INTRODUCTION

Presidential Decision Making: Rationality, Advisory Systems, and Personality

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The authors in this special issue of Presidential Studies Quarterly *draw on a rich heritage of decision-making analysis in the scholarly literature, much of it in the discipline of political science. Over the past several decades, scholars have approached the understanding of presidential decision making from a range of perspectives. The articles in this issue are rich in theory, strong in empirical evidence, and often prescriptive, explicitly or by implication. This introduction will briefly characterize some of the relevant research, contrast two decisions central to George W. Bush's presidency, and then introduce the articles and their contributions to our understanding of presidential decision making.*

Scholarship on Presidential Decision Making

The scholarship on presidential decision making is broad in scope, deep in quality, and varied in texture. A brief overview of some of the scholarly literature is here divided into decision-making theory, advisory structures, and the analysis of individual presidents. Most of the literature mentioned in this introduction is treated in much more depth in the articles that follow.

Decision-Making Theory

Much of the decision-making literature after World War II focused on the limitations of the rational model. At first glance, the rational approach to decision making—stating objectives, ranking values, analyzing alternatives, examining consequences, and making choices—seems to accord with common sense (who would want to be irrational?). But the reality of making decisions under conditions of complexity (virtually

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all public policy decisions) is much more problematic. Much of the scholarly decision-making literature emphasizes just how complex making decisions really is.

The rational or deductive model has been analyzed by, among others, Lindblom (1959), Braybrooke and Lindblom (1963), and March (1994) in general and Schelling (1966, 1980) and Snyder (1961) with respect to nuclear deterrence. Much of the literature on rational decision making and its limits was marshaled and summarized by Graham Allison in *Essence of Decision* (1971; Allison and Zelikow 1999), which analyzed the Cuban Missile Crisis through the lenses of three different models. His Model I lays out the rational approach in general and applies it to analyze the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Herbert Simon argued that economists attributed a "preposterously omniscient rationality" (1976, xxvii) to individuals, and he distinguished between "facts" and "values" in organizational decision making (1945). He concluded that organizational decision makers operated within "bounded rationality" and tended to "*satisfice* because they have not the wits to *maximinze*" (1976, xxviii, italics in original). He also characterized the context of most governmental decision making: "A decision is not a simple, unitary event, but the product of a complex social process generally extending over a considerable period of time" (1965, 35).

Charles Lindblom (1959) attacked the rational decision paradigm by arguing that, in principle, values could not be separated from concrete policies. The informational, resource, and time constraints on decision makers were so substantial that only alternatives marginally different from the status quo could be realistically examined (1959). March and Simon (1958) applied the ideas of satisficing, sequential search processes, and repertoires of actions to decision making in formal organizations and emphasized the cognitive limits on rationality. Cyert and March (1963) challenged the traditional theory of the firm by arguing that firms (and by implication, other complex organizations) did not in fact maximize net revenue or act from perfect knowledge, but rather used organizational slack to make side payments in order to keep together the coalition of subunits in large organizations. Each subunit imposes its own constraints on overall organizational goals.

Allison (1971) summarized much of the scholarly literature on decision making, and his critiques of the rational model in his Model II (organizational process) and Model III (bureaucratic politics) have become staples in the political science literature.

Advisory Systems

Another stream in the scholarly literature that attempts to understand presidential decision making focuses on presidential advisory systems. The assumption is that no one individual can hope to understand all of the ramifications of decisions facing the president and that staff structures are thus necessary but can help or hinder good decision making. Of course, well-organized advisory systems cannot guarantee good decisions. As President Eisenhower (1965, 630) put it, "Organization cannot of course make a successful leader out of a dunce, any more than it should make a decision for its chief. But it is effective in minimizing the chances of failure and in insuring that the right hand does, indeed, know what the left hand is doing." The study of advisory systems

has included the influence of formal organizations, small groups, and role expectations on decision making.

Perhaps the most basic model of structuring decisions is the idea of bureaucracy developed by Max Weber. In observing the development of bureaucracies at the turn of the twentieth century, Weber (1946) abstracted into his "ideal type" the characteristics of typical bureaucracies. Principles such as the necessity of rules, files, monocratic hierarchy, division of labor, continuous organization, salaries, professional staff, and so on, as described by Weber, seem obvious and commonplace to us now, but only because of his pioneering observations when the generic characteristics of emerging bureaucracies were not obvious.

Alexander George (1972, 1980) argued that presidents needed to assure that their advisory systems provide them with a range of alternatives for any important decision and that the best way to assure this was a system of "multiple advocacy." He argued that the mere presence of differing views among White House staffers did not guarantee the effective presentation of alternatives to the president. Thus, the system had to be consciously structured so that the representatives of different alternatives possessed similar intellectual and bureaucratic resources.

Richard Tanner Johnson (1974) divided presidential approaches to White House organization into formalistic (Ike, Nixon), competitive (FDR), and collegial (JFK). White House staffer and scholar Roger Porter (1980) analyzed the operation of the Ford administration White House and characterized different approaches to advisory systems as adhocracy, centralized management, and multiple advocacy. Haney (2002) uses the Johnson and George models to analyze crises in the Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, and Bush (41) administrations.

Irving Janis (1982) analyzed the effects of small-group solidarity in situations where the stakes are high, pressure is great, and secrecy is important. The danger in these situations is that the group will develop the illusion of invulnerability and inherent morality, underestimate the enemy and chances of failure, and fail to reexamine their initial assumptions. Janis used the term "groupthink" to characterize such situations and analyzed cases of presidential decision making to illustrate the syndrome as well as cases when it was avoided. One possible way to mitigate the groupthink syndrome, Janis suggested, is to have one advisor play the role of "devil's advocate," by systematically criticizing the group consensus and articulating alternative approaches to the problem.

Small-group dynamics are also central to analyses by Garrison (1999) and Ponder (2000), who provide insights into the causes and consequences of the internal staff dynamics of advice to the president, Garrison in foreign policy and Ponder in domestic policy. Newmann (2004) argues that most presidents begin their terms with a relatively formal policy development process, but eventually narrow their sources of input to a few trusted advisors.

The idea of roles played by different staffers, as in Janis's devil's advocate, has also been useful in understanding the relationship among presidential staffers and between the president and staff. The neutral (or honest) broker concept implies that in any important decision-making situation, the staffer presents to the president in a neutral way the most important policy alternatives and represents faithfully the views of the advocates

of different policy alternatives. The president can thus have confidence that the dice are not loaded in favor of one or another alternative (or staffer). Playing the role of neutral broker does not preclude the staffer from giving his or her best advice to the president, but it assures that this judgment will not unfairly subvert the judgments of other staffers.

The neutral broker role and its variants are taken up by John Burke in this issue, and have been analyzed with respect to the assistant to the president for national security affairs by I. M. Destler (1972, 1981) and Mulcahy and Crabb (1991), among others. It has also been used to analyze different approaches to the office of chief of staff to the president (Pfiffner 1999). If the top staffer does not carefully play the neutral broker role but becomes a policy advocate, the burden shifts to the president to assure that all legitimate perspectives are well represented. And if other staffers are not confident that their views are accurately presented to the president, they will find their own backchannels and undermine the order of the policy process.

Kowert (2002) argues that some advisory systems may work well with some types of presidents but not with others. He argues that "open" presidents operate best when presented with conflicting and diverse opinions from their advisors (e.g., Eisenhower), but other presidents feel more comfortable with more consensus and a smaller set of top advisors (e.g., Reagan). Bose (1998) compares Eisenhower's more formal advisory system with Kennedy's less formal system and concludes that the Eisenhower approach is superior. Henderson (1988) also compares Eisenhower's system favorably to Reagan's advisory structures.

The importance of structuring advice to the president is illustrated in the comparison of two crucial decisions on Vietnam: Eisenhower's decision in 1954 not to commit U.S. ground troops and Johnson's decision in 1965 to escalate the U.S. military commitment. Burke et al. (1989) analyze Eisenhower's approach, which was structured to elicit conflicting perspectives and consider them explicitly. Johnson's approach, in contrast, tended to narrow his options and discourage debate. Eisenhower described his approach to decision making as follows:

> I know of only one way in which you can be sure you've done your best to make a wise decision. This is to get all of the people who have partial and definable responsibility in this particular field, whatever it may be. Get them with their different viewpoints in front of you, and listen to them debate. (Burke et al. 1989, 54)

Johnson's approach tended to shut off options and narrow debate and was characterized in a memorandum by John McCone: "He wanted no more divisions of opinion, no more bickering and any person that did not conform to policy should be removed" (Burke et al. 1989, 119). They conclude that the effect of Johnson's approach was "to put a damper on the openness of exchange" though it did not shut off all disagreement (p. 145).

The Role of the Individual President

For centuries, philosophers and historians have speculated about the relative effect of individual leaders versus the effects of broad, historical forces. Are leaders merely

carried on the waves of history, or do they actively create the circumstances of historical change through individual skill and force of will? When political scientists examine the presidency, some focus on the effect of the individual president and some emphasize the web of forces surrounding presidents and their historical circumstances. Historians, biographers, psychologists, and students of "presidential character" all weigh individual characteristics heavily in analyzing presidential decision making.

In *Presidential Power* (1960), Richard Neustadt put the president and his own calculation of his power stakes at the center of presidential decision making. Neustadt, and Heclo (1999), urge presidents to be wary of their advisory systems so as to ensure that their own priorities will prevail rather than those of entrepreneurial staffers. Sam Kernell's (1989) advice in his analysis of the evolution of the White House staff is "organizations need policing," and Matthew Dickinson argues in this issue that "aides must be monitored."

James David Barber's (1972) study of presidential character takes the perspective that the fundamental character traits developed throughout a president's life had important implications for the way he conducted himself in office. George and George (1998) explore the effect of personality on presidential performance. Fred Greenstein (2000) has evaluated the performance of the modern presidents along different dimensions and abilities: public communication, organizational capacity, political skill, vision of public policy, cognitive style, and emotional intelligence.

From the perspective of cognitive processing, John Steinbruner (1974) argued that individual rationality is virtually impossible under conditions of complexity and uncertainty. He maintained that individuals will impose structure on uncertain situations even if it does not fit, and will resolve their uncertainty by simplistic assumptions rather than by rational, probabilistic judgments.

Each of these perspectives sees environmental factors and historical circumstances as important parts of any situation facing presidents, but according to these approaches, the essential element in decision making is the unique mind-set, values, or character of each president. The role of the individual president is the central factor rather than the surrounding institutions within which he is embedded.

In contrast to those who see the individual as central to understanding the U.S. presidency are a number of scholars who consider the historical or institutional environment to be the major determining factor in presidential performance. Stephen Skowronek (1993) sees presidents as constrained by the "political time" of their historical circumstances. Presidents' options are heavily influenced by their historical era. The cycles of dominant ruling coalitions and challenges to them constrain presidential options, regardless of their personal skills. Other scholars, particularly since World War II, have emphasized the importance of the institutional context of presidential decision making.

In the post-World War II era, the many offices of the presidency have grown to the point that some scholars (Polsby 1983; Hart 1987, 1995) have characterized it as the "presidential branch" in which the White House Office and Executive Office of the President often have different interests than the rest of the executive branch. Broader perspectives on the institutional presidency have been provided by Burke (2000),

Walcott and Hult (1995), Hult and Walcott (2004), and Pfiffner (2005), among others. These approaches emphasize the effects of large, complex organizations on presidential options and decisions. On the one hand, these large organizations exist to serve the president and are at his disposal. On the other hand, the necessity for coordination and control constrains presidential options.

Hugh Heclo (1999) analyzed the "deep structure" of the presidency, that is, the expectations of other political actors, in constraining individual presidential preferences, but the rational choice school of thought goes much further in minimizing the range of presidential discretion. The imbalance between presidential incentives to deliver on policy commitments and the resources available to presidents forces them to maximize their power position, often by politicizing the executive branch (Moe 1985). From the rational choice perspective, for purposes of understanding presidential behavior, presidents are generic rather than unique individuals with their own psychology and values. Through understanding the structure of incentives facing presidents, we can best build a theory to explain and predict their behavior.

Moe and other rational choice/new institutionalism scholars (e.g., Howell 2003; Lewis 2003; Mayer 2001; Zegart 1999) often present their perspectives explicitly, in contrast to Richard Neustadt and others who focus their analysis on the individual president. Theodore Lowi (1985, 136) characterized the relative balance of the two approaches: "An institutionalist approach does not deny the relevance of individual psychology but treats it as marginal in the context of the tremendous historical forces lodged in the laws, traditions, and commitments of institution."

As valuable as the rational choice perspective is in understanding presidential motivation and performance, the role of the individual president in influencing historic decisions cannot be dismissed entirely. As John Kennedy said in commenting on McGeorge Bundy's description of his (Bundy's) role in the new Kennedy administration, "I only hope that he leaves a few residual functions to me" (Bird 1998, 189). The role of the president as an individual will be highlighted in the next section by contrasting two historic decisions by George W. Bush.

President George W. Bush and Decision Making

Each of the articles in this special issue draws on the scholarly literature on presidential decision making, and most deal in part with the first term of George W. Bush's presidency. We (as scholars and citizens) suffer from a lack of authoritative inside information about the Bush presidency, but the historic nature of the decisions and policies of the administration are so important that we must do our best with what we have so far. We do have the benefit of several inside accounts (Clarke, Suskind) and the authorized accounts of Bob Woodward (2002, 2004) that can be used with the general caveats that come with our understanding of the authors' perspectives.

In order to contrast the institutional perspective with an emphasis on the impact of the president as an individual, it may be useful to juxtapose President George W. Bush's immediate reaction to 9/11 with his later decision to invade Iraq. One argument

that might be made is that the initial decisions thrust on President Bush by the 9/11 atrocities were made in reasonably expectable ways. President Bush skillfully reassured the nation in the wake of the attack and successfully pursued domestic policies designed to enhance the ability of the government to deal with the threat of terrorism.

The logical response of hitting back at the terrorists by attacking their base in Afghanistan was undertaken by President Bush in the fall of 2001. The war was conducted effectively by minimizing the participation of U.S. ground troops until the fall of Kabul in December 2001 (Woodward 2002). Without minimizing in any way the impressive performance of President Bush in these initial responses to 9/11, one could argue that any president in this situation would have acted in similar ways. That is, reassuring the nation, enacting domestic security legislation, and attacking al Qaeda in Afghanistan.

In contrast, it can be plausibly argued that the decision to attack Saddam Hussein by invading Iraq was a decision much less likely to be taken by a different president, particularly by Al Gore if he had won the presidency in 2000. The impetus to invade Iraq was favored by a group of neoconservative politicians who had advocated attacking Iraq since the 1990s, and President Bush appointed a number of these "neocons" to his administration (Mann 2004). In addition, there were indicators early in the administration (Suskind 2004), immediately after 9/11 (Clarke 2004; Woodward 2002), and in the spring and summer of 2002 (Haney, this issue; Woodward 2004) that deposing Saddam Hussein, by force if necessary, was a major policy goal of President Bush.

In accomplishing his goal of taking the United States to war in Iraq, President Bush very skillfully used his leverage as president to convince Congress and the American people that war against Saddam Hussein was essential to the national security of the United States (Pfiffner 2004a). In doing this, he effectively overcame the serious reservations of Secretary of State Colin Powell, a significant portion of the professional Army Officer Corps (as articulated by retired officers and leaks to the press), and of U.S. allies, and even public objections from his father's advisors, Brent Scowcroft and James A. Baker, not to mention opposition from a number of Democratic members of Congress (Pfiffner 2004b).

President Bush's ability to overcome all of these obstacles in a relatively short period of time—one year before the invasion few people foresaw a war with Iraq—has to be attributed in large part to his political will and considerable personal skills rather than to the imperatives of the situation or pressures from the political system. (It might be interesting to contrast civilian control of the military services during the Bush administration with the impression one gets from Allison's Models II and III.)

Articles in the Special Issue

In making their own scholarly contributions, the authors of the articles in this special issue each draws upon the decision-making literature to add to our understanding of how presidents make crucial decisions. Several of the articles are prescriptive and suggest more effective ways to organize presidential advisory systems, and present cases

or empirical evidence to support their analyses. Several of the authors take up the analysis of President Bush's decision to invade Iraq from several different perspectives.

Walcott and Hult trace the development of what they term the "standard model" of White House organization as it developed from the Eisenhower administration to the present. The major elements of the standard model include, most importantly, a chief of staff, a specialized internal hierarchy, and a regularized policy development process. They establish that the general outlines of the standard model are now taken as the conventional wisdom about how the White House should be organized and that any major deviation from that model by a new administration will draw criticism from the Washington community.

Although they argue that there is no viable alternative to the standard model in the modern, institutional presidency, they admit that there needs to be a fine-tuning of it for each president so that it does not become pro forma and subject to the well-known pathologies of hierarchies. Their prescriptions for avoiding the pitfalls of hierarchy include distinguishing between decision making in conditions of uncertainty and in the presence of controversy. In the former case, it is best to elicit a broad range of alternatives from groups of people with problem-solving skills, regardless of their official positions. In cases of controversy, however, the key stakeholders in the administration need to be ensured an opportunity to provide input to the president. Thus, they conclude, the formalized hierarchy must be supplemented by less formal avenues of advice from top staffers.

Andrew Rudalevige uses the scholarly literature to come to a prescriptive conclusion that a White House advisory system organized along functional lines (such as budgeting or the legislative agenda) will serve the president better than one organized along specialty lines. If organized along specialty (such as domestic or national security policy) lines, the specialists will more likely come to a consensus and present it to the president, whereas if generalists do the policy development, it is more likely that essential conflicts will be elevated to the president's attention. The dangers of uncertainty absorption must be compensated for. "Parallel processing" advisory structures will also help ensure that too much uncertainty is not absorbed before information gets to the top.

Rudalevige explores these propositions through case studies of the organization of the Bureau of the Budget in the 1950s, the shift in organization between Ronald Reagan's two terms, and the George W. Bush administration in decisions about going to war. He concludes that the Bush advisory system worked well in presenting a unified front to the public and selling its priorities, but did not work as well in providing the president the full range of information about the Iraq war that might have been useful to the president.

In his article, Patrick Haney draws on the scholarly literature to highlight a paradox in our understanding of presidential decision making. On the one hand, much of the literature paints the picture of the president as seriously constrained by a myriad of forces, from Congress, to domestic political centers of power, to his own executive branch. On the other hand, we have examples of presidents asserting their power in pursuing policies despite opposition from significant centers of power in the political system.

Haney fleshes out this paradox by using U.S. policy toward Cuba, with its important domestic and international implications, to illustrate how presidents must carefully navigate the shoals of domestic political forces. In contrast, Haney takes up President Bush's decision to invade Iraq as an example of presidential dominance of the policy process in this crucial decision about war and peace. His challenge to the discipline is how to reconcile theoretically these two different conceptions of the president: "How can the president be both Gulliver, tied down by the Lilliputians, and the Puppetmaster, pulling the strings, at the same time?"

John Burke begins his article with an examination of the neutral broker role from the analysis and proposals of Alexander George, and notes that other roles have been added to the duties of the assistant to the president for national security affairs by various administrations over the years. In his in-depth treatment of the use of the neutral broker model and comparisons with other models of presidential decision making, Burke explores how the appropriate use of the role might have mitigated the problems caused by Iran-Contra. He also analyzes Condoleezza Rice's role in the Bush administration and how it resembled and differed from the traditional roles of national security advisor. He suggests that a resurrection of the neutral broker role might help avoid some of the pathologies of ill-informed decision making or the distortions caused by groupthink.

Presidents have been praised and criticized for their allocation of time and attention. President Carter was roundly criticized for his attention to the allocation of time on the White House tennis courts, and Ronald Reagan was criticized for his attention to the big picture without sufficient attention to the details of some of his more important policies. Although the issue of allocation of time is clearly important, most of our evidence comes from anecdotes and impressions conveyed in memoirs of presidential aides. In his article, Timothy McKeown defines "micromanagement" as "a presidential concern with administrative questions that would ordinarily be seen as much too unimportant to merit presidential attention."

McKeown brings empirical evidence to bear on presidential time allocation and puts it into a theoretical context. He takes up presidential decisions to allocate time and attention to the U.S. international aid budget over three administrations (Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon). His focus is personal presidential attention to the distribution of the U.S. aid budget in the 1960s and 1970s. He shows that Kennedy tended to "micromanage" the budgetary details in a manner that seemed far beyond their relative importance and that Nixon took a more hands-off approach. McKeown finds the explanation for this difference among presidents in the broader context of the Cold War and the balance of payments problem. Thus, McKeown emphasizes the effect of the political environment on the parceling out of presidential attention.

Matthew Dickinson takes up the challenge that presidents face in how to ensure that they receive the information they most need. His theoretical analysis brings together insights from Neustadt's *Presidential Power* and the rational choice–new institutionalism school of thought. He argues that each approach begins with the premise that presidents need accurate information about the broader political system, the national government, and the executive branch. Thus, they need extensive staffs of their own to obtain the necessary information. But they also need to ensure that their own staffers present them with

the information that will best serve their own (the presidents') interests, not the staffers' (the principal-agent problem). Dickinson explores different approaches to staff structure, including careful analysis of the differing staffing approaches that FDR and Nixon took to organizing their presidencies. He concludes (along with Rudalevige) that in many cases a mixed approach, with nonspecialized, parallel staffing structures, will supplement the standard model in beneficial ways (agreeing with Walcott and Hult's conclusion).

In conclusion, the articles in this issue point the way for potentially fruitful future research on presidential decision making. Does the Bush (43) administration fully follow Walcott and Hult's "standard model"? Will it have worked well for him? Is the Rudalevige prescription for parallel processing and generalist policy advice to the president compelling? How can we answer Haney's paradox of reconciling a sometimes powerful president with a sometimes constrained one? Can Burke's argument for a renewal of the neutral broker role apply well to the second Bush term or future presidencies? Can we expand the empirical analysis of presidential time allocation that McKeown has set out? Can we build a base of case studies in presidential decision making that links staff structures with better or worse outcome, as Dickinson suggests?

A lot of good scholarship (e.g., Mayer 2001; Cooper 2002; Lewis 2003; Howell 2003) has been published that analyzes the unilateral power of presidents. Does decision making concerning unilateral power differ significantly from decision making about policies that necessarily involve Congress? Does Rudalevige's (2002) argument that centralized policy making fares less well in Congress than more broadly developed policy still hold? Is Lou Fisher (2000) right that Congress has "abdicated" its constitutional role in important areas of policy making?

Finally, as more inside accounts become available about the George W. Bush administration, it may be possible to address still unanswered questions about decision making on issues of national security policy and war. What were the organizational and turf dynamics of the Bush "war cabinet" immediately after 9/11? How did the CIA and the Defense Department interact in the planning for the war in Afghanistan? How did the decision to attack Iraq develop and when was it finalized? How was the intelligence on weapons of mass destruction presented to the president? What were the relative roles of the assistant to the president for national security affairs, the vice president, and the secretaries of State and Defense? Was the groupthink concept relevant to administration deliberations? Was there effective multiple advocacy?

These questions merely hint at the broad array of important questions still to be answered by scholars of the presidency.

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