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Using and Misusing History: Kosovo and the Epistemological Challenge

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Abstract. This article highlights the difficulties inherent to informing security policy with history.

During the policy process--or more accurately, policy processes characterized by and ascribed to nonlinear, chaotic phenomena that are linked largely through illusory correlation to acts deemed to be policy--respect, tribute, and even oppositional aphorisms often are raised to history. So the story goes, there are lessons from history that must be learned. Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. On the other hand, history is the past not the present nor future. No two situations are alike, so those who think they learn from history are not doomed to repeat it, but merely doomed.

Three are even more pragmatic concerns. Is history a sequence of events in series and/or in parallel? Is history a continuous, onrushing welter that can only be sampled? Does history have any meaning at all independent of necessarily skewed perceptual and interpretive strategies. And even if history can be validly conceived of as manageable and meaningful, how does one know what aspects are germane to the present and future--e.g., to policy development, implementation, and evaluation?

That all the above concerns have concrete as well as abstract consequences can be illustrated by considering the current policy deliberations concerning the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) bombing of Yugoslavian military assets in Montenegro and Serbia. Supporters of the evolving policy point out that Milosevic has "backed down" in the face of military force before and, therefore, he'll back down now. These supporters conveniently do not point out that the "backing down" has occurred so that his overall political position has been bettered. Is this really backing down or merely an example of an anchoring technique wherein aggression is escalated and then reduced to a level above the pre-escalation level that seems to be a retreat only via the most recent psychophysical and social comparison processes?

Opponents of the evolving policy point out that it's eerily similar to United States (U.S.) policy leading up to and during the Vietnam War that ended in 1975 with a US defeat. Specifically, the opponents cite a civil war involving atrocities on both sides, although much more on one than the other; one side having a strong, authoritarian ruler, the other, a more amorphous, shifting, and less adept leadership, seemingly doomed to failure without Western aid; and the threat of an ever-widening conflict transcending political boundaries of its origins. Yet the leadership differences between Ho Chi Minh and Slobodan Milosevic--as well as sociocultural differences between Slavic-Serbs and Vietnamese--should cause opponents of NATO policy to pause in their righteous indignation.

Too often, history is not used to inform policy but rather to consciously and/or unconsciously support instincts, predilections, and outright decisions that have already become salient. This social psychological phenomenon is not that different than selectively attending to positive information about an expensive purchase while ignoring and discounting that purchase's negative features as well as the positive features of other products/services that were not purchased. In Kosovo, as with other security policy dilemmas, the history of history informing policies is largely tragic. Is this the only lesson learned? (See Attempting to Learn from History: NATO, Anti-Drug Policies, and Intelligence Assets. (July 18, 1997).

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