse wheel, introducing people to others they would never have met otherwise and encouraging and supporting those relationships even when they did not center around him. For example, he convened lunch groups among colleagues at Harvard, UCLA, and Columbia to discuss and debate current events—broadly construed to include whatever topics arose—coming full circle to the group he instigated in fifth grade, albeit without the newsletter. Stanford University psychologist Lee Ross used to say that you could make your life about your work, or you could make your work about your life. Robert Jervis provided a powerful lesson in his final year by living the latter dictum: if you do what you love, nothing much changes in how you live your life, even when you know your time is shorter than you might have hoped. He loved baseball, museums, opera, and politics, but most of all, his cherished family. In his ability to share his wisdom and teach his friends and students the many lessons he extracted across a lifetime of study, Jervis practiced the value of generativity, a concept pioneered by Erik Erikson. He shaped, guided, and potentiated the well-being of the next generation of scholars to help support their success and continuity, not only because he was interested in their work, but also because he cared about them as individuals. Through this process, he also incidentally and inevitably secured his own legacy as a scholar of immense brilliance and enormous generosity.

When he told us that he had been diagnosed with lung cancer in October 2020 "even though I never smoked … not even pot!," he then chortled and said, "well, at least it will help keep my mind off the election." Indeed, Robert Jervis's many contributions help inform not only our current political moment and those that will follow, but also serve to reformulate our understanding of the big questions surrounding the psychological components of decision making, the nature of nuclear strategy and deterrence, intelligence collection and analysis, and the processes underlying signaling and perception. One of his most generous contributions, however, involved the reciprocity of ideas he shared with those he trained and influenced and who strive to follow in his footsteps. We all benefit from the legacy of his thoughts and the endowment of insight, inspiration, and integrity they offer.

Robert Jervis received many honors in his life, including election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1986) and the American Philosophical Society (2015). He was thrilled to be elected to the National Academy of Sciences in April 2021, when he knew his remaining time was short. In a memorial biography, one designed particularly to honor a towering figure such as Bob Jervis, it feels very challenging to adequately capture the depth and variety of his contributions. This means I could only highlight some of his most prominent contributions, but such emphasis should not be taken to diminish the value of writings that cannot be adequately summarized in a short commentary. These achievements include his groundbreaking work on the security dilemma, which observed that states add armaments in order to defend themselves, thus ironically posing an inherent threat to others who, in defending themselves, can provoke an arms race that inadvertently raises the risk of conflict that such weapons were deployed to prevent. Jervis's work continued to examine such unintended consequences in myriad and sophisticated fashion, exploring the ways signals are both sent and received, often duplicitously, in international relations, how intelligence information is systematically interpreted in often biased fashion by national security professionals, and why nuclear deterrence is neither as stable nor as secure as policymakers claim or the public would like to believe. The professional contributions that are not so evident from reading Bob's corpus also remain influential and enduring: the bridges he built between policymakers and academics; the institutional structures he created to both broaden and deepen the discipline in ways that benefitted numerous colleagues; and, most importantly, the legion of students, in both government and the academy, who remain deeply indebted to the innumerable intellectual as well as personal lessons and favors he so generously bequeathed.

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