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How I Got Here

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For as long as I can remember—and long before I knew there was a field called Political Science with a specialization in International Politics—I was intrigued by politics. This was due to a combination of what must have been my in-born nature, the strongly political atmosphere of New York in the 1940's and 1950's, and, perhaps most of all, “events, dear boy, events,” in the words that Prime Minister Harold Macmillan used to explain to an interviewer why his policies had changed.¹ Since I was born in 1940, my first memories were of World War II and then the Cold War. The early years of the latter led me to the question I would grapple with later in exploring deterrence and the spiral model as explanations of and prescriptions for conflict.² In fact, I remember pestering my parents about what they thought the U.S. should do in response to the Soviet Union shooting down what I thought were innocent American airplanes in the late 1940's (I would have been shocked had I been told that the Soviets were correct to label these spy missions). Needless to say, this question recurs not only in my scholarship, but, more importantly, in world politics. When I started writing this essay in late January 2020, the newspapers carried a story about the American strikes against Iranian backed militias in Syria and Iraq in retaliation for a rocket barrage that killed an American contractor. “The key question” according to the American reporter, “is whether the American counter attack can end the cycle of violence of escalate it.”³

In fifth grade I organized a few classmates to produce a current-events newsletter. A strange hobby, perhaps, but it was not out of sync with the spirit of the times, at least not in New York liberal circles. McCarthyism and the Korean War heightened our worries, and because friends of my parents were called before various Congressional committees, the issues were more than abstract.

Two other influences were important. My older brother, with whom I am now quite close, beat me up quite regularly, including once knocking out a (loose) tooth. From this I developed a healthy respect for the use of force, paired with an understanding that it made sense to avoid conflict if possible. The other influence was my fierce loyalty to the Brooklyn Dodgers, who in this period would often come close to the holy grail of the World Series, only to falter at the end. This torment was compounded by the fact that almost everyone else in my school rooted for the New York Yankees, and the result was a sympathy for the underdog. Perhaps the most crushing memory, and the last time I cried over anything other than a death, was Bobby Thompson's home run that defeated the Dodgers in the 1951 playoffs. Given my later interest in

¹ In fact, although the saying is well known, it may be apocryphal: Robert Harris, “As Macmillan Never Said,” *The Telegraph*, 4 June 2002, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3577416/As-Macmillan-never-said-thats-enough-quotations.html>.

² Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976; 2nd ed., 2017), ch. 3.

³ Julian E. Barnes, “U.S. Attacks Iranian-Backed Forces in Iraq and Syria in Retaliatory Strikes,” *New York Times*, 30 December 2019.

deception in international politics, I was glad when the story came out that he managed this not only because of the short left field fence in the Polo Grounds but because the Giants had stolen the sign and knew he was getting a fastball.

Being a good liberal, I did my bit by handing out leaflets for Adlai Stevenson in 1952 and 1956 (not that this mattered much in Manhattan). While I later learned from political scientist Fred Greenstein and many historians that Dwight D. Eisenhower was very skilled, and was perhaps a better president than Stevenson would have been,⁴ I still have great admiration for him and so was gratified many years later when I was given the Adlai Stevenson chair at my university. As documents from the Eisenhower Administration became available and I was able to compare my contemporary views with a less biased and more accurate understanding, I learned (a bit of) humility and an appreciation of the importance of preserving and studying the historical record.

Until my junior year at Oberlin College my interests were much more driven by current events than by scholarship. This is not to say that my high school and college courses in history and political science were bad—I had one marvelous course in early modern European History in high school and great courses in American politics and European History at Oberlin—but they did not give me powerful analytical tools for understanding what was happening. But the Oberlin library put new books on display, and in quick succession I stumbled upon Thomas Schelling's *Strategy of Conflict* and Glenn Snyder's *Deterrence and Defense*.⁵ I had already been deeply interested in nuclear strategy, or rather in the raging debates about the "missile gap," the commonly-believed 'fact' that the Soviets had a great advantage over the U.S in this domain, and its consequences. Indeed, for my own benefit I had written a paper on this subject in 1959. The theoretical structure it lacked was supplied by the Schelling and Snyder books, which are now recognized as classics. Among their foundational ideas is the importance of strategic interaction, i.e., that when rational states act, they do so anticipating how others will respond, knowing that the others are similarly anticipating what the actor will do. This and the other tools that were developed in these books led me to a much deeper understanding not only of nuclear strategy, but of a wide range of international politics, both current and past.

Schelling and Snyder became very important figures later in my life. Serendipitously, Berkeley had given Snyder a two-year visiting appointment, and so I enthusiastically took his field survey course in the fall of 1962. He was a very good instructor, but in the classroom as in his writings he was not flashy or self-promoting. This low-key stance did not fit with the Berkeley department's drive to get to the top of the professional ladder, and so it foolishly let him go, thereby missing out on his two later milestone books, *Conflict among Nations* (co-authored with Paul Diesing) and *Alliance Politics*.⁶ Not only did I learn a great deal from Snyder's lectures, but his reading list included chapters from Arnold Wolfers's *Discord and Collaboration*.⁷ Here I discovered the work of a founder of American Realism (although of course he and the others were European emigres) that made analytical sense to me. I had been assigned Hans Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations*,⁸ and while at the time I found it discursive and vague, I have revised my critical judgement of some of Morgenthau's other writings, my evaluation of his textbook remains the same. Wolfers's essays, on the other hand, were clean, clear, and incisive. I think they can be read today to great advantage. I was also deeply impressed with Snyder as a person. Unassuming, he always listened carefully to

⁴ Fred Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower As Leader* (New York: Basic Books, 1962).

⁵ Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), Glenn Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward A Theory of National Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

⁶ Glenn Herald Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁷ Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).

⁸ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 2nd ed., revised and enlarged (New York: Knopf, 1959).

students, many of whom did not deserve this attention, would spend time mulling over ideas, and greatly encouraged me to pursue my own. I was able to return the favor many years later when I urged my colleagues at the University of North Carolina to consider Glenn for their opening—he had been in for a talk but his low-key manner had not impressed.

I also audited a course by the great European diplomatic historian, Raymond Sontag. His lectures were marvelous, and I still turn to his *European Diplomatic History, 1871-1932*,⁹ but I looked in vain for the sort of probing for explanations and causes that I had grown accustomed to from Snyder and the readings he had assigned. I was fascinated by the events Sontag recounted and his ability to make sense of them, but frustrated by the narrative's blurring of the line between description and explanation and the lack of focus on bringing evidence to bear on theoretical propositions. This was simply a different way of approaching the material.¹⁰ He, like Snyder, cared deeply about his students, however, and when I went to visit him in his office hours was struck by the fact that he wrote my name and interests on a card which he placed in his massive file. But he also indicated that much as he appreciated the interests of political scientists like myself in European diplomatic history, he did not think that they could shed much light on the subject.

My view of the history discipline was very much as an outsider, and I missed most of the fascinating cross-currents that David Hollinger saw as a history graduate student.¹¹ As he notes, Sontag was of the older school and the emerging trends in intellectual, social, and cultural history that caught the imagination of the younger faculty and students did not enter in.

Two episodes at Berkeley embodied the interaction of doing and studying politics. Given my commitment to civil liberties and civil rights, I was an active participant in the Free Speech Movement (FSM). The right to speak and organize that we were defending in the FSM was intended to combat racial discrimination in various commercial establishments in San Francisco. Although I had been active in student government in high school and college (and had chosen Berkeley partly because of its students' role in the protests against the House Un-American Activities Committee meeting in San Francisco), the FSM was on a larger stage and played for more serious stakes. While I can't say that I had much influence, I was struck by the importance of dedication and commitment, the large role for folly and error, the significance of accidents and luck, and the difficulty of any one actor of understanding the whole picture; as a prime example of this point, almost none of us understood the political pressures Clark Kerr, the reviled president of the university, was under. I also saw that my own political instincts and calculations often proved flawed if not entirely wrong, which offered a nice lesson in humility. Unlike many of my colleagues, neither the FSM experience nor my opposition to the Vietnam War (see below) moved my general political views. These were already deeply anchored. Those with much less political experience were more strongly buffeted by these winds.

The second instance involved the reverse flow from studying to changing a policy position. In the spring of 1963 I took a course on revolutions from Chalmers Johnson, the brilliant scholar of Japan, whose own political position moved from the right to the far left without pausing in between, and I wrote a paper on what was then called internal war and what we would now call insurgency and counter-insurgency. This study of past cases and relevant theories convinced me that the U.S. could not win the war in South Vietnam, at least at a reasonable price, as long as the border with North Vietnam remained unsealed. Unlike many of my liberal colleagues, however, I did not think that the war was immoral, that the North Vietnamese regime was benign, or that the marvelous solution of neutralization was available. My later research was to study the propensity of people to avoid difficult value trade-offs and the prevalence of rationalizations to ease the burdens of choice, but even then I saw that a negotiated solution, nice as it would be, was simply beyond reach. Like many in my

⁹ Raymond Sontag, *European Diplomatic History, 1871-1932* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1933).

¹⁰ For my own discussions of difference between IR scholars and international historians, see "Diplomatic History and International Relations: Why are they Studied So Differently?" in Miriam Fendius Elman and Colin Elman, eds., *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001) and "International Politics and Diplomatic History: Fruitful Differences," H-Diplo, June 2009. <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Jervis-InaguralAddress.pdf>.

¹¹ David Hollinger, "Between Samuel Flagg Bemis and Perry Miller," 8 February 2020, <https://hdiplo.org/to/E189>.

generation, however, I am drawn back to the Vietnam War, teach about it, and have written a bit on it.¹² Here too the documents, first in the *Pentagon Papers* and later in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* volumes, tell us how much of the story we could not see at the time.¹³

As an aside I should mention that although the Vietnam War did not have much impact on the political science discipline, my sense is that it did strongly affect the field of diplomatic history. On the positive side, it induced a more critical perspective on American foreign policy and a refusal to take official justifications at face value. So far, so good; but in my view much of the field went too far in seeing American blundering as either uniquely American or the product of capitalism (with the implication that other economic and social systems would behave differently) and, relatedly, by transmuting moral condemnation into cheap moralism, with the implication that we academics not only know more than the policy-makers at the time but are morally superior to them. Vietnam also contributed to the flight of the historians from international political history.

Academic study, perhaps also combined with Vietnam, also affected my political views on the question that had preoccupied me from the beginning—whether, when, and how conflicts are best dealt with by threats or by conciliation, or, of course, how these approaches can be sequenced and interwoven. I started working on deterrence and the spiral model as alternative descriptions of and prescriptions for the Cold War with a strong bias toward deterrence. But immersion in the relevant theories, the analysis of perception and misperception, and a wide range of historical cases led me to have more sympathy for the spiral model. In the end, while I continue to study and teach about the Cold War, my conclusions remain fluid.¹⁴

As I continued to read history, I became more convinced that not only was chess a wildly inaccurate model for international politics (the rules are established and all play is open), but even poker (with its role for deception) is inadequate. In fact, actors often live in very different worlds, fail to perceive each other accurately, and, even more, do not appreciate this. The best picture is then provided by the Japanese short story and movie *Rashomon*, which reveals that each actor sees the situation very differently, and usually in a self-serving manner.

It was thanks to Schelling, to whom I had sent my early work on signaling, that I owe the two years of research at Harvard's Center for International Affairs (CFIA) that was so important for my later career. To digress, I want to note that without disclaiming the virtues of the papers I had sent Schelling, getting this position involved a good bit of luck. Without it my research and career would not have been nearly as successful. In those two years I was able to complete my first book on signaling and deception (in retrospect, this would have been a much better title than *The Logic of Images in International Relations*¹⁵), which was built on the scholarship of Schelling and the imaginative sociologist Erving Goffman¹⁶ and was a

¹² Jervis, "The Politics of Troop Withdrawal: Salted Peanuts, the Commitment Trap, and Buying Time," *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (June 2010); "Audience Costs and Vietnam: A Comment on Lewis and Trachtenberg," H-Diplo/ISSF Forum 3(November 2014), <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Forum-3.pdf>

¹³ Just to mention one fascinating study I draw on for my thinking and teaching about on diplomacy, see James Hershberg, *Marigold: The Lost Chance for Peace in Vietnam* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Jervis, "The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 24:4 (December 1980): 563-92; Jervis, "Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?" *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3:1 (Winter 2001): 36-60; Jervis, "Identity and the Cold War," in Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 22-43.

¹⁵ Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970; New York: Columbia University Press, 2nd ed., 1989).

¹⁶ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959).

combination of rational choice and constructivism, both *avant la lettre*. Not surprisingly, it did not fit any of the categories in the field, but did spark the interest of a Ph.D. student of Schelling's in economics, Michael Spence, who went on to win a Nobel Prize for his approach to signaling.

An additional benefit of these years was meeting life-long friends of my generation in political science and coming into close contact with three others. Schelling had brought me to Harvard, his written work was and remains a lodestar for mine, and we established a friendship that ended only with his death. The second was Kenneth Waltz, who, on his sabbatical year, had the office next to me at the CFIA. We talked literally every day, often for several hours (it got to the point where when his wife wanted to reach him, she phoned my office first). Talking to Waltz allowed me to pick up where I had left off with Glenn Snyder (the two of them were also good friends), and I realized in a combination of delight and horror how little of the field I had learned at Berkeley. Guided by Ken, and having the gift of being free of teaching and administration, I read and thought much more than I had before. His approach to rigorous social science theorizing and to the analysis of systems served me well in the rest of my career. I was overjoyed when, after retiring from Berkeley, Ken and his wife moved back to New York and he became an affiliate of the institute that had been founded by his mentor, Bill Fox.

The third friendship was with Samuel Williamson, an assistant professor in the History department. He taught me a great deal about the origins of World War I, pointed me to other important books in his field, and helped start the dialogue with history and historians that I have sought to maintain ever since. Williamson himself sank to becoming a university president, but fortunately did not abandon scholarship and anyone in early twentieth-century international politics should read his books and articles.¹⁷

Much of the rest of my career can be read in my CV, so here I just want to pick up a couple of themes. First is the continuing involvement with the field of history. Although I have not plumbed cases and trends to the depth of some of my colleagues and students,¹⁸ continuing conversations with historians, especially Robert Dallek, John Gaddis, Mel Leffler, Paul Kennedy, Paul Schroeder, and Marc Trachtenberg have enriched my life, my teaching, and my own writings. Rather than trying to summarize what I have learned from each, I will be content to say that in addition to developing a deep appreciation for the historian's craft, I have thought more about the contrast between the typical political science method of comparing cases in order to try to establish the causal efficacy of various factors (an approach which usually assumes that cases are independent of each other) and the historian's sensibility that the backbone of understand is chronology, and that events, trends, and 'cases' (a term that historians would not use) are not independent but rather are strongly influenced by what has preceded them.

Throughout the rest of my career, academic scholarship and current politics continued to intersect and enrich each other.¹⁹ Three instances stand out. First, when I became a consultant to the CIA in the fall of 1978, I rekindled my interest in nuclear strategy, which was then a subject to raging debates centering on the state of the nuclear balance and whether the Soviet leaders believed, to take part of the title of one influential article that grew out of an official study, that they "Could

¹⁷ See, for example, Samuel Williamson *The Politics of Grand Strategy: Britain and France Prepare for War, 1904-1914* (London: Ashfield Press, 1990); Williamson, *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 1991); Williamson and Ernest May, "An Identity of Opinion: Historians and July 1914," *Journal of Modern History* 79:2 (June 2007): 335-387.

¹⁸ See, for example, Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Affairs* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Jack Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495-1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983) and articles too numerous to cite; James McAllister, *No Exit: America and the German Problem, 1943-1954* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

¹⁹ For more on this, see my "Politics and Political Science," *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (Palo Alto: Annual Reviews, 2018), 1-19.

Fight and Win a Nuclear War.”²⁰ I not only closely followed the public debates, (and listened to, without being persuaded by, the hawkish arguments of the famed nuclear strategist Albert Wohlstetter),²¹ but was now able to read many of the classified studies. These convinced me that official thinking was superficial and failed to come to grips with the insights of theorists like my UCLA colleague Bernard Brodie and the clear thinking of Tom Schelling. Instead, they viewed nuclear weapons within the intellectual framework of earlier eras in which military victory was possible, an error that Hans Morgenthau labeled “conventionalization,”²² rather than grasping the implications of what I and others called the nuclear revolution.²³ This led me to think more deeply about the subject, culminating in two books in which I sought to both intervene in the policy debate and lay out fairly rigorous analytical arguments. Their validity is of course subject to debate, as is their relevance for contemporary politics.²⁴ I cannot do justice to the issues here, but just want to note that I would not have gotten deeply into these questions were it not for having to confront how they were playing out within the government.²⁵ This involvement not only carries the obvious risk that policy preferences will drive analysis, but also brings out the tensions between the descriptive and the normative aspects of many of our theories.²⁶ As I was working at the CIA it became apparent that, contrary to what had been foreseen, Iran was entering the throes of a revolution. Because Deputy CIA Director Robert Bowie was a former colleague who knew of my work on misperception, I was asked to write a post-mortem. This was a fascinating experience that taught me quite a bit about how the government worked, and led me to propose a similar study of the Iraq intelligence failure a generation later. Although the former had only a slight impact on the way the U.S. did its intelligence business, the latter, combined with internal studies, did I think make a positive contribution, and I was able to mine both cases for insights into how individuals and organizations processed information under difficult circumstances.²⁷

This pattern continued even without exposure to inside information. The election of President Donald Trump was not only an unpleasant surprise, but led me to think about how his term in office would test various IR theories. A few weeks after Rex Tillerson was appointed Secretary of State, lecturing to my introductory undergraduate course led me to think that the

²⁰ Richard Pipes, “Why The Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight and Win a Nuclear War,” *Commentary*, July 1977.

²¹ See my contribution to the Roundtable review of Ron Robin’s biography of Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter, *The Cold War They Made* <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-10-17.pdf>.

²² Hans Morgenthau, “The Fallacy of Thinking Conventionally about Nuclear Weapons,” in David Carlton and Carlo Schaerf, eds., *Arms Control and Technological Innovation* (New York: Wiley, 1976), 256-264.

²³ For my own thinking, see *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984) and *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). I have updated and extended some of these ideas in “The Nuclear Age: During and After the Cold War,” in a forthcoming volume edited by Nuno Monteiro and Fritz Bartel.

²⁴ See the Symposium on the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, forthcoming in the *Texas National Security Review*, forthcoming.

²⁵ My own experience is far from unique; in fact, the field of nuclear strategy developed through close contact with pressing policy issues, as I have explained in “Security Studies: Ideas, Policy, and Politics,” in Edward Mansfield and Richard Sisson, eds., *The Evolution of Political Knowledge* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004), 100-126.

²⁶ I discussed this further in “International Politics and Diplomatic History: Fruitful Differences.”

²⁷ *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

arguments of Richard Neustadt on presidential power pointed to the likelihood that Tillerson would be extraordinarily weak.²⁸

In light of the discussion of the gap between IR social science and policy relevance,²⁹ it is worth noting that my slight entrée into the policy world and even slighter influence has come much less through my writings on policy than by the fact that a range of middle-level officials are familiar with my academic writings (and also that a number of my students have gone into the government either at the working levels or for short-term political assignments).

Not all my research was sparked by policy concerns, however. My work on the dynamics of systems was not. Initially spawned by an invitation to contribute to Tom Schelling's festschrift, it built on ideas of strategic interaction and Schelling's collection of marvelous essays explicating how collective outcomes could diverge from individual desires and actions,³⁰ to discuss selection effects and other ways in which the anticipations of how others would respond were central to a wide range of political and social patterns.³¹ I later expanded this into *System Effects*, which I think is my most important book because it applies to so much of human (and animal) life.³² Drawing not only on Schelling, but also on psychology and, especially, ecology and evolution, I tried to elucidate the mechanisms that arise when multiple actors and influences are interconnected, often in ways that make tracing causation impossible before the fact and difficult afterwards, confounding many of our standard notions about causation that are derived from the belief that we can compare cases holding all but one variable constant.³³ We then often see unintended consequences, nonlinearities, various forms of feedbacks, and co-evolution of actors and their environments (to the extent that these can be meaningfully distinguished). All of this is further complicated when the actors have their own ideas about the workings of the system. This perspective has parallels to historians' sense of the ironies of history, and to the view that John Gaddis developed in his *Landscape of History*.³⁴ Not being anchored in pressing political science debates, this book has received less attention in the discipline than others I have written, but it has gained readers in other fields and been assigned in at least one medical school class. Its contribution is to expand our ways of thinking to deal with complexity; those who are intrigued can read the quotation that begins the book and do not have to read further if they see the dangerous oversimplification that it embodies.

²⁸ Jervis, "President Trump and IR Theory," International Security Studies Forum Policy Series, American and the World—2017 and Beyond," 2 January 2017. <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5B.pdf>; Jervis, "Rex Tillerson Might Be the Weakest Secretary of State Ever," *Foreign Policy*, 2017. Neustadt's path-breaking and still relevant book is *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership* (New York: New American Library, 1960).

²⁹ See, for example, Michael Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); also see the review essay on this book by Lawrence Freedman in *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42:7 (December 2019): 1027-1037.

³⁰ Thomas Schelling, *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

³¹ Jervis, "Systems Effects," in Richard Zeckhauser, ed., *Strategy and Choice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 107-130.

³² Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

³³ I discussed this further in "Causation and Responsibility in a Complex World," in Martha Finnemore and Judith Goldstein, eds, *Back to Basics: State Power in a Contemporary World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 313-338.

³⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Reading in the diverse fields that constituted my research and writing the book were great fun and led me to see the world in a different way. This enjoyment and stimulation that we hope leads to a collective better understanding of the world is of course the point of our shared enterprise.

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