

Reasoning of State

Scholars and citizens tend to assume that rationality guides the decision making of our leaders. Brian Rathbun suggests, however, that if we understand rationality to be a cognitive style premised on a commitment to objectivity and active deliberation, rational leaders are, in fact, the exception – not the norm. Using a unique combination of methods, including laboratory bargaining experiments, archival-based case studies, quantitative textual analysis, and high-level interviews, Rathbun questions some of our basic assumptions about rationality and leadership, with profound implications for the field of international relations. Case studies of Bismarck and Richelieu show that the rationality of realists makes them rare. An examination of Churchill and Reagan, romantics in international politics who sought to overcome obstacles in their path through force of will and personal agency, show what less rationality looks like in foreign policy making.

BRIAN C. RATHBUN is a professor in the School of International Relations at the University of Southern California. He is the author of *Partisan Interventions* (2004), *Trust in International Cooperation* (2012), and *Diplomacy's Value* (2014), which won the best book award from the Diplomatic Studies Section of the International Studies Association. He has published articles in journals such as *International Organization*, *World Politics*, *International Security*, and *International Studies Quarterly*, among others.

Cambridge Studies in International Relations: 149

Reasoning of State

Editors

Evelyn Goh
 Christian Reus-Smit
 Nicholas J. Wheeler

Editorial Board

Jacqueline Best, Karin Fierke, William Grimes, Yuen Foong Khong,
 Andrew Kydd, Lily Ling, Andrew Linklater, Nicola Phillips, Elizabeth
 Shakman Hurd, Jacque True, Leslie Vinjamuri, Alexander Wendt

Cambridge Studies in International Relations is a joint initiative of Cambridge University Press and the British International Studies Association (BISA). The series aims to publish the best new scholarship in international studies, irrespective of subject matter, methodological approach or theoretical perspective. The series seeks to bring the latest theoretical work in International Relations to bear on the most important problems and issues in global politics.

Cambridge Studies in International Relations

- 150 Emanuel Adler *World ordering* A social theory of cognitive evolution
- 149 Brian C. Rathbun *Reasoning of state* Realists, romantics and rationality in international relations
- 148 Silviya Lechner and Mervyn Frost *Practice theory and international relations*
- 147 Bentley Allan *Scientific cosmology and international orders*
- 146 Peter J. Katzenstein and Lucia A. Seybert (eds.) *Protean power*
Exploring the uncertain and unexpected in world politics
- 145 Catherine Lu *Justice and reconciliation in world politics*
- 144 Ayşe Zarakol (ed.) *Hierarchies in world politics*
- 143 Lisbeth Zimmermann *Global norms with a local face* Rule-of-law promotion and norm-translation
- 142 Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro *Nuclear politics* The strategic causes of proliferation
- 141 Mathias Albert *A theory of world politics*
- 140 Emma Hutchison *Affective communities in world politics*
Collective emotions after trauma
- 139 Patricia Owens *Economy of force*
Counterinsurgency and the historical rise of the social
- 138 Ronald R. Krebs *Narrative and the making of US national security*
- 137 Andrew Phillips and J.C. Sharman
International order in diversity
War, trade and rule in the Indian Ocean

Series list continues after index.

Reasoning of State

*Realists, Romantics and Rationality
in International Relations*

Brian C. Rathbun
University of Southern California



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42742-5 — Reasoning of State
Brian C. Rathbun
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108427425
DOI: 10.1017/9781108612937

© Brian C. Rathbun 2019

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2019

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-42742-5 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-108-44618-1 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42742-5 — Reasoning of State
Brian C. Rathbun
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

For my parents, Josette and Chris
Not always entirely rational, but perhaps that is
why I love them.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page ix</i>
Introduction: Three Theoretical Arguments, Four “Great Men” of History, Multiple Methods and Disciplines	1
1 The Psychology of Rationality: Cognitive Style in International Relations	13
2 The Three “R”s of International Relations: Realism, Romanticism, and Rationality	38
3 Little Bismarcks: A Laboratory Experiment on Variation in Rational Thinking and Rational Behavior (with Joshua Kertzer)	74
4 The “Prince” among Men: Bismarck’s Realpolitik in Prussian Politics	93
5 Cold Blood and Iron: Bismarck, the Struggle with Austria, and German Unification	121
6 Blind Faith: Richelieu, the Devoted, and France in Counter-Reformation Europe	148
7 “Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat”: Churchill, Romanticism, and the Rational Appeasement Debate	176
8 “In Defeat, Defiance”: Churchill in Words (1935–1939) and in Deeds (1940) (with Therese Anders)	207
9 “Beginning the World All Over Again”: Resolving the Paradox of Ronald Reagan	246
10 Winning One as the Gipper?: Reagan’s Administration and American Engagement with the Soviet Union	270
	vii

viii Table of Contents

Conclusion: The Irrationality of Rational Choice Theory:
Saving a Paradigm from Itself 303

References 310

Index 331

Acknowledgments

Like every other academic in the world, I am sometimes asked at a dinner party, on a bus, or in the gym, by those not in this peculiar line of work, what I research. “What are you working on now?” they often inquire. The past few years I have told them about a book I am writing on rationality, and how we should not assume that foreign policy decision makers are rational. “Don’t we already know that?” (Some book editors have said the same.)

We should. But perhaps more than in any field other than economics, political scientists and international relations scholars have been taken with the rational actor model. We could chalk this up to tractability and simplicity. It provides a useful starting point. But as people like myself question this “assumption,” it becomes clear that is a deeply rooted conviction of not a few. As they admit the implausibility of rationality assumption and claim to use it only as an analytical convenience, they simultaneously resist conclusions resting on other, more substantiated bases of human decision making consistent with the evidence. Even those who don’t believe in universal rationality have often been reluctant to offer nonrational alternatives, choosing instead to broaden the scope of what encompasses rational behavior, such as appropriate behavior in a particular context given a set of norms. This is likely a result of a desire not to depart too far from the international relations mainstream as well as a reflection of the difficulty of understanding just how to explain nonrational behavior. Surely we are not in the psychiatry business.

So I am just going to say it: human beings are not always very rational, even the most highly educated among us (and those considerably less so) to whom we entrust our foreign policy. See, that wasn’t so bad.

But that is not even the central argument of this book. My claim is that human beings systematically vary in their rationality, even if highly rational decision makers are relatively rare given the cognitive demands and effort required by active deliberation and maintaining objectivity (which is how I define rational thinking). Just as it wrong to always assume pure rationality, so it is folly to assume that everyone is always

x Acknowledgments

irrational. While it is certainly true that rationality is a function of situation and that every individual displays both tendencies every day, I focus in this book on stable individual-level differences. It is best to think of more rational or less rational individuals rather than irrational or rational ones, and to judge this based not on the outcomes of their decisions and the substance of their beliefs but on the process by which they form their judgments. Nonrational individuals display more intuitive, even impulsive thinking styles with fewer concerns about seeing things as they are.

This is not a book just about leaders, as some have tried to make it. Too often those who study the psychology of decision making are dismissed as “merely” doing foreign policy analysis. Even though the case studies are of four key figures in history, the conclusions are meant to matter for international relations Theory with a capital “T.” The fact that our most rational foreign policy makers (in this book, Bismarck and Richelieu) are realists, and realists are rare, tells us a lot about how to approach the universality of realism as a theory of foreign policy. It is more exception than rule.

Rationality is best judged in relative terms, which necessitates that we understand at least one type of nonrational leader. Here I seized on romantics, fulfilling a longstanding wish I have had to integrate insights from the humanities with those of the social sciences. The humanities tell us a lot about being human, and taking our humanity seriously is at the heart of the psychological approach to explaining decision making. Doing so allows us to understand how Churchill and Reagan tick, figures who seem larger than life and ill explained by existing theoretical frameworks. That’s because they were not very rational.

This book is itself a mixture of romantic and rationalistic scholarship. It is rationalistic in the sense that it seeks to carefully consider concepts and demonstrate their causal role in human decision making. It is romantic in trying to make a bold argument that recasts our understanding of rationality even if it has little chance of succeeding. In other words, I hope it combines the best of two increasingly separate types of international relations theorizing: the more traditional approach focused on taking big swings and initiating grand debates, and the more modern positivistic turn toward making tangible progress on tractable research questions with a careful focus on research design. The former laments the narrowing of our research aims and claims and the increasing technicality of our research methods – the lack of romance, as it were, in our scholarship. The latter complains of the pointlessness of grand theory ill suited and uninterested in testing its hypotheses in a rigorous way since no one is going to change their mind anyway. Both are right.

Now for the delicate task of thanking co-authors. Two of the chapters in this book are the result of close partnerships. Joshua Kertzer and I together designed and implemented the bargaining experiment, previously published in *International Organization*, that forms the basis of Chapter 4. This was the first step in testing the hunch that formed this book, and there was no one else who could help me carry this out. Gold, Jerry! Gold! Therese Anders was my research assistant for a year and a half, the best I have ever had. She helped me construct and analyze a data set comprising Churchill's speeches and comparing them with those of government speakers, which is at the heart of Chapter 9. I thank both of them for teaching an old dog new tricks.

I have had many important conversations that have guided me along the way, and I cannot remember them all. Jon Mercer, Rose McDermott, Kathleen Powers, Teresa Capeloz, William Wohlforth, Vincent Pouliot, Nicolas Wheeler, Aaron Rapport, Keren Yarhi-Milo, and Marcus Holmes had a particular impact. A master class with Justin Grimmer gave me the idea for the textual analysis of Chapter 8 and Justin was always available for Python-related advice. I thank audiences at Cornell University, Oxford University, Brigham Young University, Dartmouth College, University of Birmingham, Brown University, University of Toronto, Northwestern University, Chinese University of Hong Kong, and University of Washington, where I presented parts of the book. I received indispensable research support from the Dornsife College of Arts and Sciences, the German Academic Exchange Service, and the Center for International Studies at the University of Southern California.

I dedicate this book to my parents, to whom I owe the particular left- and right-brain combination (rational and nonrational, perhaps) that enabled me to put this all together. My mom received her bachelor's degree only in her forties, earning a degree in theology and going on to a successful career in, of all things, finance. I remember my mom with papers splayed across the bed when she was taking a class on art history, and I kept the textbook, which I have been carrying around for years. I cite it in this book in my review of romanticism. My dad is a numbers guy, an accountant who derives his greatest pleasure from singing in choirs. In loving and deep partnership with my wife, Nina, I am trying to encourage the same broad understanding and love of the world in my sons, Luc and Max, as they become fine young men who appreciate both science and the arts. Combining the two makes for better scholarship and better people.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42742-5 — Reasoning of State
Brian C. Rathbun
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)
