

Chapter One

Power, War, and Decision-Making Aptitudes

The very powerful can afford not to be rational. Inordinate amounts of power free decision makers from having to engage in systematic-decision making procedures to attain their objectives. Even amongst the powerful, however, success without rationality is not eternal. The presence of rationality in an uncertain world cannot guarantee victory, but its repeated absence courts disaster.

To many Americans, the Gulf War symbolized the end of the Vietnam syndrome and the beginning of a new era. A war that many experts claimed would drag on for months, result in the deaths of thousands of young American soldiers, and split the nation into rancorous factions, brought about precisely the opposite effects. Forty-eight days after the war had begun, and at the cost of but 146 American lives, the United States succeeded in preserving its access and that of the industrialized world to the Arabian oil fields.¹

The victory might tempt some to assume that the outcome had to be the culmination of a well-thought-out, highly sophisticated decision-making process within the Bush administration. This book challenges such an assumption not by uncovering new facts, but by focusing with a critical eye on how problems were defined, goals identified, alternatives evaluated, and policies selected. This challenge has as its intellectual root a typology of decision-making aptitudes derived from the propositions posited by three cognitive theories—*attribution, schema, and cognitive consistency*—and comes in the form of two interrelated arguments. The first argument, which is entirely theoretical, sets the framework for the second argument, which is theoretical, empirical, and normative.

Attempts to infuse explanations of U.S. foreign policy making with a theoretical perspective have been dominated by the assumption that decision makers act rationally.² Convinced that to “search for the clue to foreign policy exclusively in the motives of statesmen is both futile and deceptive,” Hans Morgenthau sought to persuade American scholars of the 1940s that the most effective way to give form to the relationship between a state’s national interest and power was through rationality.³ Encumbered by the conviction that the Second World War would have been averted had the United States and France used their power earlier to bloc Germany’s hegemonic aspiration, and by the need to answer to the new challenges brought into the international environment by the Soviet Union’s emergence as a superpower, U.S. scholars and foreign policy practitioners embraced Morgenthau’s logic. His model, they concluded, was theoretically sound and would help promote the interests and gratify the appetites of the United States.

A less-than-wise idea became theory and then dogma. As time went by, the advocates of Realism and rationalism lost sight of the fact that Morgenthau’s theoretical perspective had little to say about the “real” world of foreign policy making.⁴ They did not keep in mind that Morgenthau, conscious that foreign policies had rarely been the result of rational processes,

had created a model designed not to explain and predict, but to dictate, how leaders *ought* to reason.⁵

In time, some scholars began to challenge this heavy reliance on rationality. They accepted Morgenthau's dictum that only a "rational policy minimizes risks and maximizes benefits."⁶ But they also emphasized that if a rational foreign policy was the ultimate goal, it was imperative to uncover the obstacles in the cognition of humans that might impede its attainment. With this mission in mind, these scholars attempted to give meaning to the large number of elements that undermine the ability of decision makers to reach past their cognitive confines. Through their work we finally began to understand why the Truman administration, after having voiced little concern about South Korea's fate, rushed to its aid and became entangled in a war that would result in a stalemate; why the Kennedy administration, although led by "the best and the brightest," handled the Castro regime as only an unskilled novice would; or why the Johnson and Nixon administrations lost South Vietnam to a nation much weaker than the United States and plunged America into its worst international nightmare.⁷

Four scholars stood above the crowd. Alexander L. George, by reviving and refining Nathan Leites' "operational code," further reinforced the long-standing belief that the tactics and strategies relied on by foreign policy makers to address international problems are in part a function of their beliefs. A few years later, by merging cybernetics with cognitive consistency theory, John Steinbruner demonstrated why foreign policy makers so rarely adhere to the rules of rationality and why they seldom seek solutions that wander far from past courses of action or that offset their cognitive balance. Steinbruner's work was soon followed by Robert Axelrod's heroic attempt to recreate the cognitive maps used by foreign policy makers to "derive explanations of the past, make predictions for the future, and choose policies in the present." And then came Robert Jervis. His book *Perception and Misperception*, first published in 1976, was not original in content. Its beauty and strength lay in providing an

intellectual synthesis of psychological theories and findings and their applicability to foreign policy making.⁸

Although admired for their intent, these studies did not generate wide support. Their nature demanded data rarely available, and when attainable, often unreliable. Moreover, these works seldom attempted to place in a coherent framework the different "variables" that could intercede in the decision-making process. A broad range of psychological and sociological factors were believed to affect the way humans made decisions, but nobody knew how to gauge their significance or how to apply them as multiple "causal" variables. These problems were compounded by the fact that the applied psychological and sociological factors were borrowed from theories generated in fields permeated by dissonance.

Today, the study of foreign policy making stands at a crossroads. New works by Deborah Larson, Dwain Mefford, Philip Schrodt, and myself, to name just a few, are applying the latest works in artificial intelligence, linguistics, and cognitive psychology in order to design formal models of foreign policy making and to provide the field with a sounder theoretical foundation.⁹ The obstacles faced by my colleagues and I are somewhat less formidable than those encountered by our intellectual ancestors. Vast improvements in computer technology and greater access to more detailed information about the cognitive nature of decision makers may help enhance the relevance of these studies.

Overall, however, students of international politics continue to be enamored with structures and how they impact on the relationships between states. Those who share this affection pay little attention to the roles of decision makers; and when they do, almost invariably they attach the adjective "rational." The latest changes in the international environment have not tarnished their enchantment. As they seek to understand how the international system will be affected by the dissolution of the Soviet Union; by the attempt by Eastern European countries to redefine themselves as political, economic, and social entities; and by the struggle

by Middle Eastern states to give form to a new regional structure—these analysts are inclined to disregard the roles played by those who pushed for these changes, or else to perceive them as mere abstract, rational entities, differentiated only by the interests they promote. For the most part, they continue to assume that the actions of such leaders were a function of the structural forces faced by their states.

Structural constraints do impose themselves on states, but decision makers do not always respond to them in the same manner. Their beliefs, values, and intellectual capabilities affect their perceptions of constraints, and determine the types of solutions they try to design.

Contemporary cognitive psychologists inform us that the problem solver can be conceptualized as a seeker of attributable causes, or of analogical schemes, or of cognitive consistency.¹⁰ The first perspective views the decision maker as an untrained scientist interested in finding causal relationships as he struggles to understand the universe and make decisions. If he is not entirely rational, it is because he is ignorant of his own inadequacies and not because of some cognitive need. The second approach perceives the policy maker as an individual burdened by the lack of time and energy, and by a limited intellectual capacity. He compensates for these shortcomings by searching for a generic concept, stored in his memory in the form of a schema, that can be imposed as a solution on the problem at hand. The third method envisions the problem solver as a character living in an uncertain world permeated with conflicting values, and hampered by his need to achieve a tolerable balance between his beliefs, values, and cognition. As he defines problems and selects policies, he attains cognitive consistency by disregarding information that challenge his preconceptions and by ignoring values that conflict with those he is trying to promote.

These three cognitive perspectives share rationality as their reference point. Cognitive consistency, with its assumption that no problem solver has the capacity to overcome fully his cognitive needs, is located the farthest from

the ideal process.¹¹ Schema theory, with its contention that the decision maker attempts to make inferences and judgments with a minimum expenditure of energy, time, and thought, stands at the middle of the decision-making aptitude spectrum. And attribution theory, with its belief that the decision maker acts as a "naive" scientist, is located closest to the rational decision making mode.

These competing perspectives can be used in at least two ways. Until recently, they have been applied concurrently to a variety of cases to gauge their explanatory reach.¹² It is doubtful, however, that any one perspective would be comprehensive enough to explain the decisions of the universe of decision makers, even if such universe were to be very small. Foreign policy makers do not all possess the same intellectual ability to make decisions, and some have a greater need than others to maintain cognitive balance. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to assume that to explain the decision of more than one decision maker we must use more than one theory. If this is the case, then by associating a theory with a particular decision maker it would be feasible to determine that individual's ability to function rationally.

The theoretical and practical significance of any typology is determined by its applicability. To gauge the utility of the typology just proposed lies beyond the scope of this book. A glimpse of its relevance, however, will be given in this book's second section as it addresses two questions:

1. Why did the United States fail to prevent Iraq's invasion of Kuwait?
2. Why did the United States go to war against Iraq?

Deterrence, propose Alexander George and Richard Smoke, entails "the persuasion of one's opponent that the costs and/or risks of a given course of action he might take outweigh its benefits."¹³ Theorists of deterrence differentiate between the "failure to conduct a policy of deterrence" and "deterrence failure." Analysis of the first type of failure entails explaining why a group of foreign policy makers did not

contemplate deterrence as a viable policy or decided that its implementation was unnecessary. Analysis of deterrence failure entails explaining why a policy of deterrence failed to stop the aggressor from doing what he was warned not to do.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait signifies for the United States a failure of the first type. The decision not to implement a policy of deterrence can result when the potential aggressor conceals information from his target or deceives him about his intention, rationale, strategy, capability, target, and/or time; or it can result when the potential victim fails to derive the correct estimates although he has the information to do so. Blame for the United States' failure to predict Iraq's invasion of Kuwait must to be placed squarely not on Saddam Hussein or the U.S. intelligence community, but on President George Bush's top advisers.¹⁴ By late July 1990, Saddam Hussein had given the United States ample opportunity to infer his intentions and to deter him if it found them objectionable. The U.S. intelligence community, after monitoring closely the movement of Saddam's military forces in Iraq, informed the Bush administration that an attack on Kuwait was very likely. President Bush's top foreign policy advisers rejected the assessment.

To implement a policy of deterrence, the observer must first be able to question, and alter if necessary, his image of the would-be aggressor. Influenced by their own dependence on analogical reasoning, the central figures within the Bush administration assumed that Saddam would not invade Kuwait because he was a rational actor and had learned from Iraq's war with Iran how costly another major war would be. Brent Scowcroft, Richard Cheney, Colin Powell and Norman Schwarzkopf held fast to this belief even after they had been warned by the Defence Intelligence Agency and Central Intelligence Agency that Iraq was getting ready to attack Kuwait.

Pentagon officials played a critical role in the assessment. They knew that if they accepted the argument that Iraq intended to attack Kuwait, the only way to stop the invasion would be for the United States to threaten to retaliate with

its own military power. However, humiliated by the Vietnam war and the fiasco in Lebanon in 1983, the top military leaders were determined not to use force as an instrument of deterrence unless the political leaders defined with the utmost clarity the political and military goals and authorized the usage of whatever means were needed to fulfill them.

The ease with which the United States defeated Iraq has persuaded a large number of analysts that the decision to go to war was rational. This book takes a different stand. It contends that although the effect of a policy is always important, rationality is a function not of effect but of process. Based on this proposition, this book argues that the decision to go to war against Iraq was not the upshot of a process one would hope from the government that rules the most powerful state in the international system.

A rational response to any major problem entails gathering the information necessary to delineate the full nature of the problem, identifying and evaluating the goals and their interrelationships, isolating the pertinent alternatives and estimating their probable consequences, and choosing the alternative with the highest expected utility. George Bush and Brent Scowcroft prevented the "rational" execution of these steps. They alone determined that the United States would: 1) refuse to tolerate Iraq's attempt to impose its will on Kuwait and possibly Saudi Arabia, because such a change in the status quo would give Saddam Hussein extensive control over the oil market; 2) deploy its forces over Saudi territory, if authorized to do so by Saudi leaders, to protect it from a possible Iraqi attack; 3) not wait to see whether containment would succeed in persuading Saddam to pull out of Kuwait; and 4) resort to violence, if necessary, to expel Iraq from Kuwait. All these steps were taken by Bush and Scowcroft with almost no input from Middle Eastern experts, and without eliciting alternative interpretations and possible solutions of the problem from other top foreign policy officials.

Bush and Scowcroft relied on two analogies to design their decisions. From the 1938 Munich debacle they deduced that

appeasement never pacifies tyrants. Since Saddam Hussein was another Adolf Hitler, the only choice left to the United States was to act aggressively. This meant two things: 1) protecting Saudi Arabia, and 2) going to war against Iraq, if necessary, in order to free Kuwait. A decision not to protect Saudi Arabia would have been viewed by Saddam as a lack of resolve on the part of the United States and, thus, as an invitation to continue with his policy of expansion. Moreover, a policy of containment would have signaled Saddam that the United States and its allies lacked the will to make hard choices, and that if he stood fast the alliance would eventually falter.

Before deciding that a military operation against Saddam and his military establishment was a viable option, however, Bush and Scowcroft had to cope with another important memory: Vietnam. For the two decision makers, the central lesson to be inferred from that nightmare was that the United States should never get involved in another major conflict unless it was willing to use the military power it needed to win the war swiftly and impressively.

In sum, this book contends that the foreign policy process adopted by Bush and his closest advisers during the Gulf crisis was a function of their dependence on two analogies, and that this dependence was so intense that it undermined their ability to contemplate alternative definitions of the problem and to give serious thought to other policy options. Members of the Bush administration, in other words, relied on historical analogies not only to define and respond to the Gulf crisis, but also to maintain an acceptable level of cognitive balance as they made decisions.

The study of international affairs is usually divided into the analysis of international politics and of foreign policy. Students of international politics focus on macro questions, while students of foreign policy address micro issues. The environments studied by the two groups do not exist independent of one another. As Kenneth Waltz notes, different international structures tend to create different expectations on the part of foreign policy makers.¹⁵ But Waltz and other

structuralists assume that rationality is a constant—that it does not vary with changes in a state's location in the structure of the international system. They presume, for instance, that the leaders of an unchallenged hegemonic state are as rational as those who preside over a state losing its hegemony. This study contends that the assumption is unjustified, and proposes that the leaders of a state experience a greater need to be rational when they believe that the state is vulnerable to the actions of other states than when they believe it is not. More specifically, it proposes that the absence of vulnerability frees decision makers from the fear of making mistakes which in turn, free them from the need to think rationally.

Based on the above proposition, this study argues that without the Soviet Union as a veritable counterbalance in the Middle East, the Bush administration had little incentive to view Iraq's invasion of Kuwait rationally. Knowing full well that the United States had the military power to defeat Iraq, the only major step the Bush administration had to take was to permit the Pentagon to use whatever means it needed in order to achieve its assigned objective swiftly and at a relatively low cost.

Having identified the principal impediments to rationality, this study closes with a short discussion of how the proposed typology of decision-making aptitudes can help leaders of democratic states improve the quality of their states' foreign policy-making processes. It does so by bringing into perspective the dilemma faced by the leaders of a powerful democratic state who are determined to define the structure of the international system but need to be responsive to the expectations of a citizenry that, while not particularly competent about international matters, often demands a voice.