Learning in U.S. and Soviet Foreign Policy:
In Search of an Elusive Concept

Philip E. Tetlock

This book appears at a key transitional point in international relations. The bitter cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union is, if not permanently over, at least in deep remission. The old bipolar world has given way to a new, increasingly multipolar order. It is timely, therefore, to look back over the 45 years since World War II—to look back not only at what American and Soviet leaders thought they were doing at particular junctures in history, but also at the sometimes gradual and sometimes dramatic transformations that occurred in the thinking of these leaders. These transformations raise a complex mixture of empirical and normative questions: Under what conditions are policy makers likely to change their minds? How do psychological, institutional, and domestic political processes interact to impede or facilitate changes in point of view? When are changes in point of view actually translated into policy? And when are we justified in saying that policy makers were either too slow or too quick to change their minds?

A retrospective assessment of this sort immediately runs into an enormous obstacle: the difficulty of saying anything about the past half century of U.S.–Soviet interaction that is simultaneously not platitudinous and not controversial. Observations that evoke general agreement across the political spectrum sound pretty obvious. There is broad consensus, for example, that the two superpowers created weapon systems of enormous destructive power, competed for influence in virtually every region of the globe, and eventually reached numerous agreements to limit both their military and geopolitical competition. Beyond these least-common-
In this, less-than-ideal world, we must scale back our objectives. To be sure, we can still pose questions about learning in the more limited, descriptive meaning of the term. Investigators can ask: "Who drew what lessons from which experiences and with what political consequences?" without any implication that they themselves know what policy makers should have done. We need to be exceptionally careful, however, in using the term learning in its more expansive, normative sense. We cannot replay history the way we can a game of chess. There is inevitably controversy over whether policy makers drew the right or wrong lessons from particular experiences.

This chapter is intended to serve an integrative function for the volume as a whole. As such, it has multiple objectives. First and most important, I attempt to clear away the definitional underbrush that threatens to obscure common themes running through the case studies of U.S. and Soviet learning in a wide range of policy arenas. Different investigators use the term learning in different—sometimes downright incompatible—ways. I distinguish five usages here: (1) the neorealist approach to learning (learning involves the rational adjustment of policy in response to the reward and punishment contingencies of the international environment); (2) the belief system approach (learning involves change in the cognitive content of one's image of the international environment and the best ways to cope with that environment); (3) the cognitive structural approach (learning involves change in the cognitive structure of one's image of the international environment: change in the direction of greater complexity and greater capacity for self-criticism); (4) the organizational and political cultural approach (learning involves change in the institutional procedures or cultural norms that shape how governments respond to international events); and (5) the efficiency conception of learning (learning involves acquiring the ability to match means and ends more effectively than one could in the past: either by employing more appropriate means or by pursuing more realistic goals). This latter conception of learning raises vexing problems of counterfactual assessment (what would have happened if . . .), problems that neorealists can escape (because they make strong assumptions about the rationality of security policies in the first place—there is not much room for improvement), that cognitivists can escape (because they make no assumptions about the relative efficacy of different policies—their focus is purely intrapsychic), and that organization theorists can escape (one can document patterns of institutional change without making any assumptions about the adaptiveness of these changes).

In addition to mapping out different conceptions of learning, this chapter has a number of other objectives. Assessing whether learning—in any of the previous senses—has occurred turns out to be a hazardous undertaking. Methodological and theoretical traps abound. One theoretical trap is to use the term learning so loosely that it becomes synonymous with any new policy initiative by a government. Learning—at a psychological or institutional level of analysis—is by no means the only possible explanation for policy change. The alternatives are, however, the subject of some controversy. Different writers emphasize different alternatives to learning and draw the line between learning and other processes at different places. Haas (Chapter 3), for instance, argues that governments often change course in a mechanistic or cybernetic fashion, with little or no reassessment of basic beliefs and goals. He calls this process adaptation, not learning. Anderson (Chapter 4) notes that governments often change course as the result of shifting coalitional patterns that reflect who is now "in" and "out"—coalitional dynamics that have little or nothing to do with the international situation (see also Thies, Chapter 6). And March notes that governments often patch policies together in "garbage-can" fashion. The ultimate product will depend much more on chance conjunctions of persons, ideas, and issues than it does on rational planning responsive to external events. Another type of trap—more methodological than theoretical—is to take foreign policy rhetoric too seriously as evidence of how policy makers actually think. Policy makers sometimes know more than they let be known. If we underestimate what policy makers understood in the past, we run a serious risk of overestimating what they have learned in the present. A final trap raises both methodological and theoretical issues: the danger of social scientists' using the term learning in so self-serving a manner that it becomes synonymous with the adoption of policies that the investigator deems correct. Judgments of learning become, in this case, thinly veiled partisan pronouncements.

There is a lot of room for disagreement rooted in divergent political and theoretical perspectives on U.S.–Soviet relations, disagreements that occasionally surface in this volume. There is also, however, enormous potential for advancing our understanding of U.S.–Soviet relations in particular and of foreign policy theory in general. Insofar as we can identify cognitive psychological, institutional, and domestic political processes that facilitate or impede different types of learning, and we can separate our factual from our value judgments of what has been learned, we will be in a much stronger position to fashion policy-relevant theory in a complex and rapidly changing international environment.

CONCEPTIONS OF LEARNING

How one thinks about learning in international relations is profoundly shaped by theoretical first principles. If one believes that it is useful to black-box the foreign policy-making process and simply look for lawful regularities between international events and governmental responses
This neorealist approach to learning is a useful starting point. It calls our attention to the structural incentives in the international environment for particular types of policies. Neorealists and game theorists lead us to expect policy makers to be highly attuned to these incentive structures.\textsuperscript{15} In general, the expectation is for a high baseline of military, political, and economic competition within the international environment, an expectation that follows from the security dilemma and the anarchic nature of the international system.\textsuperscript{16} These theorists also, however, allow for the possibility of cooperation. The rational actor premises underlying neorealist and game theoretic approaches lead us to expect cooperation when cooperation is indeed prudent—when, for example, the penalties for noncooperation are steep (e.g., violating arms control agreements motivates the other side to develop destabilizing first-strike weapons systems), the rewards for cooperation are high (e.g., the economic and security benefits of reduced military competition), and the shadow of the future looms large (it does not pay to cross an adversary with whom one expects to deal over a protracted period of time).\textsuperscript{17} Some observers argue that these conditions were clearly satisfied in the case of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.\textsuperscript{18} The massive Reagan defense build-up made clear to the Soviets that the penalties for noncooperation were steep (sharp Western responses to the build-up of intercontinental ballistic missiles, SS-20s in eastern Europe, and Third World activism); the prospect of revitalizing the stagnant Soviet economy by redirecting scarce resources from defense to economic modernization greatly enhanced the rewards of cooperation; and the shadow of the future loomed ominously indeed (it doesn’t pay to cross adversaries who may have decisive technological and economic advantages in long-term competition). Gorbachev, in short, need not have been a nice guy.\textsuperscript{19} Why invoke altruism when enlightened self-interest is up to the explanatory task?

Although useful up to a point, the neorealist conception of learning is profoundly unsatisfying. One reason is that the neorealist approach is so epistemologically restrictive; it rules out most of the questions our contributors to this volume find most interesting. Our contributors are not content with merely describing shifts in superpower response thresholds in response to external events. They want to explore the psychological, institutional, and political processes that lead governments to define their interests in certain ways and to adopt certain policies in pursuit of those interests—policies with which governments occasionally persist even in the face of repeated punishment. Just as pigeons sometimes fail to respond to changing reinforcement contingencies\textsuperscript{20} and just as economic actors sometimes fail to respond in a timely fashion to changing market signals\textsuperscript{21} so foreign policy actors are sometimes slow to respond to changes in the distribution or even the nature of geopolitical power. There is a hollow
autological ring to purely structuralist explanations of foreign policy that presume a frictionless capacity of unitary rational actors to adjust strategies in response to new events. It is possible to generate post hoc geopolitical rationalizations for a wide range of policy decisions. If it is easy to argue that the conciliatory Gorbachevian initiatives of the late 1980s were dictated by systemic necessity, it is equally easy to argue that, had the Soviet Union moved in a militant, neo-Stalinist direction in the late 1980s, that response too would have been dictated by systemic necessity: What better way to hold on to superpower status than by reasserting discipline on the domestic front and by devoting massive resources to defense programs?22

Our objections to the neorealist approach are not, however, just methodological; they are also substantive. It sounds uncontroversial, even platitudinous, to claim that, ceteris paribus, governments persist with policies that yield desired consequences and modify and eventually abandon policies that yield undesired ones (a political restatement of the earliest behaviorist law of learning, Thorndike’s Law of Effect). What counts, though, as a good or bad outcome? The answer is sometimes obvious, sometimes not. The Bay of Pigs can be uncontroversially classified as the sort of outcome the Kennedy administration strove thereafter to avoid; it is not clear, however, whether the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties—SALT I and SALT II—should be placed in the good or bad outcome category. The lessons one draws from the early arms control treaties largely reflect one’s overall political outlook. Many liberals and moderates saw the consequences of the early treaties with the Soviets as, on balance, positive; many conservatives concluded the opposite. There is so much room for disagreement here because there is so much uncertainty concerning the causal connections between policies and outcomes. We do not know which outcomes were the result of the policies adopted and which would have occurred anyway.

A straightforward reward-punishment model of learning in international politics fails because it fails to address how decision makers cope with the causal ambiguity inherent in complex historical flows of events.23 The feedback that decision makers receive from their policies is often equivocal and subject to widely varying political interpretations. Moreover, feedback to a policy may be delayed. What appears to be a prudent policy at one time may appear to be extraordinarily foolish at another. In the 1950s and 1960s, supporters of covert action cited the coup sponsored by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) against Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh as a good example of how to advance U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East and elsewhere; after the fundamentalist Islamic revolution of 1979, opponents of covert action argued that a reappraisal was in order. To invoke another example, Soviet policy in the Third World seemed to bear fruit in the 1970s, with pro-Soviet governments sprouting up in such diverse locations as Indochina, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua. By the late 1980s, a reappraisal was in order. Geostrategic assets increasingly looked like liabilities. In an international environment that is complex to the point of indeterminate, even rational actors may be unable to anticipate the long-range consequences of their actions.24

THE COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO LEARNING

If what counts as a rewarding or punishing consequence in the international environment critically depends on the ideological assumptions of the beholder, it is no longer adequate to black-box the policy-making process and limit the study of learning to documenting action-outcome covariations. It becomes necessary to study how policy makers think about events within the international system. The belief system approach to learning rests on a pair of simple functionalist premises:

(a) The international environment is extraordinarily complex;
(b) people—limited capacity information processors that we are—frequently resort to simplifying assumptions to deal with the complexity, uncertainty, and painful trade-offs inherent in foreign policy problems.25

Policy makers, like ordinary mortals, see the world through a glass darkly—through the simplified images they create of the international scene. Policy makers may act rationally, but only within the context of their subjective representations of reality (Simon’s principle of bounded rationality).26 To understand foreign policy, we must understand the simplified images of reality that decision makers rely on in interpreting events and choosing among courses of action.27 Policies that make eminent sense within one assumptive framework look foolish, even treasonous, within other frameworks. Neo-Stalinists—who subscribed to the two-camp thesis that conflict between the imperialist and socialist states was inevitable—looked with horror on the policy initiatives of Gorbachev and the rhetoric of interdependence that accompanied those initiatives. Conversely, many liberal advocates of arms control were equally horrified as the Reagan administration attempted to dismantle the arms control understandings of the 1970s and escape mutually assured destruction (MAD) via the strategic defense initiative (SDI).

Foreign policy belief systems have enormous cognitive and political utility. They provide policy makers with ready answers to basic questions about the world with which they must deal. What are the fundamental objectives of the leaders of other states? What risks are my adversaries prepared to take to achieve those objectives? Is conflict inevitable? What
form is the conflict likely to take? Foreign policy belief systems also facilitate decision making by providing guidelines for choosing among options. They provide frameworks for estimating the consequences of different options (if we fail to do x, the Soviets are likely to do y . . .) and for assessing the significance of those consequences (How will vital national interests be affected?).

There is, however, a price to be paid for these benefits. In their efforts to maintain stable, internally consistent belief systems, policy makers may fashion images of the world that are more orderly and regular than reality itself. Belief systems may facilitate the learning of lessons consistent with the underlying assumptions but impede the learning of anything else.

Empirical and theoretical work on belief systems leads to a variety of predictions concerning the conditions under which learning is likely to take place and the forms that learning is likely to take. I summarize here four hypotheses that have been advanced in the literature and that receive support in many of the case studies commissioned for this volume.

**Hypothesis 1:** Several lines of work suggest that foreign policy belief systems are organized hierarchically with fundamental assumptions and policy objectives at the apex of the system, strategic policy beliefs and preferences at an intermediate level, and tactical beliefs and preferences at the base of the system. If so, it is reasonable to ask at what juncture in belief systems learning occurs. Given the powerful cognitive psychological and political accountability pressures to demonstrate consistency in policies over time, a plausible hypothesis is that most learning takes place at the level of tinkering with tactics. Policy makers rarely have the time or the inclination to start questioning the fundamental premises of policy; they are, however, willing to make frequent tactical adjustments to cope with unforeseen events.

Three examples of such tactical learning (or adaptation, in Haas’s terms) should suffice:

1. Spiegel (Chapter 8) argues that fundamental U.S. objectives in the Middle East have been remarkably constant over the last 40 years: protecting Israel, maintaining access to oil, blocking Soviet influence, and promoting peace. Most debate within administrations has focused on the relative weight of particular objectives—weights that hinge largely on the threats or opportunities most salient at the moment. Events such as wars, oil embargoes, coups, and uprisings prime or activate different objectives, and administrations respond by making mostly tactical adjustments.

2. Haslam (Chapter 13) argues that the Soviet policy toward Germany between 1945 and 1985 was anchored in a unilateralist approach to national security that emphasized reliance on both territorial expansion and the Soviet army as an instrument for oppressing local populations. Although the Soviets made numerous tactical adjustments to mollify the West (especially after 1953 when they became more interested in détente), Soviet leaders adamantly refused to give up the territorial control they had won at such a cost in blood in World War II. Reconsideration of the German question—and of the possibility that Stalin’s method of preventing a repetition of the last war might be eroding long-term Soviet national security—were simply too emotionally and politically explosive issues to take on in the 1945–1985 period.

3. Thies (Chapter 6) notes that the Eisenhower administration was convinced of the need to reduce defense spending “to a level the economy could support without undue strain over the long haul.” Eisenhower turned to the doctrine of massive retaliation to reconcile what he saw as the contradictory needs to deter Soviet expansionism and to maintain economic growth and political stability. This escape from the guns-versus-butter trade-off (“more bang for the buck” in nuclear weapons) had a significant price tag of its own. It placed the political onus on NATO of threatening to begin a nuclear war in response (in principle) to even minor Soviet acts of aggression. The Eisenhower administration did not, however, question the premises of its policy. Instead, it adopted what Thies terms a “schizophrenic” public stance: simultaneously threatening to employ “big weapons” to protect “free people” and attempting to control the resultant political damage in Europe by suggesting that it really would not be necessary to follow through on those threats. This tactical bandaid may have sufficed as long as the American homeland was reasonably safe from Soviet nuclear retaliation and the deterrent threat retained credibility. As it became increasingly apparent that we lived in a MAD world, it also became clear that Eisenhower’s escape from the guns-versus-butter dilemma was a temporary one.

**Hypothesis 2:** A logically related hypothesis is that policy makers reconsider their basic strategic approach to a problem only after repeated failures to come up with a tactical solution. One can make a strong case, for example, that the U.S. decision to withdraw from Vietnam and the Soviet decision to withdraw from Afghanistan were made only after it became clear that, given the political constraints on the use of force, a military solution was not attainable. Similarly, one can make a strong case that the So Şiet decision to accept the Reagan “zero option” for intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe was made only after the failure of repeated diplomatic and political efforts to halt the deployment of Pershing and cruise missiles (Haslam, Chapter 13).
Hypothesis 3: A third, closely linked hypothesis is that policy makers reconsider basic goals or objectives only after repeated failures to come up with a strategic solution. This type of "fundamental learning" may occur only when current policies appear to lead to either undeniable logical contradictions or unpalatable empirical consequences. Weber (Chapter 20) argues that, in the domain of nuclear arms control, there are only two reasonably clear-cut examples of fundamental learning: Mcnamara's acceptance of the radical strategic implications of mutually assured destruction in the 1960s (motivated in part by the growing incredibility of the doctrine of massive retaliation—Thies, Chapter 6) and Gorbachev's embrace of both MAD and the doctrine of sufficiency in the 1980s (motivated in part by the counterproductive effects of adopting a war-fighting nuclear posture in the 1970s—Blacker, Chapter 12). To this list, Garrett (Chapter 7) would add the Nixon-Kissinger initiatives to Beijing, which required restructuring the dominant American image of the People's Republic of China: from that of a revolutionary pariah state to that of a rational national actor in a balance-of-power system. The old cold war policies toward China were yielding little and, given the domestic constraints and international trends Nixon and Kissinger confronted, there were compelling realpolitik reasons to see China as a counterweight to growing Soviet power. Finally, the most recent example of fundamental learning is the wholesale abandonment of the Brezhnev Doctrine by the Gorbachev leadership—the acid test being the willingness to accept German reunification within NATO (Haslam, Chapter 13). Here one sees a sharp, qualitative shift in the Soviet conception of security. The buffer state or cordon sanitaire model, rooted in a fear of invasion from the West, gave way to an understanding of security grounded in the economic and political interdependence of states.

Hypothesis 4: The three previous hypotheses are consistent with McGuire's principle of least resistance in attitude change. All other things being equal, people try to accommodate new evidence and arguments by minimizing the number of related cognitions that must be changed in the process of incorporating the new evidence into the belief system. For instance, it was cognitively easier for John Foster Dulles to dismiss Soviet troop cuts in eastern Europe in the mid-1950s as a propagandaistic gesture necessitated by economic weakness than it was to consider seriously the possibility that the expansionist model of Soviet intentions underlying the containment policy was fundamentally flawed. Only in the face of repeated disconfirming instances are policy makers willing to reappraise basic premises.

Repeated disappointment may be a necessary but almost certainly not a sufficient condition for fundamental reappraisal to occur. Philosophers of science have noted the tenacity with which old-generation scientists hold on to basic assumptions underlying their research programs. When unexpected results emerge, the first intellectual instinct of scientists loyal to the research program is to challenge the appropriateness of the research methods that produced the results (analogous to challenging tactics). If a number of theoretically credible methods lead to the same conclusion, the second reaction is to challenge the middle-range theories that generated the disconfirmed hypothesis (analogous to challenging strategy after repeated failures). Only if it proves impossible to improvise a middle-range theory consistent with the observed facts are some scientists willing to reconsider their commitment to the hard-core objectives of the research program (analogous to challenging fundamental policy objectives after repeated strategic failures). The fourth hypothesis maintains that this latter type of learning is often so cognitively difficult, that it typically occurs only in the presence of massive personnel shifts. Two examples of fundamental learning discussed in this book—the Nixon-Kissinger reconceptualization of the role of China in the international system (Garrett, Chapter 7) and Gorbachev's reconceptualization of the entire system (Blacker, Chapter 12; Breslauer, Chapters 15 and 21; Legvold, Chapter 18)—depended very much on massive personnel shifts. What Max Planck observed of physicists may also be true of national leaders: one must wait for the old generation to retire or die before new ideas can be thoroughly explored.

How does one know, however, whether learning of the fundamental type has occurred? The debate over Gorbachev illustrates the inferential problems involved. Even into the late 1980s, some conservatives continued to argue that the Gorbachevian policies did not reflect a fundamental reevaluation of Soviet goals, but rather a strategic shift, an effort to achieve a perelyshka or breathing spell in which to revitalize the Soviet system and then resume competition with the West on more advantageous terms. In one sense, debates over levels of learning are unresolvable. For any given Gorbachevian act, it was possible to come up with rival tactical and fundamental explanations. The scales of plausibility began to tip dramatically, however, when one broadened the range of evidence considered and took into account a wide array of foreign policy acts. If fundamental goals have indeed been reevaluated, we should expect policy in many arenas to change (as it did). Moreover, we should expect major institutional and domestic political restructurings in response to this reevaluation (restructuring that clearly has occurred under Gorbachev; see Legvold, Chapter 18 and Blacker, Chapter 12). Even so, there is ultimately no well-defined evidential standard for distinguishing among levels of learning. As late as 1974, James Jesus Angleton, the director of U.S. counterintelligence, resisted revising his monolithic image of international communism by dismissing the Sino-Soviet split as a strategic feint. And as late as 1989, some diehard essentialists still harbored dark suspicions about Gorbachev's true motives.
THE COGNITIVE STRUCTURALIST APPROACH TO LEARNING

Some contributors use the terms learning and changing one’s mind interchangeably. Within the belief system approach to learning, for example, one might say that, as a result of an event, decision makers adjusted their views on the likely effectiveness of a particular policy or their views on the feasibility or desirability of achieving a given goal. Learning, in this view, involves adjustments in the content of a belief system—shifts in subjective probability estimates that could, in principle, be modeled as a Bayesian process of “updating priors.” Dallin (Chapter 11), for instance, notes that many conservatives lowered their estimates of the likelihood of expansionist Soviet acts in response to the Gorbachevian initiatives of 1985–1989. Changes in belief systems also involve shifts in goals and even values. Blacker (Chapter 12), for example, suggests that Brezhnev gradually became more accepting of mutual nuclear vulnerability in the 1970s. There need not, of course, be any implication of approval on the analyst’s part of the lessons that policy makers have learned. The term learning is used in a purely descriptive fashion to characterize the direction and magnitude of the shifts that have occurred on certain issues within the belief systems of certain individuals.

Belief systems, however, vary not only in content, but also in structure. In his pioneering study of government learning, Etheredge attaches special significance to this cognitive structural dimension of belief systems, defining learning in terms of increased cognitive differentiation and integration of thought and increased capacity for self-reflection. I focus here on four structural dimensions of belief systems of special relevance to learning in foreign policy: (1) the cognitive complexity of the idea elements within a belief system, (2) the evaluative complexity of the idea elements, (3) the degree of interrelatedness or integration among idea elements, and (4) the capacity for self-reflection or metacognition. Learning can take the form of change on each of these structural dimensions:

(1) Cognitive complexity refers to the number of logically distinct arguments or considerations that a policy maker takes into account in judging an event or arriving at a decision. Two individuals, for example, may hold identical policy positions, each favoring or opposing ballistic missile defense with equal intensity—but differ greatly in the cognitive complexity of the reasons underlying their stands. One individual may have a complex rationale for opposing missile defense, a rationale that takes into account the vicissitudes of U.S.–Soviet strategic nuclear competition, the transience of technological advantages, the destabilizing effects of undermining mutually assured destruction, and the enormous expense of the proposed projects. The other individual may have a simple rationale that is anchored in only one set of objections to ballistic missile defense. These differences in cognitive structure may, moreover, be consequential. There are strong logical and psychological grounds for expecting policy preferences buttressed by a cognitively complex array of beliefs to be much more resistant to change than a preference buttressed by only a single argument.

(2) Evaluative complexity refers to the degree of inconsistency or tension that exists among the considerations that a policy maker uses to judge events or make choices. A degree of cognitive complexity is obviously necessary for evaluative complexity. If there is only one idea element in one’s belief system, and that element is not self-contradictory (e.g., “This statement is false”), then one’s belief system must be evaluatively consistent. Cognitive complexity is not, however, a sufficient condition for evaluative complexity. One can have an extremely cognitively complex belief system, with many arguments converging on the same conclusion, that may still be evaluatively simple because there is little or no tension among these mutually reinforcing arguments. Or one can have a belief system characterized by both cognitive and evaluative complexity, in which some arguments point the decision maker in one policy direction and other arguments point in the opposite direction. Evaluative complexity implies conflict, dissonance, and dialectical tension among cognitions.

(3) Cognitive integration refers to the development of complex rules, schemata, and trade-off principles for coping with evaluative tensions among the values within a belief system. Policy makers often want contradictory things: to promote economic efficiency but not at the expense of producing domestic instability; to deter the other side but to avoid triggering an uncontrollable arms race spiral; or to pursue a sound foreign policy but not to antagonize key political constituencies. Cognitive integration is critical for establishing priority rules or boundary conditions among such competing objectives. One must decide how much of one value one is prepared to sacrifice to achieve gains on other values. Moreover, at the highest levels of cognitive integration, one must confront the need to make flexible or contingent trade-off judgments in which the relative weight one places on competing values changes with the domestic or international situation.

(4) Self-reflection or metacognition can be viewed as a special form of cognitive integration. It refers to the capacity to view one’s own mental processes with a degree of detachment and to comment on those processes from a logical or even epistemological standpoint. Policy makers don’t just think; they (perhaps rarely) think about thinking. Examples of metacognition include self-conscious attempts to design a decision-making system that avoids the problems of earlier systems (e.g., how to achieve...
high-quality, multidimensional policy analysis without diffusing too much authority, taking too much time, or exacerbating bureaucratic in-fighting? and self-conscious efforts to articulate standards of evidence and proof (e.g., at what point do we decide that we need to begin revising basic assumptions about an adversary's intentions or capabilities?).

From the standpoint of cognitive consistency theory, we should expect most learning in foreign policy to take the form of increases in cognitive but not evaluative complexity. This prediction also follows from Jervis's characterization of "belief system overkill." Policy makers, he notes, are often not satisfied to argue that, on balance, the policy they prefer is better than the alternatives. They feel a psychological and political need—two needs that are difficult to disentangle—to argue that their policy is, in decision theory terms, dominant or better on all possible criteria. In this way, policy makers can avoid confronting cognitively difficult, emotionally wrenching, and politically embarrassing trade-offs.

A cognitive consistency analysis suggests that most learning in foreign policy involves the acquisition of progressively more elaborate justifications that support what one has done or plans to do. All learning, however, certainly does not fit this restrictive template. Several chapters make reference to learning that involves increases in evaluative complexity. Spiegel, for example, notes a long-term trend for U.S. policy toward the Middle East to be informed by an increasingly more evaluatively complex image of regional dynamics than U.S. policy in the 1940s: a greater appreciation for cross-cutting inter-Arab rivalries and for ways of balancing U.S. interests vis-à-vis the Israelis and Arabs (Chapter 8). Griffiths notes a long-term trend from Stalin to Gorbachev for Soviet views of the United States to make greater allowance for evaluative inconsistency. The simple Stalinist image of a society dominated by a cohesive group of monopoly capitalists has been superseded by a much more multidimensional image of a pluralistic society in which policy is the product of competing interest groups, institutions, and factions. Breslauer (Chapter 15) notes growing recognition among Soviet elites—through the 1970s and 1980s—of the tension between supporting "progressive" Third World regimes and enjoying the benefits of détente. Finally, Legvold (Chapter 18) notes that the overall Gorbachevian conception of international security is more evaluatively complex than the Brezhnevite conception. The Gorbachevian concept explicitly acknowledges the reality of what U.S. academics call the security dilemma—one can undermine one's own security by building up one's conventional or nuclear forces to the point at which they breed fear, anxiety, and hostility in other powers, setting up the potential for a conflict spiral (see also Blacker, Chapter 12; Haslam, Chapter 13; Whiting, Chapter 14).

Increasing evaluative complexity might be applauded as a sign of greater realism; it can also, however, be dangerous. In part, this is so because reality is sometimes simple. Chamberlain would probably enjoy higher historical esteem today if he had held a less evaluatively complex view of Hitler's intentions in 1938. And, in part, this is so because increased evaluative complexity—in the absence of cognitive integration—can induce confusion, even paralysis, within a decision-making system (the Hamlet syndrome). Recognizing that conflicting points of view compete for dominance within the government of one's adversary is not useful if the knowledge merely adds to one's uncertainty and causes one to temporize and vacillate. Recognizing a tension between objectives is not useful if one merely randomly shifts from one objective to another as a function of whichever one is more salient or politically expedient at the moment (a common criticism of the Carter administration—Garrett, Chapter 7). Learning at the level of cognitive integration—establishing flexible but reasonably well-defined guidelines for resolving conflicts among goals—would seem a critical precondition for successful coping in a complex international environment—an observation that leads naturally to the efficiency conception of learning.

THE EFFICIENCY DEFINITION OF LEARNING

It is possible to assess learning at the level of individual belief systems or political structures without taking any stand on whether governments are becoming more adroit or adept at achieving the goals they value. It is not possible to avoid this extraordinarily important—but also extraordinarily difficult—issue when we try to assess learning in the efficiency sense of the term. According to this definition, learning has occurred whenever policy makers have learned to match means and ends in more efficient or effective ways. Learning in this sense can take two very distinct forms—one can discover more effective strategies for pursuing one's original goals, or one can redefine one's goals in more realistic ways. A chess player, for example, might learn to play the game more effectively or learn to keep his morale and self-esteem intact by giving up trying to defeat much stronger players.

Assessing whether learning in the efficiency sense has occurred is quite straightforward in highly controlled environments with well-defined functional properties (call them learner-friendly environments). We can be reasonably confident that we have learned a great deal about how to conduct recombinant DNA research, to construct more powerful supercomputers, and, of course, to design and deliver nuclear weapons. These environments are learner-friendly in four key respects: (a) There are well-defined evidential standards for determining success and failure; (b) it is possible to conduct controlled experiments to eliminate alternative
causal hypotheses; (c) it is possible to draw on well-replicated and precise laws of physical and biological science in designing the relevant technologies; and (d) investigators tend to get quick and unambiguous feedback concerning the correctness of their predictions.

Assessing whether learning in the efficiency sense has occurred in post-World War II superpower relations is much more complex—for we don’t have any of the just-mentioned methodological and theoretical advantages. Elegant controlled experiments are impossible. There is no sophisticated research literature that political analysts can draw upon for well-documented scientific laws and principles. Indeed, even the most tentative generalizations about deterrence or decision making evoke spirited debate within the professional community. We also lack a large, carefully quantified, and uncontroversial data base that we can rely on for assessing the accuracy of past expectations or predictions. Policy makers rarely receive quick or unequivocal feedback concerning the accuracy of their predictions. In fact, the issue of who should take credit or blame for particular outcomes is typically hotly contested. In the United States, for example, many conservatives are eager to assign credit to the Reagan administration’s defense build-up for the more conciliatory Soviet foreign policy of the late 1980s. According to this view, the Soviets recognized that they could not compete on a protracted basis in the kind of intense military-technological arms race to which the Reagan administration had committed the United States. Gorbachev was merely following the old Bolshevik operational code dictum: in probing your opponent with a bayonet, when you strike mush, keep pushing, and when you strike steel, draw back. We should not be surprised, from this perspective, that the Soviets have pulled back in response to the recent political and military assertiveness of the West.

By contrast, many liberals and moderates argue that the new Gorbachevian approach to foreign policy would have emerged on the scene pretty much regardless of who occupied the White House (indeed, if anything, Gorbachev’s approach emerged despite, not because of, Reagan’s policies). In this view, the Gorbachev leadership is a natural stage in the internal evolution of the Soviet political-economic system and an inevitable consequence of the generational transfer of power to a new, better educated, and more politically sophisticated leadership cohort. Whereas physical and biological scientists can turn to well-designed experiments with control groups to address causal questions that intrigue them, here the control groups exist only in the imaginations of political analysts. We must rely on highly speculative forms of counterfactual analysis: what would have happened if X had or had not occurred? It is easy to slip into tautological patterns of reasoning in the face of such ambiguity and complexity. It is tempting to allow one’s preconceptions to fill in the missing data points for the no-Reagan control condition. Counterfactual history is in this respect rather like the Rorschach inkblot test. People often see what they want or expect to see. And what one sees may tell us as much about the inner mental workings of the observer as it does about the external political workings of the world.

Some contributors to this volume have voiced skepticism concerning the very possibility of learning in the efficiency sense in U.S. and Soviet foreign policy. In his study of U.S. arms control policy, Levine (Chapter 5) forcefully argues that little changed from 1960 to 1985 in our thinking about arms control, despite massive changes in the technological, strategic, and political environments. Arms control debates, he maintains, have ultimately been theological in nature. We have no concrete or generally accepted evidence that allows us to determine which policies increased or decreased the likelihood of nuclear war. He notes that we learn from experience and, fortunately, we have had no experience of nuclear warfare since 1945.

Levine’s point is well taken. We simply do not know whether nuclear war would have occurred if we had travelled down a different—more conciliatory or more hawkish—policy path. As Joseph Nye notes, much of what passes for nuclear knowledge “rests upon elaborate counterfactual arguments, abstractions based on assumptions about rational actors, assumptions about the other nation’s unknown intentions and simple intuitions.” It is easy for the nuclear theologians to construct a dizzying variety of theories to account for the nonoccurrence of a unique event.

Where does all this leave us? Should we give up on assessing whether learning in the efficiency sense has occurred? Some analysts may conclude that the task is hopeless. We suspect, however, that this response would be too extreme. It is difficult, but not inherently impossible, to draw inferences about whether learning in the efficiency sense has occurred in particular foreign policy contexts. To be sure, making the inference does require a lot of confidence in the analyst’s grasp of the underlying geopolitical reality and of what would have happened if other policies had been pursued. Nonetheless, such confidence may sometimes be justified. Most scholarly observers agree that it was prudent for U.S. policy makers to recognize the strategic significance of the Sino-Soviet split (Garrett, Chapter 7), that the Camp David accord advanced U.S. influence in the Middle East (Spiegel, Chapter 8), that it was inappropriate to rely on the Korean analogy as a detailed guide to policy in Vietnam (Khong, Chapter 9), and that supplying certain types of nuclear technologies substantially increases the risk of a country “going nuclear” (Lavoy, Chapter 19). Most observers also agree that Soviet policy makers—under Gorbachev—have begun to pursue both more adaptive tactics and realistic goals in their dealings with China (Whiting, Chapter 14), in arms control negotiations with the
INTERRELATIONSHIPS AMONG TYPES OF LEARNING

Assuming that we are justified in making at least tentative inferences about learning in the efficiency sense, an interesting theoretical question arises: How is learning in the efficiency sense related to learning in the "cognitive content" and "structural" senses? Here we discover a plethora of possible answers. Much depends on the hypothesized degree of correspondence between the thought patterns of decision makers and the geopolitical environment that they confront. Learning in the cognitive content sense (adjusting tactics, strategies, and goals) may be quite adaptive in an environment that is undergoing dramatic change but quite maladaptive in an environment that superficially is in flux but in reality is highly stable and requires constancy of purpose (an argument that conservative advocates of containment advanced in the late 1980s with respect to U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union). And even in highly labile environments, learning in the cognitive content sense is at most a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for learning in the efficiency sense. The mere fact that one adjusts one's tactics, strategies, or goals does not imply that one is doing so wisely. Policy adjustments may confuse the bureaucracy, erode one's domestic base of support (which, in turn, reduces one's long-term flexibility), antagonize allies, and trigger undesired responses from adversaries.

Learning in the cognitive structural sense is also related in subtle and context-dependent ways to learning in the efficiency sense. In many cases, one can make a strong case that cognitive structural learning is close to being a necessary—although certainly not a sufficient—condition for learning in the efficiency sense. That conclusion seems to follow from how many contributors have characterized the policy problems confronting U.S. and Soviet decision makers. Spiegel (Chapter 8), for example, describes the often sharp tensions among the objectives that have driven U.S. policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict, including the protection of Israel, the containment of Soviet influence, continued access to Middle Eastern oil, and the promotion of conservative Arab regimes. Thies (Chapter 6) notes the multiple policy objectives that U.S. administra-
to ends. The simple-minded and determined pursuit of a single, well-defined objective may sometimes yield better results than complex attempts to achieve many, poorly defined objectives. For example, after reading Khong's study of decision making within the Johnson administration, one cannot help but wonder whether a simple dovish or hawkish policy would not have worked out better from an American standpoint than the complex, sometimes downright confusing, mixed policy that was actually pursued. The Johnson administration may have simultaneously overestimated both the winnability of the ground war in the south (encouraging excessive optimism that the projected troop commitments would be sufficient to do the job) and the danger of provoking Chinese entry into the war (failing to take into sufficient account the rising Sino-Soviet hostility, historical enmity between the Vietnamese and Chinese, and the chaos of Mao's Cultural Revolution). And after reading Dallin's description of the simplistic, stereotype-driven policies of the early Reagan administration toward the Soviet Union, one cannot help but wonder whether, indeed, the Reagan administration did the right thing for the wrong reasons. We may never know for sure (it would require a remarkable Soviet willingness to declassify records of their internal deliberations), but the unprecedented, peacetime expansion of American military strength—combined with what many Soviets regarded as the technological trump card of SDI—all may have combined to persuade a Soviet leadership beset with internal problems to adopt a much more conciliatory foreign policy posture than they otherwise would have.

If these speculative arguments are valid, the relationships between learning in the cognitive structural sense and learning in the efficiency sense are extraordinarily complex. Perhaps the strongest claim that can be made is that learning in the cognitive structural sense—developing a more nuanced, differentiated, and integrated view of one's environment—increases the likelihood both of pursuing policies that lead to achieving important goals and of setting realistic goals, especially when the environment is highly complex and rapidly changing.50 Cognitive structural learning is clearly no guarantee, however, of success.

LEARNING AT THE LEVEL OF INSTITUTIONS AND POLITICAL CULTURES

So far, all the conceptions of learning considered here have been intrapsychic in focus: that is, learning occurs within the minds of particular policy makers. National security decisions are not, however, the product of isolated individuals. Such decisions are the product of political actors (a) who work within complex normative systems regulated by rules of accountability and constrained by standard operating procedures and (b) who are often in intense competition with each other for influence and power and spend easily as much time negotiating with each other as they do with foreign governments.52

A number of writers argue that learning can take place not only at an individual level of analysis but also at the level of organizations and political cultures. Just as individuals are capable of change in response to events, so too are institutions and political systems. This volume offers numerous examples of such collective learning—examples that fall into three broad categories, described below.

1. Policy makers may create or dismantle institutions with the objective of avoiding the mistakes or repeating the successes of the past. To reduce the danger of a Soviet blitzkrieg invasion of Western Europe, Western leaders created a unified NATO command structure that was modeled on SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force), which directed the Normandy invasion and follow-up campaign in World War II (Thies, Chapter 6). To reduce the likelihood of a return to a Brezhnevite foreign policy, Gorbachev has instituted a system of public accountability of key decision makers—a system that bears some resemblance to the U.S. system of congressional accountability (Legvold, Chapter 18). To reduce the demonstrated ability of the foreign policy bureaucracy to subvert policy initiatives, Nixon and Kissinger centralized a great deal of authority in themselves and worked under a veil of secrecy (Garrett, Chapter 7).

2. Policy makers may draw systematically on the knowledge base of an epistemic community and attempt to institutionalize the access of that community to the decision-making process (Breslauer, Chapter 15; Haas, Chapter 3; Lavoy, Chapter 19; Weber, Chapter 20; Whiting, Chapter 14). Weber notes, for instance, the willingness of defense secretary Robert McNamara to draw on the insights of academic strategists such as Thomas Schelling in rethinking the premises of nuclear deterrence. Lavoy notes the receptivity of the Carter administration to the highly complex nonproliferation problems that arise in transferring and monitoring commercial nuclear technologies. Whiting and Breslauer note the growing willingness of the Gorbachev leadership to draw on special area expertise (on China and the Middle East, respectively) in crafting policy toward those regions of the globe. Of course, epistemic communities can fall in and out of favor—as many social scientists discovered when the Reagan administration came to power and MAD theorizing was no longer in vogue (although—because it had been successfully institutionalized in the 1970s—the MAD doctrine significantly constrained the counterforce and ballistic missile defense initiatives of the Reagan period; Weber, Chapter 20). Other reminders of the reversibility of influence include the "red scare" purges of American Sinologists in the late 1940s (a purge that may have inhibited pre-Korean-War overtures to the People's Republic of China..."
to distance itself from the Soviet Union); the “yellow peril” scare that, for all practical purposes, destroyed the Soviet Sinological community in the late 1960s and cut the top leadership off from the advice of people with in-depth knowledge of Chinese politics and culture (Whiting, Chapter 14); and the dramatic deemphasis on nuclear nonproliferation from the Carter to the Reagan administration (Lavoy, Chapter 19).

(3) Policy makers may set cultural, political, and intellectual forces in motion that they lose the ability to control. Legvold (Chapter 18) describes the synergistic effects that relatively open debate has had on the quality of “foreign policy dialogue” within the Soviet Union. The top leadership sketches an idea—in vague or inchoate form, such as reasonable sufficiency or interdependence—and scholars (who may have been waiting decades for the opportunity to elaborate on these ideas) draw out a rich web of implications: the nature of the nuclear security dilemma, the danger of conflict spirals, and the need to consider explicitly the nonmilitary dimensions of security issues. The leadership, in turn, draws on many of these more specific and easier-to-operationalize-in-policy notions. Legvold describes the process well: “Ideas are inspired by ideas. People are sparked to thoughts they never had by others’ equally novel thoughts.” These changing norms of intellectual debate have important effects (see also Griffiths, Chapter 17).

The normative environment is not, of course, always quite so hospitable to creative questioning of the underlying premises of policy. A groupthink-like atmosphere sometimes falls on intellectual debate over policy issues. George Ball’s objections to the Korean analogy in guiding the early decisions to enter the Vietnam War were apparently given short shrift. The McCarthyite atmosphere of the late 1940s and 1950s inhibited U.S. politicians and intellectuals from advocating a conciliatory policy toward Mao—a leader some thought of as a prospective “Asian Tito” (Garrett, Chapter 7). When people feel that their political careers are on the line, they are understandably reluctant to express doubts about popular policies or support for deviant ideas. According to Janis, President Kennedy felt that such a normative atmosphere stifled critical questioning that could have prevented the Bay of Pigs disaster and bent over backward in organizing the executive committee deliberations during the Cuban missile crisis to avoid a repeat performance.

In summary, there is nothing immutable about the normative, institutional, and political mechanisms that regulate the policy-making process. There is also nothing inevitable about the value judgments that we attach to particular institutional or political changes. Changes that one observer lauds, another may ridicule. One source of normative disagreement is quite straightforward and, in principle, empirically resolvable. An institutional procedure that is adaptive for some purposes may be maladaptive for others. We just need to specify the normative boundary conditions. External accountability demands are a good example. Policy makers sometimes respond to such demands by engaging in preemptive self-criticism: anticipating valid objections that skeptics could raise to what they are doing and modifying policy to take those objections into consideration. The result is sometimes a better decision-making process. For instance, Thies (Chapter 6) notes that Dean Acheson’s self-described conversion on German rearmament was speeded by his discomfort at having to acknowledge a logical inconsistency in Truman administration policy before a Senate committee: on one hand, he agreed that no viable defense of Europe was possible without a German contribution and, on the other hand, he had to admit that there were no current plans for rearming Germany and including it in NATO defense plans. External accountability demands can also, however, be impediments to good policy making; too many cooks can spoil the broth. A policy that must gain the acceptance of a broad spectrum of political actors may be so diluted that it accomplishes none of its intended objectives. Sometimes the need to act quickly and secretly may be great enough to justify circumventing external accountability checks—as some might conclude from Garrett’s study of the Nixon-Kissinger policy toward China.

Another source of normative disagreement is much less easily resolved—disagreements rooted in competing political assumptions and values. Weber, for example, views the gradual elite acceptance of the MAD doctrine as a positive development of the late 1960s and 1970s. He notes that in this period the “SALT solution” to nuclear deterrence in a MAD world was “firmly institutionalized” within the U.S. government. The Defense Department and National Security Council became accustomed to using SALT assumptions as starting points in formulating security policy and negotiation proposals. This embedding of SALT assumptions into the standard operating procedures of the national security bureaucracy was not viewed, however, in such a favorable light by conservatives such as Richard Perle and Caspar Weinberger. Nuclear use theorists saw this residual SALT influence not as a manifestation of institutional learning, but rather as an obstacle to crafting and mobilizing support for policies that would effectively close the “window of vulnerability” and deter new acts of Soviet expansionism.

Blacker (Chapter 12) observes an interesting mirror-image example of obstacles to institutional learning on the Soviet side—an observation that underscores Weber’s claim that U.S. and Soviet nuclear policies have been badly out of syncrony. Although the Soviet political leadership grudgingly came to accept the strategic implications of MAD between 1972 and 1985, the Soviet military leadership was more resistant. They apparently saw their institutional mission as one of minimizing damage
to the Soviet Union (in the event that war occurs) by maximizing damage to U.S. nuclear forces and by undertaking as extensive protective measures as SALT permitted. Thus, in the Soviet case, the military functioned as a brake on the fundamental learning about nuclear deterrence that occurred under McNamara in the United States and under Gorbachev in the Soviet Union. Although most Western observers saw Soviet military resistance to accepting MAD as backward, rigid, and parochial (rooted in short-sighted self-interest), the situation probably looked very different to those hard liners who remained in positions of influence in Moscow. From their point of view, the press organs of the military may have been one of the last bastions of lucidity in an age filled with naive talk about the end of the international class struggle and reasonable sufficiency in deterrence. Our judgments about what constitutes institutional learning versus an institutional obstacle to learning depend in no small degree on our political perspective.57

CONCEPTUAL AND EMPIRICAL PROBLEMS IN ASSESSING LEARNING

If we define the concept of learning sufficiently broadly—for instance, by subsuming all of the previously discussed definitions and making it synonymous with any attempt by a government to cope with changing circumstances—the concept loses all explanatory force; it becomes an empty tautology. If everything governments do is a manifestation of learning, nothing has been explained.

What are the theoretical alternatives to a learning framework? Under what conditions do investigators run the risk of concluding that the superpowers have learned (in one or another sense) when learning has not actually occurred? There are many possible pitfalls, five of which I identify here: (1) observers may confuse learning with adaptation; they may conclude that a government has learned when it has merely adapted in automat(on) fashion to changing stimulus conditions; (2) observers may confuse learning with political competition; they may attribute policy shifts to learning when those shifts are best explained by internece bargaining among political rivals who have staked out distinctive foreign policy platforms for themselves in an effort to woo the support of key constituencies; (3) observers may confuse learning with the random ebb and flow of event streams within organized policy-making anarchies; much hinges on what problems are salient at the moment, who attends which meetings and controls the agenda, and who decides what counts as a solution; (4) observers may falsely conclude that learning occurred because they underestimated what policy makers knew in the first place; (5) observers may allow their own political biases and preferences to color their judgments of when learning has occurred.

ADAPTATION VERSUS LEARNING

Haas (Chapter 3) draws a sharp distinction between adaptation and learning—a distinction that a number of our contributors find useful (Lavoy, Chapter 19; Weber, Chapter 20). Adaptation has a mechanistic or cybernetic ring to it: one adapts or changes one’s behavior in response to new events but without questioning one’s beliefs about basic causation or underlying values. It hardly makes sense, for instance, to say that a thermostat—which activates or cuts off the operation of a furnace at a specified temperature—has learned each time the antecedent conditions for switching the furnace on or off have been satisfied. Equally so, it makes little sense to say that policy makers have learned if they are mindlessly relying on standard operating procedures to keep a few feedback variables within a politically tolerable range (e.g., make sure that the negotiations on conventional forces in Europe don’t advance too quickly but avoid provoking the other side into a walk-out).58 As long as policy makers are reasonably successful in performing this sort of cybernetic balancing act, there is little incentive for them to learn in Haas’s sense of the term—to undertake the psychologically and politically stressful task of reformulating basic assumptions and goals.59

By contrast, learning involves a transformation in mode of thinking—a reassessment of fundamental beliefs and values that draws on the consensual knowledge of an epistemic community. There is nothing piecemeal or ad hoc about learning in this view. It entails a systematic restructuring of how policy makers approach a major problem such as strategic arms control, ozone depletion, or international debt. Policy makers have learned when they adopt a new, typically more complex, theory of the causal processes at work in a domain—a theory that guides the selection of objectives and options and that, in the eyes of the relevant scientific community, is more realistic than the conceptual framework that previously guided policy.60

The distinction between adaptation and learning is an intriguing one. There is a big difference between claiming: (a) the Soviet government has initiated a new policy because it has carefully reassessed the assumptions underlying the old policy, found those assumptions wanting, and drawn on the consensual knowledge of epistemic communities inside and outside the country to formulate an alternate set of premises and goals for guiding their actions (an interpretation endorsed to varying degrees by all our Sovietological contributors, but most forcefully by Legvold, Chapter 18) and (b) the Soviet government has changed its policy course in the last few years but has not altered its basic view of the world or its basic objectives. According to this (less-and less influential) interpretation, the policy changes observed are merely the result ofactivating different components of a complex knowledge structure (a master plan for global
h egem ony). This knowledge structure specifies the relative importance that policy makers should place on competitive versus conciliatory strategies under different economic and geopolitical circumstances. In principle, the knowledge structure could be operationalized in the form of production rules: under conditions A, B, and C, do x_1 and x_2; under conditions D, E, and F, do x_3 and x_4. . . . Nothing has been learned in this view—the perceptual preconditions for activating one or another policy recipe have simply changed.

The Haasian distinction would subsume the reward-punishment and trial-and-error approaches to learning under the rubric of adaptation. One could easily imagine a cybernetic mechanism—wired up to assess the positive or negative value of the outcomes of its actions—adjusting its conduct to the reward and punishment contingencies of the environment. Indeed, such cybernetic mechanisms already exist. Commercially available computer chess programs can now play at a master level of sophistication (better than 95 percent of human players). The Haasian conception would also call into serious question what we called earlier the belief system approach to learning. Merely changing one's judgment about the probability or desirability of an event (adjusting beliefs and goals) is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for learning in the Haasian sense. To qualify as learning in this latter sense, policy makers must draw on the consensual knowledge of an epistemic community—be they economists, arms control specialists, physicists, or psychologists. This constraint on the term learning will also probably strike many scholarly observers as useful. It would sound odd to say that a policy maker who displayed growing symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia—like Secretary of Defense Forrestal in 1948—was learning something about his environment, although he quite demonstrably changed both his beliefs and his goals.

Although theoretically provocative, the distinctions Haas raises are difficult to operationalize. There is no neat nonarbitrary line dividing adaptation from learning. It will often be ambiguous whether policy makers are responding in a more cybernetic or in a more thoughtful fashion to events. Indeed, it may well be possible to mimic—via production rule systems—virtually any hypothesized example of learning in international politics. That would leave us in an ironic situation. The danger at the beginning of this section was that the concept of learning was so diffuse that it could be invoked to explain any government policy. The danger now is that the empirical threshold for identifying learning has been raised so high that nothing will qualify.

Difficult empirical problems also arise in deciding whether policy shifts have truly been informed or guided by the consensual knowledge of an epistemic community. As Haas (Chapter 3) and Anderson (Chapter 4) are well aware, politicians may not internalize the ideas promoted by epistemic communities; they may merely use these ideas to appeal to influential constituencies, to outflank rivals, and to gain tactical advantages in ongoing struggles for power. The consensual knowledge of epistemic communities may be employed to justify rather than guide policy. An equally tricky issue concerns exactly what counts as an epistemic community. Must it be a group of scholars or scientists who subscribe to a common set of rigorous procedures for evaluating evidence and claims? Or would Nancy Reagan's calls for advice from her astrologer count as attempts to draw on the consensual knowledge of an epistemic community? Although this question can be easily answered in my opinion (and I suspect in Haas's opinion), the underlying issue raised by the question cannot be so readily resolved. Different groups resemble to varying degrees the ideal type of an epistemic community united around a consensual core of knowledge. We may decide to disqualify a group because it fails to live up to Popperian standards of scientific argumentation, because it lacks scholarly credibility, because there is too much internal dissension, or perhaps for a host of other reasons.

In short, the boundaries between adaptation and learning are fuzzy. This fuzziness does not, of course, mean that the distinction is useless; it does mean that those who choose to employ it should do so circumspectly.

POLITICAL COMPETITION VERSUS LEARNING

Anderson (Chapter 4) has advanced a political competition model of change in Soviet foreign policy—one that, mutatis mutandis, could be readily applied to U.S. foreign policy (see Thies, Chapter 3). In Anderson's model, "foreign policy changes in response to variation in the distribution of authority among contenders for leadership, who compete for authority by proposing distinctive foreign policy strategies." International events may influence policy, but only indirectly by altering the relative credibility of competing foreign policy views in the eyes of key constituencies. Moreover, it is probably quite common for foreign policy to change completely independently of international events. Policy makers' influence may wax and wane as a result of purely domestic events: poor agricultural or economic performance, a scandal such as Watergate, or the like.

According to the political competition model, Politburo members consider three sets of information in deciding what foreign policy stands to advocate: (a) the international environment; (b) the policy preferences of domestic constituencies; and (c) the policy stands of rival Politburo members. Each competitor confronts tough trade-offs in formulating a political strategy. On one hand, each wants to maximize his share of domestic support by advancing a position close to the median of elite constituency preferences. On the other hand, each also needs to carve out a distinctive
Observers of foreign policy may be struck by the resemblance between the day-to-day chaos of high-level governmental functioning and the garbage can model. A pessimistic interpretation of this resemblance is that long-term learning in foreign policy is impossible. Different lessons from experience will be activated depending on what problems events make salient, which decision makers are on hand to advance their preferred solutions, and what choice opportunities have arisen. A more balanced interpretation would acknowledge a large stochastic element in superpower foreign policies, but allow for the possibility that learning at an institutional or cultural level can prevent people with oddball ideas from getting into the central event streams of the policy-making system or, at a minimum, prevent those ideas from being taken seriously when they do get into the event stream. As with Anderson’s political competition model, it is not difficult to build learning parameters into the garbage can model. Governments may learn how to make decisions: how much time and energy to allocate to certain categories of problem (e.g., governments may learn that some problems are just intractable and there are greater payoffs to devoting effort elsewhere), how to prevent certain problems from arising (e.g., through skillful managing of political opponents or use of the press or diplomacy), whom to include and whom to exclude from particular decisions (e.g., through control of the agenda and timing of meetings), and which types of ideas to take seriously and which ones to disregard. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that a government that failed to learn how to exercise some control over the event streams that constitute it could survive for any protracted period of time.

THE DANGER OF UNDERESTIMATING POLICY MAKERS

Many claims about the occurrence or nonoccurrence of learning ultimately rest on inferences about what policy makers thought from what policy makers have said. As our contributors are well aware (see especially Dallin, Chapter 11; Whiting, Chapter 14), one is on tenous grounds drawing confident cognitive conclusions from public political pronouncements. Policy makers may say things in public that they would privately acknowledge to be simplistic, naive, and even demagogic. Shifts in public statements over time more often reflect shifts in impression management goals and tactics than they do shifts in ways of thinking.

Sometimes this distinction between true private beliefs and public posturing is an easy one to make. We have access to both private and public statements. Drawing on declassified documents, Thies (Chapter 6) argues that U.S. officials in the early postwar period deliberately exaggerated the risk of a Soviet invasion of Western Europe in order to rally domestic support (and mute criticism of) the Marshall Plan and the NATO alliance. It was not so much that they expected a Soviet blitzkrieg as they felt it politically useful to raise the specter of such an event. Garrett (Chapter 7) argues—again based on declassified documents—that Eisenhower and Dulles were well aware that Mao was not merely a Soviet puppet and that the communist monolith was more myth than reality. They were pursuing a “wedge-through-pressure” strategy toward China: by isolating China and increasing its dependence on the Soviet Union, they thought they could increase friction between the two major communist powers (an hypothesis that Garrett claims was borne out by subsequent events). And there is, of course, the famous quote from an exasperated Dean Rusk during the Vietnam War: “I’m not the village idiot. I know that Ho is not Hitler.”

We know from Khong’s (Chapter 9) careful analysis of the internal deliberations of the Johnson administration that the reasoning behind the decision to commit ground troops to South Vietnam was considerably more complex than the ritualistic “no more Munichs” rhetoric addressed to the American public.

Analysts of Soviet learning have a much more difficult time drawing sharp distinctions between private beliefs and public posturing. They have to work, virtually exclusively, with public records. As a result, much is left to one’s imagination. We do not know, as Whiting (Chapter 14) notes, what the Soviets thought they could achieve through a massive conventional and nuclear buildup of forces along the Chinese border. Did they hope to pressure the Chinese Communist Party into overthrowing Mao and replacing him with a more pro-Soviet leader? Or did they merely hope to deter an irrational Mao from attacking Soviet Siberia? Without knowing what the original Soviet expectations were, it is hard to say what, if anything, they learned from the experience. There is also, of course, much ambiguity about Gorbachev. Did he envision in March 1985 the dramatic transformations that have occurred in Soviet security policy in the last five years? Or has he been engaged in a synergistic learning process of the sort sketched by Legvold (Chapter 18)—one in which the top leadership signals that it is acceptable to elaborate on certain ideas (e.g., nuclear sufficiency), the policy community does so in rich detail, the leadership picks up on many of the new ideas and identifies further directions for elaboration, and so on? Lacking any solid baseline for comparison, one must rely on educated guesses about learning from the available data: the evolution of actual policy over time, public statements from various sources, and the conditions under which shifts in statements precede versus follow shifts in policy.

THE DANGER OF PROJECTING ONE’S NORMATIVE PREFERENCES

It is difficult—indeed unnatural—to use the term learning in a completely value-neutral way. When a political observer says that learning
Philip E. Tetlock

has occurred, more often than not the observer approves of the policy
decisions being described. The study of learning, from this perspective, is
under the implicit or explicit control of political agenda. We should
expect cognitive accolades to be showered on policy makers who act in
approved ways and cognitive insults to be showered on policy makers
who stray from the “correct” path. It is thus not surprising that Western
analysts laud the conciliatory initiatives of the Gorbachev leadership—a
leadership that is intellectually sophisticated enough to appreciate the
interactive logic of the security dilemma and the subtle trade-offs among
its domestic and foreign policy goals. Nor is it surprising that observers
of liberal inclination laud McNamara’s recognition of the strategic implications
of MAD as insightful and perceptive and criticize the Reagan administra-
tion for “unlearning” these important lessons (an administration that
allowed its worst-case ideological assumptions about Soviet intentions to
exert too much influence on policy).

We need to be vigilant that the term learning is not just used as a syn-
onym for policy shifts with which the analyst sympathizes. As discussed
earlier, the connections between cognitive and institutional conceptions
of learning and learning in the efficiency sense can be tenuous indeed.
Policy makers may fashion policies on the basis of assumptions that experts
would deem simplistic, and those policies may actually work out quite
well. Or policy makers may make Herculean efforts to be responsive to
new evidence and to confront complex trade-offs only in the end to be
identified with a policy failure. Learning is a multidimensional concept
whose parts do not always cohere as one might expect. Historical analysts
need to be on guard against what psychologists call halo effects (the
mistaken assumption that all good things go together). As also discussed
earlier, we need to maintain a certain humility about our ability to make
conclusive judgments about learning in the efficiency sense. There are
many normatively loaded questions that lie outside the scope of current
knowledge. Do we see in Gorbachev the fulfillment of George Kennan’s
1947 prophecy that containment would eventually cause the Soviet state
to mellow? Or would such a leadership have emerged in response to a
wide range of Western policy postures? Or are we relying too soon a
time perspective? Might Gorbachev’s successors pursue a quite different
set of foreign policy priorities? Often the most that analysts can honestly
claim is that “at this point in history, a particular policy has not led to
Armageddon and may even have played some role in producing conse-
quences that, given my values, I welcome.”

Just as it is possible to pretend to know more than one does, it is also
possible to pretend to know less. One can take the pursuit of value-
neutrality to ludicrous extremes. Few would argue that social scientists
should keep their silence, no matter how preposterous the premises or
malignant the values underlying government policy. Who, for instance,
would propose that social scientists should act as though they are totally
agnostic on whether the monolithic neo-Stalinist image or the pluralistic
Gorbachevian image of U.S. foreign policy is more correct? Or on whether
the winnability of all-out nuclear war is an open issue? These questions
raise substantive issues on which social and physical sciences directly
bear. In Haas’s terminology, there are relevant epistemic communities.

Aspiring to total value neutrality in an intellectual enterprise of this
nature is not only unrealistic, it is also undesirable. In part, this is so
because it requires us to underrate our substantive knowledge. We know
a good deal about the technical feasibility of various types of ballistic
missile defense, about the rapidity with which technical innovations dif-
fuse, about the complex trade-offs one confronts in making economic
everyday choices, and security policy, and about the indigenous dynamics of particular
regional conflicts. There is little to be gained and much to be lost from
assuming that one person’s opinion is as good as another’s.

The quest for total value neutrality is misguided for another, equally
important reason: it requires us to underrate the procedural knowledge
of relevant epistemic communities. Not only do we possess knowledge,
we know how to go about generating new knowledge. Most scientists
subscribe to a common set of epistemic norms. They believe, for ex-
ample, that claims to knowledge should be stated in a format that allows
empirical testing of either the claims or the logical implications of those
claims. They also believe that these empirical tests need to be conducted
in a fashion that minimizes the potential influence of the personal or
institutional interests of the investigator. Investigators who fail to play
by these basic rules of the scientific game (the most efficient method
of generating knowledge human beings have yet devised) rightly lose
their credibility in the eyes of colleagues. To be sure, adapting these epistemic
tests to the domain of foreign policy is a complex undertaking—not least
of all because of the equivocal and delayed nature of the feedback one
receives concerning the correctness of one’s policies. Nonetheless, one
can make a strong case that policy makers who resist treating foreign
policy beliefs as testable propositions and who assimilate virtually any
evidence into those beliefs have failed to learn how to learn. These
policy makers will be slow to update their beliefs in response to new
events, slow to revise their expectations about future events, and slow to
acknowledge the need to adjust policy as circumstances change. In short,
failure to live up to the epistemic ideals of science may be the best
evidence of limited, long-term potential for learning in the efficiency sense.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The chapters in this volume are a heterogeneous lot. This diversity
reflects the state of the art. There is no single way of looking at learning
in U.S.-Soviet relations. Much depends on one's disciplinary orientation. Different schools of thought sensitize us to different issues. Neorealists remind us not to forget the incentive structures intrinsic to the international system at any given moment: the balance and distribution of power and the relative rates of change in the economic and technological underpinnings of that power. Cognitive psychologists remind us that policy makers react not to the international environment as such, but rather to their mental representations of that environment. To understand the evolution of policy, we need to understand our cognitive biases and limitations: our tendencies to oversimplify complex problems, to be oblivious to trade-offs, and to assimilate new evidence into our preconceptions. Organization theorists remind us of the powerful inertial forces at work in institutions: the rigidity of standard operating procedures, the parochialism of bureaucratic fiefdoms, and the paralyzing effects of internecine rivalries. Students of domestic political affairs remind us of the real need to place foreign policy in the context of ongoing struggles for influence among powerful constituencies in the country at large. Politicians are less interested in understanding the outside world than they are in putting together combinations of foreign policy ideas that will enable them to assemble winning coalitions.

These different approaches—or levels of analysis in Allison's terms—are not mutually exclusive. They serve as beacons that selectively illuminate some facets of the evolving U.S.-Soviet relationship and leave other facets very much in the dark. Each level of analysis highlights distinctive determinants of learning or of failures to learn at particular junctures in post-World War II history. From a neorealist perspective, learning can be viewed as the rational adjustment of policy in response to the shifting reward and punishment contingencies of the international environment. From a cognitive psychological perspective, learning can be viewed as the not-so-rational adjustment of the content and structure of foreign policy belief systems in response to the often equivocal feedback of the international environment. The superpowers may respond to reality, but not always in a timely or appropriate manner. From an organization theory perspective, learning can be viewed as the adjustment of institutional norms and procedures in ways designed to minimize the likelihood of past mistakes (or what have come to be thought of as mistakes) and maximize the likelihood of past successes (or what most people currently think of as successes). The reality that the superpowers respond to is largely filtered through elaborate institutional screening mechanisms that no single individual fully understands. From a domestic political perspective, learning appears to be very much a hit-or-miss affair. Competing politicians use foreign policy ideas as weapons in their struggles for influence. There is no guarantee whatsoever that policy ideas which capture the imaginations of key domestic constituencies will capture important aspects of international reality. If anything, there are reasons for expecting the opposite (Anderson, Chapter 4).

There is, of course, no elegant theoretical formula for integrating these different levels of analysis. If one were simply to sum up—in impressionistic fashion—the grounds for optimism and pessimism, one would have good cause for deep depression. There are far more theoretical impediments to, than facilitators of, learning: the ambiguous nature of the policy feedback that national leaders receive; the cognitive, institutional, and domestic political limits on rationality; and the confusion and time pressure that often surround the policy-making process. Such a summation exercise would lead, however, not only to an artificially precise conclusion, but quite possibly to a prematurely pessimistic one. There are countervailing arguments for guarded optimism. Policy makers may not be as obtuse as they are sometimes depicted in the research literature. When learning becomes especially critical (Haas's trilogy of urgency, desirability, and feasibility), our leaders may often rise to the occasion. Moreover, the world may be more forgiving of slow learners than the harsher variants of neorealism lead one to suppose. If the world is populated largely by other slow learners, our leaders may often be protected from the consequences of their folly. A chess metaphor provides an appropriate closing note: errors of judgment that grand masters would mercilessly exploit frequently go unnoticed by less perceptive players. Slow learners can survive, sometimes even prosper, as long as they play mostly with each other.

NOTES

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In Search of an Elusive Concept

10. For a recent review of the central role that counterfactual arguments play in comparative politics and international relations, see J. Fearon, "Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science," World Politics, in press.


16. K.N. Waltz, Theory of International Politics.


18. H. Pines, "Waiting for Mr. X?"; R. Pipes, "Paper Perestroika".


22. Many sociologists expected such a retreatment. For example, Philip Stewart argued in 1986 that: "Gorbachev, perceiving the Soviet Union as threatened abroad by resurgent 'imperialism' and at home by a stagnant economy, has articulated a defensive, strongly nationalist foreign policy designed to protect the Soviet Union during a lengthy period of domestic rebuilding." He concluded that this realignment of the Politburo in 1985 and 1986 had created a fundamental shift in its prevailing outlook. Stewart was not optimistic about the future, however, as he believed that "this shift may be characterized as movement from the moderate, outward, and western orientation of the Brezhnev era to a tough, uncompromising, predominantly inward, nationalist or self-reliant perspective that is reminiscent of the late Stalin era." P. Stewart, "Gorbachev and Obstacles Toward Detente," Political Science Quarterly, 101 (1986): 2.


24. Perhaps the most we can realistically hope for is to move from one type of policy mistake to another before the consequences of any given mistake become inevitable. For instance, in his historical analysis of U.S. policy toward Europe, Thuc (Chapter 6) argues that "in their zeal to avoid the mistakes of their predecessors, U.S. officials have often been blind or at least insensitive to the shortcomings of their own approach." Eisenhower and Dulles shunned the Truman policy of endorsing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) with sufficient conventional forces to deter a Soviet invasion on the ground that such a policy would prove prohibitively expensive and politically unsustainable. As a result, they turned to a policy of massive retaliation, which raised alarm among the Europeans (who happened to live at ground zero) and became increasingly incredible as the Soviets acquired the capability to strike the American homeland (why should the United States give up New York to save Paris?). The Kennedy and Johnson
administrations were so determined to boost U.S. military capabilities and to acquire a wider range of conventional and nuclear options (between doing nothing and all-out nuclear war) that they provided the Europeans with a ready excuse for not increasing their own forces (sowing the seeds for much future discord). The Reagan administration was so motivated to overturn the image of weakness and vacillations from the Carter years that it may have seriously endangered the political unity of NATO through blustering rhetoric about nuclear shots across the bow. Learning in this view is a trial-and-error process.


29. O.R. Holsti, "The Operational Code as an Approach to Analysis of Belief Systems" (Final report to the National Science Foundation, Grant SOC 75-15368, Duke University, 1977); A. George, "The Operational Code."


31. The different conclusions that Larson (Chapter 10) and Garrett (Chapter 7) draw concerning the occurrence of learning in the Nixon-Kissinger period are traceable to two distinct analytical sources. Larson, on one hand, argues that Nixon and Kissinger were cognitively predisposed all along to exploit the Sino-Soviet rivalry. Both individuals were guided by realpolitik assumptions (or the cognitive psychological terminology employed by Larson, schemata). Garrett, on the other hand, is more impressed by the capacity of Nixon and Kissinger to transcend the prevailing wisdom about China in 1969 (a nation "gone mad" during the Cultural Revolution) and to pursue a policy anchored in very different premises. If one limits one's conception of learning to a strictly individual level of analysis, the key question is "What did Nixon and Kissinger know at 1969?" Sino-Soviet relations and when did they know it? If one broadens one's conception of learning to a governmental level of analysis, the question of what Nixon or Kissinger believed at particular times is of only secondary or biographical interest. The key point is that the individuals who assumed key posts of authority in 1969 had a more complex and perhaps realistic view of the international environment than did their predecessors.


41. R. Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics.


46. J. Hugh, Russia and the West: Gorbachev and the Politics of Reform (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).
because most epistemic communities rely on the self-correcting norms of science to weed out deviant or crackpot ideas. Learning in the Haasian sense need not, however, entail movement toward greater complexity of thought (consensual knowledge may consist of simple but powerful generalizations) or movement toward greater efficiency (policy makers may be persuaded to adopt a body of consensual knowledge that turns out in hindsight to have been seriously flawed). 


63. F. Griffiths, "Sources of American Conduct": Chapter 17 in this volume.

64. Thies (Chapter 6) independently advances a political competition model of his own to explain the twists and turns of U.S. policy toward Europe since 1945. He notes that "competition for control of the executive branch encourages ambitious individuals to formulate alternative policies intended to improve on those of the incumbent administration." The new ideas of aspiring U.S. politicians—like those of aspiring Politburo members—need to be distinctive (otherwise why should others support them?), to appeal to important constituencies (otherwise why bother to campaign at all?), and to be plausible (who wants a platform that leads to demonstrably incorrect predictions?). The political stimulus to creativity does not, however, as Thies notes, guarantee learning. Indeed it can inspire demagoguery and, once the challengers gain power, overreactions to the shortcomings of earlier policies.


66. J. March, *Decisions and Organizations*.

