



HAL
open science

Book review: The Psychology of Strategy. Exploring Rationality in the Vietnam War

Charles Sitzenstuhl

► **To cite this version:**

Charles Sitzenstuhl. Book review: The Psychology of Strategy. Exploring Rationality in the Vietnam War. *European Review of International Studies*, CERI-Sciences Po/Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU), 2016, 2 (3), pp.169 - 171. hal-03459326

HAL Id: hal-03459326

<https://hal-sciencespo.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03459326>

Submitted on 1 Dec 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Kenneth Payne, *The Psychology of Strategy. Exploring Rationality in the Vietnam War*

(London: Hurst & Company, 2015), pp. 222, ISBN 9781849043373

Reviewed by Charles Sitzenstuhl

CERI-Sciences Po, Paris

In the flourishing field of political psychology, *The Psychology of Strategy* comes as a new affirmation of the added value of psychological perspectives on foreign and defence studies. A former student of leading political psychologists Yuen Foong Khong and David Houghton, Dr Kenneth Payne brilliantly reassesses the US strategy during the Vietnam War through psychological lenses. Focusing on the Johnson and Nixon presidencies, the book does not pretend to be a new history of the conflict. The author's aim is to highlight the (still unappreciated) psychological dimension of the US policy during the Vietnam War, thanks to modern findings in psychology and neuroscience. The book is meant to address people interested in political psychology, international relations (IR), foreign and defence studies (even if the author appears to be more familiar with the IR literature than the FPA one).

Kenneth Payne's thesis is quite clear: strategy is "an inherently psychological activity" (p. 1). More precisely, three recurrent psychological dynamics are the core of strategic reasoning – unconscious processes, group dynamics and emotional processes. This point of view is a challenge to mainstream IR theories based on the rational actor model. The author also makes a strong point arguing that decision-makers do not wage war because of 'rational' concepts of fear and interest (that are the core of realist theories of IR). According to Payne, honour can be "the most important reason for conflict between groups", since fear and interest are socially constructed realities, while psychologists show that the search of self-esteem within the group and the group's great concern with its standing towards other groups are the key to understanding human behaviour (pp. 8–9). In short, the main benefit of *The Psychology of Strategy* is to provide alternative answers based on psychology, when mainstream IR theories are incapable of explaining puzzling policies, such as the American one in Vietnam. Why did a super Power remain engaged in a marginal and costly war for such a long time (p. 5)?

Kenneth Payne develops his answers in six chapters mixing theoretical and empirical elements. Chapter 2, 'The Genius of Command', develops around the role of the unconscious in decision-making. Leading psychologist Daniel Kahneman showed that our 'System 1' mode of thought is instinctive and emotional, in opposition to 'System 2' which is deliberative and logical. "Decision-makers ... might strive for calm rationality, but their behaviour is inevitably imbued with passion", states

Payne (p. 30). He proves his point with examples showing how Johnson and Nixon were balanced between rational and emotional attitudes during the Vietnam War. He also clarifies why strategic goals are not purely rational. They are influenced by psychological processes such as impact bias (overestimation of future feelings) or cognitive fluency (preference to take easy decisions). Kenneth Payne also brilliantly challenges the so-called rationality of the domino theory. The latter was popular in US command because it provided simplicity in a confusing and uncertain situation. It helped US leaders to justify their actions in Southeast Asia while it was in fact difficult to know how countries, like Thailand, were really vulnerable to communist expansion (p. 44).

Chapter 3 and 4, entitled 'Social Identity at War' and 'Honour, Revenge and Reputation', explore the role of esteem in decision-making. We act for our own esteem and for the esteem of the group to which we feel we belong. This social psychology perspective reminds us that "preferences are shaped by social context, not ontologically given" (p. 53). The author also shows that a war is not only a purely military confrontation. It is also a social confrontation between two societies, as well as a constant dialogue between leaders and their fellow citizens. That is why the search for esteem was an essential driver for US decision-makers during the Vietnam War. American officials were obsessed with the reputation of their country, explaining why they did not leave the war when the first problems appeared on the field.

Chapter 5, 'Shock Versus the Social Network', continues to study the importance of social dynamics during wars. A war can be seen as a test of a society's resilience. During the US Air Force bombing, Vietnamese society proved its resilience. The gradual escalation strategy of the Americans allowed the people to get used to bombing. The Vietnamese social network was actually stronger than US military capacities, perfectly illustrating the fact that war is not only a 'raw' material confrontation but also a social and psychological one.

Chapter 6, 'Risk and the Fog of War', turns back to leaders' attitudes. How does the command cope with risk? Based on recent findings about the brain functioning towards risk, Payne continues here brilliantly to dismantle rationalist theories of decision-making.

Chapter 7, 'Memory and Myth', finally addresses the role of history in decision-making. In a neuroscience perspective, memories do play a role as a construction of the mind rather than a digital record of what happened (p. 167). Payne's conclusion is that memory and imagination have a profound impact on strategy, seeing them as the "essence of cognition" (p. 182).

Far beyond the Vietnamese case study, Dr Payne distinguishes himself thanks to an erudite discussion of Clausewitz' writings all through the book. We all remember from the famous Prussian strategist that war is politics by other means, but Payne reminds us that Clausewitz also wrote that "action can never be based on anything firmer than instinct" (p. xii) and that "the commander's psychology greatly influences his actions" (p. 28). According to Payne's careful reading of Clausewitz, war is a psychological activity. This link between classical writings and recent psychological discoveries makes this book original, valuable, and shows that contemporary political psychology can exhume old arguments.

Readers interested in this perpetual issue of the level of analysis in social sciences can also find interesting developments in Payne's work. The author is not afraid to

address the structure and agency debate in a 'balanced' way. He firmly believes in agency, because he thinks that individuals do make history. Nevertheless, "agency does not require consciousness" (p. 185), meaning that individuals do not often know why they decide something. Moreover, agents live in a social environment and their behaviour is shaped by social constraints. That is why the collective structure has a deep impact on the individual actions. But Payne interestingly states that this impact is "probabilistic" and "not deterministic" (p. 185). In that sense, even if he does not mention it clearly, Payne is in line with the idea that every actor has a "margin of liberty" (the expression comes from Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg). Eventually, behind its main psychological topic, *The Psychology of Strategy* proves to be a way of thinking about the role of the individual in the making of history.