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Book Reviews

U.S. Presidents and Foreign Policy Mistakes by Stephen G. Walker and Akan Malici. Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2011. 360 pp. Cloth, \$100.00; paper, \$29.99.

Reducing Uncertainty: Intelligence Analysis and National Security by Thomasingar. Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2011. 176 pp. Cloth, \$60.00; paper, \$21.95.

If perfect policies and complete foresight are beyond us, perhaps we can at least minimize mistakes and reduce uncertainty. These are the objectives of the two books under review. Of course this is not new, and the fact—if it is a fact—that things have not gotten much better might lead us to wonder if even these somewhat-modest objectives can be reached. General Carl Von Clausewitz's comment may still apply: "We know more, but this makes us more, not less uncertain." [*On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 102].

Both books also aim for readers in both the academy and the concerned public. A laudable objective, but one difficult to achieve, given the divergence of interests between the two. Thomasingar may have some success, in part due to the widespread interest in intelligence, but I cannot imagine anyone other than a professor or advanced graduate student tackling *U.S. Presidents and Foreign Policy Mistakes*, despite the allure of the title. Part of the reason is that Stephen G. Walker and Akan Malici deploy multiple complex approaches, including Brams's Theory of Moves (a variant of game theory), role theory, and, when more than two actors are involved, complexity theory. Indeed, this makes a simple summary impossible and so I will just present a few of the themes and problems.

The authors center their analysis on the power relations among the actors, highlighting the often-brutal realities summarized by Vladimir Lenin's famous question, "kto-kvo"—who can dominate or control whom? Many mistakes follow from leaders' failures to correctly assess the distribution of power. Others follow from the failure to properly diagnose the situation and the nature and intentions of others. States may then err by doing too little or too much to oppose others, and by acting too soon or too late, a framework that has some parallels to that developed by Charles Glaser in *Rational Theory of International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). Walker and Malici show how we can explore good and bad strategies through the Theory of Moves,

which is more dynamic than normal game theory in focusing on how each actor can and should react to what others do, and which can lead states to minimize mistakes by correctly anticipating how others will respond to what they do. All too often, however, American presidents (and presumably other leaders) have not looked far enough down the game tree or have assumed that others will simply accept American dominance. The strategies that are usually appropriate, the authors argue, are flexible and contingent.

While both the ambition and scope of the book are admirable, it loses sight of some of the subtleties involved in both power and uncertainty. The former is foundational, not only here, but for much of political science, and yet is notoriously slippery and so causes trouble for theory building. Thus, in looking at Soviet–American relations, the authors note the equality of power between them, when it could be argued that much that happened, such as the Soviet attempt to put missiles into Cuba, was a response to the power imbalance. Here, and even more in the cases of Pearl Harbor and Vietnam that the authors discuss, power was central but took forms that the authors as well as the actors failed to fully appreciate. North Vietnam was able to prevail because of its great intensity of preference, which meant that it was willing to take enormous punishment rather than forgo its objectives, and it was this that American leaders were very slow to grasp. But sometimes, even great strength in this dimension is insufficient. It did not allow Japan to prevail in World War II, and while Walker and Malici are correct to note the American failure to anticipate that when pushed to the brink, Japan would attack, they neglect to note that the American error was the result of the failure to see that Japan would adopt a suicidal policy. The question of how one behaves rationally toward an irrational adversary is an interesting one that is not explored here.

Uncertainty, the concept with which Walker and Malici perceptively begin their study, unfortunately gets submerged as they proceed. While they are correct to note that many mistakes follow from misplaced certainty and that to minimize this, leaders should adopt flexible, contingent, and reversible stances, they both underplay the possible bargaining advantages of taking irreversible moves, and, more importantly, underestimate the ambiguity that is likely to be present at all stages of an interaction, and, indeed, to remain in retrospect. Throughout the war in Vietnam, it was unclear whether the North would settle for anything other than total victory. The authors often imply that such a settlement would have been possible had the United States adopted a better strategy, but I think what we now know indicates that this is incorrect, and the fact that there is room for debate even 50 years later reminds us that even if strategies can be designed to probe the environment, great uncertainties will almost always remain. Even so, many mistakes do result from the failure to make a serious and unbiased effort to anticipate what others will do, and so Walker and Malici's message is to be welcomed.

Thomas Fingar, too, points to the importance of reducing uncertainty and, befitting his career experience as an intelligence officer, focuses on its

role. There is much that is sensible and even wise in his analysis, but it simply is not true that intelligence always can—or should—increase certainty. One reason policymakers often cringe when they get a good intelligence briefing is that at its best, intelligence is likely to disturb prevailing policy and decrease rather than increase uncertainty. It often tells those in charge that their ideas may not be right and that several possibilities are plausible, as he notes on pp. 36–37. When the world is uncertain, and the information available is even more so, intelligence must strive to reflect this.

Aside from this misstep, Fingar provides a clear and useful tour of how intelligence analysis is produced, although in places, the book's loose structure betrays its origins as a series of lectures. Aiming more at a general audience than at experts in the field, and having served as Assistant Secretary of State in charge of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research and then as head of the National Intelligence Council in the aftermath of the flawed estimates of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), he is in a good position to describe a wide variety of subjects ranging from relations between policymakers and intelligence officials, to the ways in which the estimates are put together and the functions they can and cannot serve, to the errors that often crop up. He notes, but might have said more about, the obstacles posed by change, which come in two flavors. First, it is hard for intelligence to detect change when it occurs below the surface and is masked—often purposefully—by continuity of rhetoric and some forms of behavior (pp. 9, 27). Second, it is hard for intelligence analysts as individuals and the intelligence community (IC) as a whole to change their views, especially as a product of more and more careful thought rather than dramatic new evidence (pp. 94, 100). The resistance to admitting mistakes is compounded by the competition among agencies to be the first to bring news to policymakers (p. 132), which increases the chance that the initial analyses will, in fact, be incorrect.

Fingar explains that his account is in many ways a personal one, but either his discretion or the requirements of security mean that there are fewer inside stories (there is a good one on p. 31) and less of a sense of what it was like to be there than one might expect. The fact that he was there, however, is central to his claim that the IC performance has greatly improved in response to the Iraq WMD failure. As he explains, analysts now know more about the sources they are drawing on (although whether they know enough is still uncertain), statements are much more carefully documented through the use of footnotes, and cooperation among analysts and agencies has increased, as has self-conscious rigor, abetted by more-institutionalized retrospective evaluations. This is certainly noteworthy, but it is more difficult to judge the extent of the substantive improvements in the intelligence products, since only fairly old estimates are available to the public. It is at least possible that the current stress on backing up all statements with supporting reports may be crimping the acuity of analysts and limiting what they can write.

Fingar was involved in two particularly controversial national intelligence estimates (NIEs): the October 2002 Iraq WMD assessment and the

November 2007 NIE on Iran's nuclear program. The former has been discussed so much that Fingar cannot add much, but his analysis of the latter is more valuable in walking us through how the estimate changed as new information was received, leading to the conclusion that Iran had halted its weaponization program in the fall of 2003. He is convincing in his argument that, contrary to many claims, the estimate holds up very well and was not politically motivated, but he fails to explain why leaders in the IC, himself included, and top officials in the White House failed to anticipate the need to declassify a summary of the paper and so ended up hurriedly releasing the Key Judgments, which, because they had been written for very knowledgeable readers, were badly misunderstood when they were released to the public. He also underestimates the damage that was done in terms of helping to produce relations between policymakers and intelligence that one of the former described to me as "poisonous."

Scholars of international politics rightly see their first job as explaining national behavior and international outcomes, but these books remind us that we should also think about how countries can do better.

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Worse than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia by *Thomas J. Christensen*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2011. 311 pp. \$24.95.

Thomas Christensen has written a superb book that will be of value to scholars of both international relations theory and East Asian security. Refining theories of alliances to explore when and under what conditions weakly coordinated alliances lead to miscalculation, and when and why tightly coordinated alliances might also lead to miscalculation, Christensen provides a number of insights into the complexities of international relations. Christensen argues that while it may seem that facing a united and coordinated set of enemies may appear to be dangerous, it may be just as dangerous to face a set of enemies that are uncoordinated and internally divided. This is because engaging in successful coercive diplomacy with divided enemies is more difficult. Furthermore, internal divisions can lead to mixed signals and contradictory diplomacy, both of which can increase the possibility for miscalculation.

Christensen explores these insights with several case studies drawn from the Cold War in East Asia—the Korean War, the Taiwan Strait crises of 1954–55 and 1958, and the Vietnam War. Christensen argues that weakly coordinated alliances can lead to mixed signaling of intent and seriousness, inviting miscalculation by the rival side. For example, the Korean War was rife with miscalculation: the United States originally was unclear about its commitment to defend South Korea and Taiwan, which undercut deterrence in