7 Summary: Sources of Error and War

A world of science and great machines is still a world of men.
David Lilienthal

In this concluding chapter I will undertake four tasks. First, I will draw together the findings from previous chapters and show their convergence with the evidence from projective tests detailing how emotional processes affect the imaginative experiments decision makers use to conceive the world and select satisfactory policy. Second, I will offer a brief summary of the main points of the "leader's personality" theory of decision making suggested by the evidence. Third, I will consider whether the psychological insights from this research offer any guidance to people who wish to reduce foreign policy errors or the incidence of war. Finally, I will offer concluding remarks about the seriousness of the problem addressed in this book, namely the unnecessary and avoidable deaths of the victims of the commonplace features of political psychology I have studied.

International Politics as a Projective Test

As we have seen, American foreign policy is not grounded exclusively in objective reality. Instead, the shapers of that policy, like all men, react partly intuitively to the world; and they adopt the most subjectively plausible self-expressive responses to the situations in which they find themselves. Self-expression and projective intuition converge to form a self-deceptive pseudorationality. While there is always the possibility of fortuitous agreement between predispositions and the true structure of international politics, such a decision-making process will often not be reliable.

This is, of course, not a complete characterization of the thought processes brought to bear on foreign policy questions. But, as we have seen, self-expression and projective intuition can decisively tip the balance of major decisions.

These findings accord with much additional evidence developed by social scientists about the functioning of the mind when it is presented with inadequate objective data.[1] If you show a man a picture of other people and ask him to tell you a story he will, without much difficulty, tell you a great deal which extends beyond the surface facts of the picture itself. He will readily imagine and tell you about the motives and feelings

of different characters, perhaps tell you whether they are restless or content, trustworthy or treacherous, what they strive for or fear, whether he likes or dislikes them. Possibly he will tell you about the future that will unfold for the characters in the picture, what opposition or support they can expect, what the consequences of different actions by different characters might be.

If you provide a man with many different pictures, the themes he imagines will vary greatly (assuming that he is mentally healthy) depending on cues from the picture itself. A mother holding a peaceful baby and smiling tenderly will cue certain feelings and themes in his mind; an older and angry man behind a desk shaking his finger at a younger man will arouse other responses and suggest different themes to the storyteller.

And yet, if you consider the themes which any one man tends to supply across different pictures, you will find that his themes differ from those supplied by another storyteller and, moreover, that the themes of these different men will vary in ways that are straightforward and characteristic representations of the personality differences among them. For example, men who tend to see people as being highly concerned with power typically are men who in their own lives have high power motivation, who seek power, and who fear the use of power against them by others. Storytellers who enunciate fewer power themes turn out to have lower motivation to acquire power and less fear of the power of others in their own lives.[2] In retrospect, and viewed in context, each man's stories can be seen to reflect the confluence, in different proportions, of different aspects of his personality that are triggered by the bare and ambiguous cues presented to his objective scrutiny.

The philosopher John Dewey has provided a classic description of deliberation and decision making as an imaginative process. Deliberation, Dewey wrote, is a

> Dramatic rehearsal in imagination of various competing lines of action. . . . It is an experiment in making various combinations of habits and impulses to see what the resultant action would be like if it were entered upon.[3]

What can now be added to Dewey's account is specific evidence and detail of systematic personality-based shaping of those "habits and impulses"

which different men find most accessible within themselves to draw upon and use when they make decisions. Such a process appears rational on the surface, but the deep, largely unconscious sources of imaginative processes introduce an implicit, unrecognized, subjective shaping of perception and outcome.

The data from past chapters fit this theory of a convergence of self-expression and projective intuition in the imaginative processes of policy deliberation. The evidence from chapter 3 is that differences in external situations (stimuli) are a major determinant of whether the predisposition to use force is aroused, and the data in chapters 4 and 6 indicate that the tendency to employ or oppose force within each situation reflects more general personality-based differences between individuals.

That different issues or situations selectively engage different aspects of personality was found in chapter 4, and again in chapter 5.[4] For example, in chapter 4 we saw competitiveness engaged by challenges in underdeveloped countries but suppressed when the subjects faced a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the ambition to feel active and powerful increased the tendency to *use* military force but did not affect the level of war capabilities desired. And the evidence has been summarized, in chapter 5, for different patterns of personality engagement in perception: the data showed certain aspects of personality systematically engaged to create the image of the Soviet Union while the same aspects of personality were not engaged to create the different image of British foreign policy. Finally, the evidence from both chapters 4 and 5 showed that policy views and perceptions are multiply affected (sometimes in conflicting directions) by the confluence of different personality-based determinants. Thus these findings merge with the well-established literature in psychology that deals with imaginative processes. International politics is crucially a projective test.[5]

By stressing that men probably use self-expression and projective intuition in the responsible effort to make effective policy and in the service of understanding the world, I do not want to rule out the possibility that such personal involvement might be supported by other motives and considerations. Self-expression and projective intuition can create a comfortable sense of confidence (even overconfidence and a pose of arrogant om-

niscience), a justification for dismissing critics. There could well be important ego gratifications from the power to shape world events as an expression of oneself.[6]

Sources of Error and War

I think the evidence from the State Department and historical studies (and the ancillary evidence from studies of the general public, from cross-cultural anthropology, from Donley and Winter, and from the study of projective test behavior) clarifies five of the basic sources of error and war:

Within the decision maker are three sources:

1. The tendency to express personal motives, behavorial patterns, and fears in decisions, and especially doing so without flexibly assessing the value of this self-expression.

2. The tendency to introduce these same a priori internal structures and forces into intuitive processes to shape beliefs about external reality, again without flexibly assessing the appropriateness of these images.

3. The mind's tendency to deceive itself by using the confidence and consistency generated by these first two subjective processes as an erroneous criterion for believing its decisions are right and rational.

Beyond these three sources of error in the typical processes of a leader's mind, there is a source of error and war external to the decision maker:

4. The ambiguous, uncertain nature of international reality which makes it difficult to reliably calibrate self-expression and intuition and converts what might be a straightforward technical problem into a projective test.

Finally:

5. The fact that American elite composition—and especially presidential personalities—are generated by domestic political structures and processes which:

a. Offer no guarantee (except by fortuitous circumstance) that the personal predispositions of the most influential people will be appropriately aligned with requirements for success and realism in every situation; and

b. In the American case introduce significant ingredients (i.e., competition, ambition, dominance) which, in conjunction with the four features listed above, make fear and war more likely.

I should add that, while the mechanisms in this list increase directly the likelihood of the use of American force, their effects in other nations can also be consequential. That is, if these same mechanisms are true of the most influential leaders in a foreign country, those leaders may thereby produce situations which serve to arouse fears and military tendencies in American decision makers. For example, the ambitions of Hitler and Japanese leaders in World War II, Stalin's approval of North Korea's invasion of South Korea, Soviet Premier Khrushchev's forays in various crises, and many other cases of confrontation with America might well be instances in which the personal psychology of top foreign decision makers played a crucial role.

This complex web of self-expression and intuition would of course not be necessary if international politics could be a science instead of an art. But unfortunately it will probably remain an art: presidents will decide emotionally arousing issues in the face of ambiguous and inadequate data and with theories that can be only partially validated. And the sober, unpleasant lesson is that such conditions increase the likelihood of major error and war in the future.

I think there is another potential conclusion in these data—that there is a darker side to heroic ambition. This deserves comment because of the hope of many people for forceful leaders to bring domestic progress. While not a logical necessity, it appears from the evidence that popular leaders with heroic vision and determination may often be predisposed to extend their crusades for a better world into foreign military battle. Americans drawn to Teddy Roosevelt's trust-busting also made possible Big Stick foreign policy. People were drawn to Woodrow Wilson's heroic idealism and Mexico was invaded. They voted for the New Frontier and got the Bay of Pigs and assassination plots. They voted for the Great Society and got an escalation of the Vietnam War. And the pattern exists more dramatically for other nations: Hitler promised his people a thousand-year Reich, Napolean promised his an empire. Both failed and also left millions dead.[7]

Alternatives

Given the personalization of foreign policy at the higher levels, the question arises whether there are ways of selecting leaders who will be predisposed to act in ways that bring peace. For any one nation such a foolproof selection cannot be made without a prior agreement on the nature of international reality: if the leaders of the Soviet Union are primarily hard-line and expansionist, then selecting American leaders strongly disposed to trust and cooperation could be erroneous. In the same way the Soviet Union would be ill-advised, from the viewpoint of its national security, to select trusting and cooperative leaders if American political leaders are primarily hard-line and expansionist.

But the implications are clear for all nations taken together. A collective shift toward leaders of less personal ambition and less dominance, less competitiveness, more inclined toward trust—men gentle, kind, and modest—would increase the likelihood our world could live at peace. Yet such a shift may not be possible, since the peoples of the world cannot act in concert.

Despite the implausibility of any direct political application of these results, greater psychological understanding of themselves by elites might be salutary. By creating for decision makers an explicit metaperspective on their inherent mental processes and biased, overconfident functioning, such increased self-awareness might enlarge their capacity to use their personal predispositions more modestly and their intuitive resources more flexibly in the service of accurate empathy and successful policy.

This study, of course, is only a first step toward such sophisticated self-awareness; and it is unclear whether top political leaders would be interested in supporting more projects to increase their professional competence. Both personally and politically these might be unattractive.

There are three responses to this elite reserve. First, there is the fact of the public responsibility and trust which political leaders hold: the private selves of public leaders—their fantasies and other personality traits—manifestly affect their professional judgments, sometimes consequentially, on issues of major political importance. Hence increased self-knowledge is part of meeting standards of a responsible professionalism. It takes courage to confront this fact—but it would at least begin to approach the courage

of the soldiers who leaders now ask to face death on the battlefield. I think that leaders should expect no less of themselves—and we should expect no less of them.

Second, it is not true that greater self-knowledge, as some people fear, increases neurotic soul-searching and paralyzes the capacity to act. The results of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy show rather that, if it is done well, the opposite is the case: self-awareness leads to a strengthening of the self, a deeper sense of one's values. More importantly, there is a sense of release, greater flexibility, creativity, and perspective—an inner freedom to have one's ideas challenged without feeling set upon.[8] The problem to which a research program is appropriately addressed is how to free a decision maker to bring *all* of his potential capabilities to bear on an issue, how to make empathy and intuition *flexible* rather than, as at present, locking in a man and restricting his processes of judgment and intuition. The goal is to support the creation of more fully human, sophisticated, and sensitive policy makers, not to intimidate men so they repress their feelings and function like machines.

Third, it will be necessary to create a research and educational program which is psychologically safe. It will be distressing if this book, with its public criticism, makes men reluctant to further explore their subjective processes out of fear of adverse political consequences or personal embarrassment. To succeed, a program would need to be private, conducted with a high sense of professional ethics by people of integrity. And the media would need to eschew voyeurism and the short-term sensationalism and competitive advantage to be gained from searching out and printing privileged information. But I think that arrangements could be worked out and that, moreover, an honest program in the Executive Branch would be reassuring to the American public, to foreign governments and peoples, to the Congress, useful to presidents and secretaries of state personally in meeting their responsibilities, reassuring to the news media, and reassuring, as well, to top level officials who frequently must rely on professional staffs and appointees for sound judgments and advice. And of course foreign governments could appropriately begin their own programs. Such programs would obviously have to be voluntary—both to be ethical and to meet the first requirement of a good working relationship.

I am not, of course, in a position to predict with certainty that an ad-

vanced program of research and education explicating the personal psychology of political decision making will increase the flexibility and appropriateness of self-expression and intuition. But it seems worth doing whatever can be done, and irresponsible not to address the problem directly and fully.

Concluding Remarks

This book has not been only an investigation of the resort to self-expression and intuitive processes, or only about processes of self-deception, about structural patterns of elite recruitment and their consequences, about the vicissitudes of innocence and the realistic virtues of a mature skepticism about politicians and political systems. It has been about unnecessary and avoidable death, because that is what we are talking about when we talk about decisions to use force and about erroneous judgments on issues involving force. It is a special misfortune that some of the many deaths from international violence in this century could, in principle, have been avoided; the mechanisms clarified in this book have been known to have a likely relevance to politics for at least the forty years since Harold Lasswell's pioneering investigations in his *Psychopathology and Politics* and *World Politics and Personal Insecurity.*[9,10] No one listened, at least not the people in power who could have taken to heart Lasswell's warning and clarified their own judgmental processes to avoid systematic folly. Nor am I completely confident that the world's political elites are sufficiently motivated to listen this time around. The State Department data imply that elites may have somewhat idealized images of themselves.[11] And perhaps every administration indulges itself in the vanity that it is more sophisticated than its predecessors, believing there is a bright future ahead now that they are in charge and the past is behind us.

I wish it were possible to end this book with a note of hope. But in truth I do not know whether hope is a realistic stance. Men may have the capacity to be rational, generous, and mutually cooperative, but as we face a world in which nuclear weapons and conventional armaments proliferate, it is sobering to know that the world in which they proliferate is a world

of men. Human beings will decide whether or not to use them. And that necessity to trust the minds of human leaders, especially given the results of the present research, makes me uneasy.