Kenneth N. Waltz

A Conversation with Kenneth Waltz

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Video

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Abstract

Kenneth Waltz's books and articles have definitively shaped the study of international relations over the past fifty years. He developed a version of "Realist" thinking on the subject that has structured research in the entire field, for critics and supporters alike. On March 11, 2011, at his home in New York, he was interviewed by James Fearon, a member of the Editorial Committee of the *Annual Review of Political Science*. The conversation ranged over some of his best-known arguments and the relationships between them, his thinking about contemporary international politics, and issues in the field that he thinks are understudied relative to their importance. What follows is an edited transcript of that conversation. A video of the entire conversation is available online.

James Fearon: Ken, thank you very much for talking with me about your career in political science and in the field of IR in particular. Let's start with some basic information. I gather you were born and raised in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and you went to high school there, but I also gather that you weren't particularly interested in international relations in high school.

Kenneth Waltz: Not at all.

JF: What were the things you liked at that time?

KW: Well, I always enjoyed mathematics and ultimately, when I went to college, majored in mathematics. I liked history. I liked English literature, and I liked French. I really can't think of anything that I studied in high school that I did not like!

JF: And you went to Oberlin?

KW: I went to Oberlin College quite by fortunate accident. Most people, especially people from lower middle-class families, took as a matter of course that if they were going to go to college, they would go to the University of Michigan; and I made that assumption as well. And then luckily two of my friends were the son and daughter of the Dean of the University of Michigan, Arts and Sciences; and he encouraged his kids to consider other colleges, namely Oberlin. So I went with them. They drove from Ann Arbor to Oberlin, about 150 miles, and we took examinations for scholarships. I took the examination in mathematics, and in due course I got a message from Oberlin saying that they had decided to offer me a one-semester tuition scholarship. Almost the same day, I got a letter from the University of Michigan, where I had checked the box on the admissions form saying yes, I would like to have a scholarship. The offer from Michigan was a four-year tuition scholarship. So I immediately wrote to Oberlin saying, "Much though I would like to come to Oberlin, under the circumstances, I obviously cannot." Promptly I received a letter from Oberlin saying, "Just by chance when we received your letter, we were considering you for a four-year full-tuition scholarship," which I then of course accepted.

JF: It's so nice to know this kind of negotiation occurred even back—

KW: I didn't even know I was negotiating. That's the best way to do it.

JF (*laughing*): Right. Your time at Oberlin was interrupted by service in the Army in World War II?

KW: The first thing, after three semesters in a row and suffering a good deal with sinus headaches (it's a bad climate, it's very damp in Oberlin), I decided to go to the University of Texas for a semester. Which turned out to be extremely good because I took classes for which I had no prerequisites; and in fact the transcript was almost all "not good for credit at the University of Texas." But I cleared it with Oberlin, and they were delighted that I was taking courses I had no preparation for. So it worked out very well; and shortly after the end of that semester, I was drafted.

JF: And you were sent to the Pacific?

KW: In due course I was sent to the Pacific, correct. Having concentrated on German and French because I thought the war in Europe would last longer than it did, I was sent to the Pacific. Spent a year in Japan and—

JF: A year in Japan in the occupation?

KW: Right.

JF: And then you went back for the Korean War.

KW: I stayed in the Inactive Reserve, and I was called back as a—I guess I was a First Lieutenant. I was called back and spent nine months in Korea.

JF: Did these Army experiences influence your subsequent thinking about the U.S. Army, U.S. defense policy or international relations more generally?

KW: Generally but not in any specific way . . . . I was not interested in studying international politics at that time, and in fact I wasn't even interested in studying international politics subsequently when I was a graduate student. One had to have a major and a minor; and since I had done work in international economics, I thought a minor in international relations would be probably the easiest minor I could have and would interfere to the least possible extent with what I was really interested in, which was political philosophy. So that's how I happened to do international relations at all.

JF: So this is back at Columbia. You were taking exams . . .

KW: I took the comprehensive exam, which then consisted of, and only of, a two-hour oral exam. I took that before I went back into the Army.

JF: I've heard you say the idea for your dissertation, which became your first book, *Man, the State, and War*, actually started with this minor exam.

KW: It did. It was customary for people who were studying with a professor named Peffer, Nathaniel Peffer, to make arrangements if you were a minor in the field to cover certain things and not other things. So for example, his principal course was Imperialism—he's always gonna cover imperialism, European diplomatic history, and leave aside law and organization and all such matters; and he got sick. So it turned out that William T. R. Fox was the principal man on the minor field. When I explained this arrangement to him, he said he had never heard of any such arrangement. If I was gonna do international relations, I would do international relations, period. So that's what I did.

So we had three weeks, which I was gonna spend on my major; and my wife and I scurried around the library getting a lot of books on international relations. And I couldn't make head or tail of them. And that's when I realized what the problem was with this embryonic literature. There was no big literature the way there is now in that field, luckily for me. But the writers in the literature were talking at cross purposes. That's when I figured out that some of them were beginning with man and what human nature's like and all that; and some were concentrating on the state (good states make peace and bad states fight wars); and some were looking at international politics as a whole. And that's what led to *Man, the State, and War*.

JF: And so you kind of gravitated into the IR side of things.

KW: Well, I didn't intend to. I thought I was doing theory, because *Man, the State, and War* is a lot of theory. But it turned out of course that when you were on the job market, the jobs, if there were any at all, were in international relations, not in political theory.

JF: [Your dissertation advisor, William T.R.] Fox, had quite a circle of people studying international relations and American foreign policy. Is that something you engaged in very much, or were influenced by?

KW: I didn't do much foreign policy. Bill Fox was very much interested in military policy. He was one of the early people to become interested in that vital, fundamental subject, but I did not do much with either foreign policy or military policy because I was interested in doing this theory dissertation.

JF: Well, Fox I think had a fair bit to do with the formation of or the development of the IR field we now know. I have the impression from reading works on IR theory really from the fifties through or up to and including your 1979 *Theory of International Politics* that there was a particular concern with trying to stake out a field of international relations as a distinct field within political science that deserved to be treated with respect and as its own intellectual enterprise. Was that something in the air then or something that—

KW: Oh, it was definitely in the air. It was in the air. It was also on the ground. Ken Thompson of the Rockefeller Foundation was very much interested in the development of the field of international politics, and there really was not any such field in existence. In 1930 there were 24 professors of international politics in the country, 18 of whom were teaching international law and organization. And that gives you a pretty good idea of what the field was like. Before Bill Fox came, there was really nobody teaching international politics at Columbia. Harold Sprout used to come from Princeton once a week to teach a course. It was called, and this was a very frequently used title, "Basic Factors in International Relations." And basic factors were who had how many people, who was producing how much coal, who was producing how much steel. Those were the basic factors, and you spent your time simply dealing with descriptive empirical matters. There was no conception of the field of international politics as such.

JF: Clearly by the time you're writing *Theory of International Politics*, one of your goals is to argue for a field of international politics as such. Did that develop gradually or was it something that was already . . . ?

KW: Well, it developed suddenly because I had, in effect, three weeks' notice that if you're gonna take your comprehensive exams, you're gonna do international relations, and not those pieces of it which Professor Peffer and I had marked out. So I suddenly had to confront the question: what is international relations, if anything. I mean, how can you make sense of it? And my way of making sense of it was, as I just said, what became *Man*, *the State*, *and War*; and that was the conception.

The oral exam was traumatic because the rumor was that two-thirds of the people flunked it. That was probably an exaggeration. It was probably only three-fifths, but one person after another would wake up on the day of the oral exam and cancel and creep away and never be heard of again. So it was preparing for the oral exams in IR and confronting the question of what is international relations that really caused me to develop the ideas that became *Man*, *the State*, *and War*. In fact my wife and I borrowed her family's car, and took a little trip, and we spent much of it discussing what became the dissertation. That's where it all began.

JF: Now, one of the ideas that makes an appearance in *Man*, *the State*, *and War*, and is much more explicit later in *Theory of International Politics*, is the analogy between international politics between great powers and an oligopolistic market. I believe you'd started at Columbia in economics . . .

KW: I started in economics, right.

JF: Had you taken courses in industrial organization—I mean, where did this idea—

KW: It came out of economic theory really. No, I never took any courses in industrial organization. I don't think there were any, or there was no such course at Oberlin. And I didn't stay with economics very long as a graduate student at Columbia. I made the break, and I spent a semester deciding whether to do English literature or political philosophy. Political philosophy won.

JF: Fortunately for us.

KW: Probably fortunately for English literature as well.

JF (*laughing*): I don't know. Let me go a slightly different direction here. In almost everything you've written, there's a very strong focus on first principles or basic theory, fundamental theory. But another thing that I'm curious about . . . . You were my dissertation advisor at Berkeley. Knowing you then and over the years, I know that you have quite definite opinions about various aspects of American foreign policy. And correct me or modify this if I got it wrong, but in general my impression is that you feel the U.S. is, let's say, more interventionist than is for our own good in general; that we probably spend a lot more on defense than we ought to; and that at least during the Cold War, we pursued a lot of just crazy policies with respect to nuclear weapons.

KW: I believe all those things very strongly.

JF: Okay. So I'm curious about how you think about the relationship between criticism of American foreign policy and scholarly work on international relations theory. I think except maybe for your APSA presidential address, which was about nuclear weapons and took some positions on policy matters, you haven't written very many "op ed" or policy-focused papers. I'm curious about how you think about the relationship between these endeavors or parts of our enterprise.

KW: Yeah, I have written some things, but it's a small body of my overall work. I wrote a piece, for example, called "The Politics of Peace," which was against the war in Vietnam, which I began to oppose before it started. In my 1963 article "The Stability of the Bipolar World" I have a few things to say about the folly of engaging in such peripheral enterprises. I believed that for a long time, and I've written a bit about it here and there. But most notably in "The Politics of Peace," which is in my collected essays.

JF: Do you feel that it's important to focus on basic research on theory and draw implications of that for policy practice, or do you see them as just very separate enterprises, that it's good to have some people who are dedicated to policy and other people dedicated to theory, let's say?

KW: Whether or not it's good, that's what happens. And obviously, theory is what attracted me and what I did most of. But I did stray into practical questions now and then. In my collected essays there's one section, I think there are about four pieces in there about arms and disarmament and cautions against getting involved in peripheral adventures and that sort of thing. But that is admittedly a minor part of what I have written.

JF: Were you ever tempted to work in the policy world?

KW: No, not really. I like scholarly work. I like to deal in ideas and the application of ideas. I feel very much at home in that part of the world.

JF: Let me ask you a little bit more about nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons policy. So you were wrapping up *Theory of International Politics*, your third book I guess, in the late seventies; and I believe around that time you got interested in nuclear weapons and their effect on international politics in a more detailed way and, I guess, started reading more heavily in the deterrence theory literature. This led to an Adelphi paper called *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better*.

KW: Right. That grew out of a conference, a CIA/DOD conference that I was asked to write a paper for. And I remember when the person found me and asked me to do it, I said, "Give me a few days, and I'll think about it and decide whether or not I want to do it." I had just finished the final revisions of *Theory of International Politics*, so I was free to undertake the next big thing, and the more I thought about it, the more I realized that whatever I had said or written about nuclear weapons was very cursory and not based on any careful, deep reading or thinking. So I took that up as being the next subject of interest to me, and the result was the paper that I wrote for that CIA/DOD conference, which then became the Adelphi paper.

JF: What led you to want to work on nuclear weapons next? Some sort of nagging sense that there was more here—

KW:—was more here than I had—I had not paid enough attention to something that was really fundamentally important in the world of international politics. So I took the opportunity to do that, and of course I got in deeper and deeper and became more and more fascinated by it.

JF: And would it be fair to say it had a big influence on how you thought about IR since then?

KW: Yes, it did. That's correct.

JF: Now, the sense I get from reading your work is that thinking about nuclear weapons may have led to strengthening a view that's already there in a way in *Theory of International Politics*, which is that at least in bipolarity, the great powers have little good reason to get into any kind of intense security or military competitions.

KW: Right.

JF: And that it's all the more so in a nuclear world.

KW: That's right. Very much more so in a nuclear world.

JF: Does it follow then even further that nuclear weapons imply that what realists were traditionally concerned about, and the focus of a great deal of great power politics—who is gonna be allied with who in case of war—become less relevant?

KW: Become irrelevant. At the strategic level as de Gaulle always said, nuclear weapons don't add up. I mean if one nuclear country allies with another nuclear country, they don't gain anything in terms of nuclear capability. Once you have a second strike capability, adding to it doesn't matter. So it makes alliances at the strategic level irrelevant.

JF: So what does that imply about polarity and the role of power that has traditionally been a central concern in the realist school?

KW: Well, nuclear weapons have abolished war among their possessors or those who enjoy their protection. I mean, never once—this is the kind of statement you can almost never make in a social science—never once has there been a war between countries both of whom possess nuclear weapons.

JF: I'm in general on board with you here; but for the heck of it, what do you think about Kargil? The Kargil War was a spat [between India and Pakistan in 1999]—

KW: Well, yeah. As I've always said, and I think quite a few people agree, you can fight minor wars in peripheral areas even if you have nuclear weapons. I mean, the test does not lie at the periphery. It lies at the center, as both Pakistani and Indian commentators have said subsequently.

JF: Yeah. So, let me come back to this polarity question, because there continues to be interest in the distribution of power and how to think about it and how to connect it to various things we see going on in international politics. In *Theory of International Politics* you had characterized bipolarity (two great powers, two superpowers) and multipolarity. And you made arguments about the relative stability of bipolarity, which, I guess, for the first time was in the article you mentioned from 1964—which was quite controversial at the time.

KW: It was.

JF: And then, 1991 or so the Soviet Union disintegrates, and since then we've been in kind of a confusing state of affairs concerning polarity. And some people talk about it as unipolarity.

KW: Right.

JF: I'm curious—what do you think, is that a useful characterization?

KW: I think so. I mean, there's only one power in the world that could be called a great power. There's one great power, the United States, and then there are some major powers. And there's the potential second great power being China. But that's the situation we're in, it's a unipolar world, pending what happens in the future development of China.

JF: Do you see it as a stable condition?

KW: Turns out to be stable in the sense that—stability in two senses. One is the stability of the system defined in terms of polarity, and unipolarity would seem to be the least stable because unipolarity in itself gives another state a strong incentive to raise itself to the level that would return the world to a bipolar condition. And that does not have to be a level in which the challenging state equals the polar state, but develops enough strength so that it's a challenge. The Soviet Union by various measures had maybe half the capability of the United States, but that was enough to make the world bipolar. And we may be approaching that situation again with the development of the capabilities of China. So it's unipolar for the time being, but it's unstable in the sense that we can expect a second great power to emerge in the relatively near future. So the structure of the system is unstable.

JF: But in a nuclear world, what do you see as the consequences of unipolarity versus bipolarity or other polarities?

KW: The consequence is not in terms of war and peace anymore because countries with nuclear weapons don't fight one another, but it is consequential in terms of global interventions. I mean there's only one power now, the United States, that can act globally, with a blue water fleet and all that, and that's what the Chinese are trying to achieve and are moving toward with considerable rapidity. But they're not there yet. So it remains unipolar for the time being.

JF: So potentially a plus of moving away from unipolarity, in your view, might be that we'd be less able to pursue pointless interventions . . .

KW: We wouldn't be able to follow our whims in various parts of the world without considering what the reaction of China might be. Of course we now have to consider the reaction of China regionally, but in the future maybe we would have to consider it globally.

JF: So unipolarity, you suggested, allows the U.S. to do a lot of boneheaded things?

KW: Right. It's an age-old story. The dominant power always abuses it. Alexander Hamilton said, "History records no incidence in which a dominant power has disposed of its capabilities responsibly." Dominance is itself a temptation to follow one's whims. And what one thinks may be good for one's own country and at the same time good for others is not going to be looked upon by other countries as serving their interests but rather as serving the self-defined interests of the dominant power. So we run into that situation at all times. We think we're behaving nobly and disinterestedly, but it doesn't look that way to other countries, which is quite understandable. I mean, it's age old.

JF: What do you see as the main source of these mistakes? The way you just described it, it sounds like it might be a human-nature argument—

KW: A human-nature, political-nature situation that is sort of built into us. It's part of what everybody believes, that unbalanced power in the absence of checks and balances is very bad

domestically. Well, it's also bad internationally, but we don't apply the same logic internationally that we do domestically. We don't see that in the absence of checks and balances, that country that disposes of an undue amount of power is almost sure to abuse it.

JF: In various critiques you've made of U.S. nuclear policy, my recollection is that you often are stressing organizational interests of the defense establishment and parts of the military or the—

KW: Sure. Like any bureaucratic organization, the military wants more. This doesn't mean that there's something wrong with the organization or something evil about it. It's just the way big bureaucracies behave. And the difference of course is that the military in the United States is favored. It's very difficult for governments to control a military, to limit military spending. We all know the United States spends more than the military expenditures of the other countries of the world combined. Why do we do that? I mean, it's almost impossible to think of a great power that has ever been so favored as the United States has been. There is no threat in being, or on the horizon, to the military dominance of the United States. So why do we spend all that money on defense? Why do we let the Secretary of Defense now brag about increasing the defense budget by only 4% in a given year? Why not cut it 10% a year for the next five years?

JF: And what do you think the answer is for why we do this? Is it human nature, the temptation for power?

KW: That's part of it. A part of it of course is also the American political culture where military spending and military power and so on is seen as very appealing. It stands very high in public opinion. If you really wanted to cut the defense budget as much as I think it should be cut, it would be extremely unpopular politically in the United States. So, hard to do.

JF: Well, let me ask you a little bit about threats to security. You're suggesting that we're spending far, far more than is [appropriate]—

KW: —Absolutely.

JF: —given our very favored situation. Now, one of the things that people have worried a great deal about as you know, especially since 9/11, is the risk of terrorism with weapons of mass destruction and most of all nuclear weapons. Arguably, this concern was one of the reasons for our misadventure in Iraq. Now, in your writing on nuclear weapons you've argued that this is another area where there's a great tendency to exaggerate the real danger. You suggested that any state that goes to the great trouble needed to acquire nuclear weapons is going to be quite unlikely to hand it off to some unreliable third-party terrorist group that could get the state into a lot of trouble. I'm curious, though, what you think about the risk of proliferation leading to new nuclear states that may disintegrate and lose control of weapons. So North Korea and Pakistan, well, sooner or later there's going to be a regime change in North Korea; and maybe it will go smoothly but—

KW: Maybe not.

JF: —maybe not. And Pakistan might survive, but it might also disintegrate. In both cases I think those are pretty scary scenarios, but I'm curious about what you think.

KW: I agree with you. They're both scary scenarios. Now, if it happens to North Korea and another authoritarian government or at least a competent government replaces the present one, I don't think there's a worry about such a government using nuclear weapons. I mean, any country or any group within a country that uses nuclear weapons knows that it risks severe retaliation. It risks losing everything. Now, some people will say, "Yeah, but suppose the use of a nuclear weapon

is clandestine and nobody knows who did it?" Well, for anybody to run such a risk is worse than foolhardy, it's self-destructive, because one thing that the United States has and is good at using is surveillance capabilities. Our surveillance capabilities are awesome. And any country or any group in any country caught up in the use of nuclear weapons is bound to know that. So to think that any group within a country, let alone the country itself, could use nuclear weapons without being found out is simply in the realm of fantasy.

JF: Well, what about loss of control of weapons?

KW: Yeah, that certainly is a problem; and the only thing one can say is that there are certain risks one has to live with. Nuclear weapons exist, and they will not always be in the control of competent governments. And if that happens, we risk—and there's no way getting around this. The risk is simply there. But if nuclear weapons are used under such circumstances their use will be limited. Maybe that's not much consolation, but it's some. There may be considerable damage to one major city in the world; but beyond that anything is extremely unlikely. Now, what can you do about that? I mean, there are certain things you just have to live with. That's one of them.

JF: Some would say we can try to move towards a nuclear-free world or a world where there is such good control of fissile material that this risk is minimized by having so few countries or agencies actually having nuclear weapons. So the risk of losing control of them would be smaller.

KW: Yeah, how do we get from here to there? I mean, if there's an agreement to abolish nuclear weapons and if you can even assume that all countries are sincere in their desire to do that, it's still not going to happen because any country with any halfway competent government is going to have enough sense to secretly keep a few of these things. We sometimes lose sight of the fact that nuclear weaponry is very small. At Los Alamos National Laboratory there's an open unclassified area in which there are nuclear exhibits, one of which is a 1:1 model of a hydrogen device. It's about 30" long and 12" in diameter. I say that just by having looked at it. Now, how are you going to police countries? How are you going to convince yourself that all present nuclear countries have gotten rid of 100% of their weapons, which they'd have to be idiots to do, right? Because everybody knows that somebody else may cheat. So unless you're stupid, you do a little cheating yourself. So we have at best a clandestine store, small stores of nuclear weapons sprinkled around the world just as we now have larger stores of nuclear weapons sprinkled around the world. We wouldn't be any better off really.

JF: So it would follow, then, there's a really high premium on trying to get to a world where a lot of states are capable and can control their own materials. If you think it's very unlikely to get rid of them entirely, then—

KW: I think it's impossible to get rid of them entirely.

JF: Yeah, then you've gotta address the dangers posed by a Pakistan or North Korea disintegrating by doing something to try to keep them from disintegrating.

KW: Right. As Tom Schelling used to say, once the knowledge exists, the only way you can get rid of nuclear weapons is universal brain surgery; there's no way of getting rid of the knowledge of how to make the weapons. And the knowing how is not very difficult. The doing of it is difficult, but a lot of countries have the capability of doing it, so there's nothing short of an unimaginably competent and despotic international regime, if you could imagine it, that would be capable of controlling and moving toward the elimination of nuclear weapons. And who wants that? Who wants that kind of world tyranny?

JF: Do you think that given this understanding of the consequences of the nuclear revolution and what it implies that this changes the field of IR in terms of what questions merit more study and areas that we shouldn't be as much focused on?

KW: Yeah, I think it does, because to say that the number of countries possessing nuclear weapons will increase, and the number of countries that enjoy the protection of other countries that have nuclear weapons—it means that there's a large area of peace in the world where war has become practically unimaginable. You can't imagine two nuclear countries going to war. We've known that's been the condition of the Soviet Union and United States, and it's now a more general condition. And that certainly changes international political problems. The problems are now problems of what do you do in the peacetime relations of those states that can't fight each other.

JF: So in some ways international politics has become—or at least major power international politics is a lot more dull.

KW: It's a lot duller. It's become in a sense domesticated.

JF: Yeah, which is a good thing.

KW: Right.

JF: Last thing I wanted to ask you is about your perception of change over your career. One of the themes of realist writers on international relations has always been that there are certain basic, fundamental aspects of the quality of international politics that don't change: the condition of anarchy, lack of a supernational government, and the importance of the relative power of the states or the political communities. The idea is that these things are more or less a constant across time and have implications that are more or less similar across eras.

But certainly a lot of things change in time. I'm curious about when you look back on roughly 60 years of thinking about international politics, are there changes or developments that you find particularly striking, other than changes resulting from a change in the distribution of power or the implications of nuclear weapons? Are there other things that, when you think back to the world of the fifties or the sixties, and then read the paper and think about what's going on now, strike you as being different in an interesting way?

KW: I think that students and teachers now move away from the fundamentally important international political developments in order to use data sets and that sort of thing. And the real questions of power and the relations of states are emphasized less than they used to be. And these other kinds of questions that are answerable sometimes by applying mathematical and other formal methods take over the political sense in the search for precision.

JF: So that's a change in, or something you see about the field of IR. Let's stay on that for a minute. So you think we're not spending enough time on the important issues in international politics, perhaps concerning the distribution of power, or is it other topics?

KW: Maybe both.

JF: Well, if nuclear weapons have made great power war much less likely, does that not force us to study stuff that's, I don't know . . .

KW: Interdependence for example. I'd say that's a good subject. That's a subject close to my heart.

JF: Oh, that's something you think has increased in an interesting way or—

KW: No, I don't think it's increased. I think it's decreased, but—

JF: Even since the end of the Cold War?

KW: Yeah, but the perception is of course that interdependence has increased. But interdependence implies a certain degree of equality. And that's what we don't have. International politics is all about inequality, much more so than the study of domestic politics, partly because in international politics the inequalities across the acting units are much greater than they are domestically in most countries. And I mean, you can look that up, it's simply true. International equalities are immense. Domestic inequalities are somewhat tempered in most states by law and by welfare programs and all those things that we know about. That's not true with international politics.

JF: There's a lot of focus on the increased share of imports and exports and countries' GDP, but this fails to pay attention to the staggering differences in aggregate GDP between the U.S. and smaller countries, say?

KW: Right. And of course it's part of the American ideology—it's part of the ideology of any dominant state to play its dominance down, to say we're just one of the folks. We're just like these other states: they have their problems, we have our problems, so we're all in the same boat. Of course it's intelligent for the dominant power to talk that way. But it's completely wrong. It's completely misleading to do that. We're not like other states.

JF: So you say that interdependence is low in the sense that the U.S. is just incredibly much more powerful than other states?

KW: Yeah, you can't take a situation in which some states are highly independent and other states are very dependent and then call that interdependence. Well, that's what we do. It makes sense politically, but it doesn't make sense intellectually.

I remember when I was introducing this topic at Berkeley, one French student came up to me, even though we hadn't started talking about it, and said, "Why do American officials and American academics always talk about interdependence? We Frenchmen know you don't depend on us. We depend on you." Well, that's the way it looks to any thoughtful member of any foreign country. There's the dominant country, and then there are all the rest. But we like to call that interdependence, naturally, but it doesn't look like interdependence if you're one of the dependent countries. And in fact as one British political scientist put it, "Interdependence is a euphemism popular in America to disguise the extent of American dominance." That's true.

JF: Let me try another area of possible change in international relations. An area of research interest in the field has been norms, for example, norms regarding intervention and the idea of the responsibility to protect. The idea is that there used to be greater regard for sovereignty norms. Now if there's a revolution going on in Libya, lots of people from the left to the right say, "Oh, well, yeah, sure, we should go enforce a no-fly zone and help out with the revolution that's going on."

KW: That's right.

JF: And this kind of thinking reflects a change of norms from what would have occurred to anyone even 30 or 40 years ago.

KW: I think the norms probably have not changed very much, nor has the behavior, but we may be more aware of norms that especially the United States does not obey. I mean, it's hard to think of any other country that's as interventionist as the United States, which is simply because we're the strongest country. We intervene more. We don't even notice that we intervene. How many

people remember that we invaded the Dominican Republic in 1965? It just doesn't exist in the American memory. I'm sure it does in the Dominican Republic, I'm sure they remember it! We put 23,000 troops in the Dominican Republic, which is of course a larger military body than the Dominican Republic itself could muster. So naturally it fits right in with "democracies don't fight wars," because if you're a really powerful democracy, you don't need to fight wars. You just occupy the country. They're not going to fight back.

JF: So I guess the upshot is you don't see things that strike you as big changes, and in fact it is more your sense that we're fooling ourselves about a lot of these—

KW: Yeah, international politics is a realm of dreary repetition, and that's because the basic structure of the system does not change. It remains anarchic. So as long as the system is an anarchic one, you expect the repetition of the same types of behavior—now, modified by technology and other changes—but basically the same kind of behavior, spawned by the same kind of situation that countries are in.

JF: You're saying "as long as the system stays the same," in the sense of anarchy, but if there's one dominant power, why isn't that the end of anarchy?

KW: Oh, because the system remains anarchic, which places a premium on the differences in capabilities across the acting units; and that's much more so in international politics than in domestic politics. It doesn't mean that power isn't important in domestic politics. But it's at least modified by laws and the enforcement of laws and courts and so on, all those things that don't exist, at least effectively, in international politics, so it reduces largely, not entirely, but largely, to a question of relative capabilities.

JF: Which are extraordinarily skewed.

KW: Yes.

JF: You brought up a change in the field that you've seen over time; and I guess your feeling is that we're missing some of the big things that are going on. And possibly that might be related to the focus on quantitative methods and data sets and formal methods. You suggested some of the things that you think are important that we're missing: the low level of interdependence, the importance of a distribution of power that we ignore for many things, apart from great power war.

KW: Right. And the emphasis on norms—and we all know that norms exist to be broken, and the people who are going to break them are the most powerful people.

JF: One of the constants in your career has been a real interest in and attention to classical political philosophy. Would we be better off spending more time on that in order to help us to think about these larger questions?

KW: I believe that very strongly. One of the advantages that we have in political science is a great historical body of literature in the western world, largely from Plato onward. But all kinds of different emphases and all kinds of different schools are represented. And you think of Plato and St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas and Machiavelli, I mean, anything that could be of importance politically is represented and written about and discussed and debated at the highest intellectual levels. It's a wonderful literature. And it's a shame that there are people in the field who have not had the benefit of thorough exposure to that literature, not to the exclusion of other things, by any means, but there's enough time to read the really great literature in our field and to do other things as well. It doesn't interfere with doing other things.