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INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION WITH JAKE

Edith Brown Weiss*

Jake and I were professional colleagues and friends for more than twenty years, but it was in the last fifteen years that we worked closely together, bridging the supposed divide between political science and international law. Sometimes we worked together in the American Society of International Law, other times in the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), or in the Human Dimensions of Global Change program. Most often, we worked together as scholars in interdisciplinary research.

In our last and most important endeavor, Jake and I worked together as the principal investigators for a large interdisciplinary project to understand countries' implementation of and compliance (or non-compliance) with international obligations.¹ The research was a unique collaboration between 40 scholars from 10 countries, who represented three generations of scholars and a half dozen different disciplines.² The collaboration worked in large part because my co-director was Harold K. Jacobson, a man of extraordinary intellect and unfailing tenacity in ensuring scholarly quality, who had a deep sense of humanity toward his colleagues and friends.

The project emerged from discussions in the Committee for Research on Global Environmental Change of the SSRC, of which both of us were members and I then chaired. The small interdisciplinary group crossed the social science and natural science spectrum and took as part of its mandate an effort to identify and nurture ideas for path breaking interdisciplinary research. To identify issues to be addressed by research on national compliance, the SSRC supported a small "brainstorming" workshop, which led to the eventual development of the large project. The SSRC was especially important, because it gave us access to extraordinary scholars focused on national and regional studies, which

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1. Engaging Countries: Strengthening National Compliance with International Environmental Accords (Edith Brown Weiss & Harold K. Jacobson eds., 1998). The research project covered five international environmental agreements and nine countries (with the European Union as one of the nine).

2. The scholars came from Brazil, Cameroon, China, Hungary, India, Japan, the Russian Federation, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The group included University of Michigan scholars, William Zimmerman and the late Michel Oksenberg. People ranged in age from 22 to 70 or so. Jake liked having all three generations on the team, and worked to ensure that the young scholars could be included in international meetings.
made it possible to integrate international and regional scholarly inquiry, as well as different disciplines.

Interdisciplinary research is never easy. Even the title of our book reflects the tensions. It refers to “Accords” rather than “Agreements” or “International Legal Instruments,” which is a term favored by political scientists, but not by lawyers. Jake’s contributions to interdisciplinary scholarship can be grouped into four areas: to the process and progress of the research; to the conclusions; to the dissemination of the results; and to the personal effectiveness of the research team.

From the outset, Jake recognized that empirical work was essential. Together we grappled with the central issues that always arise in such work: what can you measure, how can you measure it, and what can’t you easily measure. Some members of the research team were concerned that the important questions could not be answered with quantitative data, others insisted that the research be firmly grounded in rigorous data lest the conclusions amount to little more than highly informed opinion. Jake insisted on identifying the factors that could be quantified, on developing a protocol on the gathering and use of data, and on monitoring implementation of that protocol. While recognizing the limits of empirical work, at the same time, he insisted upon it.

With similar determination, he insisted on making generalizations from the data. Whereas lawyers are always attune to the “ifs” and “exceptions” based on the facts of individual cases, political scientists are acutely aware that if they cannot generalize from their research, their findings may have no significance. Jake always insisted on making the generalizations and grounding them in rigorous cross-cutting comparisons of the findings by the different members of the research team.

At the end of the project, Jake insisted on searching for a model that would explain national compliance with international environmental accords. Certainly I agreed with him on the need for a model, which reflects my own political science training, and we struggled together to develop it. But while I and others brought the legal scholar’s cautious eye to bear, Jake tenaciously held to the political scientist’s quest for a broader model, which would still reflect the empirical findings.

Jake and I worked together with our colleagues in reaching perhaps the two most surprising conclusions at the time: first, that the interesting comparisons are not between different countries’ compliance with the same agreement but rather between compliance with different agreements within the same country; and secondly, that national compliance with international agreements varies over time. Compliance is not static. These and other findings emerged from intense discussions where we would probe our own data and the results of other research until we un-
understood it. We came to the project with certain hypotheses to test. While Jake held strong views on several of them, he was always willing to evaluate them in the light of the findings. He believed that democracy promotes compliance, but when pushed by our researchers from developing countries, he agreed that democracy also helps elements that oppose compliance. He believed in the role of leader countries, but acknowledged that eventually all countries would have to participate in global agreements if they were to be effective for the long term.

Jake wanted his research to be useful. He believed that it was important to disseminate the results of research, not just to fellow researchers but to the policy community. And so, we wrote articles for broader audiences and delivered presentations abroad to various communities.

As a collaborator, Jake embodied the ethic of “cooperation.” Throughout the study, we explored ideas and struggled together to reach conclusions, without friction. We never raised our voices. When we presented our research results at the United Nations University, we were able to shift back and forth between each other seamlessly, so easy was our cooperation.

Jake will be remembered not only as an outstanding scholar and an extraordinary collaborator in interdisciplinary research, but as a wise, gentle and understated man, who treated all generations and all nationalities with dignity and respect. He made interdisciplinary collaboration and cooperation with scholars from across the world seem easy, and natural.