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Conversations in *International Relations*: Interview with John J. Mearsheimer (Part II)¹

IR *In the conversation so far you have emphasized the centrality in international politics of the mutual uncertainty states have about each other's intentions. Can you clarify how your thinking is different to that of Kenneth Waltz in this regard?*

JM There is an important difference between me and Waltz regarding uncertainty about intentions. Specifically, Waltz maintains that his theory is built around two underlying assumptions: the system is anarchic and states seek to survive. In other words, he is saying that you only need those two assumptions to generate security completion among states. I think he is wrong; you cannot generate security competition in a structural realist world without assuming that states can never be certain about the intentions of other states. Without that assumption, the Waltzian train never gets out of the station. Let me unpack this argument.

If the states in the system simply want to survive – that's their only goal – there is no reason why they should fear each other, since there is no reason to think that they will attack each other. After all, there is no assumption that says that those states have or might have aggressive intentions. The only assumption about intentions is that states aim to survive. Randy Schweller makes this point nicely when he asks why states would feel threatened in a world where they 'seek nothing more than their own survival'. He goes on to point out that 'in a world that has never experienced crime, the concept of security is meaningless'. Thus, you see that it is essential to have an assumption which says that states have to think there is some possibility that other states have or will have aggressive intentions. In short, there has to be some chance that there might be a revisionist state in the system for structural realism to work.

Thus, I accept Waltz's two starting assumptions – anarchy and the desire to survive – but I add uncertainty about intentions. As noted earlier, I add two other assumptions as well: that all states have some offensive military capability, which I think is implicit in Waltz, and that states act rationally, which Waltz rejects.

IR *Even if your position is accepted about the potential uncertainty of future intentions, why do you have to make the leap to the conclusion that aggressive behaviour now is the appropriate response? Does your prescription not mean that states will miss opportunities for cooperation, and thereby fail to turn potential enemies into real friends?*

JM My argument is that in an anarchic world where states have offensive military capabilities and might have offensive intentions, states have no choice but to fear each other. After all, there is always the possibility that at some point down the road another state will attack you. There is no way any leader can know what

will be the future intentions of other states; they are simply unknowable. At the same time, if another state becomes powerful and aggressive, there is no higher authority that states can turn to for protection, because they operate in an anarchic system. This is what I call the 911 problem. Of course, states invariably understand this logic; they know that they live in a self-help world, and that the best way to survive in such a world is to be especially powerful. That way, no other state will dare attack you. The end result is that states seek to gain advantage at each other's expense. For sure, they sometimes miss opportunities for peace, but if they hope to survive, they have no choice but to compete for power.

IR *The problem is that you think fear needs to be met by aggression, whereas some would claim that relationships characterized by fear can be ameliorated if appropriate policies are pursued.*

JM Tell me how it can be ameliorated.

IR *It is a complex issue, but one concrete example is the end of the Cold War. Gorbachev began to realize that the West might have legitimate security concerns about Soviet capabilities, whereas the Russians knew that they were not planning on attacking. He was influenced by the 'defensive defence' thinking you criticized earlier, and decided it was important to send a signal to the West that he recognized that Soviet capabilities and postures could appear threatening. So he started to make a series of reassuring moves, cutting back, for example, on key capabilities for surprise attack. The West for some time was not sure whether Gorbachev was a wolf in sheep's clothing, but over time it became extremely difficult to hold onto this idea. Gradually, a politics developed that reconstituted the possibilities for the superpower relationship. That's how fear can be ameliorated.*

JM Let me start by saying that if states can know each other's intentions, fear disappears, provided, of course, that every state is satisfied with the status quo. Fear remains if there is a revisionist power in the system. Turning to Gorbachev, I do not think he was able to signal that he had benign intentions. What happened in his case had much more to do with capabilities than intentions. To start, the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe collapsed and then the Soviet Union itself collapsed. Gorbachev's Soviet Union was not a status quo power that figured out how to make its intentions known to the West. It was an economic and political basket case that collapsed before our eyes.

Regardless, what is the theory behind the Gorbachev case? In other words, at a conceptual level, how does a state overcome the uncertainty of intentions assumption?

IR *The Gorbachev example shows that uncertainty can be overcome by 'signalling type'. It is possible for states to communicate effectively to each other that they do not have malign intentions, and that the development of a cooperative*

relationship will not be exploited. So the argument is that the traditional features of international anarchy – cheating, aggression, intense competition – can be ameliorated.

JM Yes, but exactly how do states signal benign intentions?

IR *Carefully. It is necessary to communicate intentions, and take suitable actions to back up the words, but to do so in a manner that will not open oneself up to being exploited. It is possible to start this process by dismantling the material threat one poses to the other state. And then – moving back to Gorbachev – by dismantling the ideological threat (which he tried to do by de-ideologizing competition in the Third World, for example). One shorthand way of expressing his approach was his idea of a ‘common European home’. In this policy he was seeking to create a society of states – a legitimate international order – in which states could live together bound by shared assumptions and norms. The theoretical basis for this argument lies in the sort of international society thinking developed by Hedley Bull. Offensive realism of course argues that such a relationship is not sustainable, because states cannot ultimately convince each other that their intentions are benign; they must worry that one day these intentions might turn malign. But you don’t know that. What offensive realism does is construct insecurity. It offers two unappealing alternatives. First, states might either assume the worst, but by assuming the worst they risk creating situations that are self-defeating and destructive, or, secondly, they can risk assuming the best, and so create situations in which they may be exploited. Either way, there are potentially bad outcomes. Instead, if states can move carefully, trying to overcome the dangers of both worst- and best-case thinking, then international security can be enhanced. Isn’t there more space than you accept for states to move out of hostile relationships? Think of France and Germany, Israel and Egypt, and the Soviet Union and the West; and after the intense dangers of the past few years, India and Pakistan may be making tentative moves towards a more cooperative relationship. This is a fascinating issue in the theory and practice of our subject.*

JM It certainly is fascinating, but let me make a couple of points. No realist would argue that cooperation among states is impossible, even among adversaries. After all, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed the infamous Ribbentrop–Molotov pact in August 1939, and there was substantial economic intercourse between them in the summer of 1941 before Hitler unleashed a murderous military campaign against the Soviet Union. Moreover, Moscow and Washington made arms control agreements during the Cold War, while in the Middle East, Jordan and Israel have long worked together against the Palestinians. In short, I recognize that adversaries can cooperate, and that adversarial relationships can be transformed into friendly ones.

The main problem with your argument, however, is that you do not specify how states can assure other states that they do not have revisionist goals now and

especially in the future. Your argument about how states send friendly signals is too vague for my tastes. The beauty of the defensive realists' claim that it is possible to distinguish defensive from offensive weapons is that it makes it possible – at least in theory – for states to signal benign intentions by building just defensive weapons. If a state builds offensive weapons, it is hard for it to claim that it is a security seeker and not a revisionist state. The problem, however, is that in practice it is hard to distinguish defence from offence.

IR *Do you find the main attacks on your theory to be against your assumptions, or against the prescriptions about state behaviour that you say flow from them?*

JM Critics of realism usually go after the assumptions behind the theory, mainly because the predicted behaviour of states is derived from the assumptions. So if you knock out an assumption, you cripple the theory. If you allow me my assumptions, my argument is difficult to defeat. This is why we just spent so much time talking about whether it is possible for states to signal their intentions. You surely understand that you would deal my theory a mortal blow if you can show that states can communicate their intentions to each other. By the way, it would be all for the good if they could, as it would make for a more peaceful world.

But critics go after the other realist assumptions as well. Consider the case of G. Lowes Dickinson, who invented the concept of international anarchy, and who I think was the first great structural realist. Dickinson was a British classicist and pacifist who wrote a book in the midst of World War I (*The European Anarchy*) which argued that no state, including Germany, was responsible for that war. Instead, he argued that it was the anarchic nature of international politics that caused the Great War, and that to avoid future wars it was necessary to transcend anarchy. Not surprisingly, he became one of the founding fathers of the League of Nations, which he hoped would make the international system hierarchic, thus undermining realist logic, which he understood was powerful.

IR *Let us shift on to another set of issues. You use the US emergency telephone number '911' in a very specific way in your book on the tragedy of the great powers; it refers to states not having a higher authority to call when they get into trouble. But since the book was published, there has been a very different '9/11' of course. In theoretical terms, how can realist theory address something like non-state actors (such as Al-Qaeda)?*

JM The fact is that realism has hardly anything to say about Al-Qaeda per se. Realism is a theory about state behaviour. It assumes that the state is the principal actor in the international system and that there is no higher authority above it. So there is no place in the theory for non-state actors like Al-Qaeda. I find that fans of offensive realism who are bothered by the fact that the theory does not have a place in it for Al-Qaeda sometimes will say to me, 'Why can't you adjust the theory to fit terrorist groups into it?' My answer is that you cannot do that, because the theory would end up getting watered down, and it would lose its analytical bite. We should

all recognize that no theory – realism included – can explain every aspect of international politics.

Having said all of that, however, Al-Qaeda operates within the state system, which operates according to realist logic. Osama Bin Laden, as I read him, is not determined to overthrow the state system and replace it with an Islamic version of the Holy Roman Empire. Instead, he is bent on pushing the United States and its European allies out of the Arab and Islamic world, and creating Islamic regimes across that world. But regardless of his ultimate aims, he is not going to overthrow the state system, which is here to stay for the foreseeable future. Thus, Bin Laden will have to operate in the state system to survive; he will need to live in a state and he will have to pay careful attention to how different states react to him. So understanding the workings of the state system – which is realism's forte – will help us understand his behaviour. Still, there are limits to what realism can tell us about Al-Qaeda, because it is a non-state actor, and there is no room for non-state actors in structural realism.

IR *What about realism and a different non-state referent, the issue of the 'clash of civilizations'?*

JM It is important to emphasize that Huntington pays serious attention to the state. It is at the heart of his theory. Furthermore, he believes that states act aggressively toward each other. There is a passage or two in his writings from the 1990s that are vintage Morgenthau. Nevertheless, his book parts company with realism when he argues that states do not operate as independent actors, but instead organize themselves in terms of larger civilizations. Indeed, he maintains that they do not fight states in their own civilization, but do battle with states from other civilizations. I think that Huntington is wrong when he says that 'civilization' is the principal ordering concept in the world today. In fact, nationalism, not civilization, is the most powerful political ideology on the face of the earth and states continue to fight within as well as across civilizations. Huntington's own evidence supports my point. In short, the world of the twenty-first century is not about clashing civilizations.

IR *Having identified nationalism as the most powerful ideology in the world, would you explain how it fits into your realist theory?*

JM I do not say anything explicit about nationalism in my theory. However, they fit together neatly, since nationalism is all about nations craving their own state, and my theory, like all realist theories, assumes that states are the principal actors in the system. Although realists tend not to emphasize nationalism in their theories, almost all of them believe that nationalism is a powerful force in world politics, and the main reason why great powers should try to avoid conquering states in the developing world. I believe that almost every realist opposed the Vietnam and Iraq Wars in good part because they understood that occupying those countries would cause a major-league nationalist backlash against the United States.

What happened in the run-up to the Iraq War was that both American and British elites talked incessantly about democratizing the Middle East. I think that the Bush Administration as well as the Blair government believed that democracy is the most powerful political ideology on the face of the earth, and that if they could just democratize the Middle East, starting with Iraq, we would all live happily ever after. They hardly talked about nationalism before the war, although it is now undermining their policies in Iraq, as it undermined the US effort in Vietnam and the Soviet effort in Afghanistan. In short, I think that Americans and Brits tend to underestimate the importance of nationalism. I also think Huntington, with his emphasis on clashing civilizations, is guilty of the same charge.

IR *One of your objections against the Iraq War was that you didn't think the Bush Administration understood deterrence. Could you elaborate?*

JM In the run-up to the war in Iraq, the Bush Administration argued that Saddam Hussein might use nuclear weapons to blackmail the United States, or might even use them to strike the American homeland for strategic gain. But these were implausible scenarios that flew in the face of basic deterrence theory. Consider nuclear blackmail. It only works if the blackmailer's threat might actually be carried out if the blackmailer does not get its way. But Saddam was not going to hit the United States or its allies with nuclear weapons, because Washington has the capability to respond in kind. In effect, he would be committing suicide. Thus, the threat to use nuclear weapons against American targets is an empty threat. This is why the Soviet Union, which was far stronger than Iraq would ever be and was led by ruthless men like Nikita Khrushchev and Josef Stalin, never tried blackmailing the United States, much less attacking it with nuclear weapons.

IR *But what about the argument that nuclear weapons might spread from such regimes to terrorists?*

JM It is highly unlikely that Iraq or any rogue state would give nuclear weapons to a terrorist group like Al-Qaeda. For starters, the rogue could not be confident that the transfer would go undetected, as numerous intelligence services would be watching for such a move. If discovered, the American response would surely be swift and devastating. But even if a rogue state was confident that it could covertly smuggle nuclear weapons to an organization like Al-Qaeda, it would still be unlikely to do so. The reason is that the rogue would lose control over when and where those weapons might be used, and there is good reason to think that Al-Qaeda would use those weapons against American targets. In the event that happened, the rogue could never be sure that we would not incinerate it anyway – even if we merely suspected that it had aided Al-Qaeda. That threat should be more than enough to deter a rogue from giving nuclear weapons to a terrorist group.

Regarding the specifics of the Iraq case, there is no evidence that Osama Bin Laden and Saddam were working together. Indeed, Bin Laden thought that Saddam

was a secular devil. That link existed only in the imaginations of the neo-conservatives. Moreover, it made no sense for Saddam to give nuclear weapons to a terrorist organization that he could not control. He is now in jail because of the actions of a non-state actor that he could not control! If 9/11 had not happened, Saddam would still be in power. The reason Syria has been cooperating with the United States to track down Al-Qaeda is because that terrorist group is a grave danger to Syria. In the final analysis, Al-Qaeda was a threat to Saddam's Iraq, not a potential ally.

IR *Where does your assumption about future uncertainty come in here? According to your offensive realist logic, surely Bush and Blair were justified in thinking that they could not be assured in the longer term – 10–15 years hence – that an Iraq with nuclear weapons might not be able to stop them falling into the hands of terrorists? This being so, was it not therefore justified – in offensive realist logic – to take preventive action against Iraqi WMD now? This might eradicate a potential source of nuclear danger over decades to come? Isn't your uncertainty assumption in a post-9/11 world effectively a charter for the United States to be the global hegemon, in order to reduce all such sources of nuclear risk? This seems to be the logic of the neo-conservatives in Washington.*

JM Speaking as an American, there would be only one state with nuclear weapons in an ideal world – the United States. Thus, if I could easily take away every other state's nuclear weapons and nip the Iranian and Iraqi nuclear programmes in the bud I would do so without hesitation. As you note, one can never be absolutely certain about the future; therefore, it is best if only we have a nuclear arsenal. The problem, however, is that it is almost impossible to see how the United States could achieve this end at some reasonable cost. Consider Iraq. I favoured containment, which meant living with Iraqi nuclear weapons, over preventive war, because I thought that the war would be a disaster for the United States. I did not think that containment was a perfect strategy, but it was a good one. Again, I would prefer that Iraq not have nuclear weapons. But when I did the cost–benefit analysis, containment seemed far superior to preventive war. By the way, that same calculation applied to China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and I think it will apply to Iran and North Korea in the future.

IR *Would you agree with the view that transnational groups getting nuclear weapons is probably the greatest source of threat to the United States in the decades to come?*

JM It is clearly the greatest threat now facing the United States and why Washington must work with other states in the system – including states like Syria – to make sure that these groups do not acquire nuclear weapons.

Of course, President Bush and the neo-conservatives thought that the United States could solve the nuclear proliferation problem by itself with military force.

Their thinking was predicated on the belief that the United States had a strategy for winning wars quickly and easily. They thought we had found a magic military formula for conquering the likes of Iran, Iraq and North Korea. Indeed, they believed that once we decapitated the regime in Iraq, it probably would not be necessary to invade Iran or North Korea, because they would 'bandwagon' with the United States out of fear that we would turn the American war machine on them next if they did not give up their weapons of mass destruction and their support for terrorism. Of course, they were wrong.

The political right in America has long believed that states are prone to bandwagon with more powerful states. For example, the famous domino theory of the early Cold War was based on bandwagoning logic. The idea was that if a country like Vietnam fell to communism, countries all over Asia would join with the mighty Soviet Union and eventually all of Asia would be in Moscow's hip pocket. Eventually, dominoes would fall in other areas, and before long the Soviets would dominate the globe. The neo-conservatives thought that the United States could set in motion a domino theory of its own. Slamming Iraq and maybe another country or two would send a message to the world that you do not mess with the United States, which would cause states all around the globe to dance to our tune. For example, when I argued before the war that it might make good sense to shut down the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before invading Iraq, neo-conservatives would say: 'John what you don't understand is that the road to Jerusalem runs through Baghdad.'

Realists never bought this argument, because realists understand that we live in a balancing world, not a bandwagoning one. I argued before the war, as did many other realists, that invading Iraq would cause Iran and North Korea to redouble their efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, not throw up their hands in despair. Of course, that is just what happened. In essence, the Bush Doctrine has made our proliferation problem worse not better.

IR *On similar grounds, some of us argued that the NATO war against Serbia in 1999 would provoke nuclear proliferation, because it might teach local tyrants around the world (and others) the lesson that the way to avoid being attacked by NATO is to acquire nuclear weapons.*

JM I think your argument is right on the money, with the caveat that there are circumstances where states have no choice but to go to war. The war against Serbia in 1999, however, was not one of those cases. More generally, I am amazed that so many Americans fail to understand that promiscuous rhetoric about preventive war, not to mention actually engaging in war on a regular basis, is going to spur states all around the globe to get nuclear weapons to protect themselves from the United States. Americans tend to think that it is okay for them to have nuclear weapons, but that it is illegitimate for most other states to want those weapons. I discovered this in 1998, when India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons. I was one of the few Americans who publicly defended their decision to test.

IR *On nuclear deterrence grounds?*

JM Yes. The typical argument in the United States at the time was that the Indian and Pakistani governments were pursuing nuclear weapons either because they were irrational or were suffering from status deficiency. Hardly anyone would concede that they might have good strategic reasons for going down the nuclear road.

I want to be clear here: from an American perspective, it would be best if there were no nuclear weapons on the subcontinent. As I said earlier, I would prefer a world in which only the United States has nuclear weapons. So I was not arguing that it was good for us that India and Pakistan had nuclear weapons. I was simply saying that it made strategic sense from their perspective to have a nuclear deterrent. But few Americans could see that logic. Nor could they see that it was hypocritical in the extreme to argue that it was okay for the United States (and Israel) to have a nuclear deterrent, but not okay for India and Pakistan. After all, those countries face serious threats to their security, as do Iran and North Korea. So Americans should not be surprised that they all want nuclear weapons to defend themselves.

IR *Because of uncertainty about US intentions in the last two cases?*

JM In the case of Iran and North Korea, there is certainty about intentions – certainty that the Bush Administration has them in its cross hairs. The security dilemma is not at play in these two cases.

IR *Would you develop your thinking on these matters in more detail please, and specifically in relation to the differences between your thinking and Waltz's on nuclear weapons? Would you agree that defensive realism argues that we can live with deterrence quite comfortably and that states do not need to acquire more capabilities once they get to a certain point? Waltz is actually a theorist of mutually assured destruction. In contrast, are you a theorist of nuclear war-fighting superiority? (Is the logic of what you were just saying about India and Pakistan that they should race for nuclear war-fighting superiority over each other?) Put simply, if nuclear weapons do continue to spread, does more mean more stability (as Waltz argues) or more instability?*

JM I believe that states seek to maximize their power; they look hard for ways to dominate the international system. If they can do so by achieving nuclear superiority, they will. Waltz, as a defensive realist, maintains that once a major power has an assured destruction capability, it is secure, and it would be foolish to pursue superiority. Remember that Waltz has that famous quote where he says that international relations is too serious a business for states to maximize their power. And that argument, he makes clear, applies to nuclear weapons. I don't think, however, that the world works that way. If you look at how the superpowers behaved during the Cold War, and how the United States has behaved since then, you see

much evidence that supports my claim that states would like to achieve nuclear superiority. So, there is a major difference here between Waltz and me, the defensive and the offensive realist.

There is much less of a difference between us on the question of whether the spread of nuclear weapons increases or decreases stability. Like Waltz I think that nuclear proliferation enhances stability. Nuclear weapons in the hands of any two states are going to make them much more cautious towards each other than they otherwise would be. I think that the difference in our positions is that Waltz comes close to saying that it is almost impossible to have a war between two states with nuclear weapons. I am more doubtful on that point. I can posit numerous scenarios showing how a nuclear war might come about; they may not be likely, but they are plausible.

Consider the conflict between India and Pakistan. In December 2001, Pakistani-sponsored terrorists attacked the Indian Parliament and narrowly missed delivering a devastating blow. What if the attack had succeeded and virtually all of India's parliamentarians had been killed? This probably would have caused India to send its army into eastern Pakistan to deliver a powerful blow to its bitter rival. Given the clear superiority of India's army, Pakistan might very well have turned to nuclear weapons to halt the Indian offensive. After all, this was NATO policy for stopping a successful Soviet offensive during much of the Cold War. The Indians might then have retaliated with nuclear weapons of their own.

One could also posit a plausible scenario in which the United States and China get into a war over Taiwan and nuclear weapons are employed. Also, if Iran acquires nuclear weapons and a crisis involving Iran and Israel breaks out, one can imagine the Israelis thinking that they had better launch a pre-emptive strike before they are attacked. This logic would be especially powerful if Iranian leaders were talking loosely and foolishly about wiping Israel off the face of the earth. The Cuban Missile Crisis is also relevant here. I used to think that we did not come close to nuclear war during that famous crisis, but as more information about it has come out over the years, I have come to realize that we were close to the brink of disaster. Thank goodness that President Kennedy had the good sense not to listen to 'the best and the brightest', most of whom were very hawkish but not very bright.

The point I am trying to make is that while nuclear weapons are generally a powerful force for peace, there are a number of potential conflict situations where they might be used in the heat of battle. Therefore, I am not as sanguine about nuclear proliferation as I take Waltz to be.

IR *You have talked a lot about differences between your theory and Waltz's. What other main points of disagreement exist between you?*

JM As I said earlier, Waltz and I start with somewhat different assumptions. He maintains that you only need two assumptions – anarchy and survival – to generate security competition. I disagree; I think you also need uncertainty about intentions. Furthermore, I assume states are rational actors, while he does not. That leads him

– but not me – to argue that we need separate theories of foreign policy and international politics. Turning to state behaviour, I argue that states should and do seek to maximize relative power; they should and they do pursue hegemony in my story. Waltz thinks that is foolish behaviour and that instead states should seek ‘an appropriate amount of power’. If they seek hegemony, he argues, they will be crushed by a balancing coalition. Our differences here are largely a consequence of the fact that he thinks balancing is more efficient than I do. In that regard, I place greater emphasis on buck-passing than Waltz, and that strategy makes it hard to create balancing coalitions that can check especially powerful states.

There are a number of other differences as well, some of which reflect the fact that he is a defensive realist and I am an offensive realist. For example, war is largely the result of miscalculation for Waltz. He does not describe it as a strategy that might sometimes make good sense for a great power. I argue that war sometimes makes good strategic sense, and thus it is an important tool of statecraft. Moreover, Waltz smartly emphasizes the importance of ‘imitation’ as a form of state behaviour. While I agree with him on this point, I argue that ‘innovation’ is an equally important concept. One would expect a defensive realist to emphasize imitation, and an offensive realist to emphasize innovation.

While I follow Waltz in arguing that bipolarity is more peaceful than multipolarity, I ultimately distinguish among bipolarity, balanced multipolarity and unbalanced multipolarity. For me, big trouble comes when you have multipolar systems that contain one especially powerful state. That argument is not in Waltz. In essence, when he assesses the distribution of power in the system, he simply counts the number of poles (or great powers). I count poles and also look at how much power each pole controls. Furthermore, geography, especially ‘the stopping power of water’, is a central part of my story, but not Waltz’s. Finally, we have different understandings of theory. I believe that the assumptions which underpin a theory have to be a reasonably accurate representation of reality, and that the causal logic which is built on those assumptions should also reflect reality. Waltz, in contrast, believes that it doesn’t matter whether a theory’s starting assumptions are right or wrong: they are just assumptions, and all that matters is whether the claims that are deduced from those assumptions can be tested and shown to be right or wrong. This is an important difference between us, although it has more to do with epistemology than international relations.

IR *Can we use your earlier comment about ‘the best and the brightest’ to pull you into a different area? Can we get you to reflect broadly on the state of International Relations and Political Science as a pedagogical and civic enterprise?*

JM This is a huge topic, and one I think about a lot. I will limit my comments to the American academy, as I have commented on the British academy elsewhere.²

In the 25 years since I received my PhD, the Political Science profession in the United States has gone to great lengths to distance itself from the real world. Any

scholar who is seriously interested in engaging with the policy world or speaking to a wide public audience is viewed with suspicion, if not hostility, by his or her colleagues. Heaven forbid that one should appear on television or write an Op-Ed for a major newspaper. Political scientists have developed a self-enclosed world where they talk mainly to each other and their students, and dismiss those who have any inclination to be a public intellectual. In effect, the profession is engaged in self-marginalization. This has been less true of IR scholars than other political scientists, especially those who study American politics. But even students of IR are now succumbing in large numbers to the cult of irrelevance. I think that this is a travesty.

For the purpose of developing sound theories, which is the essence of our enterprise, we need to be deeply engaged with the real world, and to be constantly thinking about how well our theories explain what is happening in the world around us. Many well-educated Americans seem to believe that there is a clear separation between theory and policy. Those immersed in the policy world tend to think that academics do theory and they do policy, while academics tend to think that they do theory and people in Washington do policy. And never do the two meet. This strikes me as a fundamentally flawed way of thinking about how academics and policymakers approach the world around them.

None of us could make sense of the world without the theories we have in our head, and we develop and refine those theories by constantly observing what is going on around us. This way of doing business applies to policymakers as well as academics. Madeleine Albright and Donald Rumsfeld think about American foreign policy in terms of particular theories, and their theories are virtually the same ones employed by academics when they think about US policy. Albright, for example, frequently talks about international politics in terms of the three liberal theories that are at the centre of academic discourse: democratic peace theory, institutionalism and economic interdependence. Rumsfeld sometimes sounds like a hard-core realist when he speaks about world politics. Academics, on the other hand, have no choice but to pay attention to events in the policy world, at least if they are interested in developing powerful theories. After all, the best academic work has real-world relevance. In short, I think that theory and policy go together for both academics and policymakers.

IR *We have to finish. We want to thank you enormously for a fascinating glimpse into your thinking. We are confident that your clarity and clarifications will be read avidly by all serious students of the subject. Finally, can we ask you about your future plans?*

JM First let me say thanks for the opportunity to expound on so many different subjects. I have enjoyed the discussion very much. You certainly made me think hard. Regarding my future plans, I hope to continue doing research and writing until my last day on the planet, which hopefully will be many years from now. I love being a scholar and I consider myself extremely fortunate to have ended up as a professor at the University of Chicago.

On my specific plans, I am just finishing a theoretical paper on lying in international politics, a subject on which there is hardly any literature. I then intend to write a book on nationalism and international politics. In that context, I have been doing research on Zionism and the creation of the Jewish state, which is all about nationalism; I have also been studying the development of Palestinian nationalism. I may write a separate book on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict or incorporate that research into my book on nationalism. The biggest problem I face these days is that there are so many subjects I would like to write about, but not enough time to deal with more than a handful of them.

Notes

- 1 Part I of the interview was published in *International Relations*, 20(1), pp. 105–23.
- 2 See John J. Mearsheimer, 'E. H. Carr vs. Idealism: The Battle Rages On', *International Relations*, 19(2), 2005, pp. 139–52; John J. Mearsheimer, 'Roundtable: The Battle Rages On', *International Relations*, 19(3), 2005, pp. 337–60.