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# Perception and Misperception in International Relations

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clear explanations of technical points and by both expert and nonexpert to gain an understanding of the fourth dimension of naval warfare—the electromagnetic and acoustic spectra.

M.G.M.W. ELLIS  
Commander, Royal Navy

Jervis, Robert. *Perception and Misperception in International Relations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976. 445pp.

The concept of misperception is very much in vogue among contemporary social scientists. It has been employed to help explain any number of foreign policy decisions which proved less than successful, among which are German policy prior to the First World War, appeasement of Hitler in the 1930's and the American involvement in Indochina. Despite the apparent appeal of the concept to students of international relations there have been surprisingly few efforts to provide an adequate theoretical formulation of perception and misperception. Herein lies the utility of the Jervis book. It is an imaginative attempt to apply systematically concepts from psychology to foreign policy decisionmaking in an attempt to elucidate the processes of perception and the possible patterns of misperception.

The book is divided into three sections. The first is concerned with the context of policy and is set off by a perceptive analysis of the utility of and problems inherent in applying psychological insights to international relations. The remainder of the section is devoted to the concept of an actor's intentions, how statesmen draw inferences about the meaning of other's behavior. What is likely to make them conclude that another state has aggressive or pacific designs? This question is explored in two brief case studies of the origins of World War I and the cold war.

Part II, processes of perception,

examines the influence of preexisting beliefs on perceptions. Jervis convincingly demonstrates the prevalence of premature cognitive closure or the extent to which we see what we expect to see regardless of the reality. He suggests a variety of conditions that encourage such misperception, among them the concerns of policymakers, the perspectives of leaders, the distribution of information within a government and time lags.

The remainder of the book is a catalog of common misperceptions. Jervis asserts that most misperceptions can be attributed to three generic and chronic problems: Overestimating the extent to which other's actions are centrally directed and coordinated; overestimating one's own importance as an influence or target; and the influence of a policymaker's own desires and fears upon his perceptions. Within these categories Jervis develops a number of hypotheses. One of the most interesting relates to wishful thinking, the extent to which policymakers are insensitive to evidence that suggests an undesired outcome is likely. He finds that the evidence does not support the conventional wisdom that policymakers are overly prone to wishful thinking. Statesmen sometimes see what they want to see but are just as likely to perceive imaginary dangers. The \$64 question here is, of course, the circumstances in which perception will be skewed in one direction or the other. Jervis is unable to provide us with many clues.

This failure is perhaps the major drawback to the book. His analysis helps us to understand past decisions, cases where the nature and direction of misperception are known, but offers only limited guidance in avoiding future misperceptions. Such guidance consists in sensitizing scholars and policymakers to the kinds of misperceptions that exist and the kinds of situations in which misperceptions are likely to occur. This in itself is a major contribution and

probably all that the current state of the art will permit.

RICHARD NED LEBOW  
Naval War College

Jones, Douglas C. *The Court-Martial of George Armstrong Custer*. New York: Scribner's, 1976. 291pp.

Chances are most schoolchildren learn about and remember Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer as the "hero" of the battle of the Little Big Horn (Montana Territory), where he, on the morning of 25 June 1876, along with his entire unit of 266 officers and men (including 5 civilians and 3 Indian scouts), rode into the midst of thousands of hostile Indians and, to a man, were slaughtered. Custer, a graduate at the bottom of his West Point Class of 1861, was never known for his faint-heartedness or lack of ambition. At the age of only 25 he became a temporary brigadier general of a Michigan volunteer cavalry brigade that distinguished itself in the battle of Gettysburg, and Custer earned for himself national renown and a reputation for daring and brilliance. As many a combat commander has discovered, however, the difference between daring and brilliance and recklessness and defeat can be a very thin one indeed.

In that summer of 1876, Custer and his 7th U.S. Cavalry regiment were ordered against the Sioux, led by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. Custer's spearheading unit was one of three converging columns ordered to return the Sioux (and their friends the Cheyenne) to reservations they had left in protest of the U.S. Government's inability to control gold-seeking white prospectors from entering Indian lands. Custer was ordered by his immediate superior, Brig. Gen. A.H. Terry, to rendezvous with Terry's force on 26 June for a coordinated attack. Instead, Custer attacked the vastly superior Indian force one day early, with fateful results.

What if Custer had survived the battle that day and had been brought to account for his actions which contravened the orders of General Terry? Was Custer's attack the result of his desire to gain immediate tactical advantage following loss of the element of surprise? Or, was his attack the result, as the prosecution in *The Court-Martial of George Armstrong Custer* charges, of Custer's "overriding ambition (to) precipitate a headlong engagement with a vastly superior enemy in order to defeat said enemy before other friendly forces could arrive to assist him?"

In his superbly written, historically based account, novelist Douglas C. Jones poses some interesting questions: To what extent are a commander's wrong battlefield decisions criminally neglectful? How does one sustain the burden of proving that disastrous actions stem from political ambitions or from a desire for personal glory? What is the measure of an "unwarranted loss of animals and men?" While perplexing, these questions can at least be resolved in a court of law. But should they, or should they more appropriately be resolved in another forum? The author has succeeded in illustrating the difficulty in obtaining convictions for even the most disastrous decisions made in the heat of battle, even those with seemingly blatant ulterior motives. By implication, Mr. Jones also refers to two areas of potential abuse in the military judicial system: "command influence" and military prosecutors who may not be truly independent of, and immune from, those with an interest in the case. Neither plays an important role in this novel, but the reader can judge the implications.

As an interesting reading experience, *The Court-Martial of George Armstrong Custer* is commended for students of battles as well as for students of the courtroom. Jones' novel also provides a valuable psychological insight as to what may have motivated Custer's