

# 2009



## | h-diplo

**Keynote Address  
by Robert Jervis**

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/williams2009>

*Published by H-Diplo on 1 June 2009*

**Part V of the Proceedings of the First  
Williams/H-Diplo Conference on New  
Scholarship in American Foreign  
Relations, 17-18 April 2009, Williams  
College**

Proceedings Editor: Diane N. Labrosse  
Proceedings Web Editor: George Fujii

**Keynote address by Robert Jervis, Columbia University**

---

### **“International Politics and Diplomatic History: Fruitful Differences”<sup>1</sup>**

**I**t may be useful to begin a conference of diplomatic historians and scholars of international politics by discussing some of the differences in the way we approach our common subject matter.<sup>2</sup> Is it too much to say that our relations are symbiotic or even that we are doomed to a marriage? Although we have significant differences and often squabble, we not only need to stay together for the sake of the kids (i.e., our students), but while we sometimes do not want to acknowledge it, we draw great sustenance and even pleasure from each other. From the international relations /political science side, it seems to me that the investment and affections are a bit asymmetric in that most of us see the great importance of international history,<sup>3</sup> while historians draw less from IR and sometimes have the temerity to doubt the value of the discipline. In my last year of graduate studies at Berkeley I took a fine course on European international history by the renowned Raymond Sontag. I very much enjoyed and learned from the course, but when I talked to him about drawing on history for my dissertation, while he

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper grows out of remarks given to open the first Williams/H-Diplo Conference on New Scholarship in American Foreign Relations, held on 17-18 April 2009 at Williams College, and I have preserved the informal tone of the occasion.

<sup>2</sup> I will put aside here questions of the standing of each of these fields in its own discipline. These are familiar if sorry stories that I think have their roots in intellectual trends within each discipline and the political cross-currents in the academy and the wider society.

<sup>3</sup> I will use the terms international history and diplomatic history interchangeably, although of course one could argue that the former is broader than the latter, which “only” focuses on state-to-state relations. To pull on this thread would be interesting, but a digression here. For some discussion, see the H-Diplo thread, entitled “Terminology -- diplomatic history, international history, and transnationalism” that started on Thu, 19 Mar 2009. The first post is available at <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Diplo&month=0903&week=c&msg=RWOHObKQ1Y16VmJxi%02bOMXg&user=&pw=> ; the rest of the thread is available in the discussion logs for March [<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=lx&list=H-Diplo&user=&pw=&month=0903>] and April [<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=lx&list=H-Diplo&user=&pw=&month=0904>].

treated me with great personal kindness, he made clear that he really didn't see why IR was needed and hoped that I would not muck up his field. On the other hand, many historians have not only tolerated and even encouraged our intrusions, they have drawn on IR theories. For all our differences, we share a fascination with the patterns, idiosyncrasies, and changes in cross-border relations.

We both want to explain international history. When I said this at Williams, Randy Schweller objected that IR scholars seek to develop and test theories rather than to explain events. I do not entirely disagree with him, but would reply that although we have differences in our stance towards facts and generalizations, IR scholars want to develop theories that are not only parsimonious and rooted in general social science, but that shed light on (i.e., explain at least in part) events and patterns in international history.

There are important differences in style, aesthetics, and approaches, and my brief remarks can hardly do justice to all of them. But a minor point may be worth making at the start. It seems to many of us in IR that historians are gluttons for punishment, and we marvel at their linguistic competence and ability to penetrate and synthesize enormous amounts of material. Years ago I was talking to my good friend Bob Dallek about whether he was going to take a break now that he had finished the enormous effort of producing his two-volume biography of Lyndon Johnson. He said he had originally planned to, "but I just learned that they are opening a million new pages of material on Kennedy and I just can't resist." Most of us in IR would have a quite a different reaction, but we are very glad that Bob and his colleague produce such books.

There is a perhaps associated difference between the scholars in their stance toward facts. I do not want to get into the difficult and important question of what exactly we mean by facts, whether they can exist independently of our interpretations, and related issues of epistemology and ontology. But for all the debate, everyone agrees both that facts do not speak for themselves and that not all interpretations have equal claims on our beliefs. That said, Schweller's point is relevant here. IR scholars generally seek theories of some generality and in pursuit of them the field has provided license to do some but not unlimited injustice to facts and individual cases. There is no easy way to sum up community norms here, and I will just say that while IR scholars cannot give the facts the third degree to get them to tell us what we need for our theories, we can rough them up a bit. We should be aware of what we are doing, however, and alert our readers of this, taking special care to point them to alternative interpretations. Since we are often painting in broader strokes and looking for ways to explain a great deal with a relatively few factors and relationships, we can utilize understandings of history that simplify and trim it. In this way, IR scholars have something in common with postmodernists in our willingness to draw on interpretations that we know are partial and contested. Indeed, in some cases we can be happy to take contested facts and interpretations as hypotheticals. Thus even if Germany sought a war in 1914 rather than being dragged into it by its weaker ally, Austria-Hungary, IR scholars can use the latter interpretation as an example of the

pernicious dynamics that can be at work in a multipolar system, especially one in which a strong state has become dependent on a weaker one.

The ground-rules are not entirely clear here, but whatever they are, they are different from those governing historians. Well, most historians. It seems to me that A. J. P. Taylor was a political scientist in this regard, much as he would be horrified by the thought. As I read his marvelous books, they appear to resemble IR in being heavily thesis-driven and even theory-driven. The facts are pushed, pulled, and twisted to fit his fascinating argument, and this is as true of his first major book, *Germany's First Bid for Colonies* as it is of his (in)famous *The Origins of the Second World War*. As wrong as he is about both cases, he not only stimulated scholars to go deeper into the material to show his errors, but he developed important ideas that may be fruitful even if they do not apply in these cases.

### IMPORTANCE OF CHRONOLOGY

The passage of time is central to history and so it is not surprising that most historical studies are built around chronology. This is not to say that these accounts simply put one thing after the other, but that understanding how positions develop and change and relations evolve or unfold through time is central to the historian's task. History is a story, and although we sometimes tell stories out of chronological order to achieve various effects, most of them have a beginning, a middle, and an end, even if the choice of starting and stopping points is not easy and is consequential, as I will note below. To the extent that historians are explicitly concerned with causation, the underlying rationale for this approach is clear: the events, attitudes, and structures existing at one point in time influence if not determine those that come later.

IR scholars generally do it quite differently. Regardless of whether they use case studies or statistical data (what are known as large-N studies), they follow the rest of the political science discipline in using the comparative method to get at causation. The basic epistemology follows John Stuart Mill in trying to determine whether a variable (a term that puts most historians' teeth on edge) by comparing cases in which it is present or has assumed one value with cases in which it is absent or different. The treatment of cases themselves may be chronological, but the exercise is in service of comparisons to other cases (another term that historians dislike — they are studying people, processes, and events in themselves, not as cases of something). Later I will discuss the virtues of the comparative method that historians sometimes miss, but here want to note problems with comparisons of which historians are fully aware. IR scholars try to look at cases that are the same except for a difference on one dimension whose significance they wish to probe, and large-N studies essentially do the same thing with sophisticated statistical methods designed to measure the influence of each factor. Both share the assumptions that the cases are independent of one another. Sometimes they are. But when we are dealing with a series of interactions between countries, or instances in which countries have been observing what others are doing, this may not be the case. Later interactions

may turn out as they did not because of the variables IR scholars are focusing on, but because citizens or decision-makers observed the course of previous interactions and adjusted their behavior accordingly. To take a crude example, a state may stand firm (or back down) in one confrontation not because of the “underlying” variables IR scholars are prone to look at, but because of lessons (perhaps incorrect) drawn from previous crises.

Political scientists do not entirely shun chronology. There is quite a bit of work on learning, and some political scientists have stressed the importance of “path-dependence”—the way in which choices and events can set enduring patterns. But it is nevertheless the case that the comparative method is drilled into them in graduate school (or perhaps it is an affinity with this approach that has drawn them to the discipline), and chronology is rarely the backbone of their analysis.

Related to chronology is something that is more an issue and a question than it is a divide between the two disciplines. This is the importance (or lack thereof) of turning-points and irreversibility. Historians often discuss the former explicitly, but demonstrating their existence is notoriously difficult and the related question of irreversibility is discussed even less frequently. The essential argument has to be that certain events move a relationship or the course of history in a direction from which it is difficult to be dislodged. Vice-President Biden recently argued for pushing the “reset” button in Russian-American relations. But is this possible? Or, rather, under what conditions is it possible? We lack memory-erasing device used so well in *Men in Black*. At the end of a “conversation” in which Director of Central Intelligence John McCone berated an Assistant Secretary of Defense over the latter’s refusal to grant CIA sufficient influence over intelligence satellites, the Assistant Secretary said: “Mr. McCone, let’s forget about this whole episode, please.”<sup>4</sup> All we can get, however, is an agreement to pretend that we will forget, which is a pale imitation of forgetting. Some changes can be reversed only with great difficulty, if at all. Thus many people would like the Obama administration to pick up relations with other countries as they were in January 2001. But the intervening years, even if they were a terrible mistake, cannot be wiped out. For example, it is possible to argue that if Bush had continued the Clinton policies he could have ended North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs but to also conclude that North Korean preferences and beliefs have now changed in a way that has ended this opportunity. This is not to say that events always narrow the range of possible choices; in other cases it can widen them. What is important is that the sensitivity to changes over time should alert us to the importance of turning points and irreversibility. Historians may be quicker to see the importance of this, but it is fair game for all of us.

Another aspect of the importance of chronology is the role of timing. There are three areas of interest here. First, scholars, members of the interested public, and diplomats often ask whether the time is ripe for a settlement, and although showing whether or not

---

<sup>4</sup> Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Vol. XXXIII, *Organization and Management of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C., 2004), 421.

this is the case is extremely difficult (except by resorting to circular reasoning in which the presence or absence of a settlement shows whether or not the time was ripe), the topic is clearly important for analyses of whether there were missed opportunities and — the opposite side of the coin — whether premature diplomatic initiatives have made things worse.

The second category is related but broader. Decision-makers and commentators often refer to the importance of timing, arguing that a policy, act, or initiative can be effective if launched at the right time and ineffective otherwise. Sometimes the key question is what should come first, as in the current argument between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama over whether progress in negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians would facilitate an agreement with Iran or whether the order should be reversed, not only because Iran is the more pressing danger, but because getting it out of the nuclear business would make it much easier to settle other issues in the Middle East. More generally, an expressed willingness to negotiate can lead to fruitful talks if and only if the other side is ready; a threat may be inappropriate if made too soon and ineffective if made too late, but can convey the desired message if it comes at the right time; a concession that would be taken as a sign of weakness if made too early or right after the other side has taken a belligerent action can lead to reciprocation if it comes on the heels of firmness on other issues. Saddam Hussein's offers to withdraw from Kuwait in 1991 were always "a day late and a dollar short" and the fact that we have a saying for this phenomenon indicates its prevalence. Leaders often pride themselves in their sense of timing, and Neville Chamberlain's letters to his sisters are filled with self-congratulatory statements about his skill in this regard and with claims that Hitler has "missed the bus."<sup>5</sup> On the other side of this coin, A.J. P. Taylor argued that Hitler "became involved [sic] in war through launching on 29 August a diplomatic manoeuvre which he ought to have launched on 28 August."<sup>6</sup> That I would join with most historians in rejecting these claims is not inconsistent with arguing that they are getting at an aspect of interaction that is very important, rarely the subject of explicit analysis, and hard to theorize about.

Timing enters in another way as well, one that has been of more interest to IR scholars. This is the extent to which timing problems can inhibit agreements and, relatedly, the way in which creative negotiators can construct agreements to surmount these hurdles. The basic problem is that in many cases each side wants the other to go first. This is true in two senses. Each wants the other to take the initiative in opening negotiations, hinting at the possibility of a solution, or making offers of possible concessions. The reason is that although these steps can lead to agreement if they are reciprocated, they also may be taken by the other side as signs of weakness and may lead it to toughen its position, putting the state at a bargaining disadvantage or even pushing an agreement beyond reach. As with missed opportunities, it is hard to determine how

---

<sup>5</sup> Robert Self, ed., *The Neville Chamberlain Letters*, vol. 4, *The Downing Street Years, 1934-1940* (Aldershot, UK, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (New York, 1961), 267.

many solutions have been destroyed by this mechanism, but it is clear that national leaders often have refused to take diplomatic initiatives out of fear that doing so would make them appear weak. An important topic for research is how and when these fears have been overcome and how diplomats have been able to craft initiatives that open the way for fruitful negotiations if the other side so desires while minimizing the undesired consequences if the other seeks exploitation.

The other aspect of this timing problem is that in the absence of enforcement mechanisms, states must safeguard against the danger that the other side will cheat on any agreement that has been reached. Each will then want the other to take the first steps to carry it out in order to minimize the chance that the state will be exploited and leave open the possibility for the state to exploit the other. The basic trick in formulating an agreement is then to divide up transactions into a series of small steps so that renegeing at any point provides little gain, and to develop sequences that build trust, provide transparency into what each side is doing, and ensure that at each stage each side has incentives to continue complying. All this is easier said than done, and both historians and IR scholars might do well to devote more attention to these problems. They help tell us when and why agreements are reached, alert us to the role of diplomatic creativity, and could help states reach agreements in the future. To take just one example, I suspect that one reason why the agreements between the Bush administration and North Korea fell apart is that they required the North to provide a full accounting of its nuclear materials and programs too early in the process. Complying would have given away much of the North's bargaining leverage and reduced the incentives for the U.S. to comply with the later stages of the agreement.

The final aspect of timing questions is one that I adverted to earlier. Scholarly analyses of conflict have to start at some point in time. But this is often the nub of the dispute both between scholars and between the countries. The fundamental question often is the same as the one that comes up in the playground or between squabbling siblings: who started it? The date that you pick to begin your analysis predisposes an answer to the crucial question of responsibility. The obvious — and often correct — response to analysis that indicates that country X was at fault in a dispute by pointing to what it did at a particular time is that this overlooks country Y's previous provocation. In many cases, threats and hostility between two countries are reciprocated, and disentangling causes and effects is extremely difficult. There are no simple ways to proceed here, and I will be content with the general point that it helps to be aware of the problem.

## GENERALIZATIONS AND COMPARISONS

It is too easy to say that historians are concerned with individual cases and IR scholars seek generalizations. We cannot understand any a particular case without implicit if not explicit ideas about how states normally behave; generalizations rest on specific cases. Nevertheless, there is a tension here and the stereotype about the two disciplines contains a significant measure of truth. Here I think it is not just my own disciplinary

affiliation that leads me to believe that the use of comparative methods can be quite useful, and indeed often is necessary. Scholars sometimes look at a particular case or the behavior of a particular country and attribute causation to factors unique to those circumstances or country. The conclusion may be correct, but it can be securely reached only by looking at other cases or other countries. The obvious example is American foreign policy under George W. Bush. To oversimplify, many if not most analyses fall into the categories of the good, the bad, and the ugly. Scholars and analysts who strongly approve of Bush's policies generally see them as rooted in the unusual American commitment to liberty and taking preventative actions. Critics, usually on the left, attribute the behavior to the malign imperatives of capitalism or a sick political culture. The methodological problem with both claims is that they do not compare American behavior to that of other countries in somewhat similar circumstances. I cannot claim to have done so systematically, but my Realist proclivities lean me to the argument that the U.S. is generally behaving as great powers have done in the past when they have confronted situations that combine both danger and opportunity. The U.S. is not particularly good or particularly bad, international politics just is ugly. I would not expect such a bald statement to convince skeptics despite having provided at least a bit of evidence for it elsewhere<sup>7</sup>, but it is harder to dispute the methodological point that attributions of American behavior to its internal characteristics must be judged in the light of comparisons to the behavior of other countries.

Another aspect of the utility of comparisons and generalizations is raised by the perennial debates over of nuclear weapons in the crucial 1945-47 period, and here I am going to borrow from what I said in a previous post on H-Diplo. Although historians argue fiercely about why Truman dropped the bomb, they apply essentially the same techniques of historical analysis, looking at what Truman and others said and heard, how they changed (or didn't) in response to new events and new information, and what views they held on related subjects such as Soviet intentions and the killing of Japanese civilians. While I find these discussions fascinating, as an IR scholar I would approach the matter more simply (giving you the opportunity to reply that this is unhistorical and simple-minded). I would start with the generalization that unless there are pressing considerations to the contrary, states involved in a total war will use all the weapons at their disposal. There are exceptions, of course: Hitler refrained from using nerve gas during World War II because he mistakenly believed that the Allies had developed this weapon and would reply in kind, and the U.S. decision not to use more primitive but still effective gases in the last stages of the war against Japan is harder to explain. But do we find cases in which a country had a new weapon of enormous power that might terminate the conflict on favorable terms and declined to use it? The basic methodological point is that, assuming there aren't any or at least aren't many such cases, at one level I would not see any reason to go any further because the explanation for Truman's behavior is nothing peculiar to Truman, to the U.S., or to the specific situation. Rather it is just another instance of the prevailing (ugly) pattern in international politics.

---

<sup>7</sup> Jervis, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era* (New York, 2006), 92-98.

Even if I am correct in the generalization, one can argue about whether it constitutes an explanation and explore the relations among generalizations, laws, and explanations. Indeed, I can dredge up some faint memories of the discussions of Hempel's "Covering Law" argument. This is a large topic, and my only point here is that if my generalization is correct, it strongly implies that any leader would have dropped the bomb even if many other circumstances had been different, including concerns about the Soviet Union. Of course this does not exclude the possibility that a desire to limit the Soviet gains from the war or to intimidate the USSR were also present. Behavior often seems (is?) overdetermined in that we can find multiple impulses, any one of which on its own arguably could have been sufficient to have produced it: a person can die after having been both poisoned and shot. But this perspective does say that the act of dropping the bomb is not a puzzle, and I think much of the emotional power behind the debate lies in the implicit counterfactual claim that absent Soviet concerns Truman would have behaved differently. (To the claim that we look at Truman's motives here to better understand his evolving views of the USSR, I would suggest that this isn't the best source of information on this important topic.)

The failure to bring the atom under international control has similarly been the site of fierce arguments, many of which revolve around the traditional and revisionist explanations for the origins of the Cold War, with the attendant distribution of the blame between the U.S. and the USSR. My analysis again starts (and ends?) with an IR generalization. Although Campbell Craig and Sergey Radchenko make an intriguing claim that Truman's position hardened when he learned of the Soviet spying at Los Alamos, I do not find this necessary.<sup>8</sup> When has a country agreed to share its military secrets, let alone the material involved (which would have been more valuable than the secrets, most of which the Soviets had or could replicate)? And when has another great power agreed to give up the pursuit of such a weapon? (Craig and Radchenko make a somewhat similar argument on p. 133, and this is implicit in Sean Malloy's statement that "It would have taken extraordinary political courage on Truman's part to willingly give up the American nuclear monopoly without first extracting major concessions from the Soviet Union").<sup>9</sup> Even the Anglo-American wartime sharing, produced by overwhelming incentives, was strained and less than complete.

This does not mean that international control was impossible, but just that in the normal course of international events and without particularly hostile intent on either side this was extremely unlikely. Of course one can reply, as Secretary of War Henry Stimson and many atomic scientists did, that the circumstances were so unusual, the dangers of a nuclear arms race so great, and the benefits of internationalization so clear that the

---

<sup>8</sup> Campbell Craig and Sergey Radchenko, *The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War* (New Haven, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Sean Malloy, *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb Against Japan* (Ithaca, NY, 2008), 153.

standard pattern of international politics should and could have been broken. Perhaps, but I believe that at minimum the case looks very different when viewed in terms of standard international politics than it does from a detailed examination of the case that ignores this pattern. Even if the relations between the great powers had been as harmonious as they were after the Napoleonic wars (short of complete harmony, to be sure, but cooperative to an almost an unprecedented extent), it is hard to see an agreement on international control. The states in the Concert never embarked on cooperative ventures on order of this magnitude. (This perspective also implies that the existence of nuclear weapons almost automatically generated a form of nuclear arms race and a significant degree of tension between the major powers, although not necessarily a Cold War.)

Those like the historian Paul Schroeder and the IR scholar G. John Ikenberry could reply that relying on generalizations in this way implies that IR does not and cannot change (a common and partially misleading charge often levied against Realism), whereas in fact over time there is progress toward greater cooperation and order. This implies that the failure to achieve international control, and perhaps the dropping of the A-bombs, are indeed puzzles even though they were typical of earlier international politics. One response would be that these cases cast doubt on arguments for progress. A more measured one would be that even if there is progress (and I am inclined to think that there is), the generalizations remain powerful.

## MORALITY

The final difference between historians and IR scholars that I want to discuss concerns morality. I will be brief here in part because the reader can turn to an earlier exchange between myself and Paul Schroeder on this subject.<sup>10</sup> I think that historians are generally more concerned with and willing to make value and moral judgments about the conduct of those they are studying than are most IR scholars. In part, this is linked to what I discussed in the previous section. If almost all decision-makers would have acted as Truman did, then his behavior appears different morally as well as analytically. We may want to condemn (or praise) national leaders and other individuals, but unless they are behaving distinctively, then our judgments apply to whole categories of people — or to people as a whole — rather than to individuals. To the extent that we attribute the individual's behavior to the circumstances she is in rather than to her personality, preferences, or predispositions, our moral judgments must be tempered. This of course is the standard Realist argument that the compelling nature of the international environment renders inappropriate the standards of morality that we use in everyday life, and sometimes in domestic politics. Not all IR scholars are Realists and not all diplomatic historians dissent from this tradition, but I think the concern with generalizations leads to resisting ethical judgments about those being are studied. IR scholars generally expect

---

<sup>10</sup> Our essays can be found in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge, MA, 2001).

leaders to sacrifice others' interests if not their lives in order to stay in power and to be willing to sacrifice the interests and lives of citizens of other countries in order to preserve those of their countrymen, and so they find many of the accounts of diplomatic historians to be moralistic and naïve in their responses to normal if unpleasant international behavior.

Perhaps more importantly, most IR scholars see their task as explaining behavior, not judging it. The point of our exercise is to use our theories to understand why people are acting as they are and to discern and disentangle the complex webs of causation. Moral judgments may be made at the end, but they are not part of our job description. By contrast, if Paul Schroeder is correct many historians see as central to their calling the need to do justice to and for those who can no longer speak for themselves. IR scholars not so much disagree as keep their focus elsewhere, on the causes of the behavior and how they fit with our general understanding of politics.

These differences produce tensions between IR scholars and international historians that we should not expect to be resolved. Indeed, they should not be because the diversity of perspectives that they mirror and generate benefits us all. The point is not to convert others to our viewpoint, but to understand theirs.

—*Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane N. Labrosse*

---

**Copyright © 2009 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.** H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the H-Diplo Editors at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).

---