



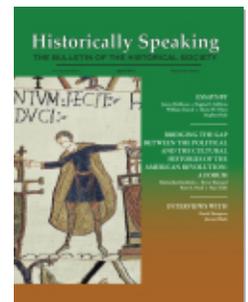
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Response to Trachtenberg

Donald Kagan

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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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Eliot A. Cohen is the Robert E. Osgood Professor of Strategic Studies at Johns Hopkins University's

School of Advanced International Studies. His most recent book, Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime (Free Press, 2002), won the first Huntington Prize, administered by the John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University.

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

standing not only in new theories but in good old ones, as well.

In the 5th century B.C., I believe, Thucydides provided a rich analysis that does justice to the competition for power and also offers a profound and helpful understanding of the motives of human beings. He understood the centrality of power in international relations, but he also thought more deeply about the reasons for it.

In this struggle for power, whether for a rational sufficiency or in the insatiable drive for all the power there is, Thucydides found that people go to war out of “fear, honor, and interest.” That fear and interest moves states to war will not surprise the modern reader, but that concern for honor should do so may seem strange. If we take honor to mean “fame,” “glory,” “renewal,” or “splendor,” it may appear applicable to the premodern world alone. If, however, we understand its significance as “deference,” “esteem,” “just due,” “regard,” “respect,” or “prestige,” we will find it an important motive of nations in the modern world, as well.

Trachtenberg is right to tell us that the goal of the student of history “is to understand the *logic* that underlies the course of events,” and he proceeds to analyze the policies of the European states in 1914 in terms of their calculations of power, of how the system will work on the basis of what Thucydides would call their fears and interests. But that is not enough. Halévy was also right to try to understand the *illogic* that underlies the course of events, to speak of the importance of Russia’s “Pan-Slavist *sentiment*” and Germany’s “Pan-German *feelings*,” both of which resemble Thucydides’s “honor” and both of which played a crucial role in bringing on the war.

Such non-rational considerations, based on feelings about honor (more usually about dishonor), often help shape the behavior of decision makers. When the crisis emerged in 1914, the Kaiser, instead of pursuing Germany’s earlier policy of restraining Austria to avoid a general war, gave the Austrians the famous Blank Check and a shove to move quickly to war. He was influenced by several considerations involving honor: the murdered Archduke Franz Ferdinand represented royalty and was seen to be close to the Kaiser personally; even more important, the Kaiser had been sharply criticized for holding Austria back the last time, and some publicly questioned his personal courage by calling

him “William the Timid.” The day after issuing the Blank Check he had a conversation with the industrialist Alfred Krupp, who reported that he said repeatedly: “This time I shall not chicken out.”



THE COMING OF THE COSSACKS.

WILHELM II. "WHAT IS THIS DISTANT RUMBLING THAT I HEAR? DOUBTLESS THE PLAUDITS OF MY PEOPLE!"

Punch, August 26, 1914.

Similar considerations, this time on a national rather than a personal level, powerfully influenced Russian behavior. The news of Austria’s ultimatum to Serbia hit Russia’s foreign minister Sazonov hard. From the Bosnian crisis on, the Russians had avoided mobilizing their forces, even at the cost of embarrassing retreats. In 1909 they accepted the German ultimatum; during the Balkan wars they had refused to back Serbia or Montenegro in the face of Austrian threats. Even when a German general had been put in charge of the Turkish army in Constantinople, a serious threat to their interests in the Straits, the Russian government allowed the problem to end in a compromise, to heavy criticism in the press. On hearing of the ultimatum, however, Sazonov at once thought that Russia could not stand aside. In July 1914 Russia was not ready for war. Its industry was devastated by a wave of strikes which raised fears of revolution. If domestic con-

siderations influenced foreign policy, they should have argued firmly against risking a war. Russia’s military and naval preparations were far from complete. Its finances were less prepared to support a war than they had been ten years earlier. Sazonov, besides, had serious doubts about Britain’s reliability if war should break out. Rational calculation should have spoken against war.

At the Council of Ministers that met on July 24 Sazonov nevertheless argued that accepting the ultimatum would make Serbia a protectorate of the Central Powers. To accept that would mean to abandon Russia’s “historic mission [to gain the independence of the Slavic peoples], she would be considered a decadent state and would henceforth have to take second place among the powers, losing ‘all her authority’ and allowing ‘Russian prestige in the Balkans’ to ‘collapse utterly.’”¹

These examples illustrate the importance of the element of honor in the triad that represents Thucydides’s theory of the origins of war, a theory that suggests questions different from the ones that are common in our time. They support the correctness and importance of Trachtenberg’s conviction that only by studying history closely with an open mind about what are the relevant questions can the scholar “develop the kind of sensibility that makes intelligent judgment possible Purely abstract analysis can only take you so far But at some point theory has to connect up with reality. At some point, it has to help you understand something important about the real world.”

Winner of the National Humanities Medal for 2002, Donald Kagan is Sterling Professor of Classics and History at Yale University. His most recent book is The Peloponnesian War (Viking, 2003).

¹ Quoted in D.C.B. Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 1983), 141-42.