



Strategic Choices and Dangerous Traps

Bruce W. Jentleson

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that one of my closest friends was actually writing. It requires others in the same fix to convince one not only of the virtual inevitability and universality of the problems of writing, but of the ability in the end to deal with them, satisfactorily and sufficiently, if not optimally and completely. A group of dissertation writers (which may be composed of people at different though preferably overlapping stages of the dissertation), meeting informally, can go far to smooth the process for the individuals involved.

If the writing process remains for me at its core magical and not subject to rationalization, I did at least find some ways to make it easier and less fearful. While I firmly believe that no one can ever teach anyone else how to write, they can at least forewarn them of the dangers which lie ahead. One has to find his own path but there are ways of reducing the obstacles to that discovery. I have tried to suggest some here. And finally, lest I conclude on a somber note, I would point out that writing is also the most exhilarating thing I do.

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Bruce W. Jentleson
University of California, Davis

Reflecting back, the most meaningful way of describing the dissertation writing experience is as a succession of strategic choices at each of which there is a dangerous trap to be avoided.

The first strategic choice is the selection of a topic. There are many obvious con-

Bruce W. Jentleson is the recipient of the Harold D. Lasswell award for the best doctoral dissertation completed and accepted during 1983 or 1984 in the field of policy studies. His dissertation, "Pipeline Politics: The Alliance and Domestic Politics of American Economic Coercion Against the Soviet Union," was directed by Peter Katzenstein and submitted by Cornell University.



Bruce W. Jentleson (left) receives the Harold D. Lasswell award from James E. Anderson of the University of Houston.

siderations here. Make sure it is something in which you are sufficiently interested to spend at minimum the next 2-3 years of your life (and probably longer) fully immersed in it. Make sure it is researchable, both in terms of data being available and in terms of the topic not already being so over-researched that originality will be hard to come by. You also should by now have acquired a strong background through your coursework in the principal relevant areas of theory and history, as well as with whatever methodological tools are going to be necessary for your empirical work.

In addition, it may be particularly useful to think in terms of avoiding two potential traps in selecting a topic. On the one hand there is the trap of trying somehow to integrate every single one of those ideas which in your graduate school years you may have found truly intellectually exciting. Don't try to say everything (you have a whole career to do that!). Delimit your topic, or it will never be manageable as a research project. On the other hand, make sure your topic is not purely monographic. One of my committee members always used to ask, "what is this a case of?" A dissertation which ends up an interesting but descriptive-only single case study will not be very well regarded by faculty search committees.

The second strategic choice is the selection of a dissertation committee. All of us

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begin thinking about this very early in graduate school; it may even have influenced the original selection of a particular university. It truly is a critical choice. More than anything else, you must choose a chairperson whom you respect, with whom you share intellectual interests and whom you feel will take a genuine interest in your work. Personal compatibility is also helpful, as long as you

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bear in mind that your chair's central role must be to provide structure and criticism. The same goes for the other members of your committee. The major trap here is being overly defensive, of unconsciously or even consciously shying away from faculty members who are quite formidable and who may have reputations through the graduate student grapevine as being "tough." Those kinds of reputations all too often are the product of other students' own anxieties and projections. So both assess the sources of any such information, and consider whether writing a dissertation may not in fact be quite an appropriate point for working with people who will push you.

Then, of course, there is the research and writing itself. The best advice I can give here is to be persistent. Everyone hits research dead-ends. Everyone has moments at which it seems like the whole structure of one's central argument is crumbling. Everyone experiences writer's block. So when such frustrations do occur, keep in mind that they are normal, that they come with the territory. But while taking comfort in this reassurance, be very sure not to succumb to its potential *immobilisme*. That can be a trap from which escape is especially difficult.

A further point about the research and writing is to be thorough and precise while also creative and imaginative. Analyze the data you gather in an original fashion, and strive to build thought-provoking arguments. Avoid assertions that cannot be sufficiently substantiated, but also don't play it too safe in building

your thesis. A dissertation which really does break new ground is what search committees, journal editors and book publishers all look for.

Finally, there is the question of how to keep your perspective on your life, your career, the world out there, etc., while going through all this. For me, having an infant son helped immensely. Dirty diapers are enough to keep anyone in touch with the world outside their dissertation data base! And becoming a father ensured that my life would not lapse into single dimensionality. This particular way of maintaining balance may not be appropriate for everyone. But through whatever means, balance and perspective are highly recommended.

China and Political Science

Kenneth Lieberthal

University of Michigan

There is little question that the American study of Chinese politics has not had a profound effect upon the discipline of political science.¹ This is regrettable because a dynamically developing China

¹For example, articles on China have rarely found their way onto the pages of the *APSR*. A review of the *APSR* for January 1975 through March 1985 reveals that only the following five articles on China were published during this decade: Lynn T. Whyte, III, "Local Autonomy in China During the Cultural Revolution: The Theoretical Uses of an Atypical Case" (June 1976); Lowell Dittmer, "Thought Reform and Cultural Revolution: An Analysis of the Symbolism of Chinese Politics" (March 1977); William Pang-yu Ting, "Coalition Behavior Among the Chinese Military Elite: A Nonrecursive, Simultaneous Equations, and Multiplicative Causal Model" (June 1979); David M. Lampton, "The Roots of Interprovincial Inequality in Education and Health Services in China Since 1949" (June 1979); and Alan P. L. Liu, "The Politics of Corruption in the P.R.C." (September 1983). As this list indicates, only one China-related article has appeared in *APSR* during the 1980s. *APSR* coverage of other non-European foreign countries, perhaps it should be noted, is generally equally sparse.