

# Parallels, prescience and the past: Analogical reasoning and contemporary international politics

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**Abstract** Analogical reasoning has held a perpetual appeal to policymakers who have often drafted in historical metaphor as a mode of informing decision making. However, this article contends that since the beginning of the ‘War on Terror’, we have arguably seen the rise of a more potent form of analogy, namely ones that are selected because they fulfil an ideological function. Analogical reasoning as a tool of rational decision making has increasingly become replaced by analogical reasoning as a tool of trenchant ideologically informed policy justification. This article addresses three key areas that map out the importance of analogical reasoning to an understanding of developments in contemporary international politics: the relationship between history and politics, in intellectual and policy terms; a critical assessment of the appeal that analogical reasoning holds for policymakers; and the development of a rationale for a more effective use of history in international public policy making.

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## Introduction

If men could learn from history, what lessons it might teach us! But passion and party blind our eyes, and the light which experience gives us is a lantern on the stern, which shines only on the waves behind us!. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1884)

Henry Kissinger once argued that ‘history teaches by analogy, shedding light on the likely consequences of comparable situations. But each generation must determine for itself which circumstances are in fact comparable’ (1994, p. 27). The pitfalls of

this process of careful analogy selection, by both policymakers and academics, are at the heart of this article's critical inquiry. Whether or not the analogies invoked by policymakers are prescient or dubious, the consistency with which policymakers utilise the past in order to interpret and justify decisions means that analogical reasoning is an important facet of the policy process for us to understanding.

The role of analogical reasoning in policy making has been noted in the existing literature for its focus on how analogies have been used to illuminate the 'lessons' of history that have come to inform the making of contemporary decisions in the foreign and security policy sphere (May, 1973; Jervis, 1976; Khong, 1992). But since the beginning of the 'War on Terror' we have arguably seen the rise of a more potent form of analogy, namely ones that are selected because they fulfil an ideological function. The Manichean division of world politics by the Bush administration into those either 'with us or with the terrorists' lent neo-conservative analogical reasoning a specific ideological function that served to justify the Bush Doctrine's efforts to reaffirm American power after 9/11 by advocating regime change in specific countries deemed threatening. By dint of this ideological interpretation, Saddam Hussein becomes Adolf Hitler and the war of necessity against the spread of Nazism is replicated in the desire to confront Islamism.

Yet it is not just neo-conservatives who have brought an ideological spin to the utilisation of historical metaphor. Liberal opponents of the Bush Doctrine themselves grabbed at negative analogies as a means of discrediting the direction of the 'War on Terror', most notably by way of linking the war in Iraq in the public mind with the divisive and seemingly intractable war in Vietnam. More recently we have seen the uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, as part of the so-called 'Arab Spring', be heralded as an Arab '1989' in which the mass appeal of democracy triumphs over suffocating authoritarianism.

Of course, the politicised use of analogical reasoning is not a new phenomenon. Back in the 1950s embattled British Prime Minister Anthony Eden deliberately invoked memories of his earlier efforts to create a 'good' war against Hitler in order to soften the image of his 'bad' war against Nasser over the Suez Canal. Eden (1960) tried to calm the fears of President Dwight Eisenhower in a letter sent to the White House at the height of the Suez crisis by utilising the subsequently oft-used 'Munich analogy' to persuade the Americans to support military action against the Egyptians:

In the nineteen-thirties Hitler established his position by a series of carefully planned movements ... His actions were tolerated and excused by the majority of the population in Western Europe ... Similarly the seizure of the Suez Canal is, we are convinced, the opening gambit in a planned campaign designed by Nasser to expel all Western influence and interests from Arab countries ... You may feel that even if we are right it would be better to wait until Nasser has unmistakably unveiled his intentions. But this was the argument which prevailed in 1936 ....



However, over the last decade analogies in policy making and in wider public debate have become far more politicised than before. Analogical reasoning as a tool of rational decision *making* has increasingly become replaced by analogical reasoning as a tool of trenchant ideologically informed policy *justification*. To this extent ideological analogical reasoning is intrinsically instrumental. It becomes self-serving, rests upon a particularly lazy interaction with the past, and, because of the political function it is now increasingly being used for, forces history into a deliberately *persuasive* role. As such, advocates and opponents of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan attempted to draft historical metaphors into their ranks in the public battle over the direction of US foreign and security policy. History has assumed an elevated status in contemporary public policy debates and in international relations scholarship, but rarely has it been so contentious.

A recent spurge of books on the utility of counter-factual analysis (see especially Lebow, 2010; Harvey, 2012; Evans, 2014) has sparked an interest in how policy gets formulated by our leaders and how history (or at least the road not taken) is considered when analysing international political events. A revision of the role played by analogical reasoning, in light of this counter-factual renaissance, is particularly pertinent. Analogical reasoning is, in Dan Reiter's (1994) words, a 'theory of learning that combines the ideas of knowledge structures and judgmental heuristics'. In other words, it is a way of making sense of the world around us by being both a cognitive framework for the organisation of information in our minds and a psychological tool to create linkage or grant explanation to a particular event or circumstance. They have a discursive and cognitive allure that allows us to believe we can simplify the complex by linking the difficult present to a reassuring past.

So why do some analogies get selected by policymakers over others? Robert Jervis (1976) forwards several explanations, including politicians' predilection to draw analogies from their firsthand experience; the 'generational effect' a certain event may have, which will inevitably guide analogical reasoning for that particular cohort (take, for example, the searing effect of the Vietnam War on the generation of Americans becoming politically aware in the 1970s); and a politico-military tendency to draw analogies with the last war fought in an effort to explicitly invoke a 'lesson-learning' exercise. To this list can be added analogies that spring from an event popularly known across generations, perhaps for its infamy, and stereotypically perceived to hold certain connotations (hence the perpetual appeal of the 'Munich analogy' and its seeming warning against the appeasement of dictators).

This article addresses three key areas that map out the importance of analogical reasoning to an understanding of developments in contemporary international politics from the 'War on Terror' to the 'Arab Spring'. Firstly, the attempts on behalf of politicians to make an ally of history brings into sharp focus the relationship between history and politics, both in terms of how they sit together within the Academy, but also in praxis in the realm of policy making. An exploration of this will then be followed by a critical assessment of the appeal that analogical reasoning



holds for policymakers, cautioning against an interpretation of any predictive or reductionist qualities history perceivably may hold. Finally, an exploration of the impact that analogies are having upon the framing of recent political developments will seek to isolate their overtly ideological utilisation of history and develop a rationale for a more effective use of history in international public policy making.

## **Today is Yesterday Tomorrow: The Relationship Between History and International Relations**

International Relations research is often classified as contributing an ‘explanation’ or an ‘understanding’ of events, phenomena or structures. Whereas ‘explaining’ often couches analysis in positivist law-like hypotheses designed to find causal links, research that proffers an ‘understanding’ of a particular facet of International Relations, as Ngaire Woods (1996, p. 11) argues, delves ‘into history not as a bank of information which might falsify a theory, but as a narrative which permits a greater appreciation of the origins, evolution and consequences of an event’. It is in this latter vein that this article urges greater caution in the utilisation of historical analogy in contemporary international relations research.

International relations and international history are two disciplines that have a close relationship, although not necessarily a smooth one (Kennedy-Pipe, 2000). Indeed, they can be considered as ‘brothers under the skin’ (Haber *et al.*, 1997). Methodologically, the two disciplines are similar, with both facilitating the use of documents, interviews (for the contemporary historian) and archival work. However, the real deviation is on an epistemological level, where the role of ‘facts’ and their interpretation produces differences over the employment of theory. As E.H. Carr (1987, p. 8) asserted, any contemporary attempt to investigate the past ‘consciously or unconsciously reflects our own position in time, and forms part of our answer to the broader question of what view we take of the society in which we live’. In other words, we project our modern condition, our current existence, retrospectively in a pursuit of understanding, rendering us unable to truly disaggregate the present from the past. Indeed, it was the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq beginning in 2003 that triggered a parenthetical clamour to revisit historical examples of counter-insurgency as a means of helping interpret the Iraqi situation, of aiding an appreciation of the war’s tactical and strategic direction, and of placing American political and military conduct in context. Historical counter-insurgency became relevant again as a belated process of asymmetric lesson-learning unfolded in US military education institutes and in the Pentagon.

Yet as Carr pointed out, the contemporary need to understand elements of the past is not only catalysed by the pressing need to untangle current complexities. With this comes a concomitant impermanence with which the past is rendered useful. Now that the coalition has withdrawn from Iraq and the contemporaneous ‘broader questions’



that Carr found inevitable are being re-calculated in a new Iraq challenged by the rise of the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group, what should be the role of history? There is a danger that historical analysis becomes merely a tool to be utilised only to help retrospectively justify or denigrate an existing policy decision. The past therefore becomes evidence offered by the defence or prosecution in the intellectual trial of contemporary international relations. This article is therefore premised as a bulwark to this fleeting and inexpedient use of history by aiming to promote, in Carr's (1987, p. 68) words, 'a profounder understanding of both past and present through the interrelation between them'.

How then are the disciplines of history and international relations interrelated and how can analogical reasoning cast light on contemporary international politics? To crudely characterise, it can be said that for the historian, IR scholars are guilty of frequently abusing history to uphold theories, hypotheses or policy recommendations; for the IR scholar, historians are largely devoid of theoretical judgement and are caught in a cycle of description not explanation (Levy, 1997). John Lewis Gaddis (1997a, p. 84) borrows from Sigmund Freud the phrase 'narcissism of minor differences' to explain the relationship between the two disciplines, because for Gaddis: 'Both disciplines fall squarely within the spectrum of "non-replicable" sciences. Both trace processes over time. Both employ imagination. Both use counter-factual reasoning'. To this list, Geoffrey Roberts (2006) would also add that both history and IR are increasingly narrative in their content. Yet for Gaddis (1997a, p. 84) the primary difference that has generated so much narcissism in both camps lies in the use of history for the purposes of prediction and policy relevance – tasks that political scientists enthusiastically indulge and ones that historians shy from 'like vampires confronted with crosses'. However, the intellectual barriers that may have enforced the segregation of history and IR in the past have been surmounted in the past two decades to the extent that, in Zara Steiner's (1997, p. 545) words, academia can no longer ignore the presence of contemporary historians or historically oriented IR scholars who 'find or create patterns that illuminate the past and open up ways to see the present and the future'. Indeed, historians should relish the task of informing policy makers, whose ransacking of history to defend decisions via the use of crude analogical reasoning has done much to ensure that contemporary political decision making (or indeed grand strategy formulation) is diverted from acknowledging prescient lessons of the past. History, in particular military and diplomatic history, is not something merely found in a dusty archive. It should be something actively involved in the formulation of contemporary foreign and security policy decision making in order to avoid what Gary Sheffield (2008, p. 102) has labelled the 'prostitution of scholarship' by policymakers.

Despite the seeming *rapprochement* between IR and history there still remains a need to balance IR scholarship between the essentially ahistorical studies that display a poverty of historical consciousness and the works that promote a form of historicism, namely the search for positivist law-like trends in historical



development, demonstrable through analogy. However the utility of history to the study of IR expands further to the contextualisation of structural and agential behaviour; to raising the awareness of policy consequences via historical parallels; to compressing temporal and spatial dimensions in order to imaginatively create abstract investigation and comparison in the present; and offering nuanced examples that caution against contemporaneous over-simplification, reductionism or generalisation. Indeed, one of the most overt aspects of historical methodology advocated by this author is the avoidance of the social scientist's predilection for separating dependent from independent variables and an embracing of an interpretation of the interdependence of all variables and an assumption of their interweaving influence through time. This chimes with the Proustian notion that the only real voyage of discovery is not the search for new landscapes but at looking back at old landscapes with new eyes. Analogical reasoning can provide us, in methodological terms, with new eyes to interpret the past in order to glean better insight or meaning about today. But this is a voyage fraught with intellectual dangers. As Oxford classicist Jasper Griffin (2003) has argued, 'we look into history from motives of two kinds. There is curiosity about the past, what happened, who did what, and why; and there is the hope to understand the present, how to place and interpret our own times, experiences, and hopes for the future'. Analogical reasoning, in its ideal type form, represents a methodological bridge between these two motives, allowing simultaneous reckoning of the here and now with an appreciation of what has gone before. However, the inevitable methodological problems that such reasoning introduces to scholarship – namely extreme selectivity of historical examples and the circumvention of context – mean that such a bridge should be crossed with caution.

### **The appeal of analogical reasoning: Between rationality and clairvoyance?**

Analogies appeal to policymakers and scholars largely because they provide shortcuts, cognitively and analytically. But shortcuts bring potential dangers. A careful path must be trodden when using historical metaphors between what Robert Jervis (1976, p. 220) approvingly called their 'shortcut to rationality', while avoiding the false assumption that they provide, in Arthur Schlesinger's (2005, p. 135) words, 'a shortcut to clairvoyance'.

Jens Meierhenrich (2006, p. 3) has argued that analogical reasoning can be utilised to serve two functions, one based on *reason* that fulfils a decision-making purpose in the policy realm, and one based on *rhetoric* that fulfils a justificatory or explanatory purpose in the discursive realm. Dominic Tierney (2007) has differentiated between two other functions of analogical reasoning, namely *strategic* analogies that mould policy responses, and *moral* analogies that dwell upon the ethics of potential decisions. The selection of appropriate analogy is important for policymakers in all



of the above respects. As Robert Jervis (1976, p. 217) has argued, ‘what one learns from key events in international history is an important factor in determining the images that shape the interpretation of incoming information’. This was evident at a National Security Council meeting on the day after the 9/11 attacks when President Bush invoked analogical reasoning as a means of sketching out the sort of military response he wanted. Bob Woodward (2002, pp. 49–50) tells how Bush was frustrated that ‘everyone was thinking about the Gulf War ... which was the wrong analogy’. Keen to avoid public expectations of a swift and spectacular military strike, the president wanted to prepare the American people for a long war: ‘His reference was Vietnam ... He later said he “instinctively knew that we were going to have to think differently” about how to fight terrorists’. Indeed, the spectre of the Vietnam War cast a long shadow for key members of the Bush administration as military plans were first constructed for the war on terror. Bob Woodward has revealed how, as the Bush Doctrine morphed into actionable military strategy, ‘Vietnam was the precedent’ (2002, p. 257): President Bush remained wary of replicating Vietnam-era public disassociation with the authority of the White House (2002, p. 168); for Colin Powell ‘Vietnam kept flooding back’ as he felt that the war on terror was unfolding without a coherent strategic plan (2002, p. 175); while Donald Rumsfeld pressed for the relentless application of airpower because ‘bombing pauses smacked of Vietnam’ (2002, p. 187). The Vietnam analogy in this instance reveals a case selection process based on strategic reasons (Powell), rhetorical bluster (Rumsfeld), inverse moral reasoning (Rumsfeld again, based on his equating of bombing pauses with weakness) and reasoning based on a rationale (Bush).

Analytically, analogies can appeal to scholars as a convenient mode of comparison. The utilisation of the comparative method in international relations research shares a longevity with the discipline itself. Comparison is not necessarily a method of measurement in a purely positivist sense, but is a tool that can be employed to discover the empirical relationship between two or more political variables (in this case two events, one past, one present). Useful as a means of providing contextual description or theory-building, any comparative study must be aware of what Richard Rose (1991, p. 487) has labelled its own ‘bounded variability’, mutually rejecting the extremes of assuming universalism and the limits of particularism. Analogical reasoning is a perilous method to utilise because of its mutual tendencies towards both of these dangers: it can be concomitantly used to paint broad brush-stroke universalist depictions of a conflict (for example, Iraq-Vietnam analogies and the inadequacies of American conduct in counter-insurgency wars), while also harnessing specific elements of comparative cases in order to try and extrapolate some commonalities across both space and time (for example, analogising appeasement with Hitler in the 1930s with efforts to pursue diplomatic channels with Saddam Hussein). As such, many efforts at analogical reasoning are in part guilty of the methodological misdemeanours of ‘conceptual travelling’ (comparing events separated by too much time or incongruence) or ‘conceptual stretching’ (applying cases to fit circumstances).

The use of analogies by policymakers is accentuated in times of crisis as a means of providing intellectual comfort and, as a consequence, a public morale boost. In a deliberate, if inappropriate, effort to engage in analogical reasoning in the immediate wake of the 9/11 attacks, Francis Fukuyama (2001) coined the phrase ‘Islamofascism’ to describe the ideology of Al-Qaeda and help engender American resistance towards Osama bin Laden’s terrorist network. Fukuyama argued that the rise of extremist Islamism in the Muslim world over the past several decades shared numerous commonalities with the mass acclaim of Nazism in Germany during the 1930s, namely rapid urbanisation, an increasing detachment from feelings of a ‘pure’ identity anchored in the past and a notion of an ‘Other’ debasing the cultural premise of society. The response to Al-Qaeda, Fukuyama reasoned, therefore must constitute an all-encompassing mobilisation of liberal democratic force:

German fascism didn’t collapse because of its internal moral contradictions; it died because Germany was bombed to rubble and occupied by Allied enemies. Osama bin Laden gained enormous popularity throughout the Muslim world by successfully attacking the Twin Towers. If he is, metaphorically, hanged from a lamppost in the public square by US forces along with his Taliban protectors, his movement will look much less appealing. (2001, pp. 62–63)

The simplicity of Fukuyama’s analogy is misleading as it encourages us to believe that all threats to Western security can be discouraged by annihilation. It is blind to the huge cultural and religious variations between Nazism and Islamism; the state versus non-state platforms upon which each ideology was espoused; and the totalising nature of World War Two versus the precision toppling of the Taliban and targeting of key terrorist leaders. Fukuyama’s particular utilisation of analogical reasoning is a prime example of how a rather un-nuanced historical metaphor is utilised in order to try and make sense of an unfamiliar, indeed frightening, present by relating it to a familiar, perhaps reassuring, moment from the past that serves to comfort a shaken Western liberal order, irrespective of context. For similar reasons such analogising found its way into top-level policy making in the White House in the wake of 9/11. In a speech in December 2001 President Bush (2001) remarked: ‘The terrorists are the heirs to fascism. They have the same will to power, the same disdain for the individual, the same mad global ambitions. And they will be dealt with in just the same way. Like all fascists the terrorists cannot be appeased. They must be defeated’. Although World War Two metaphors utilised by President Bush lack plausibility, David Hoogland Noon (2004, pp. 335 and 357) argues convincingly that ‘the analogy [between Al-Qaeda and the Nazis] works precisely *because* it avoids serious intellectual engagement with a phenomenon as complex as international terrorism ... George W. Bush has committed himself to sustaining that “9/11 feeling”, to converting grief and nostalgia into an ongoing substitute for critical thought’.

As Bush’s embrace of the Islamism/Nazism metaphor reveals, analogical reasoning when utilised by policymakers tends to avoid the complex and embrace the





simplicistic. This is a large part of their appeal. Historical analogies work best for decision-makers when serving a rhetorical device, which itself thrives on a simple message capable of being reinforced by replication in the minds of their listeners. Contemporary political communication rests on a fundamental desire to control the narrative of events. Such narratives can often be strengthened by using (or abusing) an historical metaphor to create cognitive connections in the public mind between the policy option being justified today with an historical event commonly conceived of as popular or just. Metaphor creates imagery, which has a potent power of persuasion.

Such metaphors, when borrowed from history by politicians, frequently take only macro-level issues of context into account (that is, similarities in governance models, usually dictatorships) and tend to ignore (often deliberately) the more nuanced micro-level differences. To this extent analogical reasoning can be deliberately deceptive (or perhaps, more accurately, self-deceptive) given the reassurances historical metaphor seems to offer policymakers especially in times of crisis. Even when there is no direct historical precedent for a particular circumstance or event, it has been suggested by David Patrick Houghton (1996, p. 525) that policymakers will still grasp for an analogy in one of two ways: 'they may use partial analogies, and may "mix and match" these ...; and/or they may seek, by various mechanisms, to enhance the degree of overlap between the present dilemma and a favoured analogy'. This makes for rather unreflexive analogical reasoning. Ernest May (1974, p. xi) was already convinced four decades ago that 'policymakers ordinarily use history badly. When resorting to analogy they tend to seize upon the first that comes to mind. They do not search more widely. Nor do they pause to analyse the case, test its fitness, or even ask in what ways it might be misleading'. The most common form of reasoning involves just a single analogy, an arguable result of the prevalence of macro-level metaphors. Iraq becomes Vietnam due to single analogies conjuring images of 'quagmires'; diplomatic engagement with Saddam Hussein becomes Chamberlain at Munich due to single analogies revolving around the dirty word 'appeasement'. As Arthur Schlesinger (2005, p. 138) cautioned us: 'The single analogy is never enough to penetrate a process so cunningly compounded not only of necessity but of contingency, fortuity, ignorance, stupidity and chance'.

Symptomatic of the way in which singular analogical reasoning is utilised by policymakers in an unreflexive manner is how the former British Ambassador to Afghanistan, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles (2011, p. 286), listed in his memoirs a series of issues that a 1968 article in *Atlantic* magazine forwarded as detrimental to the Vietnam war effort, including strategic inertia and a failure to find lasting political solutions. Cowper-Coles' effort to shed light on the Afghanistan war via these Vietnam conclusions is achieved rather cursorily in just five words of analysis: 'The parallels need no elaboration'. Indeed, on the veneer this is why analogical reasoning appeals to policymakers because they feel that historical comparisons do in fact speak for themselves and that the reader is able to deduce without much prompting

that parallels are self-evident and require no additional explanation or analysis by the author. The use of analogical reasoning, however, should always require further elaboration. Historical analogies should never be asked to speak for themselves or be treated perfunctorily as readily apparent to all. This makes for languid scholarship. The grander challenge is to make the case for how a certain event from the past can shed light on the present, or indeed the future, and of how lessons can be gleaned from history without resorting to stale statements of the obvious or superficial analogising.

The most exposed single analogy of recent times is the utilisation of the Vietnam War to draw parallels with specific elements of the Iraq War (2003–2010). In parts, this has been superficial and, in some quarters, trite, however the virulence of debate surrounding Vietnam/Iraq comparisons reawakened an interest in the application of analogical reasoning and ‘lesson-learning’ from the past (Dumbrell and Ryan, 2007; Gardner and Young, 2007). Policymakers, academics and media commentators were divided as to whether Iraq represented a haunting repeat of the quagmire in Vietnam (Purdum, 2005; Brigham, 2006; Campbell, 2007), or whether Vietnam comparisons were a specious analogy to draw given a perceivable gulf in context and conduct (Record and Terrill, 2004; Lomperis, 2006). Stephen Biddle (2006) argued that so common were the parallels between US strategies for Iraq and Vietnam, in terms of political reform, economic restructuring and security provisions, that when many commentators were ‘seeing Baghdad’ they were ‘thinking Saigon’. This, he contends, is erroneous because the fundamental dynamics of the violence are different, with Vietnam representing a Maoist ‘people’s war’ and Iraq looking like a communal civil war. This difference, Biddle argues, means that policymakers needed to ignore the ‘lessons’ of Vietnam because the cause and context of violence in that war is so disparate to that seen in Iraq decades later. The late polemicist Christopher Hitchens (2005), a notable advocate of the invasion of Iraq, rambunctiously denounced analogies between Iraq and Vietnam, arguing that any such metaphors were the equivalent of ‘beating a dead parrot’ because ‘Iraq and Vietnam have nothing whatsoever in common’. When asked by an advisor in July 2003 to consider instigating some counter-insurgency policies similar to that seen in Vietnam, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, Paul Bremer, reportedly exploded at the implication that the situation in Iraq was in anyway comparable to that last major American asymmetric conflict: ‘Vietnam? Vietnam! I don’t want to talk about Vietnam. This is not Vietnam. This is Iraq!’ (Ricks, 2006, p. 187). By mid-2007 President Bush felt compelled to directly tackle the Vietnam analogy. In a speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars association, Bush (2007) inverted the analogy by drawing different lessons from the 1970s that anchored his long-haul strategy for Iraq: ‘If we were to abandon the Iraqi people, the terrorists would be emboldened, and use their victory to gain new recruits ... Unlike in Vietnam, if we withdraw before the job is done, the enemy will follow us home’.

The allure of analogical reasoning, particularly of the simplistic, singular variety, should caution us against the creation of ‘instant analogies’ in the wake of global



events that arise quickly but offer few substantial similarities (Vertzberger, 1986). Analogising the Arab Spring and the 1989 Eastern European revolutions is one such example of instantaneous comparative analysis (see Freeland, 2011; Ulrichsen *et al.*, 2011). Michael Zantovsky (2011), the former press secretary to leader of Czechoslovakia's 1989 'Velvet Revolution' Vaclav Havel, and currently Czech Ambassador to the UK, argued that 'the similarities are too obvious and too numerous to ignore', including the nature of revolutionary spontaneity, the relative absence of an organised leadership and the emergence of widespread popular loathing of the *ancien regime*. In a similar vein Mary Kaldor (2011) depicted the Arab Spring as part of the lineage of mass pro-democracy uprisings stemming back to 1989: 'The people on the streets of the Middle East are asking for dignity and freedom ... As in 1989, they are showing that the power of voice and conscience has the potential to provide the kind of stability that weapons and money have failed to provide'. The presentation of such an instant analogy resides purely at the macro-level and overlooks micro-level issues that differentiate the Arab world in the early twenty-first century from Eastern Europe in the late twentieth century (Springborg, 2011), not to mention more nuanced inspection of issues like the survival prospects of the two sets of autocratic regime in question (Way, 2011), or the likely longevity of political change wrought by the respective uprisings (Dalacoura, 2012).

Arthur Schlesinger's earlier description of analogies as a clairvoyant tool stems from the perceived powers of prediction that history seems to hold for some policy-makers. The past can be seen as a playbook for contemporary politicians, seemingly enlightening their policy choices in tentatively similar situations: if Policy Consequence A happened in Year X, then Policy Consequence A could likely occur again in Year Y, given the replication of key variables. Schlesinger (2005) went as far as to argue that: 'However hard it may be to define with precision the role of history in public policy, it is evident that this role must stand or fall on the success of history as a means of prediction – on the proposition that knowledge of yesterday provides guidance for tomorrow'. Prediction, however, creates dangerous conditions of determinism in International Relations by manipulating the three temporal realms: the *past* is used from the standpoint of the *present* in order to determine action in the *future*. The policy consequences of inappropriate or misleading analogies can be pronounced if prediction about future events is based upon a determinist understanding of how it is linked to the past. Aidan Hehir (2006) has argued that the failure to secure a diplomatic solution to the Kosovo crisis of 1999 can be in part explained by the fixation on analogies with the Balkans' role in previous conflicts (especially the disintegration of European politics that led to the First World War) and with a desire to avoid repeats of recent conflicts in Africa on behalf of US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and US Envoy to the Balkans Richard Holbrooke. As Hehir argues: 'the use of these analogies necessarily steered the negotiations down a course that made it impossible to reach agreement. These analogies convinced the key negotiators that [Serbian President Slobodan] Milosevic

was pursuing policies that could be stopped only through military might ...'. Prediction is therefore too strong a yardstick by which to measure the utility of history in contemporary international politics. The creation of generalisations, conversely, is too vague (Duffy, 2001). Analogous correlation between a current and past event implies but does not ensure parallel processes in the policy outcome. Arguably, the most valuable role history can play is the provision of perspective and context on the present. We should ask for, and expect, no more than that.

### **The perils of mixing ideology and analogy**

In his seminal book *Analogies at War* Yueng Foong Khong (1992) identifies a six-pronged function that analogies serve for policymakers, under the aegis of what he labels the Analogical Explanation (or AE) framework: 'Analogies (1) help define the nature of the situation confronting the policymaker, (2) help assess the stakes, and (3) provide prescriptions. They help evaluate alternative options by (4) predicting their chances of success, (5) evaluating their moral rightness, and (6) warning about dangers associated with the options'. To this list we can arguably add a seventh function that has become apparent over the last decade, namely the provision of ideologically informed rationales.

The role of ideology in analogical reasoning needs to be accounted for to a much greater extent as a way of assessing the bias with which metaphors are selected, information is processed and, as a consequence, decision making is guided. As John Lewis Gaddis (1997b) points out in his parenthetical analysis of Cold War history, *We Now Know*, 'new' Cold War history tells us that the role of ideas in foreign policy formulation, both American and Soviet, was far more prevalent than scholars gave credit during the period itself. The prevalence of neo-conservatism within the Bush administration ensures we should pay heed to Gaddis's call to take ideas seriously when assessing foreign policy making, and therefore pay careful consideration to the ideological premise of analogical reasoning in contemporary international politics. This to a large extent blurs the cognitive distinction between analogies and schemas. Khong (1992, p. 26) talks of analogies as 'specific and concrete' metaphors between the past and present, with schemas presented as 'abstract and generic' worldviews. Yet policy making within the Bush administration after the 9/11 attacks resulted increasingly in schemas driving analogies, guiding metaphor selection given the accentuated role of ideology in shaping worldviews ('you are either with us or with the terrorists') and moulding threat perceptions ('these states constitute an "Axis of Evil"'). The neo-conservative hue of key Bush administration officials ensured that foreign-policy-making schemata were overtly ideological and analogical reasoning became directly affected by this. So, for example, we can interpret analogies made between twenty-first century Iraq and Germany under Nazism as a deliberate ideologically informed effort to aggressively assert the need for the



enforced spread of democracy as a bulwark to authoritarianism. Allies of Bush also shared this analogically justified worldview. In his memoirs Tony Blair (2010, p. 436) revealed that although when Prime Minister he ‘was careful not to conflate Saddam and Hitler and specifically disowned many of the glib comparisons between 2003 and 1933’, he would parenthetically put it differently because he had come to view the threat posed by Saddam through an ideologically informed analogy: ‘Actually there *is* a parallel, but it is less about the lead-up to action and more about the general ideology of this extremism based on a perversion of Islam and our attitude to it, and our attitude to the rising threat of fascism’.

This raises significant questions about both the validity and quality of analogies made to serve such ideological purposes. If ideology affects metaphor selection, then such bias will produce metaphors from a very narrow range that may have a tendency to simply reflect back the base fears/hopes of that ideological position. The schema therefore nullifies the potential cognitive advantages analogies residually possess because those analytical benefits require a greater objectivity of purpose (in other words, being open to analogies that may dissuade you from a favoured course of action) than the constricting subjectivity of an entrenched ideological position (which conceivably creates only self-serving analogies). Arthur Schlesinger (2005, p. 123) warned of the ‘bewitchment of analogy’ that can cause policymakers to infer more from the past than is necessary and therefore take contemporary policy in a direction that may not be needed. This bewitchment is all the more potent when combined with the allure of an ideological formula.

The proliferation of ready-made ideological explanations of events means that we should not necessarily be surprised that the Arab revolts of 2011 were analogised with the Eastern European uprisings of 1989. This deliberate metaphor made an ideological statement about the supposed common *causality* of both events, namely a bottom-up revolution inspired by a popular push towards democracy, with greater levels of freedom, achievable only by overthrowing unelected autocratic regimes. The Arab Spring/Eastern Bloc analogy is another recent example of how history has been utilised to fulfil an ideological interpretation of the present. For Fukuyama-esque advocates of an ‘end of history’ that culminates in democracy’s ultimate triumph over other models of governance, the Arab Spring represents further proof of the ideological allure of greater civil liberties, free elections and political accountability. Putting aside for one moment the multi-causal and often religiously infused elements that provoked the uprisings from Tunisia to Bahrain (not to mention the limited democratic legacy of the uprisings), we must question the assumption that one revolution undertaken in the name of democracy (or, more accurately, anti-authoritarianism) automatically forms part of an historical lineage that is appropriate for metaphorical comparison. The same ideologically driven supposition was made by the neo-conservatives of the Bush administration whose post-9/11 rhetoric surrounding the challenges to American freedom led to the widespread conflation in public discourse of radical Islamism and fascism. Osama bin Laden was the new

Adolf Hitler, and Al-Qaeda was going to meet the same end as the Nazi party, crushed by the fierce retaliation of enduring freedom. In short, the era of the 'war on terror' has seen the concepts of freedom and democracy being increasingly reduced to epithets defended by skewed historical metaphor. Both the value of history and the pursuit of democratic enlargement are poorer for this turn.

History is often shoe-horned into analysis in an inductive manner to reinforce already held ways of thinking (Lawson, 2012). If this is true of the academic world it is certainly observable in the policy-making realm, but with ideological positions replacing models of international relations theory as the object shored-up by the unreflexive grapple for a convenient, if not entirely appropriate, analogy. By way of example see how President Bush used explicit ideological parallels with which to emphasise the nature of his grand strategy in a speech in August 2007, arguing that a democratic Iraq is 'going to be an important ally in the ideological struggle of the 21st century'. He went on to place Al-Qaeda in a long line of ideological enemies that the United States has faced, and justified continuing his 'war on terror' along his planned trajectory in starkly ideological terms: 'Today the violent Islamic extremists who fight us in Iraq are as certain of their cause as the Nazis, or the Imperial Japanese, or the Soviet communists were of theirs. They are destined for the same fate. The greatest weapon in the arsenal of democracy is the desire for liberty written into the human heart by our Creator. So long as we remain true to our ideals, we will defeat the extremists in Iraq and Afghanistan'.

The cognitive dissonance frequently caused by overtly ideological analogical reasoning can have significant policy implications if the policymaker utilises an inappropriate historical metaphor in order to justify a decision without detailed regard of the analogy's propriety or context. The use of history is thus entirely self-serving. Nowhere has superficiality been more prevalent in a recent analogical context than the summoning of the spectre of 'appeasement' at Munich in 1938 during debates in the run up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. As Christopher Layne (2008, p. 436) has argued, so wantonly has the Munich metaphor been applied by scholars and policymakers that it has 'been transformed from an analogy into a myth', with little regard for the complex picture of late 1930s grand strategy. The history behind the Munich agreement has become largely irrelevant, overshadowed by its far more controversial legacy. An article in the run up to the invasion of Iraq in the conservative news magazine *Atlantic Monthly* by James Fallows (2002) critically noted how Munich analogies 'have a trumping power in many arguments, and their effect in Washington was to make doubters seem weak – Neville Chamberlains, versus the Winston Churchills who were ready to face the truth'. The inferred meaning of Munich is now more valued by politicians than an understanding of its causes. Indeed, as Jeffrey Record (2007, p. 170) has argued, 'the Munich analogy has been misused far more often than used accurately to depict a security threat'.

Examples such as the Munich analogy devalue the role that history can play in the decision-making process. The increasingly ideological function that analogical



reasoning is fulfilling for policymakers since 9/11 relies much more on interpreting and extracting lessons from the *legacies* of historical events for reasons of rhetorical persuasion or policy justification. This rationale has promoted not so much an awakening of *political* history as a means of informing contemporary security and foreign policy debates, but more of a *politicised* history that has attempted to line up 'lessons' from the past to justify an ideological worldview. This is largely because, as Robert Jervis (1976, p. 228) has put it: 'Decision-makers usually fail to strip away from the past event those facets that depend on the ephemeral context ... People pay more attention to *what* has happened than to *why* it happened'. As a result, based on Jervis's reasoning, learning from history can become a relatively superficial process for policymakers given a predilection for focussing on outcomes rather than causes. The exploration of the causes, conduct and consequences of previous wars, treaties and revolutions have proven too complex and contentious for policymakers who since 9/11 have shown an interest primarily in interpreting the reductionist legacies of ideologically convenient moments in history. This has sensationalised certain events, like the Munich conference or the Vietnam War, to such an extent that their perpetual 'trial by analogy' has reduced the scope for serious historical debate about their meaning and implications. The danger here is that in the popular view these interpretations of historical events become as incontrovertible as the entrenched, even righteous, arguments within the politician's rhetoric. History thus loses the creative friction of ongoing subjective debate because it has been so frequently reduced to sound bite.

## Conclusions and Reflections

The best bulwark against the expedient or inappropriate use of history by policymakers would be a more intense level of interaction between the various groups working at the nexus between history and policy. Some reciprocity is required. Policymakers need to become more historically conscious. This in part can be achieved by historians playing a greater role in the public policy process, especially in the realm of security. Greater historical awareness need not lead to a higher proclivity for policymakers to reach for a new-found analogy to justify a security or foreign policy decision. It should be hoped that it would indeed caution against spurious analogy given the complex multi-causality of past events and the necessity of contextualisation. It can also be hoped that this would encourage a more astute public appreciation of analogical reasoning as a rhetorical device used to persuade, as opposed to analogical reasoning as a psychological device to justify or rationalise. This would help avoid a repeat of the crude binary in which analogies were marshalled behind trenchant ideological positions in the policy realm during debates over the Iraq War, whereby the Analogy of Necessity (Munich) was pitted against the Analogy of Defeat (Vietnam). Even the recent events of the 'Arab Spring' have given

rise to the Analogy of Democratic Inevitability (Eastern Europe in 1989), which relies on veneer similarities to reinforce an ideological conviction rather than to genuinely increase the levels of historical consciousness in public debate.

The recent utilisation of analogical reasoning by policymakers has been guilty of historical reductionism. The utility of history to policymakers cannot be fully realised unless history, and indeed historians, have a more interactive role in policy debates. Some progress is being made. For example, the commissioning and release of numerous ‘official histories’ of particular branches of the British security establishment including MI5 (Andrew, 2010), MI6 (Jeffrey, 2011), the Joint Intelligence Committee (Goodman, 2014) and British involvement in certain wars (Freedman, 2007) demonstrates an increasing visibility of the historian’s trade being plied through Whitehall. However, these historians have primarily been used in a traditional sense to glean archival insights and deliver a narrative of what has already happened. What increasingly needs to happen is the historian being consulted during contemporary policy discussions. This requires a mutual process of opening up such debates to astute historical contextualisation and the increased engagement of academics in that process. This is an important interaction, albeit one open to a certain degree of inevitable ridicule. Satirist Craig Brown (2012) lampooned historian Peter Hennessey in the (in)famous diary in *Private Eye* poking fun at the role historians have in the formation of policy: ‘If I were Chief Historical Advisor to the Prime Minister, a yet-to-be-created post to which I do NOT aspire ... I would point David Cameron to the easily overlooked fact that, in the previous century, this country fought two notable wars against Germany, neither of them insignificant’. Yet historical awareness in policy making can be so much more than a rehash of the blatantly obvious. As Ernest May argued back in 1974, ‘history is not likely to be better used in government unless those who advise on or make policy discover how better to use historians ... If history is to be better used in government, nothing is more important than that professional historians discover means of addressing directly, succinctly and promptly the needs of people who govern’. Unless a belated realisation of May’s recommendations are heeded then the ideologically infused ‘passion and party’ that Samuel Taylor Coleridge alluded to will continue to define our interpretation of the waves behind us and wrongly chart the way forward.

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