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Historically Speaking, Volume 8, Number 2, November/December 2006,
pp. 14-15 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/hsp.2006.0021](https://doi.org/10.1353/hsp.2006.0021)



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I PREFER THE SENSE OF REALITY

Eliot A. Cohen

Marc Trachtenberg is not only a friend, but my favorite diplomatic historian. I know no one whose way of thinking through the problem of political choice in international affairs is more compelling, which is why I have my students read his books, including, most recently, *The Craft of International History*, a model of the application of good sense to historical reasoning. As a political scientist by training, moreover, I should applaud his call to historians to turn for inspiration and intellectual rigor to international relations theorists—but, alas, I cannot.

That there is much to be learned from reading an older school of international relations theorists—Raymond Aron, Arnold Wolfers, and Martin Wight are three that come to mind—is true. These were scholars who studied history, thought deeply about current affairs, and had a willingness to generalize that historians often lack. And it goes without saying that political philosophers, from Machiavelli to Burke, have much to teach us about the things that make international relations tick. But most (not all) denizens of today's political science who immerse themselves in the study of international politics are not like that. As a dreary trudge through journals like *International Studies Quarterly*, let alone *The American Political Science Review* reveals, the literary, historical, and eclectic style of mid-century international relations thinking has been replaced by something more dessicated, dogmatic, and narrow. The days of Bernard Brodie and Thomas Schelling (trained as an economist) are over. There are a few who try to think that way about international politics, but with a few outstanding exceptions, like Robert Jervis, they are either considerably less substantial as intellectual figures or marginal to the academic enterprise of political science.

Someone once warned of “minds that swing on hinges.” That sorry description fits too many arguments about topics such as “offensive realism” or “balancing versus bandwagoning.” A lot of international relations theorizing attempts to reduce complex choices to a set of if-then propositions, with a very small number of independent and dependent variables. In the hands of too many political scientists, Occam's Razor ends up hacking away the flesh of international politics, and the result is simple-minded judgments and prognostications, which often require elaborate reworking to make them fit with intractable reality. Thus, if what passes for contemporary realism suggests that states should balance against the United States, and yet they fail to do so, one concocts a theory of “soft” balancing,

which looks an awful lot like balancing without the balancing.

It is possible to think generally about politics without slipping into the belligerently phrased oversimplifications characteristic of contemporary American political science. Leisurely and repeated readings of *The Peloponnesian War*, to take one of the starkest examples, force one to ask whether the deepest cause of war (in Thucydides's take, the rise of the power of Athens and the fear it inspired in Sparta) is really the truest cause. Would there have been war absent the particular events in Corcyra that triggered the conflict? Would Athens have

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taken the steps it did absent the leadership of Pericles, and would it have held on to its initial strategy without his eloquence? To these questions there are, and can be, no hard answers, and universal hypotheses do not help much. It is better to train our judgment by examining these general questions in particular contexts and mulling the views of contemporaries and historians, knowing that what holds true in one case may look very different in others.

An older political science studied statesmanship; the new political science cannot figure out what to do with a Bismarck or a Mussolini, or, for that matter, an Ahmadinejad or a Pericles. For the most part, international relations theorists simply ignore the problem, or pretend that outsized individuals do not exist or do not matter. Yet surely personalities *do* matter enormously in politics. Would World War II have erupted absent Hitler? Would it have followed the course it did had Roosevelt dropped dead in 1942 or Churchill lost his bid for primacy in 1940? Even when, as in the case of World War I, the politicians were (as keen contemporary observers like Edward Spears noted) depressingly average, don't we have to reflect seriously on the nature of that mediocrity? In their workaday lives, as they gossip around the coffee pot or hold forth at the faculty club, professors of international relations will likely express strong views about the roles played by George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Don Rumsfeld, and others in shaping American foreign

policy since 9/11. They will, at the very least, attribute to them consequential behavior. In their lives as Everyman His Own Political Scientist, in other words, they will think political leaders make a huge difference. And yet their learned articles and their lectures in advanced international relations theory classes will do little to illuminate the political truths they feel in their viscera. This intellectual schizophrenia reflects a weakness in the enterprise of international relations theory more broadly: its detachment from real politics as we know it.

Again, this is *not* to say that historians should stick to works by other historians. There are vast realms of useful ideas, metaphors, and insights to be garnered from other disciplines, including social psychology and cultural anthropology. There is something to be learned from economics, of course, but also literature, even poetry. To understand the limits of the Clausewitzian view of the use of war to serve the ends of politics, one cannot do better than to ponder Dylan Thomas's “The Hand that Wrote the Paper Felled a City.”

Isaiah Berlin's essays “The Sense of Reality” and “Political Judgment” capture the difference between how academics often think about politics and how practitioners conduct it. In a better academic world the professors would make a stronger effort to acquire, or at least understand, what Berlin describes as “the power of integrating or synthesizing the fleeting, broken, infinitely various wisps and fragments that make up life at any level.”¹ This is lacking today, which may explain why political scientists carry less weight when it comes to the making of foreign policy, or even discussion of it in policy-making circles, than they did half a century ago. By and large in Washington the academics just don't count. It is not only the uncouth jargon that gets in the way, but the sheer goofiness of ideas drawn from theory that seem utterly imprudent—as when one prominent international relations theorist made a splash years ago by arguing that the Ukraine should retain its nuclear weapons in the name of the European balance of power. Good controversy and good publicity, but attention from people who shape policy, be they bureaucrats or journalists? As an idea it elicited either a smirk or a shake of the head, and in any event, brusque dismissal.

History is, in part, past policy. And historians require a grounding in Berlin's sense of “what fits with what,” of who particular persons are and how they interact, of the difference between white papers and the actual actions of government, of the role passion, muddle, exhaustion, and limited

knowledge or foresight play in making policy. They require, in short, a kind of empathy with policy makers that the academic world, increasingly detached from the world of practice, does not prize. Half a century ago that empathy often derived from some experience of the rough world outside—be it as soldier, journalist, practitioner, or simply a close and engaged observer—that earlier generations had and valued, but which this one seems to lack. To be sure, one might claim that the logic of international relations is so powerful that individual choices and peculiarities do not matter—but if that is the case, the cocktail party chatter and lunchtime conversation of the academic world should reflect the fact.

Trachtenberg is an outstanding example of a scholar who, by controlling his own political beliefs and passions, enables others to understand the per-

plexing choices made by fallible, partly informed, and pressured governmental officials.

But without claiming to understand him better than he does himself, it seems to me that his success in so doing stems from his great stock of good sense, his admirable intellectual detachment, his awareness of the vagaries of human nature, and his ability to analyze the large forces that undoubtedly do operate in the political world. Perhaps he has much to learn from the international relations theorists, but I doubt it. Rather, they—and we—have much more to learn from him.

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¹ Isaiah Berlin, "Political Judgment," in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History*, ed. Henry Hardy (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 47.

RESPONSE TO TRACHTENBERG

Donald Kagan

Marc Trachtenberg's essay is a model of the wisdom and good sense that characterize all his work. His suggestion that historians need to examine the theoretical underpinnings of their interpretations is surely right, as is his advice to theorists that they need to go beyond cherry-picking convenient facts and interpretations and get the true feeling for how things work in the real world by the careful study of history.

Theory has the function of suggesting what questions may or must be asked to achieve understanding. From earliest times at least up to the 18th century, men have included the role of the divine in their efforts to understand war, peace, and human events in general. Theories that excluded the role of the gods were rare. Clearly, some theories stubbornly persist, although to many they seem to have been discredited by events. Marxism is another example of this phenomenon. In spite of all the evidence that appears to have disproved the several versions of economic determinism emanating from Marxist theories, they still underlie, in more or less obvious ways, many current interpretations. These examples remind us that the theories dominating the scene at any time and the questions they suggest are not the only ones possible.

In our time the dominant theory has been one form or another of "realism," which puts the competition among nations for power at the center of the matter. "Realists" believe that all states and nations seek as much power as they can get. The desire for power is almost like original sin: unattractive,

such a way as to provide security for all without an unending struggle for power, although it cannot be said that any system has yet fulfilled such hopes. The realists say little about the uses to which the states wish to put the power they acquire. The neo-realists imply that states seek power chiefly to retain

the good things they already have in peace and safety. Most modern students of the question assume that states want power to achieve tangible and practical goals such as wealth, prosperity, security, and freedom from external interference. They appear to assume that the leaders of nations choose policies by reasoned calculation of good or bad quality, responding to the rules of an international system. Some regard the structure of the sys-

tem as the crucial element, making the apparently free decisions inevitable.

This theoretical preference seems to be inadequate, suggesting questions that do not necessarily, as Trachtenberg says, "connect up with reality" and "help you understand something important about the real world." Where shall we look for better theories? It is tempting to look for new ideas, not yet thought of or tested by experience. It is well to remember that the overwhelming majority of such ideas are wrong. I am by trade a historian of ancient Greece, so it is natural for me to seek a better under-

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deplorable, and regrettable, but inescapable. "Neo-realists" understand the behavior of states in their international relations in a tamer and less reprehensible form as the search, not for power itself, not for domination, but for security, which, in turn, requires power. The realist view is a gloomy one, for it envisages no way to stop the unlimited search for power and the conflict it must engender except the conquest of all by one power, or the maintenance of an uneasy peace by reciprocal fear. The neo-realist vision seems less frightening because it leaves hope that systems can be devised and people educated in