

# Can Policy Makers Learn Lessons from the Past?

Written by Adam Groves

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ADAM GROVES, DEC 3 2007

Historical lessons and analogies are commonly referred to in political discourse and the global media. I propose that whilst a knowledge of the past is beneficial, references to particular lessons are undermined by the near-infinite nature of history. Policy makers can learn almost any lesson they choose from our past because it is ambivalent in nature and its interpretation is subjective. Historical references are chosen according to personal viewpoints or bias and superficial or irrelevant similarities can be used to tie past events to modern day occurrences. Furthermore, the past is often not used genuinely to find lessons, but rather merely to justify pre-decided policies.

### Introduction

Policy makers often cite the 'lessons of history' when they address possible courses of action with current day issues. They also refer to historical events both directly through analogies, and with the use of words and phrases that summon particular historical memories.

To establish whether policy makers can actually learn lessons from the past, I will take up two key questions. Does the past hold lessons for us, and if so how and why are policy makers using or misusing the past? I shall answer these core questions and conclude that policy makers can learn any lesson they choose to from the past, and therefore despite certain uses with regards to diagnosing and evaluating situations, references to 'the past' are usually unhelpful and misleading. To argue this point, I shall focus on the complex notions of how history is subjectively constructed and interpreted and the ambiguous nature of drawing lessons from the past. I will illustrate my argument with references to historical events, concentrating primarily on the Munich and Vietnam analogies, and the comparisons being drawn between restructuring in Iraq and the American occupation of Japan following the Second World War. I will also briefly refer to other historical events and analogies as I analyse how the past has been misused and misinterpreted.

Before I begin my argument however, I shall address an ambiguity, which policy makers themselves often neglect, by defining the term 'past', and the definite and important distinctions between the terms 'past' and 'history'. 'History' is

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used as another term for 'the past'. However, it's also a word to describe people's varying interpretations of the past meaning it is a complex and contested concept that has numerous competing perspectives.

## **The Ambiguous Nature of Lessons from the Past**

The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Sudan has already been compared to Bosnia, Rwanda and the Holocaust; the rebuilding of Iraq and Afghanistan is being equated to the post-war restructuring of Japan and West Germany and the prolonged military operation in Iraq is drawing comparisons with Vietnam. Y F Khong (1992: 10) has suggested that such analogies allow policy makers to carry out diagnostic analysis that is fundamental to political decision-making. He argues that references to the past can allow current situations to be better defined; stakes to be assessed; prescriptions provided; alternatives suggested and the moral-rightness and dangers of the situation to be evaluated. However, Khong also acknowledges that policy makers often, "use history badly, invoking inappropriate analogies that not only fail to illuminate the new situation but also mislead by emphasising superficial and irrelevant parallels" (1992: 12).

In the last decade alone there have been three separate and internationally acknowledged cases of genocide: most recently in Sudan (2004) and previously, in Bosnia (1992-1995) and Rwanda (1994). These atrocities have occurred whilst the cries of 'never again' still echo from our recent past, a fact that would suggest that the 'lessons of history' are not always being learnt. Many writers (May, 1973; Khong, 1992; Reiter, 1996; Neustadt and May, 1996; Paris, 2002; Record, 2002; Dower 2003) would argue however, that this is because the past does not necessarily hold specific 'lessons' and that whilst knowledge is undeniably better than ignorance, history can mislead. David Campbell touches on the way varying interpretations can be taken from single events in his article 'MetaBosnia' (1998). Specifically, Campbell identifies the role that cultural bias and ethnic prejudices have had in interpreting events in the Yugoslav conflict.

The contentious nature of interpreting the past (and its lessons) can be seen in several scholars' response to US policy makers' comparisons between Iraq and post WWII Japan. Dower (2003) writes that 'many of the conditions that contributed to the success of the occupation of Japan are simply absent in Iraq' whilst Selden (2004) highlights the flaws in the analogy by pointing out that whilst not a single member of the US forces was killed in Japan during six years occupation, 16,000 troops have been injured in Iraq and over 1260 have died. Far from being a model for American foreign policy, Dower (2003) argues that, 'the Japanese analogy should stand as a warning that we are lurching toward war with no idea of what we are really getting into.' Dower has gleaned completely the opposite message to US policy makers from the same analogy

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Whilst some historical references have clear implications, others (such as the case with Dower's interpretation of the Iraq-Japan analogy) are less established and can be highly contested. The ambiguous nature of certain historical analogies was also seen during the Bosnian genocide and Kosovo conflict. Whilst allusions to the Holocaust were contentious only in the sense that people either agreed or disagreed with the parallel, in the case of the Balkans being a new Munich, or a new Vietnam, not only did people contest the comparisons, they also quarrelled about the actual meaning and the perceived lessons one could gain from the original events (Paris, 2002). The contentious and subjective nature of historical interpretation means that the 'lessons' one draws from the past will themselves often be the subject of debate and argument.

Policy makers must infer what their own understandings of the past may be according to their personal priorities, emotions, historical knowledge and general perceptions. All of these are subjective and liable to scrutiny from people with different backgrounds and concerns. Khong summarises this mode of thought with relation to historical analogies by commenting, "to use a certain analogy by no means prescribes a certain response" (1992:67).

## **The Emotive Nature of Historical Analogies**

As a result of the subjective nature of the past, there are numerous examples where academics have attacked policy maker's decisions with regards to their use of history. A central criticism is that one can take an emotive or narrow view (May, 1973: 45). Len Scott (in Baylis and Smith, 2001: 89) has argued that as a result of aggressive foreign policy (a response to the failure of appeasement in Munich), America unnecessarily pushed countries such as Cuba and Vietnam towards communism by alienating them from the international community.

America's foreign policy in general was driven, throughout the cold war, by a vivid awareness of the failures at Munich. This is seen in the frank and direct rhetoric used with relation to Vietnam by US policy makers. Secretary of the Navy, J V Forrestal commented in 1945, 'There are no returns on appeasement' and US ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge posed the provocative question 'Can't we see the similarity to our own indolence at Munich?' E R May (1973: 112-113) and Jeffrey Record (2002: 11-33) believe that the 'lessons' of the 1930s weighed heavily on the presidents advisors when it came to Vietnam. The emotionally driven nature of certain historical analogies can be seen with relation to the disastrous setbacks that hit the international community in the run-up to the Second World War. Chris Brown (2001: 13) notes that 60 years later 'appeasement' is still a term of abuse.

Policy makers usually rely on recent or renowned global events to form their historical understanding, with war and revolution tending to be the most influential when it comes to determining the lessons they draw (Khong,

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1992; Rheimer, 1996). This issue of particular impressions being left on individuals by the past is crucial, for policy makers do not 'learn' from the past in general; rather they respond to their own personal experiences and interpretation of history.

## **The Past used Inaccurately**

The idea that analogies from the past are used inaccurately and without sound knowledge is recurrent throughout twentieth century politics. Neustadt and May (1996: 75) point out that American policy makers simply dodged the 'bothersome analogy' of the humiliating French defeat in Vietnam just a decade earlier. Khong (1996: 60) shows that the 'French Experience' was barely raised in public at all. Addressing the risks that policy makers' take when using the past to determine their actions, Stanley Hoffmann (1968) wrote in relation to the Vietnam War that 'America's principles distorted perception and analysis because they oversimplify complicated situations.'

Robert Jervis (1976: 220) has argued that although historical analogies provide a useful shortcut to rationality, they also obscure aspects of the present case that are different from the past one. E R May (1974: 190) emphasised that when policy makers over-simplify or misunderstand the past, it leads to deficiencies in their conclusions and policies.

Merely because past events hold superficial similarities to modern day occurrences does not deem them suitable foundations for advisors to build policy upon. In 1973 Arthur Schlesinger commented in a book review that the past was, 'an enormous grab bag with a prize for everybody'; the implication being that you can prove whatever you want with history. Robert Jervis (1976: 223) argued that the aggressive stance taken following Munich by American foreign policy makers was a very different interpretation of events to the majority of scholarly accounts, which in his belief concluded that appeasement was an error, but that forceful deterrence was not possible because Hitler preferred the idea of war to containment.

## **The Past used for 'advocacy rather than diagnosis'**

There are three central ideas with regard to how policy makers use historical analogies. The first two that I shall address leave some scope for policy makers to learn from 'lessons of the past'.

Academics such as Goldstein and Keohane (quoted in Brandstrom, Bynander and Hart, 2004) suggest that historical analogies are used by policy makers primarily to provide information on which course of action will best protect their pre-existing interests. The value of historical knowledge in this instance, specifically with regards to analysis and evaluation, has been acknowledged by Khong (1992: 10) and Hemmer (1999). Both argue that this

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view is partially simplified though, and that analogies can influence policies and interests themselves. Khong (1992: 5) and Neustadt and May (1996: 7) refer to the Cuban Missile crisis where Kennedy, having learnt the lessons of Pearl Harbour, was eager not to launch a pre-emptive and illegal strike.

A third mode of thought however, leaves little scope for lessons to be assembled from the past. Many members of the academic community, (Brandstrom et al, 2004; Taylor and Rourke, 1995) question even whether policy makers attempt to learn from the past, arguing instead that politicians invoke analogies to sell their decisions to the public rather than as an aid to diagnosis. Khong (1992: 60-61) believes that by tallying policy makers' use of analogies in private and in public, one can deduce whether the analogies informed their assessment of events. He argues that in the case of Vietnam the historical analogies used show that policy makers were using them for analysis and evaluation, not merely justification. This stands in contrast to the view of Breslauer and Tetlock (1991: 307) who state that, "even those analogies used in private were used for advocacy rather than diagnosis." It is possible to argue that the past is used for all three of these practices. Vertzberger (1986) argues that history provides the building blocks for defining situations, circumscribing roles and justifying as well as determining strategy. Khong (1992: 10) attributes history with similar uses for policy makers.

## Conclusion

There appears then to be a general academic consensus that the past can be used to learn lessons, although the nature of these lessons may vary according to how policy makers apply them. The problem arises not with whether policy makers can learn from the past, but rather with the vague and indefinite nature of what they can choose to learn. Schlesinger's comments with regards to the past being a 'grab bag with a prize for everybody' seem to be highly perceptive. Policy makers are not responding to an objective past through impartial eyes. One takes varying lessons from history according to which events dominate your personal experience and knowledge. Although we may possess a common past, it is seen through the prisms of varying cultural and political biases, meaning each individual policy maker has a different idea of history and can therefore emerge with wildly different lessons. Through a combination of the past being used inaccurately, emotively, and ambiguously to decide and legitimise policies and interests, I conclude that it is more often unhelpful and misleading than an educative instrument of analysis and evaluation.

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