

Book Review

US FOREIGN POLICY DECISION-MAKING FROM KENNEDY TO OBAMA: RESPONSES TO INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGES
by Alex Roberto Hybel. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

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Foreign policy decision-making (FPDM), an interdisciplinary study among political science, public administration and policy, and international relations, is aimed at understanding the decisions and choices made by individuals (e.g. president) or groups (e.g. State Department) that result in policies or strategies with international outcomes. Those outcomes are not only affecting international realm, but also they have impacts on domestic politics. How is foreign policy made in the United States? US FPDM is a complicated process composed of several interrelated but distinct stages and factors. It has been the subject of much debate and criticism among scholars and elites in America and abroad. These scholars have sought to study this phenomenon, FPDM, from different angles and viewpoints.

In *US Foreign Policy Decision-Making from Kennedy to Obama: Responses to International Challenges*, Alex Roberto Hybel provides FPDM scholars with unique insights into a crucial period in US history during which time the Cold War emerged and rose to the highest level of tension, and from the Post-Cold War era to recent years. This book analyzes the foreign policy decision-making processes of Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama during military intervention through the lens of contemporary FPDM theories and models. Hybel argues that one of the most important aspects of the study of FPDM is why and how foreign policy decision-makers facing the same international challenge sometimes disagree as to how the problem should be defined and how the available information should be interpreted. This important book fulfils three objectives: it describes presidential decision processes using rich case studies, it provides robust theoretical analysis of the cognitive system and mindset of the presidents, and it assesses the most important FPDM models in light of decisions made during each president.

Hybel expertly describes the FPDM process in six presidential administrations. Detailed case studies are presented that are constructed around nine analytical questions (Hybel, 2014, p. 15) that seek to assess the quality of information provided each president and advisory team as well as the quality of the analysis and evaluation done by each president and the relevant advisors. The real strength of the study is the “testing of the explanatory value” of various analytical models.

This is a comprehensive set of case studies that provide a thoughtful evaluation of most of the decision-making models used in foreign policy analysis today.

The book first outlines the theories and models of the study of FPDM. The rational choice model is widely considered to be the paradigmatic approach to the study of international relations and foreign policy. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the evolution of the decision-making approach to foreign policy analysis has been punctuated by challenges to rational choice from cognitive psychology and organizational theory (Mintz, 1997). During this period, cross-disciplinary research on organizational behavior began to specify a model of decision-making that contrasted with the rational model. Among these models were the bounded rationality/cybernetic model, organizational politics model, bureaucratic politics model, prospect theory, and poliheuristic theory.

The heart of the book lies in the chapters that discuss the case studies of six presidents on how they made some of the momentous decisions of their times in the White House. The author describes the different FPDM processes generated by various presidents. The author's analytic points in each case study deal with power relationships, institutional processes, and personality factors in leadership. One of his objectives is to gauge the explanatory value and theoretical applicability of some of the leading FPDM models currently being proposed and used by analysts. In this book, the author analyzes the following presidents and cases: John F. Kennedy's and Lyndon Johnson's decisions to escalate US involvement in the Vietnam conflict; Richard Nixon's decisions to end the Vietnam War; George H. W. Bush's decisions that led to the 1991 Persian Gulf War; George W. Bush's decisions that led to the Afghan and Iraq Wars; and Barack Obama's early decisions during the Afghan War.

Throughout the book, Hybel meticulously explores each president's foreign policy decision-making process from the initial definition of the challenge to the moment the policy is formulated. Hybel pays special attention to each president's analytical process; the extent to which the president relied on the counsel of his advisors; the mindsets that influenced his thinking and those of Washington's insiders; and the cognitive obstacles, if present, that afflicted his overall foreign policy decision-making process. Hybel concludes each analysis by identifying the model or models that best explains each president's approach to foreign policy decision-making and by assessing the quality of each president's approach to foreign policy formulation. One of his objectives is "to incorporate into the models, whenever applicable, two factors that in our estimation will improve measurably their explanatory value: the first component is the president's cognitive system; the second component is the mindsets that dominate the thought process of the president and of Washington's leading political figures at the time a foreign policy is being designed" (Hybel, 2014, p. 2). The two components are related, but not always in an obvious way.

His study suggests that no one model explains each situation and that rationality and belief systems or mindsets must be considered when trying to explain foreign policy decision. This conclusion should not come as a surprise. Presidents demonstrated different problem-solving aptitudes and attitudes. Moreover, “one of the critical weaknesses of the models is their failure to consider the way in which each president defines a problem. These two findings are not independent of one another, and they ultimately affect the explanatory reach and applicability of the various models” (Hybel, 2014, p. 188). His analyses provide in depth insights into the way US leaders created foreign policies during unsettling periods.

Throughout the analysis, Hybel highlights the role of domestic politics in decision-making process, specifically as domestic politics plays a major role in the FPDM process. Do presidents typically dismiss any option that induces high domestic political costs, as suggested by the poliheuristic model, or do they view the protection of their own political standing as a goal to be evaluated along with others, as proposed indirectly by either the cybernetic model or the compensatory model? When deciding on a foreign policy, presidents will not consider any foreign policy option that they estimate will generate high domestic political costs for an extended period. In the words of Hybel: “They will adopt a policy that is likely to engender domestic political costs initially if the international stakes are very high, if they calculate that the domestic costs will not accumulate for a lengthy period, and if in time the costs will be offset by benefits. Moreover, presidents are likely to tolerate substantial domestic political costs if a foreign policy option has been in place for quite some time. Having spent extensive human and material resources on a particular foreign policy, presidents will continue to implement it in the hopes that their fortunes will change” (Hybel, 2014, p. 187). In short, although international factors are important in the making of foreign policies, ultimately foreign policies are rarely independent of domestic politics.

While the book certainly provides a great amount of scholarly debates over theories and models engaged in FPDM plus case studies to support its main argument, it fails to discuss some important elements of the debate. First, the book goes around the war cases from Vietnam to Afghanistan and we cannot see a thorough discussion of a case study that is not involved with war. The reality is that the great amount of situations and cases in foreign policy and international crises is not involved with war, but diplomacy for instance. Therefore, the credibility and validity of FPDM models and theories for cases not involved with wars have never been examined in this book. The second weakness related to the case studies mentioned in the book is that it is not clear why the author selected those case studies. The justification of case selection could have been a matter of discussion within the book’s introduction. Otherwise, this kind of selection causes the problem of data mining elaborated that author uses those cases to prove his findings, which may not be generalizable. At the same time, however, we have to keep in mind that it is not a

dissertation in which there is always a need to explain the case selection. The author probably randomly chose the cases based on the availability of data and what other scholars had already written. Third, we could not find an in-depth analysis throughout the book regarding the comparison between foreign policy decision-making of the Cold War and Post-Cold War eras. Is there any difference? What about the influence of the Cold War era FPDM over the Post-Cold War era? That would be a valuable approach to analyze the evolution of FPDM, particularly if a scholar focuses on how the end of the Cold War might have altered the mindsets of the leading foreign policy decision-makers. It would have also altered the way the various foreign policy bureaucracies approached their analyses and decision-making responsibilities.

The last shortcoming of the book, and the important factor in the field of public administration and policy, is that the author places a lot of emphasis of his argument on individual decision-making not the organizational processes of decision-making. In fact, the author did not try to open “the black box” of FPDM in a way that we would be able learn more about the mechanism and functionality of organizational FPDM processes. For instance, the way that information is gathered, compiled, analyzed, and briefed to President through the Department of State and/or National Security Council (Stevenson, 2013). Therefore, one may argue that why the author did such an emphasis on president’s behavior alone and not the malfunction of the FPDM system, or in other words, why the author did not pay much attention to the “institutional crisis” of US FPDM. This criticism is partially correct, as opening the black box is a critical task, but not one that the author intended to do in this book. The author’s intent was to focus entirely on the interaction between the president and his advisors, and how the president and his immediate advisors processed information related to foreign policy (Hybel, 2014, p. 11).

A *US Foreign Policy Decision-Making from Kennedy to Obama* is a must-read book for any scholar interested in the foreign policy decision-making theories and models. While the book focuses on six presidents initiating or dealing with four wars US engaged after the Second World War, its findings are illuminating for a wide range of FPDM cases and predicting the way presidents react to international crises. Additionally, the book is able to inform abstract discussions of organizational decision-making in the field of public administration; in which, the question of how an international problem should be defined and how the available information should be interpreted arises as an important factor in organizational learning. The book is compellingly written and will be of interest to senior scholars, practitioners, and graduate students.

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