

Introduction

Just as my path to writing *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*¹ was not straightforward, so the way I came to write these essays was haphazard. In almost all cases the precipitating factor was an invitation to contribute to a journal or an edited book, and while these may have been distractions from larger projects on which I was working, they also enabled me to pull together ideas and research that I had been accumulating in files and in my head. It might have made sense for me to continue concentrating on political psychology after writing *Perception and Misperception*, but I was drawn into other topics including the Cold War, the role of nuclear weapons on world politics, debates about appropriate American nuclear strategy, and the mechanisms by which systems work. Political psychology retained its hold on me, however, and while I could not keep up with all the literature, I continued to believe that this approach had a great deal to offer to anyone who wanted to understand how we as individuals think and act, how collectivities develop, and how states react to each other. In this I always was both attracted and repelled by parsimony. Even without close personal contact with scholars like Thomas Schelling, Glenn Snyder, and Kenneth Waltz, I would have sought explanations that involved relatively few moving parts. Not only did I find them aesthetically satisfying, but with my bad memory I could hardly operate without them. But partly because of my fascination with history and the propensity for unfolding politics to surprise me, I also saw a rich and complicated variety in human and international behavior. Political

¹ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976; 2nd ed., 2017).

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psychology seemed to hold out the possibility for combining if not reconciling these conflicting impulses.

In the preface to the new edition to *Perception and Misperception* I have outlined what I see as the main developments in the field over the past forty years. Many of them are represented in the essays here, and before introducing them I just want to note a few things about the field.² For better and for worse, political psychology is a *they* rather than an *it*. There are many different kinds, proceeding from different assumptions, employing different methodologies, and asking different questions. Some look for commonalities, while others focus on differences among individuals or categories of them. Often there is a stress on pathologies, but parts of the field look for strengths as well. In the past decade new instruments have allowed much better understanding of how the brain works, and so neuroscience is now yielding important if contestable insights. Other studies build on the older tradition of research on cognition and look at how individuals perceive the world and seek to solve problems, while for others the better approach is a continuation of social psychology in the belief that only when we look at the social setting in which individuals are bathed and which they produce by their interactions can we gain a well-rounded appreciation for what is happening.³

As a perusal of the main journal in the field, *Political Psychology*, indicates, the focus of most of my colleagues has been on attitudes and voting behavior. Of course there is some overlap between this and my concerns with international politics and leaders' decisions and perceptions, but not only are the individuals involved quite different, but also politics and political choices are much more important to the people I study than they are to the general public. Nevertheless, all of them are human beings faced with a surfeit of information and multiple pressures. So I think that despite many differences, most forms of political psychology share five distinguishing characteristics.

First is the belief that to understand human behavior we have to examine how people think, interpret their environments, and reach decisions. Simple stimulus-response models rarely will do. There are a large variety of stimuli to which people can respond, and they often are quite ambiguous. To turn to international politics, theories that stress the importance of the state's external environment, although extremely useful for some purposes, leave many central questions unanswered. Even when we find common patterns of be-

2 For good surveys of political psychology as it applies to international politics, see Rose McDermott, *Political Psychology in International Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), and David Houghton, *Political Psychology: Situations, Individuals, and Cases* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

3 For surveys, see Kristen Monroe, ed., *Political Psychology* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002) and Leonie Huddy, David Sears, and Jack Levy, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

havior, they are likely to be fully intelligible only when we understand how the actors see the world. Many consequential foreign policy decisions—including ones that shape the world, such as Britain's decision to fight on after the fall of France in 1940, which is touched on below⁴—are deeply contested, and knowing only the external situation does not tell us why different individuals came to different conclusions, let alone who prevailed. We need to look inside the “black box” of the state to study the goals, beliefs, and perceptions of the decision-makers.

A related way of putting this is to note that standard notions of rationality are not so much incorrect as insufficient to catch either the objectives toward which people strive or the means by which they try to reach them. This does not mean, however, that the perspectives of political psychology and rational choice theory are entirely antithetical. The form of rational choice that is most appropriate to the study of international politics is game theory, which revolves around actors' anticipations of others' behavior and of others' anticipation of their behavior. Game theory cannot put flesh on this skeleton, however, because it cannot speak to how these expectations are formed and what they will be.⁵ Political psychology is essential here.

A good deal of the field examines deviations from rationality. In many instances this may not be useful, however, partly because the very notion of rationality may be indeterminate or contested. Indeed, a focus on rationality, or the lack thereof, can lead us into two traps. First, it inclines us to giving points or demerits to the decision-makers in a way that may obscure understanding. Second, we may too easily infer the rationality of decisions from the quality of the outcomes. While we might want to think that greater individual rationality and better decision-making processes lead to better policies, we should not assume that this is the case and, even if the generalization is correct, there are sure to be multiple exceptions.

A second component of political psychology is the search not only for common patterns, but for generalizations that apply only to some groups and that separate them from others, and also for individual idiosyncrasies. Much of the discussion in the subsequent chapters, like a great deal of the field, looks for patterns that, if not universal, are at least widespread. But there is a tension here between such a search and the realization that individual and group differences are important. We must be careful not to overgeneralize from Western experience or experimental subjects.⁶ Even within the same

4 See “Why Intelligence and Policymakers Clash,” ch 7.

5 This limitation is noted in David Kreps, *Game Theory and Economic Modelling* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 101.

6 Joseph Henrich, Stephen Heine, and Ara Norenzayan, “The Weirdest People in the World,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33 (2010): 61–135. “Weird” here stands for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic, with the argument that the people in these societies are

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culture, people differ in the ways they process information, draw inferences, and reach decisions. Furthermore, since international politics is interactive, we must also come to grips with the fact that political leaders are less prone than scholars to homogenize people and that they devote serious attention to trying to understand the goals and perceptions of those with whom they are dealing.

Third, political psychology explores the nexus between people's behavior and their self-images and identities.⁷ Although much remains to be understood, it is clear that the way individuals and groups view others and the way they view themselves are reciprocally related. Thus people sometimes think badly of others in order to think well of themselves, or see another state as aggressive because they think that their own state is peaceful and therefore that the other's hostility can be explained only by its malign nature. Individuals and collectivities often define themselves as similar to those whom they admire and as different from—and usually better than—those with whom they have conflicts. The other side of this coin is important as well, as people are prone to find differences with those they dislike. The substance of even favorable self-images can vary, as can the importance of the role they play in national behavior. Soviet and American identities during the Cold War illustrate this nicely, which is why I have included a chapter on this subject.

In general, people want to see their own behavior as rational and consistent, which has interesting consequences in the form of self-perception. Contrary to common belief, people lack privileged access to their own motives and calculations, which means that people develop retrospective explanations for their own behavior.⁸ Not only are these likely to be built on preferred self-images, but also this tendency to develop retrospective explanations is more than a curiosity because people are likely to let such explanations guide their future behavior.⁹ This process can produce a form of path-dependence in

quite different from those in others. Other more fine-grained distinctions are, of course, possible, for example, between cultures that depend on rice and those that cultivate wheat: T. Talhelm, et al., "Large-Scale Psychological Differences Within China Explained by Rich versus Wheat Agriculture," *Science* 344 (May 9, 2014): 603–8.

⁷ Constructivism has rediscovered the importance of identities and has stressed their collective nature. For a good empirical treatment, see Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow 1955 and 1999* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002) and *Reconstructing the Cold War: the Early Years, 1945–1958* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁸ For a summary of the literature, see Timothy Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves; Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁹ Daryl Bem, "Self-Perception Theory," *Advances in Experimental Psychology*, vol. 6 (New York: Academic Press, 1972), pp. 1–62. For an application to international politics see Deborah Larson, *The Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

which the driver is not the action that the person took, but rather her later explanation for why she did it.

Fourth, as the previous paragraphs indicate, people have emotions as well as cognitions, and indeed, the two often are inextricably combined. Only in the past generation or so have political psychologists rediscovered them, however. Fear, anger, and pride—and perhaps love—are central to international politics, but have not figured prominently in our scholarship. Fear, of course, is the subject of much analysis of politics, especially international politics, but in most cases one could substitute the term “threat perception” without distorting the author’s meaning because the emotional connotation of fear is drained from the analysis. Even more strikingly, hatred is rarely mentioned, as though we could understand the sources and consequences of international conflict without creating space for the impulse that is so palpable throughout history. Fortunately, political psychologists who analyze international politics are now exploring the subject,¹⁰ and several of the essays in this book seek to rectify the omission of emotions from *Perception and Misperception*.

The final essential element of political psychology is an appreciation of the limits of a priori reasoning and a deep commitment to empirical research. Abstract theorizing is crucial, but looking with care at cases and making relevant comparisons is needed not only to probe our generalizations and theories and to elucidate causal processes, but also to develop ideas that we can bring to other cases and sources of evidence. While many approaches to the study of politics take for granted actors’ preferences and ideas about how to reach them, these are often the most important parts of the explanation for behavior, and it is doubtful that we can understand them without employing political psychology.¹¹ Although political psychology should not be confused with clinical psychology, it does tell us that we have to observe and listen to people.

10 For an overview, see Rose McDermott, “The Feeling of Rationality,” *Perspectives on Politics* 2 (December 2004): 691–706. Also see my preface to the new edition of *Perception and Misperception* (2017); Neta Crawford, “The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotion and Emotional Relationships,” *International Security* 24 (Spring 2000): 116–56; Jonathan Mercer, “Emotional Beliefs,” *International Organization* 64 (Winter 2010): 1–31; Mercer, “Emotion and Strategy in the Korean War,” *International Organization* 67 (Spring 2013): 221–52. For good discussions of emotions by historians, see Barbara Keys, “Kissinger, the Emotional Statesman,” *Diplomatic History* 35 (Summer 2011): 587–609; Frank Costigliola, “‘I React Intensely to Everything’: Russia and the Frustrated Emotions of George F. Kennan, 1933–1958,” *Journal of American History* 102 (March 2016): 1075–101.

11 See, for example, Christopher Achen and Duncan Snidal, “Rational Deterrence Theory and Comparative Case Studies,” *World Politics* 41 (January 1989): 143–69, and my reply, “Rational Deterrence: Theory and Evidence,” *World Politics* 41 (January 1989): 143–207

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When political psychology is applied to international politics, as it is here, and especially when we explore misperception, we must realize that there is an almost inescapable tendency to look at cases of conflict, surprise, and error. When things go wrong, they not only attract the actors' attention, they also attract ours. How many studies of American policy toward Vietnam would there have been if the United States had decided not to fight there (and if this had not led to disasters elsewhere)? The tendency to look mainly at cases where things go wrong makes the analysis of causation difficult as we lack comparisons to cases with better results and may attribute the failure to decision-making factors that are constants rather than variables. These factors, of course, can be important to understanding how people behave, but may not discriminate between good decisions and bad ones. So we have to be careful to distinguish when we are arguing that certain perceptual processes are common and when we are claiming that they are likely to lead actors astray. The other side of this coin is that concentrating on errors and conflict (and of course the two are not the same) can give us an unbalanced picture of world politics and the skill of leaders. Many if not most of the cases I and others in the field draw upon are ones where errors are made, the states do not communicate well, and each participant sees the situations differently (what I call the "*Rashomon* effect" after the famous Japanese short story and movie). But we need to know about more successes, such as the way in which during the Vietnam War the United States and China accurately communicated their "red lines" and correctly interpreted each other's signals.¹²

Plan of the Book

The twelve essays are divided into four sections. The first presents a broad overview of key concepts and arguments in political psychology, the second discusses two of the important heuristics and biases that have received a great deal of attention: representativeness and Prospect Theory. The next section zeros in on applications to international politics, and the closing part looks in more detail at beliefs and perceptions of particular relevance to issues of national security. The lines between these topics are blurry and alternative categorizations are possible, but I think this grouping is relatively coherent.

All the essays have been lightly edited to reduce repetitions, to remove inessential material to keep this collection to a reasonable length, to change the verb tense of sentences to take account for the fact that the Cold War is over, and in a few places to add some new material and update references.

12 James Hershberg and Chen Jian, "Reading and Warning the Likely Enemy: China's Signals to the United States about Vietnam in 1965," *International History Review* 27 (March 2005): 47–84.

“Prospect Theory: The Political Implications of Loss Aversion,” includes some material from my “The Implications of Prospect Theory for Human Nature.”¹³ “Political Psychology Research and Theory: Bridges and Barriers” has had more material deleted. In its original form,¹⁴ it was written in honor of Alexander George, a leading student of political psychology and international politics. While I have retained a focus on George’s scholarship, I have directed the discussion to the general issues and arguments rather than his specific contributions.

“Psychology and Crisis Stability” and “Domino Beliefs” focus on the Cold War, and I have added some material to the former to show the continuing relevance of the problem and have deleted some material on problems of Soviet-American postures. I also deleted material from the latter essay that evaluated the validity of the domino theory and the circumstances under which it was most likely to apply, because this analysis is less relevant to political psychology. “Perception, Misperception, and the End of the Cold War” was written for the proceedings of a conference of Soviet and American officials who participated in these events, and although I have retained the focus on the contributions of these people, I have removed some material that made sense only within the context of what was said there.

It may be helpful to say a little more about each of the essays.

“Understanding Beliefs,” which begins the collection, presents some of the arguments that are applied in the later chapters. Drawing on a classic book in political psychology, *Opinions and Personality* by M. Brewster Smith, Jerome Bruner, and Robert White,¹⁵ I argue that expectations on the one hand and personal and political needs on the other are the two main sources of political beliefs and perceptions. As psychologists discuss them, the former is cold, cognitive, and unmotivated and the latter is hot and motivated. “The Drunkard’s Search” discusses how both kinds of biases lead to looking at information that is most readily available, easiest to process, and most understandable rather than to probing more deeply for what is more illuminating and diagnostic. Although the story about the drunkard looking for his keys under the lamp post because the light is better there is a joke, we find it funny because it is all too true.

One of the short-cuts or heuristics that psychologists have isolated is the tendency for people to make judgments on the basis of representativeness, which is the extent to which an instance or case resembles a stereotype while

13 “The Implications of Prospect Theory for Human Nature,” *Political Psychology* 25 (April 2004): 163–76

14 “Bridges, Barriers, and Gaps: Research and Policy,” *Political Psychology* 29 (2008): 571–92.

15 M. Brewster Smith, Jerome Bruner, Robert White, *Opinions and Personality* (New York: Wiley, 1956).

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downplaying if not ignoring the frequency with which the stereotype is present within the relevant population (what is known as the base rate). When you hear hoof beats, think of horses, not zebras, medical students are told when learning about diagnosis. Good advice, and the reason it is given is that without special reminders people will ignore the importance of bearing in mind the actual frequency of phenomena. In “Representativeness, Foreign Policy Judgments, and Theory-Driven Perceptions,”¹⁶ I argue that while representativeness sometimes characterizes perceptions of politics, when the base rate is seen by the person as part of a causal account of why things happen as they do, it is overweighted rather than underweighted because it establishes expectations that influence the way new information is interpreted.

Probably the best known and intriguing psychological theory that has been developed since the publication of *Perception and Misperception* is Prospect Theory. Like the representativeness heuristic and many other insights that I and others have drawn upon, it was developed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, and the former received the Nobel Prize in economics for it (Tversky having died before the award was made). In brief, the theory argues that while people are generally risk-averse when it comes to the possibility of making gains, they will accept risks to avoid losses, and that their behavior is influenced by whether the situation is framed in terms of a possibility of making gains or the converse probability of avoiding losses. “Prospect Theory: The Political Implications of Loss Aversion” asks what this theory leads us to expect about political behavior. Economists have been challenged and tantalized because Prospect Theory argues that people violate standard postulates of rationality; for students of international politics it opens up important lines of inquiry about when and why states engage in risky behavior. Among other things, it indicates that when each of two opposing states believes itself to be in the realm of losses war is especially likely.

Political psychology speaks to important issues of the theory—or theories—of international politics. In “Signaling and Perception” I bring together two strands of literature that have been kept separate, but actually depend on each other. My first book, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*,¹⁷ developed and applied abstract theories of signaling, separating signals from indices, explaining how actors used them to project desired images, and analyzing the logical status of kinds of actions for distinguishing between honest and deceptive behaviors. Building on this work, Michael Spence developed related concepts that have had great influence on economics (earning him the Nobel

16 The essay was originally titled “Representativeness in Foreign Policy Judgments”; the one I use here gives a better sense of the argument.

17 *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970; 2nd ed, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

Prize) and political science.¹⁸ But neither Spence nor I paid a great deal of attention to how various categories of verbal and nonverbal behavior actually were perceived. In this essay, I stress the need to do so and to unify theories of signaling and theories of perception, although here I only begin the task.

Political psychology not only seeks to help build theory, in many formulations it also shares with the discipline of social psychology out of which it grew the desire to make this a more just and peaceful world. Building on the path-breaking work of Alexander George, “Political Psychology Research and Theory: Bridges and Barriers” explores the tensions as well as the synergies between these two objectives, notes the psychological and political barriers inhibiting the application of psychological research to foreign policy decision making, and outlines some areas in which our findings might have a receptive audience.

Some of these themes are approached from a different angle in the next essay, “Why Intelligence and Policymakers Clash.” This research grew out of the postmortems I did for the CIA on the intelligence failures surrounding the Iranian Revolution of 1978–79 and the assessment that Iraq had active programs to develop weapons of mass destruction before the 2003 invasion.¹⁹ The main tasks and dominant needs of policymakers differ from those of intelligence organizations. Most centrally, the former have to act. For both political and psychological reasons, they must have confidence, benefit from being able to present multiple reasons for pursuing a course of action, and need to believe that they can succeed. At its best, intelligence brings out alternative interpretations and highlights the ways in which policies can go wrong. Even with the best will in the world, this is a difficult mix. Examining it helps us understand the ways in which security policies are formed and how foreign policy outcomes are the product of contested ways in which information is processed, inferences about the state’s external environment are developed, and policies are formulated, sustained, and altered.

A great deal of work in the past decade has stressed the importance of national identity. Neither the psychological underpinnings nor the empirical manifestations have been sufficiently explored, however. In “Identity and the Cold War” I look at how Soviet and American identities affected their relations, especially in seeing the other side as inevitably hostile. But the symmetry is not perfect here as Soviet identity was more deeply tied to beliefs about the danger posed by the capitalist world than American identity was in its perception of the threat posed by communism, which was one reason why the

18 Michael Spence, *Market Signaling: Informational Transfer in Hiring and Related Screening Processes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

19 *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

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United States was able to capitalize on the Sino-Soviet split and why the end of the Cold War reinforced rather than threatened the American image of itself.

The final set of four essays narrows the focus to the intersection of political psychology and national security issues. Most of the analysis draws its examples from the 1930s and the Cold War, but the arguments apply more generally. Deterrence theory comes in many variants and often baroque elaborations. One obvious point is generally given short shrift, however: that the effect of policies designed to deter others depends on how the others would perceive them. It is all well and good to talk about credibility, punishment, and reward in the abstract, but as they work out in the real world they depend on what the targets value, believe, and think about the state's behavior. To take just one example, in the fall of 1969, Richard Nixon tried to frighten the Soviet Union into putting pressure on North Vietnam by staging a nuclear alert. Unfortunately for him, however, the Soviets hardly noticed.²⁰ In "Deterrence and Perception" I explore many of the ways threats can be less potent or more potent than a priori reasoning would lead us to expect, drawing most heavily on British beliefs on the damage that German bombers could inflict in a war. For a variety of reasons, including German deception, not only the British public but British political leaders of all political persuasions overestimated the threat and so increased German coercive capabilities. Perceptions, not the reality, mattered.

Deterrence stresses the importance of credible threats in keeping the peace. But, as Schelling pointed out as he develops this theory but others have sometimes neglected, this endeavor simultaneously requires states to make credible promises not to strike if the other side reciprocally does not attack. There was a real danger, Schelling realized, that "the reciprocal fear of surprise attack" could produce instability in a crisis and a war that no one wanted.²¹ Dealing with this problem became a cornerstone of American defense policy and underpinned arms control negotiations²² but little attention was paid to the impact on stability of how people process information, draw inferences on what others are likely to do, and analyze their own alternatives. This is the subject of the next essay, "Psychology and Crisis Stability." If the end of the Cold War has reduced the saliency of inadvertent war, it has not eliminated it, either between the United States and Russia or between other nuclear-armed rivals, especially India and Pakistan.

20 William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2015).

21 Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), ch. 9.

22 I have discussed this in "Arms Control, Stability, and the Causes of War," *Daedalus* 120 (Winter 1991).

If crisis instability was one of the main American fears during the Cold War, another was that minor defeats would ramify throughout the entire system, just as one falling domino could knock over many others. The Munich analogy was central to American policy and remains important today, as much of the current debate between those who urge strategic restraint and those who advocate deeper security involvement turns on whether local defeats and instabilities will ramify or remain contained. In “Domino Beliefs” I explore the characteristics and workings of the belief that this kind of positive feedback is relevant in world politics.

It is perhaps fitting to end this collection with an essay that brings psychology to bear on how the Cold War ended. Many of us who lived through it doubted that this conflict would ever come to an end, and the fear that if it did it would do so through all-out war was a dominating feature of this era. Images of the other side as deeply hostile and beliefs that concessions, rather than being reciprocated, would lead to perceptions of weakness seemed unlikely to disappear. “Perception, Misperception, and the End of the Cold War,” explores how the momentous change took place. This returns us to the basic argument of this volume that a full understanding of politics requires us to probe how people perceive their environments, draw inferences about what others are like and how they will respond to alternative actions the state could take, and reach judgments. The Cold War has ended, but not only theorizing but also the analytical and policy problems we continue to face call for the application and further development of political psychology.