Rejoinder
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How should historians and political scientists—and above all diplomatic historians and international relations theorists—relate to each other? Some of the commentators, especially Fraser Harbutt and Robert Jervis, believe that people in both fields have a lot to gain by taking each others’ work seriously. And Jervis, I think, puts his finger on perhaps the most basic reason why a productive relationship is possible when he says at the very end of his comment that many of us have a bit of both disciplines in us. Donald Kagan is a bit more end of his comment that many of us have a bit of both disciplines in us. Donald Kagan is a bit more.

Crowds of people meeting M. Maisky, Soviet ambassador, at a tank factory somewhere in Great Britain, 1942 or 1943. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division (reproduction number, LC-USW34-006020-ZB).

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subsequent professional life.

To do decent historical work we need to think as deeply as we can about the issues we’re concerned with, and that simply cannot be done in a vacuum. But does that mean that the historian has to study theory? Why read Kenneth Waltz, in other words, when we have Thucydides? I have a certain sympathy with that point of view, and I do think that the traditional texts are very much worth reading. I think, in fact, that they give you the bulk of what you need—that they can take you maybe 75-80% of the way. But that remaining 20-25% is important, and you can get it—or at least I got it—from the more formal writings, like those of Waltz. They certainly affected the way I did my own work, if only because the overtness and directness of an argument gives it a certain force that is otherwise lacking. Even the simple notion that one can distinguish between the “system level” and the “unit level” (with the implication, for the historian, that one should try to keep one’s eyes on the system as a whole) had a certain impact on the way I came to approach the past, over and above what I got from reading Thucydides and other more modern writers.

To a certain extent, I absorbed the theorists’ way of looking at things. They, of course, do not look at the world the way we historians do, but interacting with them—and many of them are both very smart and quite serious about the subject they’re studying—is like visiting a foreign country. You spend time in France, and you get to know the French. You get to know what the world looks like through their eyes. That doesn’t make you French, but it does change the way you view America and the world. My exposure to the historians had a profound influence on the way I did my work. I was led to push the envelope a bit—to sharpen my argument, to focus more on fundamentals, to avoid talking about the details for their own sake.

Now, whether or not this was a good thing is to my mind a very important and indeed difficult question. When my book on the Cold War came out in 1999, the University of Virginia held a little symposium on it, and Stephen Schuker, one of the commentators, used Dean Acheson’s famous phrase to characterize the way I had handled the Potsdam Conference of 1945. My discussion of that episode, he said, was “clearer than the truth.” And I replied that not only was he absolutely right about that, but that you had to write that way—that you had to “lean forward” a bit in emphasizing the importance of the things that really mattered—if you were to make the past comprehensible. The historians in the room were a little shocked by that comment. But I remember thinking, even at the time, that the reason I had had the courage not just to say that but to write that way was that I had been exposed to Waltz, or, more generally, to the theorists’ way of doing things, and had come to the conclusion that they were on to something, and that there was value in that kind of approach.

Still, is it right to approach things that way? Jervis has his doubts. He feels that historical reality is messier than I tend to assume—that people are less consistent, that policy is less coherent, that the picture is a lot cloudier, than I (when I write history) lead people to believe. The easy answer here is that the assumptions he is referring to are essentially instruments of analysis: I assume a degree of rationality, I assume that people know what they are doing. I assume that you can make sense of what was going on, mainly as a way of getting a handle on a problem. If those assumptions are not borne out by the evidence, well then of course they would have to be softened or abandoned. But to make that point and let it go at that would not be entirely honest, because you can’t draw a sharp line between method and substance. In making those assumptions at the start, I am in effect stacking the deck a bit. I’m loading the dice in favor of a certain picture of the past in which things fit together neatly and in which people know what they are doing.

This is something I have struggled with (in part Jervis has forced me to think about this particular problem—a nice example of the positive effect interaction with the political scientists can have), and I can’t say that I have come up with a totally satisfactory solution. You obviously can’t do violence to the historical record, but you don’t want to just throw up your hands and say you shouldn’t try to make sense out of what you are studying. You have to be aware of what the risks are, on both sides, and you have to try to strike a balance. I strike it in a certain way—I lean more in one direction than other historians might—because I think understanding means bringing out what is fundamental and thus involves a certain degree of simplification. But I don’t think the answer I am giving now is the really important point here. The important point is that you profit by taking this kind of issue seriously, and I at least would not want to just throw up your hands and say you shouldn’t try to make sense out of what the theorists are saying—nor because theories give you answers, but because they will help you see what the questions are. You shouldn’t look down on the political scientists, certainly not on the best of them. If you interact with them, you will see that they are not all cut from a cookie cutter. You will be dealing with all sorts of people—serious and intelligent people, interested ultimately in the same issues you yourself are concerned with, but who approach them in all kinds of ways. I think you will find the effort worthwhile. It is certainly worth a shot.