

[ISSF Article Review 74 on “You Never Get a Second Chance to Make a First Impression? First Encounters and Face-based Threat Perception.”](#)

Discussion published by George Fujii on Tuesday, April 11, 2017

H-Diplo | **ISSF Article Review 74**
issforum.org

H-Diplo/ISSF Editors: **Seth Offenbach** and **Diane Labrosse**
H-Diplo/ISSF Web and Production Editor: **George Fujii**

Marcus Holmes. “You Never Get a Second Chance to Make a First Impression? First Encounters and Face-based Threat Perception.” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1:14 (2016): 285-302. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogw015>.

Review by **Seanon Wong**, Chinese University of Hong Kong

Published by ISSF on 11 April 2017

tiny.cc/ISSF-AR74
<https://issforum.org/articlereviews/74-second-chance>
<https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-AR74.pdf>

From deciding whom to engage in business, romantic, and other relationships to which professors to take courses from, to whether to entrust one’s fortune and wellbeing to unknown strangers – for instance, a doctor, a real estate broker or a babysitter – we often rely on our “gut” feeling upon initial contact to estimate a person’s intentions, character, and competence. First impressions matter.

World leaders, like the rest of us, are human beings. There is no reason to believe that they would behave differently when they interact in person. The challenges for scholars, then, would be to specify the psychological and even neuroscientific processes involved and at the same time demonstrate their empirical relevance in the conduct of face-to-face diplomacy. Marcus Holmes has achieved both in the current article.

I would, however, caution against overstating the role of first impressions in international politics. Holmes argues that “first impressions are sticky in that they last long into a relationship and color future interaction ... [S]ince threat processing occurs automatically and can be long-lasting, first impressions may set the tone for a particular dyadic relationship... The development of beneficial dyadic relationships in diplomacy is affected by what happens in the first few seconds of interaction” (285- 86). As he explains, the claim that first impressions have “staying power” is based on findings in psychology (notably the works of Alexander Todorov and his colleagues)¹ that impressions are formed within milliseconds of a first encounter, commonly manipulated through the presentation of an unknown and often fictional face to an experimental subject (292-94). That first impressions can be vivid, however, does not necessarily mean that they persist beyond the highly controlled settings of

Citation: George Fujii. *ISSF Article Review 74 on “You Never Get a Second Chance to Make a First Impression? First Encounters and Face-based Threat Perception.”*. H-Diplo. 04-11-2017. <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/174975/issf-article-revie-74-%E2%80%9Cyou-never-get-second-chance-make-first>

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.

the laboratory. Experiments are good at estimating a causal effect, not at achieving realism. Simply put, first impressions may be “sticky” if they are examined in isolation; they may be less so in “real life”, where first encounters in the strictest sense (i.e. the individuals involved knew absolutely nothing about each other beforehand) are rare, and where other evidence of intentions is available.¹⁴ In diplomacy, as in other relationships in practice, leaders are exposed to all sorts of information before, during and after a first encounter that could inform and even transform their beliefs about each other.

Indeed, one of Holmes’s hypotheses is that “[i]nitial implicit intuitions are subject to revision... based on subsequent interaction” (294).¹⁵ But beyond what leaders are able to learn about each other in later rounds of face-to-face contact, there are also other sources of information they can consult (to what extent they are cognitively motivated to do so, however, is a separate question). These would include not only behaviors that rationalists, realists, and other scholars of International Relations often highlight (costly signals, changes in relative power and interests, track record of cooperation vs. defection, etc.), but also, and I shall elaborate on two of them because they speak directly to the article’s focus on diplomacy, 1) a leader’s preexisting impression of a counterpart, and 2) behaviors that are not intuitive and physiognomic in nature but are nevertheless informative in face-to-face interactions. In fact, I would suspect in some of the case studies presented in the article, it might be these factors rather than first impressions that best explain how their protagonists came to perceive each other.

First, as Holmes points out, “[i]n real-world politics, individuals are encumbered with a number of different priors” (292). One such prior would presumably be the impressions that the leaders have of each other – even before a first encounter. Diplomatic relationships are rarely a *tabula rasa*. Leaders invariably know something about a counterpart, including his character traits (trustworthiness and how trusting of others, proneness to bluff, self-confidence, etc.). Such impressions could come from a number of channels: reports by others who are acquainted with the counterpart, the latter’s performance in face-to-face meetings with other leaders in the past, intelligence reports, etc. The remark that people often make when they first meet – “I’ve heard/read a lot about you” – is not just a pleasantry.

Take, for instance, the Vienna summit between President John F. Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in June 1961 (a case that Holmes discusses). Notwithstanding his own brief first encounter with the Soviet leader during Khrushchev’s visit to the U.S. two years earlier (Kennedy was a junior Senator then), Kennedy “read scores of intelligence reports on the Russian leader and every available word he had ever spoken or written for the public record.”¹⁶ Kennedy also consulted those who knew Khrushchev best. He met with French President Charles de Gaulle in Paris en route to Vienna. The General had dealt with Khrushchev a number of times over the years, and warned Kennedy that Khrushchev would again flare in temper and threaten to seize West Berlin; de Gaulle, however, considered him a “bluffer.”¹⁷ Kennedy’s “Ambassador at Large”, Averell Harriman, also knew Khrushchev well personally. He advised the President similarly: “Don’t let him rattle you, he’ll try to rattle you and frighten you, but don’t pay any attention to that.”¹⁸

Does the outcome of the Vienna summit support the argument that first impressions are “sticky”? Holmes suggests that Khrushchev was aggressive – “he just beat the hell out of me,” according to Kennedy¹⁹ – because he had formed “a non-threatening intuition” regarding Kennedy when he met the

Citation: George Fujii. *ISSF Article Review 74 on “You Never Get a Second Chance to Make a First Impression? First Encounters and Face-based Threat Perception.”*. H-Diplo. 04-11-2017. <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/174975/issf-article-review-74-%E2%80%9Cyou-never-get-second-chance-make-first>

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.

“young and inexperienced senator” two years earlier (297). That is possible. It is also possible, however, that Khrushchev was deliberately taking advantage of his superiority in age and experience to patronize and intimidate Kennedy (as he famously liked to do to those around him). His objective was to get across the message that he thought of the President as inexperienced, irresolute, and even immature. For instance, immediately after they sat down on their first day of meetings, Kennedy reminded Khrushchev that they had met before. Khrushchev, “[i]n an initial thrust of one-upmanship that would come to characterize their talks” said that he remembered the meeting, but bantered that he had “no opportunity to say much except hello and good-bye” because the Senator had arrived so late.¹⁴ In other words, his reference to Kennedy’s youth may indeed have reflected an impression about Kennedy that had lingered since their first encounter. But it could also have been a psychological ploy to demoralize Kennedy. If they were to meet at the brink, particularly over Berlin, it would be Kennedy, not Khrushchev, to back down first.

This leads to my second point. There is more to face-to-face diplomacy than first impressions. Perceptions of intentions might take shape instantly upon contact, but diplomacy also entails behaviors that are consciously performed, observed and processed, and whose meanings are understood - often implicitly - among those involved. As Dean Rusk, Kennedy’s Secretary of State, noted, “[s]everal times during the [Vienna] summit he [Khrushchev] referred to Kennedy’s youth, and he never meant it as a compliment.”¹⁵ He was, as discussed, trying to assert himself over Kennedy, and the Americans knew it. Similarly, Khrushchev explicitly threatened Kennedy with war over Berlin. But “[d]iplomats almost never use the word ‘war’,” Rusk added, “they always talk about ‘gravest possible consequences’ or something like that.”¹⁶ Consciously or not, Khrushchev was hoping to convince the Americans that he meant business with the use of the taboo word in such a high-profile summit meeting.

On the surface, Holmes’s case studies on the relationships between President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev at Geneva in 1985 and between President Jimmy Carter and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1977 show that first impressions often trump whatever incoming images leaders have of each other, and that such impressions are “sticky.” “Despite the priors that Reagan brought to their first encounter,” Holmes argues, “Reagan admits to forming a favorable first impression of Gorbachev in Geneva.” The opposite transformation occurred between Carter and Rabin. Carter was “briefed on Rabin’s personal beliefs” and he believed that “the meeting would go well and be productive”. It turned out to be a disappointment, with Carter likening the exchange to “talking to a dead fish” (295).

It is also possible, however, that Reagan and Carter revised their perception of Gorbachev and Rabin respectively not because of intuitions formed immediately upon contact, but because of how they behaved as the interactions unfolded. For instance, Holmes notes that in the Reagan-Gorbachev case, “[c]ritically, the first moments of the interaction, the handshake itself, led to beliefs about the productivity of further engagement” (295). In diplomacy, as in other interpersonal relationships, shaking hands does not necessarily mean sincerity. Refusing to shake, however, could signify lack of interest to engage or even non-recognition. Consider, for instance, John Foster Dulles’ well-publicized effort to snub Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai at Geneva in 1954, and the symbolic significance when in reversal, Nixon extended his hand to the Chinese leader two decades later. The same could also be said of certain bodily - including facial - cues of intentions. Former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice once recalled that to register her displeasure with Sudanese President Omar al-

Citation: George Fujii. *ISSF Article Review 74 on “You Never Get a Second Chance to Make a First Impression? First Encounters and Face-based Threat Perception.”*. H-Diplo. 04-11-2017. <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/174975/issf-article-review-74-%E2%80%9Cyou-never-get-second-chance-make-first>

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.

Bashir, she had to remind herself “not to smile” when they shook hands.¹⁴ As her predecessor, Madeleine Albright, wrote, diplomacy “inevitably lead to some playacting. Sometimes it’s useful to pretend that you have a warmer relationship than you actually do. At other times, a show of anger or walking out is useful.”¹⁵ Similarly, Rabin’s “strange reticence” towards Carter could also be a deliberate move to communicate his reluctance to become involved in the ongoing peace process (295). Such behaviors – to shake hands, smile or speak or not, one’s choice of words, to show warmth, throw a fit or walk out or not, etc. – and what a counterpart makes of them, are oftentimes conscious, performative, and played out over the course of an interaction rather than intuitive, spontaneous, and physiognomic. A more balanced takeaway from the current article, and perhaps as a follow-up research, would be to better understand how first impressions interact with these other, often competing, sources of information about intentions.

Seanon Wong is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Government and Public Administration, the Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research interests include International Relations theory, diplomacy, emotions, and social identity and nationalism. His work has appeared in the *European Journal of International Relations*, *Asian Perspective*, and other outlets.

©2017 The Authors | [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

Notes

[1] Alexander Todorov, Christopher Y. Olivola, Ron Dotsch, and Peter Mende-Siedlecki, “Social Attributions from Faces: Determinants, Consequences, Accuracy, and Functional Significance,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 66:1 (2015): 519-545. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psyc-113011-143831>.

[2] Although, as Holmes points out (293), studies have shown that social attributions from faces influence a wide range of real-world behaviors.

[3] See also Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 18.

[4] Pierre Salinger, *With Kennedy* (New York: Avon Books, 1966), 227.

[5] Kenneth P. O’Donnell and David F. Powers with Joe McCarthy, *“Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye”* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 1972), 330.

[6] William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 494.

[7] William Kempe, *Berlin 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth* (New

York: Penguin, 2011), 258.

[8] *Ibid.*, 223.

[9] Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 220.

[10] *Ibid.*, 221.

[11] Condoleezza Rice *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2012), 388.

[12] Madeleine K. Albright, *Madam Secretary* (New York: Miramax Books, 2003, 620).