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Diplomatic Historians and the Return to Theory

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Politics and psychology often conspire to make people believe what they need to believe in order for them to have faith in their policies. This is necessary to give them the confidence to move forward and to persuade others to join them. My theory suggests that the main reason why the Bush administration relied on the expectation that Ahmad Chalabi could quickly stabilize Iraq and permit U.S. forces to withdraw was that this belief allowed them to proceed with the war with relatively little psychological conflict or political opposition. To take another example, John Coogan argues quite convincingly that at the start of World War I Woodrow Wilson was able to—indeed, had to—delude himself into believing that he was upholding American neutrality against the British blockade. To have seen clearly would have forced him to make an unpalatable choice between threatening Great Britain, whose defeat he believed would have been very much against the American interest, and openly rejecting the defense of neutral rights that was deeply embedded in international law and American history. Better, both politically and psychologically, to convince himself that he was not making such a choice.¹

There is a high cost to such behavior. Many choices are made implicitly rather than explicitly. Courses of action that might appear attractive upon hard and prolonged thought are never contemplated. It is often very difficult to understand which beliefs in fact drive behavior. Mediocre scholars often imagine they are smarter than decision makers, but good ones have to grapple with the fact that it is hard to reconstruct the pressures that leaders feel and must adapt to. Trachtenberg is of course correct that we are not without weapons in this struggle for understanding. We can often see which beliefs form first and which seem to be dragged along in their wake, and we can look for consistency between beliefs and actions. Silences in the documents also are diagnostic: it is telling when questions that are not only obvious in retrospect but that normally would be addressed go unexamined.

In the endeavor to understand beliefs and how they fit with behavior, political scientists are more inclined than historians to make explicit use of the comparative and hypothetico-deductive methods. There is no magic in either of them, and they are not unfamiliar to historians, although the latter often forego the labels. In its essence, the comparative method simply means seeking to establish causation by comparing several cases to see if the effect changes when the possible cause has changed. Trachtenberg often does this, and so does Ernest May in his study of American expansionism and the Spanish-American War.² The hypothetico-deductive method is less familiar, especially in its explicit form. The basic point is the importance of taking one's theory or causal argument seriously and probing it by asking what one would expect to find if the argument is correct. In other words, in addition to moving from facts to explanations, the scholar asks herself what evidence she would expect to see (aside from that which produced the hypothesis) if the hypothesis is in fact correct. This is difficult to do because it not only requires drawing out the implications of one's argument, but, even more important, putting aside what one knows happened in order to figure out what *should have* happened if the hypothesis is correct. Even though the method rarely works out neatly or without dispute, it can be powerful for pointing scholars toward important evidence and, perhaps even more, for leading them to understand the implications of the arguments they and others are making. It may seem unhistorical because it moves away from directly examining what happened, but this method is central to how we can understand the past.

A final issue combines both method and substance. This is how much consistency we expect to find in the behavior of leaders and states. In his book more than in the piece under discussion,³ Trachtenberg's analysis rests on the idea that there is a high degree of consistency in state behavior both over time and across related issues. I do not mean to

exaggerate; he does not claim that everything fits together neatly and follows a master plan. But, in a way similar to Halévy, he believes that we can do quite well by asking what motives or objectives logically link or underlie disparate acts. Using this method and a very careful reading of documents, he concludes that President Roosevelt squeezed Japan in the summer of 1941 in order to provoke it and allow the U.S. to enter the war. He may be right, and his argument is very well done. My doubts arise not because I can muster good counter-evidence, but because I think Trachtenberg may be being more logical and consistent than the decision makers. This is not to argue that leaders are less smart than scholars, but that they value consistency less and are often forced to respond to immediate (and conflicting) pressures and to improvise. Of course, showing this to be the case is difficult, and, pushed to the extreme, it would mean that general explanations, or at least many forms of explanations that stress actors' goals and strategies, become impossible. This might bother the historian less than it would the political scientist, but many in our professions have a bit of both in us.

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¹ For more on this, see Robert Jervis, "Understanding Beliefs," *Political Psychology*, forthcoming.

² John Coogan, *The End of Neutrality: The United States, Britain, and Maritime Rights, 1899-1915* (Cornell University Press, 1981).

³ Ernest May, *American Imperialism: A Speculative Essay* (Atheneum, 1968), especially ch.1.

⁴ Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

DIPLOMATIC HISTORIANS AND THE RETURN TO THEORY

Fraser Harbutt

Thanks to Marc Trachtenberg for opening a debate about theory that also serves very usefully to show how sadly fragmented the community of scholars interested in foreign relations and international history has become. We might well include a third wayward discipline—international law—which at certain points in the early 20th century and again in the late 1930s took a leading role in the study and shaping of American diplomacy. In recent years international lawyers have detached them-

selves in their preoccupation with the clinical study of formal institutions. But I would not regard them as a lost cause

It is central to Trachtenberg's argument, with which I agree, that diplomatic history and international relations theorists are too far apart. I first encountered the problem in college when my painstaking efforts were dismissively characterized as "poetic" by a political science professor who had, I thought, an excessively robotic view of humanity.

I bear no grudge, I hasten to add, and am always quick to applaud journal editors (notably in *Political Science Quarterly* and *Diplomatic History*) who have tried over the years to bridge the gap. I have also listened patiently to the homilies of innumerable deans on the virtue of interdisciplinary work. However, the administrator's beehive scenario—the history drones doing the research, the political scientists conceptualizing the results, the lawyers elucidating the rules of the game—bears little resemblance to reality.

Three inhibiting factors seem to be at work here. First, while they share a common fascination with power, diplomatic historians and international relations scholars are rather different kinds of people. Diplomatic historians tend to be inspired by the romance of the event. They seem instinctively drawn to crises and conflicted personalities, and when crossed they can be a bit polemical. International relations people seem to be altogether more purposeful, goal-oriented, and analytic, and they undoubtedly have a greater flair for and commitment to collective work. At my university they can often be seen dining together in ostentatiously collegial fellowship. I'm not sure what this means, but it looks impressive.

So far, so impressionistic, not to say poetic. Let me move quickly to the firmer ground of differentiated training. IR students obviously get some history but are primarily excited by specific bodies of knowledge and instrumental methodologies. Diplomatic history means documents, reconstruction, and keeping the speculative demon under tight control. Otherwise our education is often remarkably eclectic and uncoordinated. There is some logic in this. Historians are academia's licensed generalists, obliged to grapple in their professional and teaching careers not just with political matters but also with economic, psychological, cultural, and other phenomena in which they often receive only the sketchiest grounding. But this is traditional. Theodor Mommsen's 1894 aphorism still rings true. "If a professor of history thinks he is able to educate historians in the same sense as classical scholars and mathematicians can be educated, he is under a dangerous and detrimental illusion. The historian . . . cannot be educated, he has to educate himself."¹

A third problem is differing intellectual approaches. It is true, as Trachtenberg says, that historical work is permeated with unacknowledged theory; and, at least in its realist vein, political science can seem remarkably open to broad historical vistas.² Still, the demythologizing, skeptical historian is distinctive in his stress on discrete events and the inductive method. International relations specialists, by contrast, seem more affirmingly "whiggish" and tend toward the deductive and the universalistic. Such distinctions have a history of their own. Modern historiography, for instance, is firmly rooted in self-conscious opposition to the abstractions and system-oriented approaches one finds in the social sciences. It is in fact the outcome of a long struggle, first against the tyrannical conceptions of institutional religion, and later in confrontation with the political metaphysics inaugurated philosophically by Hegel and later detonated politically by Marx and his followers.

None of this, however, foredooms Trachtenberg's collaborative vision. We may never live up to Atticus Finch's standard: "You never really understand a person until you climb into his skin and walk around in it for a while." Nor is this desirable. But

the prospective partners clearly have some preliminary thinking to do. Are international relations specialists, always in professional pursuit of the pristine, cut-glass, universally applicable formula, willing to grapple with the witches' brew, familiar to historians, of tainted, false, or incomplete evidence? Are they ready to leap into the hogswallow of multiple causation? For the diplomatic historian the mating dance may be no less problematic and may well be—for those in American diplomacy at least—rather more protracted. This is because in recent years, with a few honorable exceptions, we seem to have lost interest in the intellectual dimension of our subject. As Gordon Craig remarked in 1972, "To establish the relationship between ideas and foreign policy is always a difficult task, and it is no accident that it has perhaps inevitably attracted so few historians."³ Since the eclipse of Marxism and the end of the Cold War the situation has deteriorated further. Theory-oriented

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social scientists can doubtless help us out of the rut. But the truth is, we need to get our own house in order.

For illustration and inspiration in this cause I will follow Marc Trachtenberg and turn to Elie Halévy. His portrait of the trapped European powers in 1914 may seem remote from American experience. For we tend to see the diplomacy of the republic as a Promethean projection of virtually unconfined power—sometimes economic or cultural, sometimes the dispatch of an expeditionary force from a more or less immune homeland. We see this power as limited or shaped, to the extent we are willing to recognize constraints, almost entirely by the domestic, homegrown impulses variously identified by George F. Kennan (moral-legal attitudes), William Appleman Williams (American economic compulsions), and Michael H. Hunt (racial prejudice and anti-revolutionary feeling).

A modern-day Halévy might see these things very differently. As a European he would surely draw our attention to the possibilities of an anti-Promethean interpretation of United States foreign relations, focusing on the demonstrable susceptibility of the American state over time to external influences, geopolitical considerations, international reciprocity, foreign manipulations, and to a range of neglected recurrences and unacknowledged determinisms. His professional eye, trained to a beady realism by long contemplation of the caged European arena, might well be caught by what would look to him to be a somewhat similar trap set by history for the United States, manifest most dramatically in a re-

markable set of unplanned recurrences (entry into the two World Wars and the Cold War) between 1914 and 1946. This thrice-repeated American passage through the invitational British corridor to politico-military engagement in Europe is surely a historical fact of fundamental significance. Its origins and significance might well be, as Halévy would surely think, one of the great continuous, consuming intellectual issues in American diplomatic history. Is it? I don't think so. To be sure, each of these three great episodes has separately attracted a large, still-burgeoning literature, stressing the singularities of each conflict. Yet the deepest issue, from the perspective of theory and intellectual analysis, is not the singularities but the recurrence. How and why did the United States get itself into the same predicament so often in such a short period of time? If we are going to get theoretical, let's get into large issues like this and see where they take us.

If we can get ourselves into this frame of mind, we will be better placed to associate with and profit from the impressive range of theoretical insights offered by our colleagues in international relations. In my own work I have been thinking recently about the problems of transition in 20th-century American diplomacy, specifically Woodrow Wilson's predicaments in 1914-17 and 1918-1920, and those faced by Presidents Roosevelt and Truman

in the World War II era. It is clear to me that there is a range of challenges in this subject that call for both the historian's skill in careful reconstruction and the political scientist's flair for conceptual analysis. There are so many similar examples. We undoubtedly have much to say to each other. Let's work more vigorously toward a closer, mutually rewarding engagement.

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¹ Rectoral Address, 1874, at the University of Berlin, cited in Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (Yale University Press, 1944), 257.

² Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (McGraw-Hill, 1979), 91.

³ Gordon Craig, "Political and Diplomatic History" in Felix Gilbert and Stephen Graubard, eds., *Historical Studies Today* (Noton, 1972), 362.