

## Appendix C

### The Possibility of Personal Bias

Much of what passes for knowledge at any given time is likely to be more or less mistaken.

Bertrand Russell

The disillusioning image of American foreign policy decision making—and of the history of American foreign policy since 1898—proposed by this book is critical of the masked error-prone subjectivism and overconfidence in judgments about reality involved in major decisions. I think it is appropriate, then, to consider here whether there may be similar subjective distortion to my own conclusions and whether they are trustworthy.

With respect to the main conclusions I think the possibility I have distorted reality by personal bias is small. The evidence has been assembled by explicit indicators and the conclusions drawn by explicit and formal methods: neither I nor the reader has to depend on any bold rhetoric or mystical claims to omniscience on my part. Moreover the main conclusions are supported by four reinforcing tiers of hard evidence: (1) extensive cross-cultural work by anthropologists which shows the war propensity of a society to depend partly on whether its people are competitive and ambitious; (2) mass public opinion surveys in the United States and foreign countries previously conducted by other social scientists, which find similar personality effects. The two original studies reported in this volume, the State Department study (3) and the historical study (4), add to this base with direct evidence that part of the modal personality of American elites has a central effect on the decision to use force among both professional specialists and presidents and secretaries of state. Moreover, the image of American elite political behavior built upon these four tiers of evidence is consistent with the large ancillary body of literature from psychology on the generalization of private motives and overconfident perception in the partially ambiguous situations of projective tests. Both the formal methods of the two original studies reported here and their strong convergence with the conclusions of many independent researchers give me confidence that the image I propose goes beyond mere plausible conjecture, is worthy of public attention, and indeed has a substantially greater claim to scientific merit than the trust that political leaders typically decide the fates of others on judgments of war and the use of force "rationally, in the public's interest."

But there are two instances in which there are personal elements shaping the text. First, this study had considerable emotional charge for me. I was at times horrified and angered that, although the warning was sounded by Lasswell forty years ago, the world's political leaders were never responsible, professional, or self-critical enough to undertake this kind of investigation themselves. I suspect a lot of people have died unnecessarily because of avoidable mistakes over the subsequent years: the hands of ignorance drip blood. I have been as fair and sympathetic as I can in the text, but I feel greater sympathy for victims than for elites, and there are limits to how completely sympathetic I feel about leaders with power and responsibility who have made others victims of their own failures.

Second, I may misunderstand the power of competitiveness and personal ambition on pronouncements about reality and on policy. In writing this book I have implicitly imagined that politicians today might be basically sincere professionals of great personal integrity who will now investigate, question, and disengage the automatic linkages of their competition and ambition to fear and war once they directly see the evidence and the problem in perspective. But perhaps I am naive about this: some of my colleagues and graduate students find more plausible than I do both the argument that men in power like too much their ego trips of self-expression and personalism, and the argument that ambitious and competitive people will continue to adopt scare rhetoric and advocate force because this brings them prominence, votes, or career advancement. I hope that I am right and these cynical views of human nature are wrong: time will tell.