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HISTORY’S SLOW EMBRACE OF PSYCHOLOGY

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Early on, in fact, historians greeted those who waded into the murky waters of psychology with open hostility. This was particularly characteristic of studies that took a psychoanalytic or “psychohistory” approach. Historians’ resistance to such methodologies is understandable. Untrained to make psychodynamic diagnoses, uneasy about the sources, and unsympathetic to the perspective, they were unwilling to lend credence to this work regardless of the author.

Contributions such as the study of Woodrow Wilson and Colonel Edward House by Alexander and Juliette George, published originally in 1956 and revised in 1964, were emblematic of this concern. George and George argued that Wilson’s counterproductive behavior, especially his refusal to compromise over the League of Nations, was explicable primarily, albeit not solely, by his relationship with his father and his consequent compulsive personality. Although exemplary in its methodology due to the lengthy and intense psychoanalytic training of the authors and the years they spent immersed in the available biographical details of Wilson’s life, the subsequent publication of the more than sixty volumes of Wilson’s papers and the revelations about the declining state of his health indicated there was much more to be done. The George and George book provoked the criticism of the papers’ venerable editor and Wilson biographer Arthur Link, who challenged the data as well as the conclusions. Eventually, Link conceded a degree of irrationality to Wilson, but he rejected the Georges’ psychoanalytical diagnosis. Joining forces with a physician, Edwin Weinstein, he promoted a physiological and neurological explanation. A war of words ensued, and consensus remains elusive.

The controversy underscores the problem of collecting and assessing evidence of this kind. Few policymakers leave the mountains of papers, especially intimate and introspective letters and diaries, required for this type of study. Further, contemporary policymakers are likely to reveal themselves most candidly in telephone conversations or emails, many of which historians may not ever be able to access, or if they can, they may find it all but impossible to sift through the data.

What is more, as the effort to uncover the hidden histories of “ordinary people” grew in popularity, historians increasingly characterized political history, especially the Rankean tradition of international relations, as pedestrian and conservative. From this perspective, the history of US foreign policy appeared to be top-down history of the worst sort. In another context, historians might have considered the application of psychological theory as a welcome innovation. Yet in the post-Vietnam historiographic climate, it seemed
more of the problem than the solution. We would be studying the personalities and cognitions of the elite: leaders and decision-makers who in the majority of instances were white and male. In fact, the emphasis on sociology, cultural anthropology, and mentalité left little room for the individual. Unless historians were going to probe the psychology of broad-based groups rather than specific leaders, prudence dictated that they borrow theories and approaches actions and “cross-fertilize” historical perspectives from disciplines other than psychology.9

Historians of US foreign relations have progressively overcome these impediments. The subtitle of one of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) most enthusiastically received Stuart Bernath Lectures is “Exploring the Psychological Dimension of Postwar American Diplomacy.”10 Psychological theory also laid the foundation for SHAFR’s 2007 presidential address.11 In sharp contrast to the reception accorded early psychoanalytic work, historians have praised studies of foreign relations that apply psychological theories, particularly those studies that combine impressive archival research with methodological sophistication and rigor.12 This trend indicates that historians are recognizing that a psychologically informed approach to international affairs is a valuable complement to work emphasizing broader social developments and situational contexts. After all, the history of US foreign policy is the history of specific human choices, and the actions of individuals working alone or as members of policy groups shape, make, and implement these choices.

PERSONALITIES AND POLICY

The literature on political psychology suggests a plausible array of linkages between a policymaker’s observable personality traits, such as communicative skill and rhetoric, and his or her behavior. Some social scientists have gone so far as to postulate relationships among these traits, producing typologies that generate predictions about styles and policies.13 This approach borders on the dangerously reductionist, yet identifying finite relationships can prove insightful.14 The evidence suggests, for example, that individuals confident in their ability to control events tend to take a more activist stance in foreign affairs, and that the norm in the West, at least during the Cold War, was for extroverted leaders to advocate for better relations with communists, whereas introverts did not.15 Historical analyses of the contrasts between Johnson’s and Kennedy’s personalities, their respective power needs, and their differing styles of dealing with subordinates reinforce such arguments, and juxtaposed against other variables, they also suggest that had Kennedy lived, the American experience in Vietnam would have been different.16

Even if such counterfactuals are dismissed as fruitless, the premise that one’s character traits can affect decisions remains compelling. For example, one archivally based examination presented credible evidence that President

Johnson’s Vietnam policy reflected his psychological attributes. His propensity for “we-they” thinking, as well as his passionately personal identification with the cause of the United States, prompted a diminished capacity for assessing information and advice.17

Dogmatism, mental complexity or flexibility, and similar attributes or traits can likewise affect policy choices and the conduct of state and non-state actors. They are foundational elements of an individual’s overall personality. The history of American foreign relations is punctuated with fascinating and psychologically compelling people. For example, in the early years, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, and William H. Seward come to mind. Later, Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt, George F. Kennan, James V. Forrestal, John Foster Dulles, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Henry Kissinger, and Zbigniew Brzezinski stand out. More recently, Andrew Young, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, Madeleine Albright, George W. Bush, and Condoleezza Rice are all notable. Their personal dispositions and that of the many allies and adversaries who surrounded them did not alone determine policy—environmental and situational variables have sometimes been decisive. But predispositions, attributes, motives, and emotions, as well as other elements that constitute personality, including what Fred Greenstein labels “emotional intelligence,” that is, the ability to “manage… emotions and turn them to constructive purposes,” also play a role.18

That role can only be inferred because history does not repeat itself. Nevertheless, common sense requires and indeed supports such notions, and a few counterfactual excursions illustrate that examples abound. A secretary of state less self-confident, audacious, stubborn, and, we would add, highly principled than John Quincy Adams might have failed to orchestrate the transcontinental treaty of 1819 with Spain, settled for a joint Anglo-American declaration of policy toward the Western Hemisphere instead of the Monroe Doctrine, or refused to sacrifice his life-long ambitions for an American empire because he judged the expansion of slavery intolerable.19 Imagine the possible impact on history had the 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria occurred under the watch of a president with the “character” of Teddy Roosevelt in contrast to that of Herbert Hoover.20 Had a person less influenced by an Ulster ethnicity than Dean Acheson been secretary of state in 1949, the United States may well have vigorously challenged British objections and supported inviting Ireland to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.21 Negotiations to end America’s military engagement in Vietnam and pave the way for Nixon to visit the People’s Republic of China surely would have proceeded differently if conducted by someone less secretive and devious than Henry Kissinger.22 And while we cannot rule out a president other than George W. Bush invading Iraq in 2003, it is hard to imagine that an alternative “decider” surrounded by a different set of advisors would have followed precisely the same course. Doubtless the relationship between the president and his father mattered, but determining just when and how much poses serious challenges.23
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Barack Obama’s biography suggests that he may be the most psychologically compelling president yet. Although it is still too early for the release of archival evidence, when this material becomes accessible it will be fascinating to see how historians account for his administration’s policy choices. One can only imagine the salience they will assign to his personality and those of his distinctive advisers, including Hillary Rodham Clinton, Susan Rice, Samantha Power, and John Kerry. How these complicated and strong-willed individuals collectively formulated the American responses to the Arab Spring, or the choice to “lead from behind” in Libya, or the decisions on Syria and Iran will be particularly telling.24

**GROUP DECISIONS AND POLICY**

Linking personality to policy is but one approach. Based on an early model of affect-based decision-making, Irving Janis’ well-known “groupthink” hypothesis suggests that small groups at the highest levels of government may unconsciously court foreign policy disasters by striving for unanimity. Terminating deliberations prematurely or promoting overly optimistic expectations, they develop an in-group/out-group mentality and thus engage in a “concurrency-seeking tendency.” Janis characterizes the Kennedy administration’s Bay of Pigs decisions as an example of a policy fiasco that involved “shared illusions and other symptoms [of groupthink], which helped the members to maintain a sense of group solidarity. Most crucial were the symptoms that contributed to complacent over-confidence in the face of vague uncertainties and explicit warnings that should have alerted the members to the risks of the clandestine military operation.”25

Although historians today criticize Janis’ evidence and the specificity of his claims, the policy community often applies his insights, and it does so in ways that are both reflexive and superficial. The most widely known contemporary public references to this phenomenon are the g/ti Commission Report on the decision to invade Iraq and the review of that policy’s underlying intelligence undertaken by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Each study explicitly applies the groupthink notion, but both neglect to identify the particular high-level “group” they are considering and pay scant attention to alternative and plausible interpretations. They fall short of addressing the influence of available intelligence or pre-existing beliefs and images about al-Qaeda or Saddam Hussein, and they overlook the very real possibility that a rational-choice interpretation of the opponent’s behavior might have explained what seemed to be perplexing actions.26 Guarding against simplistic applications of the “groupthink” hypothesis by addressing each of its nuances and all of its dimensions should be fundamental in future policy and scholarly inquiries.

The multiple-advocacy approach to group decision-making stresses the utility of a vigorous and uninhibited exchange of viewpoints as an antidote to the groupthink tendency.27 We are persuaded, for example, that studies of the Eisenhower administration’s policy deliberations on Indochina would have benefited from such a psychologically informed multiple-advocacy perspective since the president strongly encouraged disciplined debates among experts throughout the government. The dilemmas posed by the successive French regimes did precipitate some policy making procrastination, and even a bit of wishful thinking at times. Nevertheless, as John Foster Dulles indicated in his testimony to Congress on May 11, 1954, four days after the fall of the French fortress at Dienbienphu, the administration had made every effort to keep an open mind about Indochina. “We do not want to operate on what has been referred to as the domino theory,” he noted, vividly illustrating the administration’s openness to debate rather than a need to mislead the legislature or the public.28 Similarly, as time passed and the administration confronted the ineffectiveness of their Vietnamese ally, Ngo Dinh Diem, and detected the lack of unity within the Communist bloc, it repeatedly engaged in spirited discussions. Still, it concluded that the Geneva settlement was the best arrangement the United States could achieve.29

**COGNITIONS, MOTIVATIONS, PERCEPTIONS, AND POLICY**

Another stream of psychological work focuses on the cognitive processes that prompt people to interpret their environments in particular ways. Cognitive approaches can help assess the potential for a diplomatic policy initiative to succeed or fail and provide insight about an interpretation of data collected, directly or indirectly, on the threat or promise posed by an adversary or ally. They can also assist in establishing a basis for inferences about the normally and oftentimes deliberately ambiguous, or even deceptive, behavior of others.30

It has become almost axiomatic that the assimilation and interpretation of information, the grist for the policymaking mill, does not occur in a contextual vacuum. Decision-makers frequently rely on the “lessons of history,” drawing analogies to define a situation or identify a phenomenon.31 For Jeane Kirkpatrick, failure to support the “contras” in Nicaragua was tantamount to appeasement. “It’s not Vietnam that’s the appropriate analogy,” she argued, “it’s Munich.”32 Paul Wolfowitz, an obsessive student of the holocaust, believed that history teaches that humankind must eliminate evil leaders or suffer the consequences. His policy fixation on attacking Saddam Hussein’s Iraq reflected this assessment.33 Students of the crises in Bosnia and Kosovo will need to determine the relationship between Madeleine Albright’s complicated family history and her advice on the use of force during the Clinton administration.34 Psychological theories can help to explain how and why decision-makers act in this manner, and in the process they can provide clues for locating errors in judgment or perception. They can likewise alert us to conditions such as stress and anxiety that can affect deliberations and their outcomes.
The two cognitive perspectives that are probably the most valuable for historians of US foreign relations involve attributions and schemas. Attribution theorists seek to explain behavior by noting that individuals function like “naive scientists” or “constructive thinkers.” They judge the actions of others by looking for and accumulating clues; this is a logical, systematic, and rational process (unless emotions interfere). Schema theorists contend that our ability to assimilate information is limited; as a consequence we are “cognitive misers.” We categorize the knowledge we have into schemata, mental or cognitive structures that fit the knowledge into a pattern. In other words, drawn primarily from what we have learned from previous experiences, we develop and retain preconceived notions, including beliefs and other information about how social objects and phenomena relate to one another.

Intimately tied to the concept of schemata is the identification of heuristics. These shortcuts to rationality allow individuals to reduce complicated problem-solving tasks to simple judgments; they are strategies for managing information overload. Typical are the availability and representative heuristics, by which people evaluate the extent to which the characteristics of a person, country, or political system—any object—are linked to a category of that same object: Using the availability heuristic, we draw inferences based on whatever pattern or frame of reference most easily or rapidly comes to mind. A military man, such as General Lucius D. Clay, is predisposed to interpret the 1948 coup in Czechoslovakia as evidence that the Soviets appeared poised to invade Europe with “dramatic suddenness.” Depending on one’s conceptual or generational background, a policy analyst might employ the representativeness heuristic and see Filipinos as American Indians, or Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser and Iraq’s Saddam Hussein as Adolf Hitler’s identical twins. Guatemala’s Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán had to be a communist according to 1950s thinking. If it looks like a duck and acts like a duck, it is a duck. Korea is another Manchuria; Khe Sanh, another Dienbienphu.

These perspectives help to explain how people make sense out of the complex world in which they live. They also help to account for important errors of judgment and inference. Attached to each perspective, or explanation for how we perceive and diagnose, are a series of “biases” or common mistakes: We tend, for example, to overestimate the influence of personal dispositions on behavior and to underestimate the influence of situational influences (commonly referred to as the fundamental attribution error). Or we often are influenced more by vivid, concrete data than that which is pallid and abstract; a nonevent (the dog that did not bark in the dark; the Soviet intervention that did not occur) may be overlooked altogether. Or because we believe we know our own motives and intentions, we may assume others know them as well. Or we do not always distinguish between the inferences we draw from the data we receive and the data itself. Or we overlook base rate statistics and overestimate the size of the sample we used to generate a heuristic or category (Hitler was sui generis). There are many other biases, but we have made our point.

Most fundamentally, cognitive psychologists uniformly agree that once we form a belief we only reluctantly discard or even qualify it. We normatively interpret new evidence as conforming to our prior beliefs. If it is consistent with them, we will accept it; if it is inconsistent or ambiguous, we will discredit, distort, or ignore it. This propensity is most pronounced when the belief is deeply felt and deeply held. Our values may be hierarchically ordered, but our beliefs and knowledge are interconnected, forming a system; when incoming information is so discordant that we can no longer ignore it, we will revise our least fundamental notions before even questioning our core assumptions. Our most highly valued beliefs or deepest knowledge systems are thus minimally disconfirmed. By establishing the parameters of an individual’s “particular type of ‘bounded rationality,’” belief systems and knowledge can serve as sets “of lenses through which information concerning the physical and social environment is received.”

Those theories that pertain to our strategies for coping with complexity highlight the influence that beliefs and knowledge have on perceptions and behaviors. A growing body of thought concentrates on the potential interplay between our wants, needs, and fears and the information stored in our schemata. Psychologists who emphasize motivations argue that our judgments are largely a function of emotions as opposed to mental capacities. Perhaps the most prevalent motivation for human error is the need to reduce the anxiety an individual experiences when confronting a severe dilemma. This stress can lead to such tactics as bolstering, in which one chooses one option by extolling its virtues and denigrating all alternatives; defensive avoidance, in which people refuse to acknowledge a threat; or hyper-vigilance, in which one makes an impulsive commitment stemming from panic to the least objectionable alternative.

Because these theories dovetail with many of our experiences, a few well-known examples from the recent past will suffice. No matter how forcefully Mikhail Gorbachev pushed for arms control, he did not alter then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney’s estimation of the Soviet threat. Cheney could “explain away” Gorbachev’s behavior by attributing it to the administration’s own “peace through strength” posture, by dismissing it as a tactic to lull the non-communist world into complacency, or by acknowledging that Gorbachev himself was different but would not last. Cheney trusted Boris Yeltsin no more than Gorbachev. He continued to counsel that the United States must keep a watchful eye on Russia and the Soviet Union’s other successor states and take the utmost care before agreeing to any arms control or force reduction measures. Cheney’s core beliefs and images remained frozen in a Cold War mentality. Judging from his tough response to Russia’s 2008 conflict with Georgia, they have yet to thaw.

An early work of Immerman’s shows how an awareness of psychological factors can enhance the interpretation of US foreign relations beyond great power dynamics. In his The CIA in Guatemala, Immerman argues that
Washington's exaggerated assessment of the communist threat there resulted in the decision to intervene in 1954. Immerman arrived at this interpretation after analyzing what he described as a "Cold War ethos" that had pervaded American society in the post-war period. Had he been familiar at that time with the literature on cognitive psychology and belief systems, he could have strengthened his analysis. Immerman could have clarified what he saw as the Cold War ethos by linking it to schema theory or attribution theory. He could likewise have offered a framework for understanding how Americans perceived or defined the threat in Guatemala and why they interpreted the imposition of local labor codes, agrarian reforms, and other liberal measures as evidence of Soviet influence.

Psychological perspectives could also help to explain why nothing the Guatemalan government did or said seemed to shake Washington's preexisting beliefs. When the Arbenz regime purchased arms from Czechoslovakia in a last-ditch attempt to defend the revolution against the impending American invasion it predicted, Eisenhower administration officials jumped to the conclusion that the communist threat was spreading and placing Guatemala's neighbors in peril. Indeed, just a few years later, the CIA linked Fidel Castro to Arbenz and applied the same covert operations strategy it had developed for Guatemala to the island of Cuba. This suggests that intelligence analysts were cognitive misers who unconsciously employed the availability heuristic followed by the representative heuristic to address their problem. The availability shortcut would have led them to associate the Castro regime with the Arbenz government, and the representativeness shortcut would then have prompted them to plan the Bay of Pigs effort based on the Guatemala model.

Most of us, at one time or another, have sought to identify the influences on a policy makers' perceptions. And once we have judged a leader's perspective to have been subjective, regardless of the extent, we have concluded that psychological factors warranted consideration. One need not classify Thomas Jefferson's relationship with France as a "long affair" to assess his perceptions of the French as complicated by his emotions, beliefs, values, and/or motives, or to see the American intervention in Iraq as a fiasco in order to assess the inadequacy of post-invasion reconstruction planning as a triumph of "desirability over feasibility." In arguing that there was a very rational, pragmatic, and even human side to Joseph Stalin, President Dwight D. Eisenhower repeatedly recalled conversations that General Dwight D. Eisenhower had held with the Soviet leader. "[D]amn near all he talked about was all the things they needed, the homes, the food, the technical help. He talked to me about 7 people living in a single room in Moscow just as anxiously as you or I'd talk about an American slum problem." Eisenhower's recollection supports the psychological notion that first-hand experiences, particularly those that take place at an earlier time in one's career or are remembered vividly, can powerfully affect subsequent perceptions, images, and actions.
the possible influences of emotions and knowledge, perhaps bolstered by recent advances in neuroscience, can help us to explain many foreign policy choices.57

DETERRENCE, DIPLOMACY, AND THE SECURITY DILEMMA
IN FOREIGN POLICY

The very nature of psychology leads us to associate it with abnormal behavior, distorted perceptions, compromised processes, and other phenomena discussed above. Yet its relationship to international affairs is so pervasive as to be unexceptional. Deterrence, brinkmanship, credibility, commitment, reputation, risk, threat – these and many more conventional entries in the historian’s lexicon are essentially psychological concepts. Central to each are perceptions, fears, wants, values, goals, and parallel mental phenomena. The psychological aspects of foreign relations became more pronounced in the atomic age. Leaders frequently manipulated their nuclear capabilities for the purpose of producing diplomatic and political solutions. The resultant control of the destinies of entire populations by a small set of people whose biases, perceptions, emotions, and other human qualities call into question – pace Nixon and his madman theory – the rationality of key decisions.48

The nuclear revolution and prospect of Armageddon is but one exemplar of the integral and thus unexceptional relationship of psychology to international politics.49 What analysis of negotiations, for example, can overlook the psychology of the different actors? Success or failure at the bargaining table depends largely on how the hand is played as well as the chips one holds. Outcomes can turn on the ability of one participant to “read” or mislead another, the flexibility or inflexibility of the respective individuals or personalities, comparative risk-taking tendencies, and personal or group attributes, styles, or cognitive dynamics. Actors often adopt negotiating strategies in light of the predicted response they will generate, both at home and abroad. Employing carrots and sticks, or sugar and vinegar, are all psychological ploys.50

Likewise, the concept of a security dilemma – often thought of as a mathematical or economic construct – is fundamentally rooted in psychology. The idea that measures intended to increase the security of one nation can generate fears or insecurity in another nation is a key factor in analyzing policy choice. Consider all the historical studies that emphasize the failure of antagonists to distinguish between offensive and defensive weapons and force structures, and that reveal how such spirals of misunderstanding and misperception feed tensions and conflict.51

Much of the literature on the origins of the Cold War accents this phenomenon. To quote John Lewis Gaddis’ initial study, “It seems likely that Washington policy-makers mistook Stalin’s determination to ensure Russian security through spheres of influence for a renewed effort to spread communism outside the borders of the Soviet Union.”52 It seems no less likely that the ominous inferences Kennedy drew from Nikita Khrushchev’s War of Liberation speech of January 1961, and the threatening inferences Khrushchev drew from Kennedy’s inaugural and State of the Union addresses shortly thereafter, fueled a spiral of misperception that climaxed with the crises of the next year.53

What is more, most students of the history of US foreign relations are now comfortable applying the descriptive term “personal diplomacy.” No doubt the catalyst was Woodrow Wilson’s decision to travel to Versailles and the much-debated consequences. But it was the dynamic that developed between the Grand Alliance’s Big Three during the Second World War that confirmed for a broad audience the salience of personality to both the conduct and outcome of negotiations. At Tehran and Yalta especially, personal diplomacy involved more than “just” the interplay of Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin, three almost larger than life individuals and leaders. What proved most fascinating was evidence that illuminated how each developed strategies to exploit the strengths and the weaknesses of the others, how they each sought to play one off against the other, how critical the notion of “trust” became, and other psychologically driven dimensions. Indeed, assessments of which of the Big Three was most effective – or most culpable – often rested on psychologically based criteria. Historians’ evaluations of the negotiations among Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin differ dramatically, but virtually all agree that these meetings and their results, to a greater or lesser degree, would have been different were it not for Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin. Conversely, as Frank Costigliola argues, the disintegration of the personal relationships among the Big Three influenced the breakdown of the alliance and the onset of the Cold War.54

This stress on the personal nature of diplomacy continued as the Cold War ebbed and flowed, reinforced by the concept of “summitry.” Nevertheless, it was perhaps the series of encounters that propelled the end of the Cold War that cemented the place of personal diplomacy in the hierarchy of interests among historians of US foreign relations. Without the distinctive contributions that Reagan, Gorbachev, and their advisers made to these summit meetings, first in Geneva, then Reykjavik, then Washington, and then Moscow, it seems inconceivable that the Cold War could have ended when it did, and how it did.55 Although it seems likely that neither side fully understood the other due to differences in historical experience, ideology, social or cultural backgrounds, geography, and other considerations, one can readily infer from the oral testimony of the “witnesses” to the end of the Cold War that their sustained interactions, coupled with other key influences on perception, allowed the principals to overcome differences in their respective conceptual worlds and achieve enhanced empathy and thus improved understanding and relations.56

After the Cold War ended relations between Washington and Moscow became, if anything, more “personalized.” Surely the next generation of
scholars will seek out evidence about the policy significance of Bill Clinton’s
decisions to define US interests in Russia as contingent on the viability,
reliability, and even sobriety of Boris Yeltsin. Central questions to explore
must include the psychological bases of the American president’s attachment
to “Old Boris,” a drinker like Clinton’s own stepfather, and the extent to which
this attachment affected the US response to Russia’s behavior in Chechnya or
the epidemic of political corruption throughout the Eurasian region.65 It also
appears that George W. Bush may have personalized his relations with Vladimir
Putin even more than Clinton did with Boris Yeltsin. It took only one meeting
with the Russian leader to convince him that by looking Putin “in the eye” he
“was able to get a sense of his soul.” That their relationship soured so
dramatically prompted Barack Obama’s effort to “reset” it later on.66
Historians cannot recognize the role of “personal chemistry” in diplomacy
without first conceding the impact of psychology in the conduct of foreign
affairs.

INTELLIGENCE IN FOREIGN POLICY

Intelligence, a fundamental aspect of US foreign relations since Benjamin
Tallmadge organized the Culper Ring and Nathan Hale sacrificed his life to
serve the cause of American independence, is a specific arena that cannot be
analyzed without taking psychology into account. The core mission of the
Central Intelligence Agency is the collection and interpretation of
information. No activity depends more on perceptions and inferences, the
core concerns of cognitive psychology.59 The legendary head of the CIA’s
Office of National Estimates, Sherman Kent, focused on this dependence
when he explained why the September 1962 Special National Intelligence
Estimate on the military build-up in Cuba missed the Soviet deployment of
offensive missiles. The answer lay “in man’s habits of thought,” Kent wrote.
The ambiguity of the evidence forced analysts to make judgments. “When we
reviewed once again how cautiously the Soviet leadership had threaded its way
through other dangerous passages of the Cold War, when we took stock of the
sense of outrage and resolve evidenced by the American people and government
since the establishment of a Communist regime in Cuba, when we estimated
that the Soviets must be aware of these American attitudes, and when we then
asked ourselves would the Soviets undertake the great risks at the high odds –
and in Cuba of all places – the indicator, the pattern of Soviet foreign policy,
shouted out its negative.” The reason US intelligence analysts “missed the Soviet
decision to put the missiles into Cuba,” Kent concluded, is that “we could not
believe that Khrushchev could make [such] a mistake.”60

A CIA internal history suggests that the same dynamics drove errors about
the likelihood the Soviet Union would invade Afghanistan in 1979.61 They also
contributed to the notorious 2002 National Intelligence Estimate on Weapons
of Mass Destruction in Iraq. Yet in this case, the outcome was the opposite of

the judgments leading up to the Cuban missile crisis and the Afghanistan
invasion. Lacking current details, analysts based their judgments about Iraq’s
capabilities on their image of Saddam Hussein and what they knew about his
past patterns: what they termed “cheat and retreat.” They assumed that because
Saddam had hidden weapons of mass destruction earlier on and secretly sought
to acquire nuclear arms in the 1980s, he had done so again. In addition, because
the CIA had failed to detect Saddam’s arsenal before and even after the 1991
Gulf War, analysts a decade later were predisposed to exaggerate the likelihood
of worst-case scenarios, thus overestimating the reliability of questionable
testimony and falling victim to Iraq’s “deceptive practices,” to quote the CIA’s post-mortem.62

The CIA, of course, does not confine itself to analyses and estimates; it also
engages in covert operations, which can include propaganda campaigns,
political action, and paramilitary ventures. These, too, invariably rely heavily
on psychology. President Eisenhower went so far as to designate C. D. Jackson
his special assistant for psychological warfare, and his administration’s strategy
for overthrowing the Arbenz government in Guatemala, by the CIA’s own
admission, was “dependent upon psychological impact rather than actual
military strength.” Successor administrations may not have believed as avidly in “psywar,” but it has remained a staple instrument of American policy.63 If
policymakers recognize the seminal relationship between psychology and
foreign affairs, so should scholars.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Although our research, and that of many others, shows that psychological
perspectives can assist in interpreting evidence, it cannot and must not be used
to compensate for a lack of evidence. To illustrate, during the interregnum
between Stalin’s death and Eisenhower’s “Chance for Peace” address, the
perceptions of the US president and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles
conflicted starkly. Eisenhower was more inclined to explore the possibility
that Georgi Malenkov was not a clone of Joseph Stalin and that some kind of
détente with the Soviets was possible. Yet by allowing Dulles publicly to
denounce the new Kremlin leadership at the same time that he was seeking to
extend an olive branch to the Russians, Eisenhower all but assured there would
be no chance for peace. A number of psychological theories are candidates for
addressing this apparent paradox. But without better data, we are hesitant to
apply any of them.64

Even when the evidence is available, the historian aiming to use psychology
effectively must study it. This means going beyond one or two general
textbooks. There is a broad literature to consider, and no one perspective
should be employed mechanically.65 Similarly, scholars must refrain from
getting carried away with psychology’s explanatory power. The temptation to
fit evidence to support a theory is seductive. Understanding an individual or
group is necessary but not sufficient to understanding the policy. To assume there is always a direct linkage between beliefs or cognitions, motivations or perceptions, and international relations behavior would be misguided.

Even if the historian has developed adequate expertise in psychology, is judicious in its application, and has the requisite documents available, there remains the problem of practicality. Ideally we should identify everyone involved in the policy process and then examine them each to determine which attributes or judgments appear most related to what behavior, investigate their individual and group contributions, and take into account the psychological influences on the policy process itself. This is an ambitious assignment. In addition to the research involved, it requires one to devise a method of weighing individual and group actions in proportion to their influence on the decision. And even once that is accomplished, it is necessary to factor in domestic and systemic variables that may shape and constrain behavior if we are to complete the analysis. This challenge is as demanding and complex as learning foreign languages or developing any other area of expertise. Yet it is also richly rewarding, and can fully complement new directions in social, cultural, and international history as well as US foreign policy.

From George Washington and Henry Knox to Ronald Reagan and Jeane Kirkpatrick to George H. W. Bush and Colin Powell, to Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton foreign policies are almost always choices. No one figure alone determines the course of foreign affairs; environmental features and situational conditions are always influential. But when policy directions can be shaped by human actions, their contributions are essential. It may take years to reach confident conclusions, but at a minimum, psychological variables are important mediators between the environment and human activity. Behavior is the product of interactions between people and the situations in which they find themselves.60 Psychological theories allow us to gain additional insights about the history of US foreign relations. Applying these perspectives presents great opportunities as well as great challenges. We must remain mindful of both.

NOTES


38. Although Alex Roberto Hybel's *How Leaders Reason: US Intervention in the Caribbean Basin and Latin America* (Oxford, 1990), 49-69, draws heavily on the evidence Richard Immerman presented in the CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention (Austin, 1982), and he develops an analogous theory of foreign policy making, we believe this approach overlooks important historical developments and nuances, thus limiting its ability to explain the Eisenhower administration's estimate of the communist danger in Guatemala and its decision to employ covert action to eradicate the threat.


47. For a brief review of some promising new techniques in neuroscience, see Fiske and Taylor, *Social Cognition*, 20-4. For an early application of neuroscience approaches to politics, see Max Lazarus, *The Manipulation of the American People: How They Think and How to Make Them Do What We Want* (New York, 1965).


