

# David Patrick Houghton

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## Tragic Choices and the Limits of Rationality

**CITIZEN GUIDES TO  
POLITICS & PUBLIC AFFAIRS**


Routledge

# A CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

American foreign policy often looks like a trail of man-made debris and disaster. Of course, the explanations for many poorly-made decisions are rather complex. In this brief and cogent analysis, Houghton shows us that understanding American foreign policy often comes down to recognizing the cognitive limitations of the decision-makers, which affects the foreign policy process. Then there is the nature of the decisions themselves. Quite a few decisions in American foreign policy involve 'tragic' choices, where leaders are effectively confronted with a series of progressively bad or uncomfortable options. And it is equally clear that some policies are not the product of any one individual's preferences, but emerge as a consequence of the way in which complex modern governments with large bureaucracies operate.

Written with the interested layperson in mind, as well as students of international affairs, this *Citizen's Guide to American Foreign Policy* asks questions like, "Why do presidents so often do things which seem to be directly against the national interests of the United States—not just in retrospect, but even at the time?" "Why do there seem to be so many fiascos in US foreign policy?" "Why does Congress sometimes tie the hands of the president in foreign affairs?" "Why do presidents seem to respond more to opinion polls or to what's on CNN and Fox News than they do to the core interests of the United States?" Houghton's overview helps us see past the partisan in-fighting that too often obscures the central issues in foreign affairs. This is vital, required reading for all readers who wish to better understand America's involvement in the world.

**David Patrick Houghton** is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Central Florida. He is the author of *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, *Political Psychology: Situations, Individuals, and Cases*, and *The Decision Point: Six Case Studies in US Foreign Policy Decision-Making*, as well as co-author of *Controversies in American Politics and Society*.

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**A Citizen's Guide to American Foreign Policy:  
Tragic Choices and the Limits of Rationality**

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# A CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

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# CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xi</i>
1 The Fiasco Factory: A Frank Drebin School of American Foreign Policy?	1
2 Don't Know Much about History: What's the Difference between Iran and Iraq, Again?	25
3 Republicans or Democrats, and Leadership in General: Does It Make a Difference?	41
4 The Trouble with Congress	57
5 Special Interests: How <i>Special</i> Are They?	74
6 Making Foreign Policy by Image, Sound Bite, and Opinion Poll?	92
7 See No Evil, Hear No Evil	110
8 Conclusions	124
<i>Notes</i>	<i>137</i>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>142</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>146</i>



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## FOREWORD

In this highly readable book, David Houghton explores why American foreign policy decisions often go awry. Dr. Houghton is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Central Florida University and a prolific author on American foreign policy from a psychological perspective. Professor Houghton's work has especially focused on the powerful role that preconceptions and reasoning by analogy (both accurate and inaccurate) play in decision making. By revealing the host of cognitive errors that decision makers commit—against a backdrop of the tragic choices and lose-lose situations in international affairs that often confront them—he explains the origins of unfortunate foreign policy adventures. Although Houghton acknowledges that Americans are astonishingly ill-informed about international events, he does not accept that decisions necessarily would be any better rendered by an insulated elite. Indeed, he argues that the foreign policy elite has contributed to many serious policy blunders.

Houghton examines the role of parties, presidents, Congress, “special interests,” mass media, and opinion polls in the mix of factors that influence foreign policy decisions. He also examines the conflicts between the moral desire to intervene as a global superpower and the boundaries of national self-interest, including the costs of intervention. Given these interwoven factors—political, psychological, and moral—that enter into foreign policy, it is difficult to find a judicious balance. On some matters, political pressures loom especially large. On others, deep preconceptions on the part of decision makers may result in obscuring important counterarguments. On still others, the conflict between morality and national interest is deep and often unresolvable.

## FOREWORD

A foreign policy motivated by moral considerations can lead to serious errors of commission and overcommitment, while a foreign policy motivated by national self-interest can lead to serious errors of omission and tragedies that might have been prevented. In either case, a tragedy—whether of the Vietnam War or the genocides in Rwanda and the Balkans—may be the consequence.

Professor Houghton finds no easy answers to these dilemmas, noting that they are not merely American problems. Other world powers also have made serious mistakes in their international relations, even though their leaders often have had more political leeway to make decisions. While it is unclear whether a better-informed citizenry would necessarily result in a wiser foreign policy, Houghton encourages us to become better informed by including a number of sources through which as citizens we can learn more and perhaps hold our leadership more accountable for the choices they make.

Bert A. Rockman & Morgan Marietta  
*Series Editors*

## PREFACE

In the Fall of 2012, my old friend and mentor Bert Rockman (of Purdue University) and his co-editor Morgan Marietta (of the University of Massachusetts Lowell) set me a challenge: could I write a popular treatment of American foreign policy that would be designed for the layperson and relatively jargon-free—avoiding all of those footnotes which tend to clog up academic texts and which often seem to put the general reader off—while still producing something that could be used as a basic introduction to the topic and would be useful to undergraduate students and other serious readers? The book should not be “dumbed down,” but should be accessible and comprehensible to the general reader while still remaining informative and drawing on scholarly research. The intended market for this slim volume, as with other contributions to the *Citizen’s Guide* series, is primarily the general reader as opposed to a solely college audience, but it is written in such a way as to be useful to those teaching a basic introduction to American foreign policy as well. It is designed to appeal to a reader with no background in the academic study of U.S. foreign policy.

I cannot think of a book on the current market that is quite like this one, designed for a general audience or “the man in the street” but still informative and thought-provoking enough to be useful as an undergraduate text. There are, of course, many excellent textbooks on U.S. foreign policy. There are also many good critiques of it—Joseph Nye’s *Soft Power* stands out in recent years as an especially good example—but most tend to focus on one particular issue rather than the broad range of puzzles discussed in this short book. Probably the best is Loch Johnson’s excellent guide to many of these issues, *The Seven*

*Sins of American Foreign Policy.* The starting point of this project is a bit different: foreign policy failure and the ways in which that can be traced to defects in how organizations, groups, and individuals think. Johnson also covers a range of issues which is a bit narrower than this one. I wanted, for instance, to touch on the role of ethnic lobbies, the news media, and opinion polls, examining how those might affect U.S. foreign policy for good or ill. I also examine the “CNN Effect” debate here, which I’ve included because the average reader or observer of U.S. foreign policy is often apt to feel that television has changed America’s approach towards the rest of the world. Maybe that’s right.

The book offers a very basic introduction to some major organizational, group and individual psychological pathologies of decision-making. Bureaucratic infighting between organizations, the emergence of groupthink and overreliance on simplified mental shortcuts like historical analogies are all discussed, illustrated with various fiascos drawn from nearly seventy years of post-war U.S. foreign policy. The main focus will be on the Bay of Pigs, Iran hostage rescue mission, Vietnam War, Iraq, and Afghanistan. However, the book also makes it clear that the problem derives not from the supposed “stupidity” of the decision-makers themselves, but from our inbuilt tendency to shortcut a fully rational decision-making process, as well as the basic difficulty or tragedy of the problems themselves.

I especially want to thank Bert most of all. He has been a wonderful source of intellectual and academic support over the last twenty years since I was his Teaching Assistant at the University of Pittsburgh, for one of those 200-person introduction to American politics classes that you have to teach with a megaphone. He has written countless reference letters for me over the years, becoming a good friend when we were briefly both at the Mershon Center of the Ohio State University, and later acting as an over-the-telephone “psychiatrist” when I was feeling down with academic life. It was Bert who initially invited me to write this manuscript while he was sitting at home in Indiana having his lunch, and I was floating around my pool with a cell phone in Florida, and I’m glad that he did. Michael Kerns at Routledge—with whom I’ve worked on other projects—was another great source of support as always, as was Morgan Marietta. Morgan did a quite superlative editing job on the original version of this manuscript, and I accepted 99% of his excellent suggestions. Annabelle Conroy researched the

## PREFACE

excellent list of foreign policy sources that appears at the end of this book. And as always my long suffering family need to be amply credited as well. I apologize for ignoring you all when I was writing this.

Before I sat down to write this book, I wasn't entirely sure what would come out. Can a book about American foreign policy actually be fun to read, while remaining informative at the same time for undergraduate students to use as an introduction to the topic? That's the balance I've tried to strike in this book, but I'll leave it to the reader to decide how far I've succeeded.

David Patrick Houghton

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## THE FIASCO FACTORY

### A Frank Drebin School of American Foreign Policy?

In the 1988 movie *The Naked Gun*, Detective Frank Drebin—played by the late, great comedy actor Leslie Nielsen—tries to uncover a plan to assassinate Queen Elizabeth II of England, who is on a state visit to the United States. In one scene, Drebin arrives at “Police Squad” headquarters. Getting out of his car, he forgets to put the hand brake on and the car collides with several other vehicles, creating various explosions and general mayhem. He is so distracted, though, that he does not realize what he has done, and even discharges his weapon at his own car. “Did anyone get the license plate?” he shouts at passers-by. He then absentmindedly wanders inside the building, apparently unaware of what he has done or of his own responsibility for the events he has set in train.

American foreign policy often resembles a similar trail of man-made debris and disaster. Indeed, it often seems as if Drebin himself is calling the shots, stumbling into one fiasco after another. In 1961, John F. Kennedy—who most people think of as one of our *smarter* presidents—gave the go-ahead for a half-baked plan to invade Cuba. “How could I have been so stupid?” he asked himself when the whole thing failed spectacularly. In 1965, his successor Lyndon Johnson escalated US involvement in a war we now know he did not want and which many of his generals predicted would take years to win, and this at a time when US military advisers were prone to give overoptimistic assessments of the future. In 1980, Jimmy Carter tried to engineer the release of US hostages being held in Iran by launching an incredibly difficult and complicated military plan which was supposed to bring about their rescue. Many of Carter’s advisers warned that the



plan had a very low chance of succeeding, and yet Carter went ahead with it anyway. The plan failed spectacularly, so much so that comparisons to the Bay of Pigs disaster were rife; and when the hostages were finally released through diplomatic means the following year, many of them expressed relief that the military plan had failed at an early stage because had it succeeded, they would most likely have been killed. And in 2003, President George W. Bush responded to the tragic events of September 11, 2001 by invading Iraq, a country which, as many of his advisers warned him, had absolutely nothing to do with the attack on the United States. Iraqi exiles visiting the White House had to explain to Bush the difference between a Sunni and a Shiite Muslim, a distinction the president had apparently never heard of before.

Of course, the explanation for many poorly made decisions is far more complex than one of simple “stupidity.” One central problem is common to all foreign policy decision making, not just to American foreign policy: the cognitive limitations of human beings. As cognitive scientists often point out, the human brain is an exquisite organ which is capable of doing amazing things. Specialists in the field of artificial intelligence have not yet been able to create a computer or robot which can do even half the things the human brain can do. How do you program for intuition, for instance? How do you give a computer judgment? And how can we program for feeling and emotion? On the other hand, computers are generally better than we are at storing and retrieving information. Human memory is fallible, and we often make mistakes when we attempt to recall events (sometimes “remembering” events that did not even occur). Psychologists and neuroscientists have shown that we only attend to about 5% of the sensory data around us. We miscategorize people and events, putting them into the wrong boxes. We also frequently ignore information which ought to cause us to change our minds about something. In order to cope with the information with which we are bombarded, we frequently resort to the use of cognitive short cuts, such as historical analogies. Added to these individual psychological limitations are the effects that group pressure and membership in organizations can have on behavior. And the fact that some problems involve tragic choices in which there is no good solution and where virtually every option is costly.

This does not exhaust the list of factors which distort what we might think of as a rational foreign policymaking process. Domestic politics