

History, Learning, and International Relations

Written by Richard Ned Lebow and Feng Zhang

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International Relations scholars have documented the importance of so-called historical lessons for foreign policy decisionmaking. They often frame the context in which those decisions are made. They help determine what constitutes a threat or a problem and how to respond. There has been less research on why certain lessons are learned and others not, and why some of these lessons become deeply embedded in a political culture. Once this happens, these lessons not only influence foreign policy but help shape the way people see the world. By doing so, they make policymakers more receptive to some kinds of lessons and less so to others. We address the first of questions: why some lessons appeal and others not. We offer seven propositions in this connection, drawn from psychology and political science. We offer reasons for our propositions and examples that illustrate them. We conclude with some thought about how historical lessons enter political life.

Historical Lessons

Margaret MacMillan (2022, p. 8) wryly observes that “Even when people think they are striking out in new directions their models often come from the past.” Political actors draw their own conclusions about the outcomes of their behavior and the reasons for its success and failure. Cognitive psychologists find that people are more likely to attribute success to their character and failure to circumstances beyond their control (Heider, 1958, p. 322; Kelley, 1967; Jones and Nisbett, 1971; Nisbett and Ross, 1980). When successful they are also motivated to downplay the role of luck and exaggerate that of skill (Frank, 2016, pp. xiv, 11). Historical learning is almost always about other people and situations they faced, sometimes at some temporal remove. Political actors can draw their own conclusions from these past events, but more often it is mediated by political commentators and historians, and almost certainly so if those events occurred at some temporal remove. International relations scholars have documented the extent to which these lessons reflect cognitive biases (Jervis, 2017 [1976]).

Historical lessons develop in stages. First comes an event (e.g., regime collapse, economic crisis, war) and then efforts to understand why it occurred. These explanations are sometimes used to generate lessons. They in turn may be applied to situations thought to resemble the original one. Political actors also reason in reverse. They invoke lessons to sell policies to which they are committed for other reasons. Occasionally, they rewrite history – usually badly – to offer a basis for their newly coined lessons. “Support our troops” and “staying the course” lessons were proposed to counter growing opposition among Americans to military interventions. Right-wing pro-interventionists created a revisionist narrative of the Vietnam War to legitimate these “lessons.” They maintained that the war in Indochina was winnable (Summers, 1982; Palmer, 1984; Davidson, 1988; Krepinovich, 1988; Moyar, 2006; Lind, 1999).

Historical analysis prior to lesson construction is the more rigorous of the two approaches. Rewriting history to justify a lesson is a blatantly political exercise. We must nevertheless recognize that more serious historical analysis is also often politically motivated. Professional and popular historians, journalists and bloggers, all approach their subjects with pre-existing beliefs and commitments. They determine the problems that interest them, influence the evidence they consider germane, and the interpretations they formulate.

Almost all historical lessons are problematic. Major events like revolutions and wars, have multiple causes that interacted in complex ways. Agency is also critical. Lessons emphasize single causes, rendering them partial

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explanations at best. Social science has tried to circumvent this problem by multivariate analysis of large numbers of cases. Political lessons are generally insensitive to context and deterministic in their application. Consider the Munich lesson. It is constructed as a binary: appeasement or resistance. There is no consideration that the two strategies might successfully be practiced in conjunction with one another or with other approaches to conflict management (Lebow, 2018, pp. 187-234). Appeasement is assumed to invite further aggression regardless of circumstances.

International relations scholars have made extensive use of cognitive psychology with particular application to crisis decisionmaking (Jervis, 2017 [1976]); Larson, 1985; McDermott, 2004; Johnson 2020). Cognitive psychologists tell us that people are most likely to reflect upon major events that affect their lives, and these include wars, depressions, pandemics, and social upheavals. Such events also prompt historians, media, and political actors to offer lessons. Cognitive psychology indicates that historical learning is frequently superficial because people mistake salient features of events for significant ones. They also make superficial comparisons between events where lessons are learned and those where they are applied (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky, 1982; Tversky and Kahneman, 1992; Fischhoff, 1975; Gilovich, Griffin, and Kahneman, 2002). Cognitive psychology has much to say about the process of learning, especially the ways in which it differs from any kind of rational model. However, the biases and heuristics cognitive psychology has documented are far from ubiquitous. Sometimes people conduct careful searches. On other occasions they are guided by biases and heuristics. Cognitive psychology does not tell us why. We have to look elsewhere for answers, as we must to understand why people develop certain kinds of explanations for events in lieu of others.

Propositions

To address the puzzle of why people generate particular lessons and why they gain traction, we offer a set of propositions. We lay out these propositions sequentially, although they are interactive and can be mutually supportive.

Our first proposition is that *historical interpretations that emphasize the power of agency will gain more public attention than those that do not*. Modern people want to feel in control of their lives and environment. Explanations for events that stress agency over impersonal forces will accordingly prove more appealing, other things being equal. Emphasis on agency has another important advantage. Historical interpretations that stress the choices made by people enable meaningful policy lessons. If the causes of wars, pandemics, recessions, or regime failure are the result of underlying economic, political, institutional, or cultural conditions over which people have little or no control, nothing can be done to prevent them. If, however, undesirable outcomes have causes that actors can influence directly, timely responses to military threats, new pathogens, or turbulence in stock markets, they can generate “actionable” lessons. For scholars interested in the real-world implications of their research, focusing on agency and choices is correspondingly more attractive.

Our second proposition asserts that *explanations that attribute outcomes to the virtues of key actors are more likely to gain traction*. People want morality to govern behavior and for “good” people to be more successful than “bad” ones. Many religions enshrine this principle. Christianity holds out the prospect of eternal life to those who lead proper lives and eternal damnation to those who violate the Ten Commandments.

The psychology of morality has been extensively studied (Ellemers, van der Toorn, Paunov, and van Leeuwen, 2019). Morality is assumed to indicate the “right” and “wrong” ways to behave toward other people (Turiel, 2006; Haidt and Kesebir, 2010). Much of the research focuses on morality’s role in maintaining social order. Various studies show that beliefs about what is morally right or wrong differ from other attitudes or convictions. They are regarded as compelling mandates that apply to everyone. People are accordingly distressed by violations, find it difficult to tolerate them, and may even resort to violence against those who challenge their views (Skitka and Bauman, 2008; Skitka, Bauman, and Sargis, 2005; Mullen and Skitka, 2006; Skitka, 2010). Moral judgments are not absolute, but based on culturally defined virtues (Giner-Sorolla, 2012; Rai and Fiske, 2011). Conceptions of right and wrong are anchored in the social groups to which people belong or aspire to join (Ellemers and Van den Bos, 2012; Ellemers and Van der Toorn, 2015; Ellemers, 2017; Leach, Bilali, and Pagliaro, 2015).

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Our third proposition is that *historical accounts that make a people and its country look virtuous, successful, and in some way superior, have a significant edge in the competition for attention*. This may help explain why books about World War II are such big sellers in the United Kingdom and the US, but not in France, Italy, or Germany. They make readers feel good about their countries, especially as so many of these books, films, and television programs portray their leaders and countrymen as men of wisdom, courage, and endurance. Efforts to write histories that examine the downsides of the past, such as imperialism, racism, and corruption, meet considerable resistance. Following World War I, socialist attempts to offer a more nuanced account of the origins of World War I were fiercely resisted within the intensely nationalist historical profession and the conservative press (Herwig, 1987). So too have been efforts to challenge the triumphalist account of American victory in the Cold War (Bell, 1995).

Our fourth proposition asserts that *historical interpretations and lessons derived from them are inevitably political in nature*. Many interpretations are predictable applications of ideologies or worldviews. Some are clearly put forward to advance political projects or enhance individual reputations. Still others are offered to justify claims to power.

Our fifth proposition is that *historical interpretation is influenced by the Zeitgeist*. Historians who write in eras characterized by pessimism or *Verfallsgeschichte* (narrative of inevitable decline), will not only regard decline of political orders differently than those in which optimism dominates, they will look for different explanations.

In optimistic moments of modernity, peace, progress, and greater affluence are expected, and the reverse in pessimistic times. Research nevertheless indicates that optimism and pessimism vary across age groups; optimism increases in young adulthood, plateaus in midlife, and decreases among older adults (Chopik, et al., 2020). Optimism also has a powerful social component as it is influenced by domestic and international developments. These moods track nicely with the publication and public receptivity to utopias and dystopias (Lebow, 2012, Ch 2). The late Victorian era saw the modern emergence of utopias, which coincided with optimism about the future (Goodwin and Taylor, 1982; Frank, 1966; Kateb, 1972 [1963]). Dystopias were more evident between the wars and the immediate aftermath of World War II. They are back in vogue again (Kumar, 1987; Booker, 1994; Gottlieb, 2001; Claeys, 2016).

A sixth proposition states that *lessons that encourage action are more successful than those that urge constraint*. This is a counter-intuitive claim because people generally prefer the status quo over change, and are generally more receptive to recommendations that urge doing nothing versus possibly costly action. If we look at important and seemingly embedded historical lessons the majority are intended to alert or arouse policymakers to action. Munich is the foreign policy poster child for such lessons. It is always mobilized to demand or justify military action or threats that could lead to it. In economics, domestic and international, different, even contradictory, lessons have emerged for preventing and coping with recessions and depressions. All of them require institutional change or innovation (Kindleberger, 1973). The Korean War lesson urged restraint and avoidance of an unwinnable and costly land war in Asia. It was mobilized by Ret. General Matthew Ridgway, among others to oppose intervention in Vietnam (Buzzanco, 1986; Crane, 2021). The American failure in Indochina generated its own lesson of restraint, but it was later contested by an appositive one that urged intervention without military constraints (Summers, 1982; Westmoreland, 1976; Reagan, 1975; Cohen, 2017).

A final proposition asserts that *successful lessons are simple lessons*. By simple we mean lessons that take the form of “if this, then that” statements. They invoke only one cause to achieve their theorized effect. Thus, mass mobilization undermines democracy, appeasement invites further aggression, government regulation damages the economy and undermines democracy. Such statements are almost invariably determinist in nature. They are not accompanied by caveats or hesitation. There is no suggestion that the predicted outcome “might” happen. They are also simple in assuming that complex outcomes like the decline of political orders, the state of the economy, or the aggressiveness of foreign leaders have single, linear causes with no intervening or enabling ones or conditions. Finally, as noted, they fail to stipulate scope conditions, that is, the circumstances in which their predicted effects will occur. They are imperious to context. For all of these reasons they are inadequate.

Good Lessons?

We argued that foreign policy relies on lessons based on past events and policies. The principal alternative would be

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the deduction of policies from theories – as the Bolsheviks did in their early years in power – and realists still do when it comes to balancing and war. Marxism, like other political ideologies, represents a distillation of history, as do realism and liberalism. There is no escaping history as a guide – unless, of course, one relies on premodern methods of reading augurs or entrails (Green, 2009; Potter, 1994, pp. 151-54). Do people – and policymakers in particular – really learn from the past? If so, does political judgment improve over time? Are we better prepared to confront major challenges today than we were in the past? Or do bad lessons predominate, like some political version of Gresham's law driving out good ones and leading us to make the same mistakes over and over again? Another possibility is that problems and their contexts change, making even good lessons inappropriate.

Definitive answers to these questions are impossible. There are multiple reasons for our caution. Most important is the difficulty of distinguishing good lessons from bad ones. Good lessons rest on good interpretations of history, but there is rarely, if ever, a “correct” interpretation. Good interpretations have a compelling chain of logic linking cause to effect and are consistent with available evidence. Over time, more evidence may become available, encouraging different readings of the past. Interpretations, moreover, always reflect the political interests and projects of those who advance them, and these too change over time. Then there is the problem of application. The political world is highly context dependent. A policy that succeeds brilliantly in one context can fail miserably in another. Such situations may or may not be fair tests of a lesson. Ex post facto, it is often difficult to know if success or failure was due to the lesson, its relevance to the situation, or its application.

Another difficulty is distinguishing success from failure. Assessments of this kind are highly political. Conservative, nationalist accounts of the end of the Cold War attribute it to Reagan's ice-breaking initiative and Star Wars (Gaddis, 1994; Matlock, 2004). More serious historians depict Star Wars as a barrier to accommodation, and emphasize the role of Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev (Herrmann and Lebow, 2003; Brown, 2009; Service, 2015, pp. 274-77; FitzGerald, 2008; Podvig, 2017). Outcome assessment is also often a function of time-line employed. A lesson that appears to lead to a good outcome from say the vantage point of six months or a year may be seen as a bad lesson and bad outcome a decade later. Opposing aggressive dictators before they grew too strong was a motivating factor behind the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Fallows, 2006; Trainor, 2006; Draper, 2020). President George W. Bush famously proclaimed success on an aircraft carrier not long after Saddam Hussein was overthrown (White House, 2003). Almost twenty years later, the Iraq intervention is generally understood as a policy disaster (Galbraith, 2007; Dyer, 2008; Davidson, 2017). But not everyone agrees. Some on the American right hail it as a success. The public is divided: almost 48 percent of Americans say the decision to use military force was wrong, while 43 percent say it was the right decision (Simon, 2017; Oliphant, 2018).

Finally, there is the possibility that questionable readings of past events generate lessons that are not historically defensible but have positive effects. This seems to have happened in the Cuban missile crisis. Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*, published shortly before the crisis, argued – incorrectly, we now know – that European political leaders took the risks that led to World War I because they had no appreciation of its likely length and cost and were ignorant of their country's military plans (Tuchman, 1962). President Kennedy was very taken by Tuchman's book and is said to have kept it in mind during the crisis, and it was arguably one of the reasons he was cautious and shied away from military action (Smith, 2012).

Good history can also produce bad lessons. The French Maginot Line was based on the solid premise that the defense had a decisive advantage on the Western Front in World War I (Horne, 1969; Nord, 2015). Attacks against well-defended positions usually gained little, if any, ground, and at enormous cost (Prior, 2014). However, military technology changed, conferring significant advantages to Blitzkrieg warfare under certain conditions, and especially if advancing forces were able to bypass and cut-off enemy strongpoints (Deighton, 1983 [1979]; Frieser, 2013). Blitzkrieg tactics, involving the coordinated use of armor, infantry, and close air support, were developed in Germany, but also in the Soviet Union, in response to the seeming advantages of the defensive.

Good lessons may be based on questionable history, but we believe that good history is more likely to produce useful lessons. We embarked on this project on the assumption that there is some positive relationship that links good history to good lessons to good policy. In their absence we would have no incentive to undertake such a study beyond our interest of why some lessons dominate over others in the minds of policymakers and the public. These

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are interesting analytical questions, and we devote a fair amount of space to them. However, our primary focus is on the lessons themselves and how they emerge, how good lessons might be distinguished from bad ones, and what we might learn about the limiting conditions of those lessons. We ultimately want to know what might be done to improve foreign and public policy.

We want to stress that good lessons are only a starting point. They have to be applied in the right circumstances and with skill. Otherwise, they have the potential to aggravate conflict and undermine national interests. As noted, one of the principal drawbacks to policy lessons of all kinds is that they are generally insufficiently attentive to context. In the absence of good specification, little stands in the way of applying a lesson that may have been appropriate in the context from which it was derived but not to another in which it is applied. Misleading inferences of this kind are very likely because, cognitive psychologists tell us, people are prone to see parallels between situations on the basis of superficial features (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky, 1982; Tversky and Kahneman, 1992; Fischhoff, 1975).

We have offered a set of propositions about historical learning rooted in psychology and political science. We suggest that receptivity to proposed lessons is greatest when they meet multiple psychological and political needs. Their appeal has little to do with historical accuracy. Once learned, lessons have the potential to become embedded in a political culture and confirmed tautologically. This discourages learning at odds with their expectations and makes it difficult for people to offers different frames of reference, analogies, or lessons. Learning can be a serious impediment to learning.

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