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INTRODUCTION

Our Gift

The intuitive mind is a sacred gift, and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

STARDATE 2821.5. EN route to deliver urgent medical supplies to the New Paris colony, the *USS Enterprise* encounters a novel star formation. Spock and six others take the shuttle *Galileo* to investigate but are knocked off course and forced to make an emergency landing on nearby planet Taurus II. Their communications are down and they have no way to signal to the *Enterprise*, which can only afford to wait a few hours for the missing crew to reappear. Hounded by alien life forms while they make repairs, the crew of *Galileo* eventually get it airborne and out into orbit, but with minimal power and without enough fuel to rejoin the *Enterprise*. After an episode focusing on Spock's cold, calculating logic, he suddenly makes a rash decision as the *Galileo* struggles to escape the planet's gravity. Spock dumps all of the shuttle's remaining fuel and then ignites it—a desperate cry for help that creates a flare in the darkness of space but sends the helpless shuttle on a death spiral to be burned up in the atmosphere of Taurus II. The still silent *Enterprise* is already moving off. Miraculously, however, Lieutenant Sulu happens to notice the tiny streak of light. Kirk turns the ship around, and the survivors are beamed aboard at the last moment. Safely back on the *Enterprise*, Kirk interrogates Spock about his impulsive decision to dump the fuel:

KIRK: There's really something I don't understand about all of this. Maybe you can explain it to me. Logically, of course. When you jettisoned the fuel and ignited it, you knew there was virtually no chance of it being seen, yet you did it anyhow. That would seem to me to be an act of desperation.

SPOCK: Quite correct, Captain.

KIRK: Now we all know, and I'm sure the doctor will agree with me, that desperation is a highly emotional state of mind. How does your well-known logic explain that?

SPOCK: Quite simply, Captain. I examined the problem from all angles, and it was plainly hopeless. Logic informed me that under the circumstances, the only possible action would have to be one of desperation. Logical decision, logically arrived at.

KIRK: I see. You mean you reasoned that it was time for an emotional outburst.

SPOCK: Well, I wouldn't put it in exactly those terms, Captain, but those are essentially the facts.

KIRK: You're not going to admit that for the first time in your life, you committed a purely human emotional act?

SPOCK: No, sir.

KIRK: Mister Spock, you're a stubborn man.

SPOCK: Yes, sir.¹

The crew of *Galileo* owed their survival to Spock relinquishing his austere, dispassionate reason in favor of an all-too-human act of impulsive behavior. As he himself explains, under the circumstances this reversion to an “act of desperation” offered them a chance of success when all seemed lost. *Star Trek's* enduring attraction is in large part the different perspectives provided by the steadfast but emotional human, Captain James T. Kirk, and the logical but unfeeling Vulcan, Mr. Spock. Typically, the episodes end with a hair-raising escape from the perils of aliens or space itself, thanks to the instinctive human nature or emotional acts of Kirk, Doctor McCoy, or Scotty the engineer, winning out over Spock's cold and calculating logic that might make sense on paper but fails to win the day. The message is that, however clever and knowledgeable one may be, and regardless of whatever amazing technology we may have at our disposal, we still rely on trusty human instincts to get us through tough times.

Writer Julia Galef warns us not to be taken in too easily by what she calls the “Straw Vulcan.”² Spock is not just rational but actually tends to conform to so-called “hyper-rationality,” an overly restrictive version of rationality that assumes complete information and perfect knowledge, which can be easy to falsify as an optimal decision-making approach in the real world (or beyond!). However, the idea that, sometimes, humans make better decisions than machines or rational actors is a familiar notion not only in literature and movies but also in our everyday experience. Often, our intuitions lead to good decisions, not bad ones. Our gut reactions and first impressions often prove correct. And our automatic responses to events and in interactions

with other people are often faster and more reliable than more calculating alternatives.

These are what I call “strategic instincts.” Strategic instincts are rapid, adaptive decision-making heuristics that we all have as human beings. And we do not have them by accident. We have them because they helped to keep us alive and successful over the many millennia of human evolutionary history—especially in fast-moving situations of uncertainty, often with limited information—and were thus favored by natural selection. They are tools of survival. The question of this book is a simple one: Do these same strategic instincts continue to serve as tools of survival, not just for individual human beings but also for the nations they lead, especially in times of crisis and war?

Demise of the Vulcans: Rationality and the Rise of Psychology

One of the most important findings in recent decades of scientific endeavor is that humans have numerous “cognitive biases”—quirks of the human brain that cause our judgments and decision-making to deviate markedly from what we would expect if people weighed up the costs, benefits, and probabilities of different options in an evenhanded way.³ This should be no surprise to astute observers of human beings, as Plato, Shakespeare, Freud, and many laypeople could tell us. Bertrand Russell once remarked: “It has been said that man is a rational animal. All my life I have been searching for evidence which could support this.”⁴ But with the rise and spread of rational choice theory in academia during the latter part of the twentieth century, we have had to prove this intuition to ourselves, through painstaking experimental research. Scholars in political science and other fields used to take psychology seriously (if sometimes flawed in how they did so), with a strong influence of approaches based on human nature, psychoanalysis, and behaviorism. Rational choice swept all that away—for some good reasons as well as bad. Now, psychology is making a long overdue comeback as a more rigorous science. After many decades in a wilderness dominated by the study of a fictitious *Homo economicus* at the expense of the study of *Homo sapiens*, we have now more or less arrived at a consensus that human cognitive biases are real, pervasive, and important.⁵

But how people *explain* these phenomena remains a major problem. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the long dominance of the rational choice paradigm as a benchmark standard for evaluating behavior in economics and political science, cognitive biases tend to be seen as errors or mistakes.⁶ There remains a widespread idea across the social sciences that rationality is the normative ideal (even if recognized as empirically false), and human brains are prevented from achieving this ideal because of cognitive limitations. Cognitive biases are thus seen as liabilities of the human brain that must be guarded against if

Table 1.1. Disciplinary differences in the interpretation of cognitive biases

Characteristics of Cognitive Biases	Social Scientists	Evolutionary Scientists
What are they?	Cognitive limitations, errors, or mistakes	Cognitive adaptations (context-specific problem-solving mechanisms)
Are they useful?	No	Yes
What do they cause?	Failures, disasters, conflict	Behavior
What are their sources of variation?	Little consideration	Proximate biological mechanisms, contingent on social and ecological context
What are their origins?	No consideration	Natural selection

we are to avoid costly misjudgments, misperceptions, mistakes, crises, policy failures, disasters, and wars. Cognitive biases are bad, and their consequences are bad.⁷

However, in other fields—most notably evolutionary biology—the same cognitive biases are seen in a remarkably different light (see Table 1.1). Far from mistakes, they are considered useful dispositions that serve important functions. Cognitive biases can be good, and their consequences can be good. An evolutionary perspective suggests that cognitive biases are *adaptive* heuristics that evolved to improve our decision-making, not to undermine it. They may contribute to mistakes and disasters at some times (as indeed can rational choice) but not always. If cognitive biases can be useful, we should find out how. This book is about whether and when cognitive biases cause or promote success in the realm of international relations. It turns out that, in the real world, *Homo sapiens* is often a better strategist than *Homo economicus*, especially given that we have to deal with other *Homo sapiens* (not other *Homo economicuses*). Japanese psychologist Masanao Toda pointed out a long time ago that “man and rat are both incredibly stupid in an experimental room. On the other hand, psychology has paid little attention to the things they do in their normal habitats; man drives a car, plays complicated games, and organizes society, and rat is troublesomely cunning in the kitchen.”⁸ When we move from the lab out into the field, cognitive biases find a new lease on life. They work well. Social scientists have, therefore, been focusing on the wrong end of the stick, with potentially significant oversights for the field. As is now recognized in other disciplines and in everyday life, biases are often better thought of, in psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer’s slogan, as “heuristics that make us smart.”⁹ Seeing biases as mistakes impairs our understanding, predictions, and recommendations for both theory and practice in politics and international relations.

Demons of the Field: A Predilection for Disaster

The interpretation of cognitive biases as mistakes may be only natural for fields without a grounding in life sciences, but in international relations it appears to be exacerbated by two additional tendencies: focusing on disasters (bad-outcome cases) and looking at isolated events (one-off cases). If instead we look at a broader range of outcomes, and at multiple events over time, a different picture emerges. Let us look at each of these problems in turn.

First, international relations scholars often tend to focus on explaining prominent crises, policy failures, disasters, or wars—unusual events that draw special attention and probing. As Robert Jervis, father of the application of psychology in international relations, acknowledged, “There is an almost inescapable tendency to look at cases of conflict, surprise, and error. When things go wrong, they not only attract the actors’ attention, they also attract ours.”¹⁰ He warns that this makes “analysis of causation difficult,” risks assigning causes to “constants rather than variables,” and fails to “discriminate between good decisions and bad ones.”¹¹ Tracing back through the causes of calamitous and complex events, involving numerous actors and organizations, examples of bias can nearly always be found. We are more likely to *seek* and more likely to *report* biases when they precede negative events.

By contrast, politics-as-normal, closely averted disasters, and even many successes are rarely noticed or reported, let alone studied. When everything goes right, we spend less time scrutinizing how that happened. Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman, reflecting on his life’s work on cognitive biases, also found that “it’s easier to identify bad decisions and bad decision makers than good decisions and decision makers.”¹² This asymmetry represents a major problem if biases are present in both failures and successes but we only ever look at the former. As Jervis urged, “We need to know more about successes.”¹³ This book aims to redress the balance.

Until now, research has tended to focus on identifying the *presence* of biases and neglected examining their actual *effects*—effects that can be good as well as bad. When found, biases are automatically assumed to have had a detrimental influence on decisions, and thus to have contributed to the negative event. Jack Levy lamented back in 1983 that “theories of foreign policy and crisis decision-making provide a comprehensive analysis of the *sources* of misperception, but are generally not concerned with their consequences.”¹⁴ Although research in political psychology has bloomed since then, there is still a strong tendency to focus on where psychological factors have led leaders and states astray, rather than where they may have helped and led them to success. This omission was also recognized by Jonathan Mercer, who noted the “ubiquitous yet inaccurate belief in international relations scholarship that cognitive biases and emotion cause only mistakes.”¹⁵ He points out that logically this can only be the case if we make some bizarre assumptions, such as that

“rationality must be free of psychology” and that “psychology cannot explain accurate judgments.”¹⁶ Both are patently false but persist as unstated assumptions in the literature.

Now for the second problem. Much social science scholarship focuses on isolated case studies, or a small sample of them, which is fair enough given the depth of work needed to understand the complexity of historical events and the methodological traditions of the field. Nevertheless, this approach is always at risk of downplaying or ignoring the bigger picture—the effects that phenomena such as cognitive biases have on average, in *many cases* over the long term. Behavioral scientist Robin Hogarth argued that “several biases identified in discrete incidents result from heuristics that are functional in the more natural continuous environment.”¹⁷ As an example, World War I has become a kind of test case for major theories of the causes of war, but any of the cognitive biases that compellingly contributed to disaster in 1914—overconfidence, attribution error, group bias, or many others—could actually have been useful at other times, or on average over the preceding decades or centuries, if they led to more effective deterrence, bargaining, or coercion. The odd mistake—even a big one—does not invalidate the utility of a general propensity. Of course, many social scientists do look at multiple cases and the broad sweep of history.¹⁸ My point is simply that we need to start looking at the role of *cognitive biases* from this perspective as well.

If we look at the long-term outcomes of cognitive biases in many decisions over time, we might find that they are generally useful rather than generally detrimental. In fact, even if a bias were only beneficial on rare occasions, it could still bring important advantages if those occasions are critical ones for a state’s security. For example, the United States is argued to have repeatedly overestimated the USSR’s aggressive intentions during the Cold War, but this very bias encouraged Kennedy to make a firm stand against Khrushchev in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.¹⁹ Who’s to say that wasn’t a useful outcome of what seemed like hype at other times? We need to tease apart the *presence* of cognitive biases from the more important *costs* (and indeed benefits) of those biases in different circumstances.

To summarize, if cognitive biases are a source of success as well as a source of failure, then they may sometimes—or even usually—bring benefits as well as costs, potentially generating *net* benefits over time. The occasional failure may be a price worth paying for a bias that works well on average, or very effectively in times of crisis. Even frequent failures may be worth enduring for a bias that brings a major coup at critical junctures. Biases may make us better at setting ambitious goals, building coalitions and alliances, bargaining effectively, sending credible signals, maintaining resolve, and persevering in the face of daunting challenges, and they may make us more formidable when it comes to conflict, deterrence, coercion, crisis, brinkmanship, and war.

Cognitive biases, therefore, might offer political and strategic *advantages*. This seems—at minimum—an interesting idea, but we don’t know if it is true or not because no one has looked. This book takes up that challenge.

Plan of the Book

This book examines the strategic advantages of three cognitive biases: overconfidence, the fundamental attribution error, and in-group/out-group bias. These biases were chosen for several reasons: (1) they are among the most important influences on human judgment and decision-making; (2) they are empirically well established in experimental psychology; (3) they have been widely applied to explain political phenomena; and (4) they are commonly cited as contributory causes of crises and wars, such as the world wars, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War. While these biases may indeed cause disasters at some times and in some contexts, at other times they may bring strategic *advantages*, promoting ambition and boldness, alertness and suspicion of potential rivals, and cohesion and collective action, furthering the aims of the leaders and groups that hold them—whatever those aims may be.

In separate chapters, I outline the scientific research on each bias, its hypothesized adaptive advantages in human evolution, historical examples where the bias caused disasters or mistakes, and then, critically, contrary historical examples where the bias seemed to have lent strategic advantages and caused *successes* instead (see Table 1.2).

Before launching into our exploration of the adaptive advantages of specific cognitive biases, chapter 1 explores the notion of “adaptive biases” and “strategic instincts” in more detail. I compare social science and life science approaches to understanding human behavior, ask why cognitive biases evolved in our evolutionary past, whether they continue to be adaptive today,

Table 1.2. Cognitive biases and historical case studies explored in the book

Cognitive Bias	Case Study	Argument
Overconfidence	American Revolution	Overconfidence increased ambition, resolve, and perseverance
Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE)	Appeasement of Hitler (<i>Reverse case</i>)	The FAE <i>would</i> have increased recognition of the threat, preparations for war, and alliance seeking
In-Group/Out-Group Bias	Pacific Campaign of World War II	In-group/out-group bias increased collective action, unit cohesion, and offensive action

and why a bias can be better than accuracy. In chapter 2, I take a step back to consider how and why international relations might benefit from an evolutionary approach at all. Evolutionary biology has a long history of misunderstanding and resistance in the social sciences, not least since the “sociobiology” debate of the 1970s, and it is important to review how the natural and social sciences have both moved on since then, as well as the promise for a future of mutual collaboration. That allows us to turn to strategic instincts themselves.

Chapter 3 examines the strategic role of overconfidence. Most mentally healthy people exhibit: (1) an overestimation of their capabilities; (2) an illusion of control over events; and (3) a perceived invulnerability to risk (three widely replicated and robust phenomena collectively known as “positive illusions”).²⁰ Of course, overconfidence has long been noted as a cause of disasters and wars. For example, Geoffrey Blainey, Barbara Tuchman, and Stephen Van Evera all blamed false optimism as one of the key causes of World War I.²¹ In the contemporary world, there has also been considerable discussion of the role of overconfidence in, for example, U.S. planning for the 2003 Iraq War and the 2008 financial crisis.²² However, overconfidence can also offer adaptive advantages—increasing ambition, resolve, and perseverance.²³ The question of this chapter is not when and where does overconfidence cause failure but when and where does it cause success? Evidence for positive as well as negative effects of overconfidence is presented from laboratory experiments, field studies, agent-based computer simulations, and mathematical models, all of which reveal some fundamental advantages of overconfidence under well-defined conditions. Overconfidence is important, pervasive, and increasingly well understood. The outstanding question addressed here is when it hurts or helps us.

In a case study of the American Revolution, chapter 4 suggests that George Washington and the birth of the United States benefited in no small measure from a remarkable confidence—arguably overconfidence—that inspired Washington to fight and sustain the revolution despite the formidable odds stacked against them and repeated setbacks along the way. In a long and grueling war in which Americans lost most of the battles and struggled to even keep an army in the field, ambition and boldness paid off handsomely.

Chapter 5 examines the strategic advantages of the fundamental attribution error (FAE). People tend to attribute the behavior of *other* actors to intentional action (their “dispositions”) but behavior of *their own* as dictated by circumstances (“situational constraints”).²⁴ This is thought to be an important reason why nations fail to cooperate, descend into arms races, escalate conflicts, and ultimately end up at war, since they fail to appreciate the constraints acting on others, overestimate the threat they pose, and—in mirror image—underestimate the threat they themselves pose to others. The FAE does not mean that we always perceive others as threatening but rather that we will *perceive apparently threatening behavior as intentional*.²⁵ For example, the buildup of armies and armaments by European states prior to 1914 was widely

considered a menace to security, while individual states considered their own buildups to be an unfortunate but essential defensive response.²⁶ The FAE suggests that we systematically *overestimate* the threat from other states because we are biased to assume that their actions reveal their intentions. Often this will reduce cooperation and increase conflict. However, the FAE has clear *adaptive* features as well. In a hostile environment with conflicting information, the FAE aids in the detection of threats, preparations for war, and the formation of alliances, which together help to strengthen deterrence and avoid exploitation.²⁷ The question of this chapter is not when and where does the FAE cause failure but when and where does it cause success? The FAE is a bias that encourages us to err on the side of caution when dealing with other actors and states, and assume the worst. In dangerous environments, the FAE may at least sometimes be useful.

In the case study in chapter 6, I examine British perceptions of Hitler's intentions in the 1930s. This offers a reverse case, in which those in power maintained beliefs *opposite* to those predicted by the FAE. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain strongly resisted attributing dispositional causes to Hitler's behavior and instead emphasized situational causes: the German desire to redress the restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles, attain territorial security, and unite the German-speaking peoples. In the face of mounting contradictory evidence, Chamberlain continued to give Hitler the benefit of the doubt, leading to the disastrous policy of appeasement and the Munich Crisis of 1938. This raises an unusual question: Where was the FAE when we needed it? Other actors whose beliefs did align with the FAE—not least Winston Churchill—insisted that Hitler was acting out of offensive intentions to expand German power and vigorously opposed appeasement. If the bias had been stronger among leaders at the time, Britain would have stood up to Hitler earlier and more effectively.

Chapter 7 examines the strategic advantages of the in-group/out-group bias. People have a powerful tendency to favor their own in-group and its members, while disparaging out-groups and their members.²⁸ The bias is so strong and prevalent that it forms a bedrock foundation in social psychology, critical to social identity and intergroup relations. Such group prejudices, however, can have appalling human consequences in the bias's contribution to the oppression of minority groups, ethnic conflict, and genocide—for example, it has been implicated for its role in fanning the flames of the Balkan wars, the Rwandan genocide, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.²⁹ However, in other circumstances the bias has highly adaptive features. For example, the in-group/out-group bias increases cohesion and collective action, as well as coordinated action against other groups, which together can increase survival and effectiveness in competition and conflict.³⁰ The question is not when and where does group bias cause disasters but when and where does it cause success? The in-group/out-group bias can lift the motivation and effort of

citizens, soldiers, and leaders alike, as well as be exploited by elites to rally support. In-group/out-group perceptions may be wrong (both materially and morally), but in times of lethal competition they can nevertheless serve to increase public support and solidarity, bolster the war effort, and boost the willingness to sacrifice self-interest and fight for the wider group.

In the case study in chapter 8, I argue that the United States was able to persist and prevail in the long and brutal Pacific campaign against the Japanese in World War II in no small part as a result of the in-group/out-group bias helping to boost support for the war effort among citizens at home, the cohesion of soldiers, sailors, and airmen in the field, and the commitment and determination of leaders.

In chapter 9, I consider an important caveat about the adaptive advantages of cognitive biases. The argument of the book is not that biases are always good in all settings. Rather, the argument is that biases can be advantageous as long as they are manifested *in appropriate settings* and *in moderation*. Biases that become extreme or arise in the wrong contexts are liable to be counterproductive and result in disaster. In general, human cognitive biases are not extreme. They are tendencies that marginally steer our behavior in some particular way. But they nevertheless vary from person to person and situation to situation, meaning that sometimes they will be too weak, and at other times they will be too strong. This chapter considers how strong biases “should” be, to be effective, and the consequences when they become overbearing. To explore the red lines beyond which strategic instincts go too far, I revisit the Pacific campaign in World War II. That brutal conflict illustrates that although the in-group/out-group bias serves to promote cohesion, collective action, and offensive action, the bias can become extreme, to the point that it begins to impose material—as well as moral—costs on the war effort, potentially negating the benefits it may bring to military effectiveness.

Chapter 10 presents a summary of the findings and explores the implications of this new evolutionary perspective on cognitive biases for international relations. The key conclusions are that: (1) *cognitive biases are adaptive*—“strategic instincts” that help not only individuals but also state leaders and nations achieve their goals (whatever those goals may be); (2) effective strategies often *differ radically from those predicted by conventional paradigms*, such as rational choice theory; (3) the approach, as demonstrated in the case studies, offers *novel interpretations of historical events*, especially the American Revolution, the British appeasement of Hitler in the 1930s, and the United States’ Pacific campaign in World War II; and (4) the approach suggests *novel and often counterintuitive strategies* for leaders and policymakers to exploit strategic instincts among themselves, the public, and other states.

This final chapter also considers the future. The mismatch between our evolved psychology and the increasingly technological and globalized world we inhabit is widening ever further. This presents new dangers. We must avoid

creating decision-making protocols, political institutions, and military doctrines that leave traps into which our evolutionary dispositions are likely to fall. But we have seen that biases can be good too. Where they promote our strategic goals, how can we harness and make best use of them? How do we ensure that the positive aspects of our strategic instincts are not swamped by cumbersome decision-making procedures, conflicting training and experience based on rational choice, or philosophical ideals that may be nice in principle but deadly when in lethal competition? Kahneman reminds us that cognitive biases are essential in helping us perform numerous daily tasks, and strategic luminary Carl von Clausewitz stressed the vital importance of intuition in times of war in particular. Our “adaptive unconscious” is by definition—and by design—something we are barely aware of, and thus we also are barely aware of how and when we may be interfering with it. Every day, in life, business, sports, politics, and war, confidence can help promote our ambition and resolve, the fundamental attribution error can keep us alert to our rivals’ intentions, and the in-group/out-group bias can help to foster cohesion and collective action, as well as effective performance in competition with other groups. These are ancient challenges and ones that will always remain important—regardless of social and technological change, as even Kirk and Spock found far in the future—but for which evolution already gave us the gift of our strategic instincts.

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