

## Introduction

### *Pathological Beliefs and U.S. Foreign Policy*

There have been occasions throughout history when war was thrust upon an unwilling and unprepared United States. Those times have been exceptions rather than the rule, however; most of the time when Washington has used force, it has done so by choice rather than necessity, following a period of extensive rumination and debate. No decision was more obviously on the horizon or more widely discussed, for example, than the 2003 invasion of Iraq. For months leading up to the invasion, talking-head programs and op-ed pages were filled with the views of people with all manner of foreign policy qualifications and lack thereof. The possibility of regime change in Baghdad was easily the top issue on the political agenda in 2002. Whatever can be said of the ultimate wisdom of that venture (and much deserves to be, and will be, said), it was not under-considered.

This national debate should have produced a good outcome, at least in theory. In the “marketplace of ideas,” or arena of debate in a free society, the strongest arguments should rise to the surface on the basis of superior logic and evidence, while those built on weaker foundations should sink into oblivion. As John Stuart Mill argued centuries ago, vigorous public debate ought to be the ally of truth and wisdom, producing the best policy outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Why, then, did the final decisions regarding Iraq go so terribly wrong?

<sup>1</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), part 2. See also Jack Snyder and Karen Ballentine, “Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas,” *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Autumn 1996), pp. 5–40.

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Foreign policy blunders are usually not too difficult to explain. Once historians have had a chance to dig into archives and see what policy makers thought and believed at the time, mistakes usually become at least understandable, if perhaps never entirely forgivable. States are typically led into disasters by leaders convinced they were making correct, even necessary choices and who were doing their best under impossibly difficult circumstances. George W. Bush believed that Saddam Hussein posed a real threat to the United States and thought that removing him would be rather simple. A generation earlier, Lyndon Johnson believed that it was important to preserve U.S. credibility in Vietnam, and certainly did not want to be remembered as the first president to lose a war. His predecessor believed that the Castro regime was not only a threat but fundamentally fragile, vulnerable to collapse with the slightest superpower push.

Foreign policies, like all other human actions, are motivated by beliefs. Without a basic conception of how the world works, what is important and what is not, and ultimately about the nature of people, decisions would be impossible to make. The key to understanding foreign policy failures, therefore, lies not in the actions themselves but in the beliefs that gave rise to them. Where do incorrect – pathologically incorrect – foreign policy beliefs come from? Or, to be blunt, why do so many American leaders hold underexamined views of the world that inspire foolish, counterproductive actions?

A series of underlying, often unstated, and certainly unsupported beliefs lies at the root of U.S. foreign policy. Even before September 11, Americans considered the world to be a dangerous place where the enemies of freedom and liberty lurked in many corners. Victory over our adversaries would be impossible without their respect; when the United States lacks credibility, many believe, policy making becomes infinitely more difficult. Furthermore, Americans worry that their nation's status as the world's leader may be about to come to an end. But in the final analysis, since there is nothing this country cannot do once its mind is made up, Americans know the United States will persevere and rise again.

The ancients would recognize these beliefs and place them into familiar categories: fear, honor, glory, and hubris. Modern leaders may be reluctant to acknowledge that they are susceptible to such basic, primal atavisms, but often their differences with the Caesars

are more in style than substance. This book is about these and other beliefs prevalent in both popular and leadership circles in the United States, which are simultaneously pervasive, influential, and underexamined. They help account for some of the worst foreign policy decisions the United States has made in recent years, from the Bay of Pigs to Vietnam to Iraq, and they will cause many more in years to come if they are not recognized and corrected. If this country is to learn from its disastrous experience in Iraq rather than merely shrug it off as another in a long series of inevitable blunders, then it needs to take a moment to analyze the roots of its actions. Though their origins may be ancient, these categories of pathological belief are not omnipotent. While it may never be possible to eliminate fear, honor, glory, or hubris from foreign policy making, their detrimental effects on behavior can at the very least be minimized.

To improve the quality of their foreign policy choices, leaders should periodically examine the underlying beliefs that motivate their behavior, with the goal of minimizing the influence of the ones that have a high probability of producing low-quality results, which are usually those based on thin reasoning and evidence. Consistently strong foreign policy cannot be built on an irrational foundation; indeed rationality in decision making should be thought of as a minimum requirement for sagacious policy makers, for their own good as well as that of their countries and of the international system as a whole. The sixteen-month-long debate leading up to Iraq exposed just how deeply a number of pathological beliefs are imbedded in the minds of many Americans. Inertia guarantees they will remain there unless acted upon by a force.

#### PATHOLOGICAL BELIEFS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

At any given time, society is home to a number of ideas, beliefs, and ideologies that compete with one another to form the foundation for policy making. In mature democracies, the weaker of these should not persist for too long in the marketplace of ideas. Unfortunately, this weeding-out process does not always function in practice as it does in theory; all too often, the fittest ideas do not survive. The victors are just as likely to be weaker beliefs, ones that proved essentially

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impervious to alteration by exposure to reason and fact.<sup>2</sup> The odds in the marketplace are stacked against many ideas, irrespective of their wisdom, before the competition begins. In reality societal debates are not detached intellectual evaluations of evidence where victory goes to the most logical, but passionate, emotional struggles where entrenched assumptions fight one another for control over decisions (and decision makers), and where the outcome is always uncertain. Rather than a marketplace of ideas, in other words, foreign policy debates more closely resemble a battlefield of beliefs.

It is on this battlefield that policy is formed. To explain the behavior of the individual, examine his or her beliefs; similarly, to understand the foreign policy actions of a state, collective beliefs are a good place to begin. The triumphs of the United States as well as its various mistakes all have their origins in the assumptions that provide the justification for action by shaping the cost-benefit analyses performed prior to decisions. When pathological beliefs defeat more rational ones, states march toward disaster.

Given their manifest importance in explaining state behavior, it is somewhat surprising how little attention is paid to beliefs as a causal variable in the study of international politics.<sup>3</sup> Scholars have spent time describing U.S. foreign policy ideologies in elites and masses, but rarely have they examined their genesis, evolution, or effects.<sup>4</sup> Little effort has been made to evaluate particular beliefs, to assess

<sup>2</sup> Chaim Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Summer 2004), pp. 5–48.

<sup>3</sup> Exceptions include Douglas W. Blum, "The Soviet Foreign Policy Belief System: Beliefs, Politics, and Foreign Policy Outcomes," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (December 1993), pp. 373–94; Richard J. Payne, *The Clash with Distant Cultures: Values, Interests, and Force in American Foreign Policy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Robert Jervis, "Understanding Beliefs," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 27, No. 5 (October 2006), pp. 641–63; and those discussed later. The relationship between attitudes and behavior is a much studied subject in sociology; for a review of the basic concepts and early scholarship, see Howard Schuman and Michael P. Johnson, "Attitudes and Behavior," *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 2 (1976), pp. 161–207.

<sup>4</sup> Ole R. Holsti and James N. Rosenau have been tracking elite opinion and ideology for decades. See their "The Domestic and Foreign Policy Beliefs of American Leaders," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (June 1988), pp. 248–94; and "Liberals, Populists, Libertarians, and Conservatives: The Link between Domestic and International Affairs," *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January 1996), pp. 29–54. See also Charles W. Kegley, Jr., "Assumptions and Dilemmas in the Study of Americans' Foreign Policy Beliefs: A Caveat," *International Studies Quarterly*,

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both their empirical justification and importance in development of policy.<sup>5</sup> Normative questions about their utility or wisdom are even more rarely addressed, as if such assessments are outside the scope (or capability) of scholarship. There are many good reasons for these omissions, because the study of beliefs immediately encounters a number of significant methodological and epistemological challenges. However, no model that entirely omits their influence can hope to explain behavior in the international system. As long as people run countries, beliefs will explain behavior of states.

Rather than ask why unsupportable ideas survive to impoverish foreign policy debates, perhaps scholars should wonder how pathological beliefs rise to become such prominent fixtures in the first place and what might be done to correct them, or perhaps to aid more rational beliefs. A few definitions might provide a good starting point for such an effort.<sup>6</sup>

## On Beliefs, Pathological and Otherwise

The person who decides to take a big risk because of astrological advice in the morning's horoscope can benefit from baseless superstition if the risk pays off. Probability and luck suggest that successful policies can sometimes be based on incorrect beliefs. Far more often, however, poor intellectual foundations lead to suboptimal or even disastrous outcomes. It is only when they lead to bad policies that

Vol. 30, No. 4 (December 1986), pp. 447–71; Leslie A. Hayduk, Pamela A. Ratner, Joy L. Johnson, and Joan L. Bottorff, "Attitudes, Ideology and the Factor Model," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (September 1995), pp. 479–507; William O. Chittick, Keith R. Billingsly, and Rick Travis, "A Three-Dimensional Model of American Foreign Policy Beliefs," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (September 1995), pp. 313–31; and Edwin Eloy Aguilar, Benjamin O. Fordham, and G. Patrick Lynch, "The Foreign Policy Beliefs of Political Campaign Contributors," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (June 1997), pp. 355–65.

<sup>5</sup> An exception is Paul R. Brewer and Marco R. Steenbergen, "All Against All: How Beliefs about Human Nature Shape Foreign Policy Opinions," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (March 2002), pp. 39–58. See also Evan Luard, *War in International Society: A Study in International Sociology* (London: I. B. Taurus, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted up front that this volume deals with a number of concepts whose meanings have, in some cases, been the subject of thousands of years of debate. For the most part, it will make a conscious decision to recognize, but *not* to engage, the minutiae of these discussions. Emphasis will be placed on clarity rather than comprehensiveness.

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beliefs become pathological and subjects for this analysis. The United States, unfortunately, suffers from a number.

In their simplest form, beliefs are *ideas that have become internalized and accepted as true*, often without much further analysis.<sup>7</sup> They are the assumptions we all work into our lives, the foundation for the prisms through which actors perceive and interpret their surroundings. Beliefs essentially shape the set of behavioral options, acting as heuristic devices for those seeking to organize and interpret new information and respond appropriately.<sup>8</sup> People are not born with beliefs; the origins of beliefs are in nurture rather than nature, and they become accepted, not because of rational analysis but trust in those who relay them. People do not choose their religious beliefs, for example, based on a review of the evidence. Secular beliefs are also sustained by faith as much as fact, and are thus distinguished from knowledge (classically, “justified true belief”) by the absence of any stringent requirement for justification. Although they almost always have some basis in reality, beliefs need not pass rigorous tests to prove that they match it. No amount of evidence can convince some people that vaccines do not cause autism, for example, or that the climate is changing because of human activity. Ultimately, as Robert Jervis explains, “we often believe as much in the face of evidence as because of it.”<sup>9</sup>

Beliefs are more than mere perceptions or intellectual interpretations of the external world. Once internalized, they can quickly become central to an actor’s identity structure or basic sense of self. Beliefs are *visceral as much as intellectual*, in other words, connected to emotion rather than reason, and as such are nearly impervious to alteration by new information.<sup>10</sup> Tolstoy memorably observed that

<sup>7</sup> Many different definitions of beliefs exist. For one of the most commonly used, see Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen, *Belief, Attitude, Intention and Behavior: An Introduction to Theory and Research* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1975).

<sup>8</sup> Payne, *Clash with Distant Cultures*, p. 10; and Blum, “The Soviet Foreign Policy Belief System,” pp. 373–94. Beliefs are functionally similar to what Ted Hopf called “habits,” which cause “an infinitude of behaviors [to be] effectively deleted from the available repertoire of possible actions.” “The Logic of Habit in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (December 2010), p. 541.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Jervis, “Understanding Beliefs and Threat Inflation,” in A. Trevor Thrall and Jane K. Cramer, *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear: Threat Inflation Since 9/11* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> A good deal of experimental evidence exists to support the assertion that beliefs are nearly impervious to disconfirmation. See Craig A. Anderson, Mark R. Lepper,

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even the most intelligent people “can very seldom discern even the simplest and most obvious truth if it be such as to oblige them to admit the falsity of conclusions they have formed, perhaps with much difficulty – conclusions of which they are proud, which they have taught to others, and on which they have built their lives.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed part of the reason our beliefs are so resistant to change is because they shape the way new information is interpreted and filter out that which appears contradictory.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed beliefs often become so central to identity that substantial anxiety can be generated when new information calls them into question. It is far easier to fit new evidence into previously constructed cognitive frameworks, or to simply ignore it altogether, than to subject deeply held sub-rational assumptions to reexamination and risk destabilization of the sense of self. The mind constructs intricate and powerful defenses to prevent such destabilization and to bolster what psychologists refer to as “ontological security.”<sup>13</sup> Those who suggest that our beliefs are incorrect are often greeted with the most passionate of denunciations. Furthermore, evidence suggests the beliefs of political experts – especially extremely negative views of adversaries – may well be even more resistant to change than those of other people.<sup>14</sup> In practice, this means the arena of foreign policy debate is dominated by people likely to disagree vehemently and emotionally

and Lee Ross, “Perseverance of Social Theories: The Role of Explanation in the Persistence of Discredited Information,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol. 39, No. 6 (December 1980), pp. 1037–49; Charles G. Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark. R. Lepper, “Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 37, No. 11 (November 1979), pp. 2098–109; and Krystyna Rojahn and Thomas F. Pettigrew, “Memory for Schema-Relevant Information: A Meta-Analytic Resolution,” *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (June 1992), pp. 81–109. See also Dan Reiter, *Crucible of Beliefs: Learning, Alliance, and World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1904), p. 143.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Slovic, *The Perception of Risk* (London: Earthscan, 2000), p. 222.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Mitzen adapted this psychological concept for international politics in “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (September 2006), pp. 341–70.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Peffley and John Hurwitz, “International Events and Foreign Policy Beliefs: Public Response to Changing Soviet-U.S. Relations,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (May 1992), pp. 431–61.



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when their beliefs come into conflict, as they so often do. Facts may change, but beliefs stay the same.

Once enough members of a group have internalized a belief it can affect collective behavior, becoming part of the conventional wisdom of widely shared assumptions that, because everybody knows, nobody really considers.<sup>15</sup> Collective beliefs tend to be even more resistant to change than those of the individual because they are continually fortified by broader society. During the Cold War, people did not need to know much about communism to believe that it was antithetical to U.S. values, for example. What everyone knows must be true. By coloring interpretation of new information and framing the options for action in groups, collective beliefs create their own reality, which may or may not match the material world. Once embedded in what Robert Lane called the “cultural matrix of behavior and expectation,” a belief can be “so persuasive and dense that one mistakes it for the natural environment.”<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps because beliefs do not generally demand close examination or evaluation, they can be held quite strongly by people from all across the spectrum of cognitive complexity. What separates modern people from those of the Middle Ages is not intelligence, as even a cursory examination of castle construction reveals, but beliefs. The brilliance of medieval architects was combined with the belief in witches, succubi, and the validity of trial by ordeal. Germany in the 1930s was simultaneously the most scientifically advanced country in Europe and the most backward in its basic beliefs regarding races, the sanctity of rural life, and the importance of *lebensraum*. That these and other Nazi beliefs were never subjected to close intellectual examination might help explain the extremes of behavior they inspired.

Beliefs are rarely held in isolation. People tend to construct tightly connected, interrelated sets that provide a certain level of consistency to their interpretation of the outside world. When so constructed, sets of beliefs can be said to constitute *belief systems* or *ideologies*, which

<sup>15</sup> Jervis, “Understanding Beliefs and Threat Inflation,” p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Robert E. Lane, *Political Thinking and Consciousness: The Private Life of the Political Mind* (Chicago, IL: Markham Publishing, 1969), p. 315.



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form the foundation of many core elements of identity, from political orientation to religion to sense of national purpose.<sup>17</sup> Belief systems reinforce the staying power of their component elements, making each even more immune to change. “Coherent and internally consistent belief systems tend to be self-perpetuating,” noted Holsti and Rosenau, and soon come to shape the way actors interpret new information.<sup>18</sup> Belief systems also tend to generate “disbelief systems,” or the corresponding broad set of information actors reject as false without much consideration. Disbelief systems are usually better described as a series of unrelated subsets rather than a unified whole, as coming chapters discuss. Conflating disbelief systems, and assuming that all falsehoods are related, seems to be a natural human tendency.<sup>19</sup>

Although beliefs drive foreign policy, they are not determinative, even among relatively homogenous populations. Indeed, although beliefs change far more slowly than ideas, they can and do evolve over time as people learn from events as well as from their own experiences. Few people still believe that the earth is at the center of the universe, for instance, or that insults to honor must be answered by a duel to the death. It is also possible, if somewhat less common, for ideologies to change if enough of their component beliefs are drawn into question. Political scientists have studied cognitive evolution in foreign policy for two decades, and have generally reached the conclusion that learning – sometimes significant learning – regularly takes place.<sup>20</sup> It is possible, therefore, to hope for more rationality in policy making. Indeed rational foreign policy decisions might be a rather

<sup>17</sup> Philip E. Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” in David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 206–61. Converse employed the two terms interchangeably, explaining that, although his subject was *belief systems*, he would use *ideologies* “for aesthetic relief where it seems most appropriate” (p. 209). See also Paul A. Dawson, “The Formation and Structure of Political Belief Systems,” *Political Behavior*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer 1979), pp. 99–122.

<sup>18</sup> Ole R. Holsti and James Rosenau, “Vietnam, Consensus, and the Belief Systems of American Leaders,” *World Politics*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (October 1979), p. 56. See also Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980).

<sup>19</sup> See Milton Rokeach, *The Open and Closed Mind: Investigations into the Nature of Belief Systems and Personality Systems* (New York: Basic Books, 1960), esp. p. 33.

<sup>20</sup> For discussions of learning in foreign policy, see George Modelski, “Is World Politics Evolutionary Learning?” *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Winter 1990), pp. 1–24; George W. Breslauer and Philip E. Tetlock, eds., *Learning in U.S.*

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uncontroversial, widely shared goal, if only there were a common understanding of what exactly rationality is.

### Rationality

For many social scientists, rationality is an assumption to be employed or rejected rather than a goal to which decision makers should aspire. In the study of international politics, rational choice theory is generally employed *descriptively* as part of the attempt to explain the behavior of states.<sup>21</sup> The assumption of rationality in behavior is ubiquitous in international relations theory and foreign policy analysis as well.<sup>22</sup> Using a weak definition, sometimes referred to as *instrumental* rationality, virtually anything people or states do can be considered rational, in the sense that decisions are goal oriented and the actor can usually explain what that goal is.<sup>23</sup> However, most conceptions of rationality go beyond this basic, rather low bar. Those who employ *procedural* rationality suggest policy makers select (or should select) from a set of options after a process of reflection and evaluation.<sup>24</sup> One of the few aspects common to these and other conceptions of rationality is the value judgment that its opposite is undesirable.<sup>25</sup> Irrationality is not merely purposeless, insane action, according to many political scientists, but rather those choices based on incorrect assumptions

and Soviet Foreign Policy (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991); Sarah E. Mendelson, "Internal Battles and External Wars: Politics, Learning, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *World Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (April 1993), pp. 327–60; Jack S. Levy, "Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield," *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 279–312; and Reiter, *Crucible of Beliefs*.

<sup>21</sup> Many consider rational choice theory to have begun with Anthony Downes, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1957).

<sup>22</sup> Neta C. Crawford, "The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotion and Emotional Relationships," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Spring 2000), pp. 116–17; Stephen G. Walker and Akan Malici, *U.S. Presidents and Foreign Policy Mistakes* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> Herbert A. Simon, "Rationality in Political Behavior," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (March 1995), esp. pp. 45–46.

<sup>24</sup> On instrumental and procedural rationality, see Frank C. Zagare, "Rationality and Deterrence," *World Politics*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (January 1990), pp. 238–60.

<sup>25</sup> Irrationality does have its place, especially in strategy. See Robert Mandel, "The Desirability of Irrationality in Foreign Policy Making: A Preliminary Theoretical Analysis," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (December 1984), pp. 643–60.