Alumni

Driving Lessons

By
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|
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Not long after you turn off the Maine Turnpike onto Route 3 East, which terminates by Acadia National Park and Bar Harbor, cell-phone coverage gets spotty and satellite-radio reception begins to fade. A couple of years ago I was driving that road with “Tangled Up in Blue” coming in off and on, when the passenger next to me asked, “Is this Bob Dylan?” I told him it was. “I thought so,” he said. “It sounds terrible.” Lucky for him, the satellite reception, as if on command, then died altogether. Lucky for me, that passenger was Kenneth N. Waltz.

Waltz ’54GSAS, who passed away last year, was one of the most important international political theorists of the twentieth century. Anybody with even a fleeting interest in international affairs must grapple with Waltz’s legacy, beginning with the book that sprang from his Columbia doctoral thesis: *Man, the State, and War*. His arguments have become a cornerstone of the study and the practice of international affairs.

In his influential thesis, Waltz laid out what history’s greatest thinkers have identified as the three broad causes of war: human behavior, the internal structure of states, and international political anarchy. More than half a century later, Waltz’s work endures because of its scope — in it, Waltz covers Augustine, Spinoza, Niebuhr, Morgenthau, Kant, Rousseau — and its particular emphasis on the absence of a global sovereign as a determining influence in world politics. Today, in the Middle East, Ukraine, and beyond, military force is employed, because, as Waltz wrote, “there exists no consistent, reliable process of reconciling the conflicts of interest that inevitably arise among similar units in a condition of anarchy.” In later works, especially *Theory of International Politics* (1979), and as a professor at Columbia, Swarthmore, Brandeis, and the University of California at Berkeley, Waltz established his reputation as the founder of what became known as the “neorealist”

school of international political thought.

I first met Waltz in January 2006 when I enrolled in his PhD political-theory seminar during the final semester of my master's candidacy at SIPA. I grew up on the Massachusetts shore north of Boston, and as a boy I frequently vacationed in Maine with my family. Given my New England roots, Ingrid Gerstmann, the business manager of Columbia's Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies, asked me in the spring of 2006 if I would be willing to drive Waltz and his wife, Helen, to their home on Maine's Penobscot Bay, and then stay with them for a few days.

All told, I made about fourteen trips with Waltz. Perhaps the thing I recall most vividly about our drives was the sense of relief we all shared when we pulled up to the house. This feeling was rooted not in stress but rather a collective sense of deliverance, of having finally arrived at a place of resplendent beauty, a beauty made more apparent after the engine went silent, leaving only the lapping of the tide and the scent of salt air that swept in through the opening car doors.

A journey roughly nine hours and 458 miles away from Manhattan left plenty of room for conversation. We talked about Waltz's beloved Detroit Tigers and my beloved Boston Red Sox, and also thermonuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles and the perplexing inability of so many people to appreciate their profoundly stabilizing effects on world politics. Sometimes we just shook our heads and laughed.

Born in 1924, Waltz was blessed with a stunning memory that allowed him to recount his experience of twentieth-century America's defining moments, struggles, and personalities: growing up during the Great Depression; dating interracially at the height of Jim Crow; observing the dawn of nuclear policy in the thinking of Bernard Brodie; marking the lessons of Robert McNamara, Henry Kissinger, Viet Vietnam, and Watergate; and assessing the impact of NSC-68 — a planning document that militarized the US policy of containment toward the Soviet Union — on the US military-industrial complex.

However much these conversations influenced my own thinking on baseball or international politics, our trips together frequently exposed a critical gap between us: music. While most people raise their eyebrows over Waltz's thoughts on nuclear weapons, the craziest thing he ever said to me was, "Who is Buddy Holly?" Given his reputation as a towering intellectual and devotee of classical music, I let this slide.

The stories that stuck with me most were those of Waltz's days in the United States Army in the South Pacific during the Second World War. Waltz's memories of the war were often tinged with exasperation at the magnitude of the destruction, the horror of the whole enterprise, and even a sense of wonder that the world managed to survive it. He was frank about the fear he and his fellow soldiers felt at the time, that they might have to take part in the invasion of the home islands of Japan. Then, one August day in 1945, as Waltz was riding in a troop ship, whispers began to circulate. *Something happened in Japan*. *A bomb, a large bomb. The war is going to end.*

In early May 2013, Waltz and I got together to plan yet another trip north. It turned out to be the last time I saw him. On May 12, 2013, having contracted pneumonia, Waltz passed away.

What I will always carry with me about Waltz is his disdain for warfare. Despite all that he understood about the tragic anarchic roots of conflict, Ken Waltz recognized how little good war does in the world. One need only glance at the headlines, or flip through the pages of some leading foreign policy journals, to see just how difficult a lesson this is for the world to learn.

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