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The FP Debate: Should Hawks Win?

In the January/February 2007 issue of FOREIGN POLICY, Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon argue that foreign-policy hawks are unduly influential due to predisposed psychological biases, almost all of which favor conflict rather than concession. FP asked two young American foreign-policy writers, one on each end of the political spectrum, for their reactions. Kahneman and Renshon responded to the debate here.

"Yes" - Matthew Continetti

"No" - Matthew Yglesias

Continetti responds

Yglesias responds

Kahneman and Renshon weigh in

"Yes" - Matthew Continetti

Are hawks “more persuasive than they deserve to be”? As social scientists, Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon are reluctant to pronounce on the relative value of the facts they analyze. But the clear implication of their essay is that, yes, policymakers find hawks more convincing than they should. Modern psychology suggests as much, they claim. In fact, the “bias in favor of hawkish beliefs and preferences” may well be immutable—after all, it’s “built into the fabric of the human mind.”

The claim is grand, but there is a frivolity to Kahneman and Renshon’s argument. They assert that all of the biases found in their survey of the past 40 years of psychological research favor hawks. Yet they examine closely only four such biases and mention only three experimental studies—and the biases they do describe are exhibited by doves just as often as they are exhibited by hawks.

First comes the “fundamental attribution error,” when subjects attribute the behavior of others to their “nature, character, or persistent motives” rather than to the context in which they are
forced to operate. What some see as a sensible approach to making decisions, Kahneman and Renshon view as a psychological error that may, in times of conflict, lead to “pernicious” results such as war. Hawks who fail to understand their adversaries’ true motives may be too quick to resort to force. World War I is the quintessential example.

Yet why do only the fundamental attribution errors of hawks lead to “pernicious” effects? Doves share the same bias; it just works in different ways. If hawks treat hostile behavior at face value when they shouldn’t, so too do doves treat docility. Those who championed the 1973 accords ending the Vietnam War saw them as a chance for the United States to leave Vietnam while preserving the sovereignty of the south. But to North Vietnamese eyes, the cease-fire was merely an opportunity to consolidate their forces for the final seizure of the south, which happened a mere two years later.

The second hawk bias Kahneman and Renshon identify is “excessive optimism,” which the authors speculate “led American policymakers astray as they laid the groundwork for the current war in Iraq.” Yet prior to the war in Iraq, some hawks worried that Saddam Hussein might set oil fields ablaze, as he had done in 1991. They worried that he might launch missiles against American allies in the region, that his removal might be long and bloody, and that post-Saddam Iraq would face humanitarian crises of great magnitude. Doves optimistically argued that Saddam could be “contained” even as the sanctions against him were unraveling and as America’s military presence in Saudi Arabia became increasingly untenable.

Why Kahneman and Renshon limit the biases they identify to hawks is something of a mystery. Take “reactive devaluation,” or “what was said matters less than who said it.” They cite likely American skepticism over any forthcoming Iranian nuclear concessions as an example, albeit conceding that doubt may be warranted in this case. They could have cited a domestic case instead: Just as many Republicans opposed President Clinton’s interventions in Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo, and at one point even accused him of resorting to force in order to distract from the Monica Lewinsky scandal, many Democrats now oppose Bush administration policies sight unseen because they don’t like the messenger. Doves are just as susceptible to reactive devaluation as hawks.

There is one tendency that Kahneman and Renshon correctly identify as a boon to hawks. “People prefer to avoid a certain loss in favor of a potential loss,” they write, “even if they risk losing significantly more.” In war, such an aversion to cutting and running may cause a conflict “to endure long beyond the point where a reasonable observer would see the outcome as a near certainty.” This is the situation America faced in Vietnam, they claim, and it is the situation they believe America faces in Iraq today.

Needless to say, that final conclusion is open to debate. But it is true that leaders are susceptible to policies of escalation if they believe that victory can be achieved. That is because, as in Iraq, the potential rewards of victory outweigh the consequences of guaranteed defeat. Still, psychological errors are neither the lye nor the most important cause behind policymakers’ reluctance to “cut their losses.” Considerations of honor also play a factor, as do aspirations to glory—two concepts that go unmentioned in our social sciences (because they are difficult to quantify) and in our foreign-policy debate (because they are out of intellectual fashion).

But these two ideas, along with power, ideology, weakness, morality, and interest, are central to any comprehensive understanding of international relations. And they are key to understanding whether hawks or doves triumph in a given policy debate. That Kahneman and Renshon mention none of them in their essay only undermines its persuasiveness. That they restrict the scope of the biases they identify to hawks suggests their piece is less a work of social science than it is a polemic. One might even go so far as to say they exhibit clear biases of their own.


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Hawks Win?

"No" - Matthew Yglesias

Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon make a valuable contribution to our understanding of questions of war and peace with "Why Hawks Win" (January/February 2007). What's most novel is their explanation of the psychological foundations of policy errors, rather than their more general conclusion that hawkish advice is usually mistaken and accepted for reasons other than its merits.

Put so bluntly, many would probably regard that conclusion as intensely controversial. Yet it should be obvious, as its truth is easy to establish. Some wars are disastrous for both sides, causing widespread damage and devastation without achieving much of anything. World War I is the classic example, where not only the Central Powers (who “lost”) but also the Allies (who “won”) found themselves far worse off than before the war began. Other wars arguably end in a beneficial manner—for one side. The reverse situation—a war where both parties end up better off than they had been before the fighting—is so rare as to be unheard of. That is because war is a negative-sum enterprise, involving the destruction of resources (most notably, human beings) that could otherwise be employed in productive ways. As a result, when two parties go to war, at least one of them, and possibly both, is making a mistake.

Consequently, Kahneman and Renshon actually end up being unduly generous to the hawkish point of view. Sometimes, of course, war is necessary. But since there are two sides to every conflict, hawks won't always be right. Even in a case where an American president is rightly listening to his hawkish advisors (George H.W. Bush in the first Gulf War, say, or Bill Clinton over Kosovo), a foreign leader (Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milosevic) is making a serious miscalculation in listening to his hawkish advisors.

In short, most decisions to go to war have been mistakes. Sometimes, as in World War I, both sides are making a mistake, and other times, as in World War II, only one side is, but the upshot is that the impulse to launch wars is more widespread than it ought to be. Indeed, hawks themselves recognize this fact. Pro-war arguments almost always contend that the enemy is irrationally aggressive, while overestimating one’s own military capabilities. Where the hawks go wrong is in their belief that irrational exuberance about violence is the exclusive province of real or potential adversaries, rather than a problem from which they themselves may suffer.

Unfortunately, Kahneman and Renshon shy away from pushing their psychological analysis into the policy domain, writing that “the clear evidence of a psychological bias in favor of aggressive outcomes … won't point the international community in a clear direction on Iran or North Korea.” In fact, the implications are rather clear. As members of the Bush administration admit, the decision to rebuff repeated diplomatic initiatives from Tehran was probably influenced in part by irrational “reactive devaluation,” defined by the authors as “the very fact that a concession is offered by somebody perceived as untrustworthy undermines the content of the proposal.”

Many analysts, meanwhile, have raised serious questions about the American military’s capacity to seriously degrade the Iranian nuclear program. Hawks are predictably more optimistic. Strong evidence of a human bias toward overestimation of one’s own capabilities is obviously relevant to evaluating this dispute. Hawks seem unwilling to consider the possibility that Iran’s efforts on the nuclear front are motivated by fear of America’s threatening behavior rather than by Teheran’s desire to behave in an equally threatening way. This would appear to be a textbook manifestation of the authors’ observation that “even when people are aware of the context and possible constraints on someone’s behavior, they often do not factor it in when assessing the other side’s motives.” If hawkish psychological biases are widespread, and if all of those biases are in play in Iran’s case, then hawks’ arguments are significantly undermined. In particular, it strongly suggests that it would be a mistake to resort to military action without first making a good faith effort at engagement and the peaceful resolution of differences—precisely what the Bush administration has failed to do.

Matthew Yglesias is a staff writer at the American Prospect and writes an eponymous blog.
Hawks Win?
Continetti responds

It ought to be “obvious,” Matthew Yglesias writes, that hawks are usually wrong and that policymakers adopt a hawkish line for “reasons other than its merits.” In war, there are no winners, according to Yglesias. Yes, there have been wars that benefit one of the combatant powers. But most wars, he goes on, are “disastrous for both sides.” And no war can be said to have ended with all combatants in better shape.

This is the sort of lesson one typically learns in kindergarten, where our teachers emphasize sharing and cooperation, and tell us that in a fight there are no winners, only losers. These lessons and values are paramount in our culture and in our politics. No less a figure than the frontrunner for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination wrote a book extolling them.

War is not like kindergarten, however. In war, one ethnic group or state or coalition of states eventually triumphs over another, with tangible consequences for both winner and loser. Yglesias points to World War I as the “classic example” of a war in which neither side “won.” But the Allied powers who in the war’s aftermath dissolved two empires and saddled Germany with a crushing reparations bill would probably disagree. So would the United States, whose entry into the war signaled its emergence as a dominant global power for the first time in its history.

There were, in fact, wars in which both sides emerged “better off” in the long run. The Confederacy was crushed, the Union was preserved, and America was better off as a whole after the Civil War. Fascism was wiped off the map following World War II and replaced by constitutional democracy. And when the Soviet Union finally dissolved, Eastern Europe and Russia could reach for democratic futures. What should be “obvious” is that, though war creates problems, it can also solve them—a fact Yglesias seems to recognize in citing the first Gulf War and Kosovo as good wars. The implication of Yglesias’s slippery standard appears to be that the applications of force with which he disagrees are “mistakes,” whereas those with which he agrees are not.

How should this standard—call it the “Yglesias Test”—guide the Bush administration in the case of the Iranian nuclear program? Yglesias would have the United States “consider the possibility that Iran’s efforts on the nuclear front are motivated by fear of America’s threatening behavior.” But America’s multilateral diplomacy has been incredibly restrained, even as the Iranians work assiduously to undermine democratic gains in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon—a fine way to offer thanks for the American removal of hostile regimes on Iran’s eastern and western borders.

It was political opportunism fused with ideology, not “America’s threatening behavior,” that caused Khomeini to order the 1979 hostage taking, just as opportunism and ideology fueled the Iranian regime’s creation of Hezbollah, its assassination of American diplomats, its complicity in the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, and its encouragement of Hezbollah’s war against Israel last summer.

It is ideology—an illiberal ideology—that explains such policies. And it is an illiberal ideology that spurs states toward aggression, expansion, and ultimately confrontation with the forces of liberalism.


Hawks Win?
Yglesias responds
Matthew Continetti responds to Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon by, in essence, insisting that doves sometimes make mistakes, too. This is, of course, true, which is why Kahneman and Renshon repeatedly concede as much in their original essay (indeed, they bend over backward to do so). Ultimately, Continetti fails to challenge the essential point that hawks are usually mistaken.

Indeed, his choice of examples is telling. Continetti points to doves’ undue optimism about the Paris peace talks of 1973, and he might also have noted undue dovish pessimism about the initial military campaign against Saddam Hussein in 2003. And, indeed, many doves did get some aspects of these situations wrong. Nevertheless, not everyone counseling in favor of peace at those times made the errors Continetti decries. Meanwhile, all hawks were not only wrong about some aspects of the situation, but mistaken on the fundamental question of war. Doves, by contrast, were right to think that abandoning the Vietnam War could save the United States blood and treasure without imperiling its security, and right to think that invading and occupying Iraq would prove far more problematic than hawks were suggesting.

Later on, Continetti even commits one of the hawkish cognitive errors Kahneman and Renshon identify, arguing that “the potential rewards of victory outweigh the consequences of guaranteed defeat.” That victory would be rewarding is certain; it is the prospects for success that are in doubt. Only if escalation actually makes victory likely is it a good idea. Human beings, however, suffer from an irrational aversion to loss that inclines them to make bets that hold out some hope of victory, no matter how bad the odds. Continetti thinks this proclivity can be rendered rational with reference to “considerations of honor” and “aspirations to glory.” But what, exactly, are such considerations supposed to explain? It’s not just a coincidence that adding “honor” to the rational calculus happens to precisely mimic the cognitive errors of problem gamblers.

Rather than rescuing hawkish proclivities from bias and error, “honor” and “glory” in this context are just alternate names for the pathology. But at least gamblers are playing with their own money—hawkish pundits and politicians, by contrast, rarely need to pay the price of their errors, giving them all the more incentive to err on the side of aggression.

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cases: Munich and Chamberlain come easily to mind as possible examples of doves trying to avoid an unavoidable war. However, we believe that submission to threats is better explained by fear than by optimism, and that attempts to coerce the other side are more indicative of an illusion of control than attempts to appease a bully.

Cognitive biases, of course, are not the main explanation for the decision to go to war and the failure to make peace. Conflicting interests are real. And many other factors—including beliefs, values, and material constraints—can affect any given decision. Cognitive biases are not policy destiny by any stretch of the imagination. But there is reason to believe that cognitive biases may make starting wars easier than it should be, and ending wars more difficult and costly than it should be.

Lastly, we’d like to note that our article was drafted long before the current debate on whether or not to send more U.S. troops to Iraq. Although an understanding of cognitive biases could be relevant to current strategic dilemmas, our piece was not intended to be read as an editorial on Iraq.