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Introduction: Three Theoretical Arguments, Four "Great Men" of History, Multiple Methods and Disciplines

Rationality is one of the most central concepts in the field of international relations, yet we have little idea of what it means. Theorists, even those whose entire approach is premised on the construct, seem almost reluctant to grapple with the concept. Rational choice scholars typically define it in minimal terms, as the pursuit of a set of carefully and consistently ranked preferences. Rationality is simply having a goal and working toward it. This somewhat trivial conception of rationality makes it hard to argue with, since it merely means purposive behavior. What, exactly, would be the alternative? A foreign policy based on whim and fancy? Leaders with no sense of how to achieve their aims or interest in doing so? This conceptualization likely explains the absence of voices calling rational choice's foundation into question. It is completely unobjectionable.

When anyone else talks of rationality, they surely mean much more than that. However, just what we mean has been hard to pin down. I conceptualize rationality as a type of thinking that is marked by two important features: a commitment to *objectivity* and active *deliberation*. Rationality means trying to see the world as it is, free from bias. And it requires active work, a systematic engagement with information. This *process* of rationality has been systematically overlooked in most international relations scholarship. Rationality requires much more than just a set of stable preferences. Without an effort to see the world objectively and to deliberate before acting, rational behavior is impossible. Instrumentally rational choices, in which a set of political actors make calculating and utilitarian judgments to maximize their interests in light of structural constraints, presupposes a particular type of cognition that neither rationalists nor any other types of international relations theorists can either assume or ignore. Rational choice requires rational thinking, and not all thinking is rational. I call this the *psychology of rationality*.

This book makes the case that some foreign policy leaders are systematically more rational than others. They have greater "epistemic motivation," a commitment to rational thought. *Rationality is a variable*,

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one that systematically distinguishes the thinking style of some leaders from that of others. Those who demonstrate greater procedural rationality – that is, a commitment to deliberation and objectivity – are those who engage in instrumentally rational behavior: a careful consideration of the costs and benefits of different courses of actions, an understanding of the likely moves of others, the updating of beliefs based on new information, and an assessment of the relative risks of different choices, among other types of calculations.

Since it is to a large degree a dispositional trait of individuals, rational thinking is not something that we should take for granted or simply assume, even in an anarchic environment that should incentivize it. Highly rational thinking is the normative goal, not the descriptive norm. It is the exception, not the default. This is something that classical realists have long stressed. An analysis of historical realist texts reveals theorists making more prescriptive than explanatory claims, admonishing leaders to make careful choices based on an unvarnished look at the realities of the system but generally disappointed that they do not. *Raison d'état* requires reasoning of state. Yet this claim goes against much, perhaps even most, contemporary international relations thinking. There is no more common bedrock assumption in the field than that of rational leaders.

Practitioners of Realpolitik, realists in practice, are the most prominent rational thinkers in foreign affairs. However, this book shows that realists are a very rare breed in international relations, likely because rational thinking requires considerable effort and is not always our default option. Realists celebrate the great realist statesmen such as Bismarck and Richelieu, whose accomplishments are captured in this book. However, this very fact shows their relative rarity. Realists are so noteworthy because they are so uncommon. In this book, I show that the realism of these statesmen has psychological foundations and that their thinking style distinguished them from most others, including their allies at home who shared their foreign policy goals. Rather than being the norm in our foreign policy makers, realism is the exception. Otherwise, we would not even notice it at all.

Part of the reason that we have spent so little time coming to terms with what rationality means and entails is that we lack a clear concept of what nonrational, or less than rational, cognition looks like. Nonrational thinking is intuitive and preconscious. It is not deliberative and effortful, but rather automatic and fast. Conceptualizing and demonstrating nonrational cognition allows us to see procedural rational processes more clearly. This type of thinking is difficult to observe. Because it is preconscious, it does not leave the same trail as a deliberative rational thought

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process. Nevertheless, we should not ignore it. Most psychologists believe that this type of thinking guides the predominance of our actions, behaviors, and choices every day. It seems unlikely that even foreign policy statesmen can completely avoid it. International relations scholars, however, are just starting to come to terms with it.

I focus on a particular type of nonrational figure in international relations. *Romantics* often leave a mark as prominent as our great realists, although in most ways they are exact opposites. They are distinguished by a belief in agency. Romantics see themselves as capable of overcoming structural obstacles and remaking the world as we know it. They act on behalf of an idealistic cause that cannot be compromised, despite the (inevitably) daunting odds they inevitably face in their struggle with others. What they lack in power, romantics hope to make up for in resolve. Where there is a will, there is a way. Just as scholars differ in terms of the stress they place on structure or agency in their explanations of political and social events (Dessler 1989), real-world individuals differ in terms of the degree of control they believe that humans have in their lives.

Romanticism gives us a sense of what an emotional, impulsive, and intuitive decision-making process looks like in foreign affairs. It reveals that a lack of rationality does not imply incoherence, aimlessness, and insanity, as it might seem. Unlike realists, romantics are not instrumentally rational; they do not adapt efficiently to the obstacles around them, making the best choices in light of structural constraints. Instead, they simply push on while disregarding (and without contemplating) their slim chances. However, romantics are purposive; they have goals. They just do not pursue them in a highly deliberative fashion. As we will see, we cannot understand Winston Churchill and Ronald Reagan without a notion of romanticism and the nonrational thinking style that it entails.

Like realists, romantics seem to be a rare breed in international relations. However, they often leave the world in a very different state than that in which they found it. As with the rationalist, we know a romantic when we see one, but we lack the systematic understanding that this book tries to provide.

Studying realists and romantics and their thinking styles also shows us that a great level of rationality is not always the key to success. Romantics have achieved great things in history, perhaps because of – rather than despite – their less rational cognitive style. A central theme of this book is that rational thinking and nonrational thinking both have their own advantages and disadvantages. Rationalists, of which realists are one kind, are judicious and cautious and generally do not take risky decisions that will likely leave their countries worse off. However, their tendency to

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deliberate, constantly weighing the pros and cons of different paths, can leave them paralyzed in situations with no good choice, of which there are many in international relations. Romantics are impulsive and emotional and often charge into political (and military) battle without any real consideration. Even so, we admire them for their dedication to principles and their decisive leadership. Sometimes they are right; what everyone else see as insuperable obstacles that cannot be overcome dissolve in the face of resolute resistance (although sometimes this also needs a bit of luck).

This book makes three sweeping theoretical arguments based on engagement with other disciplines in both the social sciences and the humanities, and tests them with a diverse and novel variety of methods. I rely not only on psychology, but also on philosophy and art history. I undertake careful case studies based on archival sources, primary texts, and interviews with former high-ranking government officials, but also utilize quantitative textual analysis and bargaining experiments in a computer laboratory.

First, we can observe systematic individual-level variation in rational thought, both across college undergraduates and across kings and prime ministers. Rational choice theory assumes that rational choice is universal and/or argues that rational thinking is inconsequential to rational behavior. I demonstrate otherwise. I conceptualize rationality by working backward from the psychological literature that finds fault with rationalist assumptions about human behavior, what is often known as the heuristics and biases literature. Bias substitutes for objective understanding, heuristics for calm and collected deliberation. Rather than basing one's beliefs on evidence, one chooses what one wants to believe. Rather than changing one's beliefs based on new information, one engages in belief perseverance and assimilation. Heuristics are simplifying devices that ease the process of thinking, acting as "theories" that serve as one-size-fits-all decision-making rules in place of a careful contemplation of information regarding the specific instance at hand.

In the behavioral literature on rationality drawn from psychology and behavioral economics, authors tend to conclude that human judgment and decision-making generally fall short of the often admittedly normative (i.e., ideal) standards of rational choice. This conclusion has been used in the foreign policy analysis literature to question the rationality assumption in international relations. This point, while important, can be pushed too far and distract us from another important observation. While few individuals, either ordinary or extraordinary, might meet the rational ideal, some get closer to it than others. In making the justified claim about the inappropriateness of a universally assuming rationality,

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we lose sight of important individual-level differences in rationality. While heuristics and biases are indeed common, this observation masks substantial heterogeneity. Both scholars in psychology and those who apply their insights to foreign policy neglect this fact and its implications for the study of international relations.

Contrary to the untested claims made by many rational choice scholars, rational thinking is essential for rational choice. We need procedural rationality to engage in "instrumental rationality." The latter is what is familiar to international relations scholars – the most efficient pursuit of interests in light of structural constraints. When we conduct a cost–benefit analysis, for instance, we must make a mental list of all the pros and cons, asking ourselves if what we want is attainable at acceptable costs. We must separately estimate the desirability of an outcome and its likelihood, particularly when, as is often the case in foreign affairs, the latter depends on a strategic understanding of others' motives. This requires both objectivity and deliberation.

I first demonstrate this in a bargaining experiment, not involving state leaders (of course), but rather college undergraduates. The laboratory offers what historical cases do not: a controlled environment in which all individuals perform the same task, and subjects whose dispositional attributes (such as the need for cognition and closure) can be directly surveyed in the exact same manner. In an experiment conducted with Joshua Kertzer, we find that those "little Bismarcks" who combine epistemic motivation with an egoistic preference structure better adjust their behavior to reflect changes in the strategic situation – in this instance, changes in the distribution of power. In a scenario resembling a repeated ultimatum game, they make better offers to others when they are in a weaker position and worse offers when they are in a stronger position. Those egoists with low epistemic motivation do not vary their behavior as much across those conditions, undermining their own selfish interests in the long run. They even do worse than prosocials, those persons committed to joint gains for both parties. The conclusion is that only those with a particular psychology act in the way that rational choice theorists expect. Rationality is psychological and varies across individuals.

We also see this relationship between procedural and instrumental rationality in the empirical chapters that follow. Combining bargaining experiments with real-world cases assures both internal and external validity. It better establishes causation and indicates that we are observing something potentially universal in human decision-making.

The second theoretical argument made in the book is that the rational leaders who combine foreign policy egoism with epistemic motivation are

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predisposed to be foreign policy realists, and those realists are rare in foreign policy-making. This is a deeply subversive finding, in that modern-day realists typically assume either that rational decision-making is compelled by the imperatives of the anarchic system, or that the system selects out those who do not meet this standard. However, the rarity of Realpolitik does not come as a surprise to classical realists, whose work exhibits a deep psychological strain that differentiates them from their contemporary, systemic-oriented cousins. Classical realists consistently suggest that objectivity and deliberation are essential preconditions of Realpolitik, but also insist that this procedural rationality is a difficult standard to meet. Classical realism is more prescriptive than descriptive, admonishing decision-makers to act solely in the interest of their country and to think rationally. They offer such advice precisely because they need to: Rationality is hard, and Realpolitik is hardly the norm in international politics.

How can I make such a sweeping claim? As subjects of study, I choose the two most famous realists of all time – Bismarck and Richelieu. Their cognitive style was deeply rational, marked by a commitment to deliberation and objectivity. This epistemic motivation was put to work in favor of egoistic, statist interests, producing all of the instrumentally rational behaviors we would expect. That part is uncontroversial. More striking is how unique both statesmen were in their home countries, opposed at every moment not just by domestic rivals who wanted their jobs, but also by others who detested their foreign policy programs. Neither patriarch of Realpolitik had any significant following domestically, making their accomplishments all the more striking. Their opponents sometimes offered alternative foreign policies that contrasted with realist egoism, arguing their country was bound by obligations to others outside of their countries, such as the Catholic Church or other legitimist sovereigns. They also often demonstrated a remarkably different cognitive style that was considerably less rational.

If these two "great men," with all their great successes, were politically rare animals at home, how can we say that Realpolitik – and by association, rationality – is anything but an exception in foreign policy-making? We remember Bismarck and Richelieu precisely because of their extraordinary qualities. And if we do not find consistently rational thinking at the highest levels of thinking, where the situational incentives to think deliberately and objectively are so intense given the stakes, where can we expect to find such rationality?

What about all the death and destruction wrought by the pursuit of power historically? Surely this war of all against all speaks for the prevalence of Realpolitik. I take issue with this claim as well. The use of force is

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not synonymous with realism. Indeed, the record shows that rational foreign policy in many instances seeks to avoid armed conflict, not on a moral basis but for egoistic reasons. Richelieu and Bismarck both engaged in strategic restraint at times, even in the wake of success, based on a recognition that pushing too far could undermine the hard-gotten gains. Human begins are perfectly able to do horrible things to each other for reasons other than the cold calculation of egoistic interests. In fact, realism often limits such applications of power.

The third argument made in this book is that we must come to understand and take more seriously nonrational thinking styles. The corollary of the claim that some individuals are more rational is that others are less so. As yet, we have not yet come to terms with what this might look like in practice. Rationalists sometimes rightfully ask, If individuals are not rationally pursuing their interests, then what are they doing? Any criticism of rationality seems to incorrectly imply a rudderless, inconsistent, and incoherent political actor of whose behavior we can make little sense. This does not do justice to the varieties of ways in which people, foreign policy leaders included, might think.

I utilize a distinction commonly made in the psychological literature between two different systems of cognitive processing. On the one hand, System II is effortful, slow, and conscious and corresponds to the procedurally rational mode of thinking. On the other hand, System I is automatic, quick, and intuitive. The contrast is commonly captured in everyday analogies such as the struggle between the head and the heart. All human beings utilize both systems of thinking, with System I acting as the default and System II being drawn in to sometimes double check and correct the inclinations of System I. System II cannot operate alone; it requires inputs from System I. Most importantly, System II needs the emotions that tell us what we care about, without which we have little to deliberate about. I claim that those who are more epistemically motivated draw more on System II, while others who are less rational are guided automatically through intuition. They are less self-aware of the dangers of bias, make more use of heuristics, and do not update their beliefs in light of feedback from the environment.

Intuition and nonrational thinking are central to the behavior of the romantic. Theorizing about romantics requires me to go even further afield than the sister social sciences of psychology and economics. I delve into the humanities, deriving insights from the literature on romanticism in the arts, literature, music, and philosophy, so as to systematically identify the essence of the romantic sensibility. This literature reveals that romantics are in many ways the antithesis of realists in their style of foreign policy-making. Where realists adjust policy in the face of

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structural obstacles such as the distribution of power, romantics have a sense of agency and aim to remake the world through the application of will and resolve. Where realists make decisions based on a utilitarian moral logic, stressing the tradeoffs that must be made between competing ideals, romantics reject this approach, arguing in a deontological fashion that no exception can be made to the pursuit of their ideals regardless of the exigencies of situations.

Not surprisingly, romanticism as a movement celebrated emotion over cold cognition, impulse and spontaneity over deliberation, and subjective creativity over the accurate reflection of reality. Indeed, without nonrational thinking, a romantic could not be a romantic. He or she would bend to structural obstacles encountered in the path and compromise his or her ideals in light of what was possible instead of summoning the inner resolve to push forward in struggles with adversaries with no concern for the consequences.

This is not a fanciful contrast. It has important implications for some of the most important events in world history. My case chapters about Winston Churchill and Ronald Reagan show that without romanticism, the Cold War might not have ended as quickly as it did and World War II might have had a very different outcome in which the Nazis fared much better. The successes of these two "great men" are perhaps owed not so much to their rationality but rather to their lack of it. In May 1940, Churchill would not accept considering a settlement with the Germans, even as rationalists in his cabinet concluded that the fall of France required that Britain adjust its expectations downward. Reagan rejected the rationalist premises of mutually assured destruction and sought a world without nuclear weapons, a desire that drove him to directly engage the Soviets in talks to radically reduce arms.

My argument might appear as a takedown of rational choice theory. I would maintain the opposite: It is a necessary corrective that puts rationalism on a much stronger theoretical and empirical footing. Only by making more realistic assumptions about the universality of rationality can rational choice be of use to the social sciences. Seeking to maintain the beliefs that (1) rational choice need not adequately represent the cognitive processes of those under study and (2) their behavior can be universally explained by a few simple decision-making principles creates a perverse incentive to disregard the overwhelming findings in other disciplines that this strategy is not working. In other words, rational choice theory exhibits a stark disregard for rationality itself, whose hallmark is the objective assessment of evidence, incorporating it in an actively deliberative process. I do not argue in this book that rationality is of no use in our study of international politics, but rather suggest that it

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is of particular use in describing the behavior of some individuals more than others. It is only by showing that some people behave in decidedly nonrational ways that rationality becomes a useful concept. I take up this issue in the conclusion.

In Chapter 1, I articulate further the logic, theory, and existing evidence for my first theoretical argument. Chapter 2 exports these insights to the field of international relations theory, showing the crucial role that rational thinking plays in realist theory and introducing the concept of the romantic. Chapter 3 tests the first theoretical argument in a bargaining experiment. From there, I proceed to the historical case studies.

The book dedicates two chapters to Bismarck, with a particular focus on the question of German unification. In Chapter 4 we see how the future chancellor of a unified Germany owed his start in politics to reactionary conservatives. With them, he shared a hatred of the democratic revolutions shaking Europe that threatened to bring down the kings and emperors who ruled by divine right. However, he parted company with them on issues of foreign policy. His fellow conservatives raised issues with his aggressive pursuit of Prussia's egoistic interests at the expense of conservative solidarity, particularly vis-à-vis the Austrian Empire. Bismarck believed a split was necessary to expel the Austrians from the German Federation and unify the dozens of German city-states, duchies, and kingdoms under Prussian leadership. To reach his goals, Bismarck was even willing to consider an alliance with liberals, the strongest proponents of a unified Germany in which the German people could exercise their collective self-determination.

With much effort, Bismarck finally pushed the king toward a "fratricidal" showdown with Austria. After decisively winning the war, as discussed in Chapter 5, Bismarck then had to restrain King Wilhelm I from pushing Prussian gains too far through extensive annexation. As we would expect from a rationally thinking realist, Bismarck had the entire chessboard in mind – the reactions of the other great powers and the necessity of maintaining good relations with Austria in the future. The king's opposition was all emotion, impulse, and righteous indignation – that is, System I rather than System II thinking. The now Chancellor Bismarck engaged in two other acts of strategic restraint. Rather than using Prussia's newfound power to dominate a unified Germany, he designed a Northern German Federation that maintained the crowns of German sovereigns and gave them significant autonomy. Rather than crushing liberal forces, in Germany he gave them a federal parliament based on universal suffrage to act as a counterweight to the centrifugal forces of German royals. In Prussia, he made peace with the liberals, provoking a final split with his reactionary patrons. These choices helped

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to consolidate the German unification project and laid the foundation for an easier incorporation of the remaining southern German states following the Franco-Prussian war.

We see remarkably similar themes in Chapter 6 on Cardinal Richelieu. Like Bismarck, Richelieu was not a sovereign, but rather the most powerful civil servant advising the king. The parallels are uncanny. Where Bismarck had to contend with those who believed in the bonds of conservative legitimacy, Richelieu fought against those who would brook no violation of Catholic solidarity in the wake of the Thirty Years War. The great practitioner of raison d'état alienated the most important political force at home, *les dévots* (the devoted), who opposed any break with fellow Catholic powers Spain and Austria during the Catholic Counter-Reformation. The cardinal asserted French influence in Italy during the Valtelline and Mantuan crises, challenging the Spanish and even fighting papal forces. Whereas the Prussian politician countenanced allying with Napoleon III and eventually partnered with the forces of democracy to unify and consolidate Germany, the cardinal struck up alliances with Protestant countries in an effort to resist the expansion of Spanish and Austrian influence in Germany. Like Bismarck, Richelieu also practiced strategic restraint at home. After personally putting down the Huguenots' last major rebellion, he convinced the king to maintain their religious freedom in what became known as the Grace of Alais. This effort to consolidate peace at home, based on Realpolitik pragmatism rather than genuine religious tolerance, further alienated him from *les dévots*. Consistent with his rational thinking style, Richelieu continually made utilitarian moral judgments rather than deontological ones, pursuing the lesser evil.

We then turn to our two romantics. I devote Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 to the person of Winston Churchill, with a particular focus on his role as the key opponent of Britain's appeasement strategy of the 1930s. Recent historiography, picked up on by international relations scholars, has made the case that British appeasement of Nazi Germany was rational, structurally compelled by the poor position in which the British found themselves during the 1930s. If appeasement was rational, however, does this mean that Churchill was not? I argue that this is indeed the case. Whereas Prime Minister Chamberlain and Foreign Secretary Viscount Halifax were highly rational thinkers, Churchill was a romantic with an intuitive thinking style. Understanding this is necessary to account for his resistance to appeasement.

Churchill had a romantic view of history in which events turned on the decisive choices and resolve of important individuals, not impersonal structural forces. He had a romantic understanding of Britain's role in

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the world as the vehicle of civilization. He viewed the Nazis through this heuristic, as the barbaric threat to what Britain stood for, forming his judgment quickly with little reflection and acknowledging no possibility that he could be wrong. His colleagues and historians describe him as emotional, intuitive, and impulsive, lacking in "judgment" – in other words, as decidedly less than rational in cognitive style. Where the appeasers adjusted to unfortunate circumstances, Churchill wanted to boldly remake them, summoning the will and resolve of the British people for a final showdown with the Nazi Germans.

We see this both qualitatively and quantitatively in Chapter 8. A quantitative analysis of the speeches of Churchill and government spokespersons in parliament during the 1930s shows that Churchill's syntax indicates a decidedly less rational thinking style when compared to that of Chamberlain and other realist government representatives. Churchill relies heavily on romantic terminology, stressing the importance of summoning will and resolve in the face of arduous circumstances, a battle between good and evil in which there was no choice but to fight. Archival documents reveal that Churchill's romanticism was a necessary condition in Britain's decision to fight on in May 1940 as France was falling. In light of Britain's deteriorating circumstances, Halifax and Chamberlain (now demoted) advocated making diplomatic approaches to Germany and Italy to explore the potential of a negotiated settlement. Churchill, now bearing the heavy burden of responsibility as prime minister, still rejected these ideas, arguing that the country's deteriorating structural position actually made it all the more necessary for Britain to fight on. Churchill in office was no different than Churchill in the wilderness, consistently romantic. This position was strikingly noble and the world thanks him for it, as the course of the war might have been very different otherwise. But it was decidedly nonrational.

Ronald Reagan, the focus of Chapter 9 and Chapter 10, was also a romantic, one whose thinking style had profound effects. Reagan was not a deliberative thinker, instead relying heavily on intuition. His simple home-spun stories and anecdotes, often apocryphal, served as heuristics he used to make sense of politics and even foreign policy. Aides describe how he made no effort to understand the details of major policy questions and demonstrated little interest even in distinguishing truth from fiction.

Reagan was elected on a platform consistent with his romanticism – one based on restoring America's belief in itself, and seeking to regain its footing through force of will and agency. Even the Cold War, which appeared to so many as an intractable and irresolvable struggle, could be overcome. Although fiercely protective of America's national interest,

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Reagan could not accept the pragmatic, utilitarian, and highly rationalist logic of mutually assured destruction upon which American postwar security was built – the notion that nuclear weapons were a lesser evil that provided peace given their immense destructive ability. This explains his pursuit and insistent belief in the Strategic Defensive Initiative (SDI), which persisted despite the fact that virtually no one believed it was possible. His faith in agency also helps us account for his strong desire to personally negotiate arms control agreements with Soviet leaders. This bore fruit in the conclusion of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987, marking the beginning of the end of the Cold War.

Reagan's romanticism made him completely unique. Conservatives in his administration disliked his engagement of the Soviets and pursuit of arms control and endorsed SDI only in the hopes it would derail talks. Pragmatists were aghast at Reagan's thoughts of upending the pragmatic strategy of mutually assured destruction through nuclear abolition and wanted to use SDI only as a bargaining chip. Understanding Reagan as a romantic helps resolve what has been called the Reagan "paradox" – that the most strident of Cold Warriors, who backed the greatest arms buildup in postwar American history, was the same figure who pursued the abolition of nuclear weapons and brought about a rapprochement with the Soviet Union.

Rather than summarizing already summarized conclusions, I end the book with a consideration of how to think about rational choice theory in light of what we have found about rationality. Rational choice, despite its contributions to international relations theorizing, has a number of long-diagnosed pathologies preventing it from moving forward. In light of what we know about rationally, both conceptually and empirically, I push this argument to its logical end. At its worst, rational choice is irrational, resistant to disconfirming information, willfully resistant to observing the very processes on which theories depend, and insistent on applying an all-purpose heuristic to explain all of politics.

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