Preface

At the core of public policy are decisions. The most important of these, such as preparing for an enemy attack or going to war, are made by chief executives and other high-level officials. History shows that when faced with such choices, leaders frequently make calamitous decisions with devastating consequences for their country—and other nations as well. Moreover, these same officials often persist in failed policies, resulting in yet more death and destruction.

How can we explain this pattern of self-destructive behavior? Are decision makers simply incompetent, irresponsible, or psychologically flawed? There are exceptions, of course, but typically those who make decisions regarding war and peace are accomplished, diligent, stable, and patriotic men and women.

Perhaps leaders’ advisory systems or their styles of decision making have been dysfunctional. There is no doubt that there has been plenty of room for improvement, but can we really conclude that better-organized advisory systems would have caused leaders to anticipate the attack on Pearl Harbor or the Chinese intervention in Korea in 1950? Would they have prevented the war in Vietnam, the invasion of Iraq, or the protracted conflicts in those countries?

I have puzzled over these questions for half a century. I begin with a paradox. Decision making, the most important function of the president, is the one we understand the least. The reason is simple: it is difficult to study decisions. Obtaining timely access to policymakers and extensive information on their thoughts and deliberations is problematic.

Fortunately, scholars of international relations have written innumerable case studies of foreign policy decisions, many of which are of high quality. These scholars have also produced more general treatises on decision
making, which are invaluable to anyone seeking to understand the subject. All this work provides a wealth of information as to the participants in decision making and the information and options they considered. What it has not done is attempt to isolate the role of officials’ premises in their decisions.

I am hardly the first author to think about the impact of premises. Useful insights are scattered throughout the literature on international relations. My point of departure is to focus explicitly on the foundation of all decisions: identifying problems. Before officials gather information and consider options, and before they make choices among alternatives, no matter what the decision-making process, they must implicitly or explicitly decide whether there is a problem to solve and, if there is, what their goals are in dealing with it. I explore the impact of the premises already in decision makers’ heads before they begin considering their options and making choices.

Two well-understood aspects of the human psyche, limits on rationality and motivated reasoning, provide the potential for premises to exercise a powerful influence on policymaking. It is not surprising that they often distort leaders’ processing of information and bias them against changing their minds. If decision makers’ premises lead them to assume erroneously the existence of a problem, the rest of the decision-making process will be fatally flawed. Premises may also blind policymakers to problems that require their attention or cause them to underestimate the likelihood of problems arising. Similarly, premises about the efficacy of a policy may distort their evaluations of its success and discourage their consideration of changes to it.

I engage in a thought experiment. Focusing specifically on policymakers’ premises, I ask, “What if we knew little else about the influences on decision makers aside from their core premises regarding a policy?” I then examine some of the most important foreign policy decisions of American history and find that in cases such as Vietnam in 1964–1965 and Iraq in 2002–2003, policymakers mistakenly assumed that problems existed and required forceful action by the United States. Similarly, leaders often overlooked looming problems, ranging from the attack on Pearl Harbor to the Chinese intervention in Korea and the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, that required their urgent attention but did not receive it. They also ignored fundamental problems with the options they chose, such as Jefferson’s embargo or Kennedy’s Bay of Pigs invasion. To round out the picture, I also address similar problems among allied leaders dealing with the
German invasions of France in 1914 and the Soviet Union in 1941. In all these cases, the decisions of capable, hardworking, and well-intentioned officials ended in disaster.

Leaders are not the only ones who may become prisoners of their premises. In 2002–2003, I supported the invasion of Iraq. I remember attending a Council on Foreign Relations meeting where a former CIA director detailed the reasons that such a policy was necessary and would result in a relatively costless success. I had been offering the same litany to others. I spent most of 2002 at the School of Advanced Study at the University of London and was ready to confront those protesting a possible war. Their arguments were generally uninformed. (Saddam Hussein was not a satisfactory leader and the invasion was not all about oil.) I even made sure to wear an American flag lapel pin when I attended the ballet at Covent Garden on the evening of the largest antiwar protest, in case anyone wished to engage in political discussion. It is just as well that no one did, because I was wrong. I had failed to rigorously evaluate my premises.

Unexamined premises plague public policy. I have no simple solution to the problem, but we can be certain that the first step in ameliorating it is understanding the power of premises.

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