"Visceral Politics and Its Impact on U.S. Foreign Policy Decision Making"

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Recent years have seen a huge expansion of interest in the role of emotion in foreign policy. Neuroscientists in particular have moved away from a more or less exclusive focus on cognition in decision making, turning instead to the role of emotion. As Jennifer Lerner and her colleagues note:

> A veritable revolution in the science of emotion has begun … yearly scholarly papers on emotion and decision making doubled from 2004 to 2007 and again from 2007 to 2011, and increased by an order of magnitude as a proportion of all scholarly publications on "decision making" …. Indeed, many psychological scientists now assume that emotions are, for better or worse, the dominant driver of most meaningful decisions in life (Lerner, Li, Valdesolo and Kassam 2014: 800-801).

The profound role which emotion plays in politics has always been clear, of course, even if it has not always been judged a topic which could be studied systematically. As Albert Einstein is reputed to have said, "not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted, counts". While the study of emotion in political science was arguably inhibited for many years by an inability to see emotional responses at work - particularly where the emphasis was on things which could be objectively measured, rather than those that were merely of strong interest - the use of MRI machines has changed the nature of the field.[1]

[1] This article benefited greatly from the astute comments of two anonymous reviewers. Any errors which remain are, of course, to be attributed to the authors alone.

Many of the accounts of emotion in IR theory and political science now highlight the centrality of emotion in everything we do (Mercer 2002; Renshon and Lerner 2012; Dolan 2016; McDermott 2018; Markwica 2018). Indeed, the role of emotion in decision making has in many ways become *the* major area of innovation in foreign policy analysis. We should of course distinguish between theories in which decision making is affected in a *secondary* or 'incidental' way by some transitory feature of the environment unrelated to the specific decision-making task (e.g. mood or stress), and approaches in which emotion has a direct effect on choice, in a *primary* or integral manner (Lempert and Phelps 2014). Here we shall focus on the second type of influence, using the example of Antonio Damasio's somatic marker approach.

As Emeran Mayer notes, "the popular statement that somebody has made a decision based on their gut feelings may have an actual neurobiological basis related to brain–gut interactions, and to interoceptive memories related to such interactionsm" (Mayer 2011: 10). The term 'interoception' refers to more than just the gut, of course, and highlights the role of what is going on in the body on the 'higher' cognitive and emotional operations of the brain (Craig 2002; Seth 2013; Tsakiris and De Preester 2019; Berntsen, Gianaros and Tsakiris 2019: 3), and normal, healthy linkages between body and mind result in what we call "intuitive decision making" (Mayer 2011: 10). This may be regarded as 'thinking without thinking' and occurs instantaneously, without the application of rigorous procedures (Kahneman 2012).

Applied to political behavior, this process has been termed "visceral politics" (Loewenstein 1996; Tsakiris and De Preester 2019; Tsakiris, Vehar and Tucciarelli 2021). Literally speaking, the viscera constitute the internal organs of the body, including the lungs, the heart, and the organs of the digestive tract. To say that something is 'visceral' means that it is felt 'deep down', within the internal organs of the body. The term denotes something which is 'of the body' in

general, and it may also refer to something instinctive, automatic or elemental, occurring independently of conscious thought. As Tsakiris and his colleagues note, "while the study of affect and emotion has a long history in psychological sciences and neuroscience, the very question of how visceral states have come to the forefront of politics remains poorly understood. The concept of *visceral politics* captures how the physiological nature of our engagement with the social world influences how we make decisions, just as socio-political forces recruit our physiology to influence our socio-political behaviour" (Tsakiris, Vehar and Tucciarelli 2021).

The role of visceral politics in decision making could in principle be studied in a number of ways. Much of Antonio Damasio's theory is about the role of the ventromedial prefrontal cortex in the brain, so the general reader may be wondering how this argument 'fits' with bodily awareness and interoception. Emotion, as he sees it, is something primarily 'Jamesian', something that we feel deep down in the body and is then transmitted to the brain, and much of Damasio's work looks at what happens when the interoceptive process is damaged or interrupted. So his theory is essentially a visceral approach, in which decision making originates in bodily responses. This manuscript suggests, then, that somatic marker theory offers a useful starting point for studying visceral politics, since it suggests that emotional feelings may play a direct role in foreign policy decision-making.

Somatic Marker (SMH) Theory

The somatic marker hypothesis theory has been "highly influential" within the study of behavioral economics (Newell, Lagnado and Shanks 2015: 222), but it remains underexploited within political science and international relations. Damasio developed this approach, though, to help explain how decisions are made in the real world (Damasio 1994: 165-201). Rational choice approaches derived from traditional economics suggest that decisions are the result of a

rather labored and complex process in which one first obtains all the information pertinent to an issue, then generates a list of options, then weighs up the costs and benefits based on this information search, then finally selects that option which is 'best' in terms of both costs and benefits. Damasio views this approach – usually termed the Rational Actor Model or RAM in political science - as wholly unrealistic, and too slow to be of use in many situations. It is especially unlikely that we evolved in this ponderous but deliberative way; if we were being attacked by a physical threat, for instance, we would have needed some very quick and near instantaneous decision-making process in order to repel or escape from it.

Damasio suggests that the slow method, which he calls 'high reason', is actually characteristic of patients with damage to a part of the brain called the prefrontal cortex. Such individuals become overwhelmed by choice, since they are unable to select a cutoff point for ending the process of considering information. In a supermarket, for instance, the absence of emotional markers or 'tags' – telling us what our likes and dislikes are - makes it almost impossible to know whether we should select one product as opposed to another (Eagleman 2017: 119-23). Somatic markers are what make us 'care' whether we choose a particular alternative, providing essential clues in the selection process. They are essentially short cuts, associations between situations and the feelings that these have previously activated within us, and Damasio believes that within the human brain the ventromedial prefrontal cortex is integral to such reasoning, interacting with better known centers of emotion like the amygdala and the limbic system.

Somatic markers are not necessarily *conscious* memories – at least, not in Damasio's view - but are initially subconscious feelings that help shape decision-making by disposing us in favor of things which produce favorable sensations and against those which are unfavorable. As Verweij and Damasio put it:

The critical idea in the somatic marker hypothesis is that when we are faced with the need to select a particular course of action, we make the selection not only based on the facts of the situation and the intellectual analysis that favors the most advantageous choice, but also based on the profile and intensity of the affective accompaniment of the intellectual process. On issues that really matter, the elements in this process—such as the options before us or the anticipation of the consequences of selecting one or another option—trigger emotive responses and generate the corresponding feelings or the corresponding covert signals, which can bias decisions nonconsciously. The implementation of the emotive process is grounded in the body—and is thus "somatic"—and as it occurs it "marks" the causative stimulus with a valence: positive/appetitive/rewarding or negative/punishing (Verweij and Damasio 2019: 2).

Sometimes known as 'biomarkers' or 'valence markers', they treat a given experience with an event or person as predominantly 'positive' or 'negative' (Prinz 2004: 160-178). They then impact decision making through a process of *re-experience* and mold decision making in a *predispositional* way, acting as a series of powerful 'pushes' and 'pulls' which can be difficult to overcome in any subsequent cost-benefit analysis; first impressions, as we know, exert a disproportionate focusing effect. Since somatic markers are largely idiosyncratic, you cannot really feel something vicariously, as you might if you read about the Spanish-American War or WWI, for example. There is an important qualitative difference between 'feeling' and merely 'knowing' something on a purely intellectual level (Damasio 2021). It is not enough to register something cognitively, and people who have not experienced an event directly do not attribute the same significance to it; they have not felt it bodily, and have not experienced the pleasant or unpleasant physical symptoms (or memory of them) which accompany psychological ones.

Just as scholars are beginning to link specific emotions to decision making, so too are we starting to utilize theories like the somatic marker approach, at least in a general way. As Rose McDermott – one of the real trailblazers in the application of neurological theories to political

psychology - puts it, the somatic marker theory offers "a powerful alternative model for synthesizing the role of body and mind in the experience of both emotion and decision making. This argument suggests that what most people understand as optimal 'rational' judgment in fact depends, fundamentally, on an emotional system, which informs us, physically, about how we feel about the choices we confront …. The core of a somatic approach lies in recognizing the primacy of the physical body in both experiencing and conveying emotions. All other aspects, including historical and cultural influences, are secondary to this somatic experience" (McDermott 2014: 558).

Some somatic markers – and probably most of those utilized in foreign policy decision making - utilize an 'as if' mechanism. In other words, we imagine what would happen if were back in that situation, and we quickly rule the option 'in' or 'out' on the basis of the likely consequences which have resulted in the past. We feel that we 'know' what will happen if a given route is taken, because different choices provoke different emotional responses. The situation is only hypothetical, but it provokes physiological and psychological reactions just the same.

The foregoing discussion might seem somewhat distant from foreign policy decision making, but consider just five examples: President William McKinley's decision making prior to the Spanish-American War in 1898, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's decisions about the Iran hostage rescue mission of 1980, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's Kosovo decision making in 1999, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and decisions about the Bin Laden raid in 2011, and National Security Adviser Susan Rice's decision making about Syria. The goal is *not* to demonstrate any kind of *one-to-one* correspondence between markers and eventual presidential decisions – the role that somatic markers play is almost always subtler than this - but to highlight the impact that somatic markers exert upon decision-making at an individual level, before they enter a group

process. The history of U.S. foreign policy in particular is replete with 'successes', or positive markers, that a decision-maker might seek to replicate: the Marshall Plan, the opening to China, the Camp David Accords, the Dayton Accords, the peaceful end of the Cold War and the reunification of Germany might be cited as examples. On the other hand, that history is also full of 'failures', attached in most cases to negative markers: the Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, the Iran hostage rescue mission and the Iraq invasion and the fruitless search for WMD in Iraq, for instance, are events that most decision makers would not wish to repeat. The definition of 'success' and 'failure', of course, is socially constructed, and negative phenomena may be especially intense and therefore particularly memorable (Johnson and Tierney 2019).

It should be noted that Damasio's perspective differs in important ways from the analogical reasoning approach, most famously utilized by Yuen Foong Khong in explaining the 1965 U.S. escalation in Vietnam (Khong 1992). While the somatic perspective seems broadly similar to the analogical reasoning one – indeed, the somatic theory includes a fundamentally analogical process - emotion is central to decision making in Damasio's approach, while it is decidedly *secondary* in Khong's perspective. It is deliberately omitted from the latter explanation (Khong 1992: 225-226), in part because the study of emotion was in its infancy when Khong was writing in the early 1990s, and in part because his cognitive approach relied upon the computer analogy. Thus supporters of the somatic marker approach would not hold that Khong was wrong, but they would suggest that his approach misses the role that emotion or 'affect' plays in how we choose. For instance, in Damasio's theory, individuals 'know' that one situation is similar to another because of how the new situation makes them feel, *not* because they have consciously or subconsciously matched features of the two situations cognitively or are relying on the

availability or representativeness heuristics. In the somatic approach, the same bodily response as before is 're-activated'.

If this is the case, analogical reasoning could be driven by purely emotional responses in which the decision maker recognizes the same bodily reaction in a new case that he or she experienced in an older one, not by the mind pairing two sets of features cognitively (Finucane et al. 2000). For instance, as we shall see later on, it is possible in the Bin Laden case that Defense Secretary Robert Gates first drew an analogy with the Iran hostage rescue mission because the 2011 situation quite literally made him 'feel' like he did in 1980. In other words, we may have misunderstood what it is that causes us to draw a historical comparison between one thing and another, and thereby under-estimated the role that emotion plays in decision making.

The somatic marker approach has usually been illustrated using experimental methods, including the much-maligned Iowa Card Game. Typically, psychologists are interested in how general mood states affect decision making, which naturally leads to large *n* studies in which the identity of individual cases is not of concern. While useful in many respects, however, this prevents a detailed qualitative analysis of how idiosyncratic life experiences might affect decision making processes. However, political psychologists *are* interested in particular cases; it matters for many purposes whether we are talking about a Vance, a Gates or an Albright as opposed to a member of the general population, for example. This article therefore seeks to contribute to discussion of the somatic marker theory, for the first time using qualitative cases drawn from U.S. foreign policy decision making.

Two methodological approaches may be especially useful in considering the argument presented here: first of all, the cases we will discuss can be considered as a kind of 'plausibility probe' of the somatic marker hypothesis as applied to foreign policy analysis, in which the materials are

used as a first cut, 'dipping a toe in the water' in order to ascertain how hospitable the empirical climate is to a given theory (Eckstein 1992: 147-152); secondly, the various cases we will present here may be considered collectively as an example of the 'parallel demonstration of theory', in which "the reason for juxtaposing case histories is to persuade the reader that a given, explicitly delineated hypothesis or theory can repeatedly demonstrate its fruitfulness – its ability convincingly to order the evidence - when applied to a series of relevant historical trajectories" (Skocpol and Somers 1980: 176-178).

Five Case Studies From U.S. Foreign Policy

Case I: William McKinley and the Spanish-American War, 1898

As a private in the Union army, future U.S. president William McKinley – then at the tender age of nineteen – was deeply affected by the experience of seeing terrible fatalities during the Civil War as part of the 23rd Ohio Infantry, especially at the bloody Battle of Antietam in 1862[2]. The battle had commenced very early in the day, before anyone had even had time to eat. Moreover, as biographer Robert Merry notes, "the fighting raged all day and into the night" (Merry 2017: 25). So McKinley ensured that his men received warm food, water and coffee, apparently acting against orders. Darting in and out of the lines, young Commissary Sergeant McKinley brought refreshments to the living and the dying, but was, as one might expect, deeply scarred by the experience (Hoogenboom 1995: 162–64). McKinley bore witness to appalling carnage; nearly 23,000 men died in that battle, and although it ended inconclusively, Antietam was in fact the bloodiest battle in all of American military history. The primitive guns of the era discharged

[2] We are indebted to Paul Vasquez for pointing out this example to us.

bullets which were sometimes insufficient to kill, so death often occurred through hand-to-hand combat or as a result of dysentery, diarrhea or gangrene.

As one biographer notes, "Antietam changed McKinley's perception of the war, and war in general, but it didn't seem to blunt his idealistic view of the conflict" (Merry 2017: 27). In a manner which would later evoke memories of the morning of September 11, 2001 – emotionally powerful 'flashbulb memories' are often recalled complete with entirely peripheral details, such as what the weather was like that day (Brown and Krulik 1977) – McKinley remembered that "it was a lovely September day – a perfect Sunday morning" (quoted in Merry 2017: 25). The juxtaposition of the beauty of the day along with so much ugliness must have seemed odd to him, and it left an indelible mark on the young McKinley which would last for the rest his life.

Thirty-six years later, he would cite this episode as a potent influence on his desire to avoid what became the Spanish American War of 1898. The drumbeat for war was strong that year, but McKinley repeatedly avoided becoming involved until other events effectively forced his hand. The President was never one of the 'war lovers', unlike Theodore Roosevelt and William Randolph Hearst (Thomas 2011). Hearst's motives seem to have been cynical ones, since the Spanish-American War provided a cheap opportunity to increase the circulation of his newspapers and to cash in on the jingoism he stoked; this became known as 'yellow journalism'. For Roosevelt, on the other hand, the motive was more psychological, even Oedipal. A devotee of the sea power theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan, he saw war as inherently virile activity which would inevitably improve the United States as a country, and he was apparently ashamed that his own father had not served during the Civil War as well; the elder male Roosevelt was from the North, but his Southern mother had not wanted her husband to fight since this would divide the

family, so Theodore's father paid a substitute to fight on his behalf (a common practice at the time among the wealthy).

McKinley had campaigned on an anti-war platform though, and his first Inaugural Address hammered this position home. "Our diplomacy should seek nothing more and accept nothing less than is due us", he stated. "We want no wars of conquest; we must avoid the temptation of territorial aggression. War should never be entered upon until every agency of peace has failed; peace is preferable to war in almost every contingency. Arbitration is the true method of settlement of international as well as local or individual differences" (McKinley 1897). As Thomas notes, "[McKinley] had seen war at Antietam …. and he hated it" (Thomas 2011: 141). As he later told Leonard Wood, "I shall never get into a war until I am sure that God and man approve. I have been through one war; I have seen the dead piled up; and I do not want to see another" (quoted in Armstrong 2000:128; Thomas 2011: 229). But he would come under enormous pressure to wage war on Spain, from two directions. One was public opinion, and the other was the steady drumbeat for war in Congress. Mass indignation at the supposed savagery of Spain in putting down the Cuban revolt heaped pressure on him, as did the legislative body, which had passed three resolutions that virtually committed the United States to war. Joseph Fry notes:

As the United States and Spain moved toward war in the spring of 1898, Homer Davenport placed one of his more memorable cartoons in the *New York Journal*. Above the caption, "Another Old Woman Tries To Sweep Back the Sea," Davenport sketched "Willie" McKinley in a dress and bonnet vainly seeking with a streetcleaner's brush to turn back gigantic waves labeled "Congress" and "The People." This image of a cowardly, bumbling, and politically opportunistic McKinley being overwhelmed by public opinion and forced into an unnecessary war proved stubbornly enduring (Fry 1979: 77).

The President was a highly reluctant warrior, then, opting for war only after a number of other options had already been tried. As Armstrong noted, "although McKinley succeeded in postponing it, he found that he could not prevent it" (Armstrong 2011: 128; see also PBS 1999).

Case II: Cyrus Vance and the Iran Hostage Rescue Mission, 1980

Cyrus Vance was Deputy Secretary of Defense between 1964 and 1967, serving in effect as Robert McNamara's deputy during the period in which the escalation of the Vietnam War occurred. Many of the operations that the two men authorized then had involved both the use of helicopters and the profound loss of human life (Vance 1995). When we think of the Vietnam conflict, we sometimes 'hear' the whir of helicopter blades in our minds. Indeed, Vietnam is sometimes known as 'the helicopter war', and of the about 12,000 helicopters used in that conflict, only about half ever came back. Unfortunately, many military operations in Vietnam were forced to rely on this mode of transportation, since the country lacked a Western-style road system or a network of airports (Jennings 2017).

By 1966 and 1967, it was hard to find anyone in the White House or the Pentagon who was really in favor of the war, and most of Lyndon Johnson's advisers had come to Daniel Ellsberg's conclusion that the war was unwinnable (Ellsberg 2002). Vance always claimed that he resigned his post on medical grounds, specifically because of back problems. However, by the end of 1967 and now technically in retirement, he was already running major troubleshooting trips around the globe, and this makes the reason he gave for his resignation from the Defense Department less than convincing. By 1966 and 1967, many of LBJ's leading advisers had resigned over the war, despairing of ever changing the president's mind. This placed Vance in a deep moral quandary. He could not continue to implement a policy he disagreed with on ethical grounds; on the other hand, he was the consummate civil servant, someone with a burning desire

to serve. Vance's role in the 'Wise Men' in 1968 and the Paris Peace Talks that year make it clear that he had changed his mind about the war, though.

In 1977, Cyrus Vance became the Secretary of State to President Jimmy Carter. By 1980, the most pressing issue facing both men was how to obtain the release of fifty-three hostages who were still being held captive in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran during the Iran hostage crisis. Initially, Carter had ruled out releasing the hostages by military means, fearful that such measures would get Americans killed. But by the first few months of that year, the situation was looking increasingly desperate. Nothing that Carter tried had worked, and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini was refusing to even negotiate. Under these circumstances – and faced with an impending presidential contest against Republican Ronald Reagan later that year – Carter was increasingly turning to the option of a rescue mission.

One major problem, though, was the location of the hostages, far from any U.S. air base and in a built-up city in the midst of a revolution. So as in Vietnam, helicopters quickly became the only practical option for getting the team in and out, and Vance was dismayed to learn that this mission too would rely on their use. The refueling point at 'Desert One' became the center of a highly complex operation, in which three C-130 transport planes and eight RH-53 Navy minesweeping helicopters would take off from different locations (the C-130s took off from Oman, and the Sea Stallions from the deck of the carrier *USS Nimitz*). One problem was that Vance apparently knew some of the hostages personally, so his emotional links with them were already strong. Moreover, reliving his experiences with helicopters – temperamental machines, even at the best of times - made Vance strongly disinclined to risk their use in the Iranian desert. Remembering that earlier experience in a later interview, for instance, Vance recalled that he had "seen a lot of things screwed up with helicopters". Indeed, the whole topic of Vietnam made

Vance even more emotional. As he talked about the Iran raid, it was almost as if he were back in Lyndon Johnson's war counsels more than a decade earlier. Perhaps, at least in terms of somatic memory, he was (Vance 1995).

Most of the team members around Carter, it should be noted, were foreign policy neophytes. CIA Director Stansfield Turner had never held high office before, for instance, while National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski had been an academic at Columbia University. In fact, aside from Defense Secretary Harold Brown and Vance himself, none of the inner had played a role in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. In any case, Carter – who did not know Washington D.C. politics at all well - preferred to surround himself with his fellow Georgians, and seems to have assumed that those who had been central to his 1976 presidential campaign would also be effective in governmental office.

When Carter decided to go with the rescue mission over his Secretary of State's objections, Vance decided that he would resign from his position as a matter of principle, regardless of whether the mission succeeded or failed. Military operations are often bedeviled by the existence of what might be called 'Murphy's Law' - what can go wrong, often will go wrong - and tragically Vance's predictions of disaster came to pass almost as soon as the plan was put into effect. Two helicopters were forced to return to the *Nimitz* due to a sandstorm (*haboob*), not in the weather forecast for that day. A further helicopter malfunctioned at 'Desert One', leaving only five, and the mission then had to be cancelled altogether. And disaster struck during the extraction, when one of the transport planes collided with one of the remaining helicopters in the dark. Eight U.S. servicemen died in the resulting conflagration, as the team scrambled to get the survivors out of the burning wreckage.

The Secretary of State was the only one of the key decision makers who really knew what an unsuccessful military operation would *feel* like, and he thought that using helicopters would be far too risky. As *Newsweek* magazine put it later, "Vance's years at the Pentagon had had led him to believe that operations that look simple on paper are often far more complicated on the ground" (Nielsen, Coleman and Willenson, 1980: 36).

Case III: Madeleine Albright and Kosovo Decision Making, 1999

The Srebrenica massacre of 1995 – which occurred during the Bosnian War in the former Yugoslavia - had a strong effect on Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in particular (Albright 1995). As U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, she had personally observed the aftermath of the massacre not long after it occurred, and she showed other members of the UN Security Council previously classified CIA images of the aftermath. She then helped to persuade President Bill Clinton to authorize NATO bombing in reprisal. Supposedly providing a UN 'safe haven' which would protect refugees from the worst effects of the war, the massacre proved to be the final straw for both the President and the Secretary of State and mobilized the administration to change course. Faced with continued bombing, Serb dictator Slobodan Milosevic quickly backed down, and the Dayton accords were signed the same year (Albright, 2003). As Albright later recalled with characteristic understatement, she "felt a measure of vindication" when the NATO bombing worked and a peace deal was successfully struck as a result (Sciolino 1996).

Albright viewed this approach as a policy success, an approach to be repeated should Milosevic adopt the same strategy again. Kosovo became a crisis in 1998 after the Racak massacre occurred. In March of that year, Serb forces slaughtered more than fifty members of the family of Kosovo Liberation Army's Adem Jashari, including women and small children. This evoked

strong images of the earlier killing. “When the pictures showed up of these massacres and there was this sense - the sense that I'd had from the very beginning of the year, that we had - were reliving the stories of Srebrenica and the terrible things that had happened in Bosnia, and that we knew better now, that we shouldn't be allowing these kinds of things to happen” (Albright 2000). The images reactivated previous feelings - “I believe in learning lessons”, as she later put it (Albright 2000) – and *Secretary* Albright was now in a much stronger bureaucratic position to act.

Milosevic may well have gambled that NATO would not be able to cobble together a consensus to act in Kosovo. But Albright argued that the same approach of ‘coercive diplomacy’ should be employed once more, and she again went on the diplomatic offensive in Washington D.C. “I came down pretty hard”, she recalled, “in terms of saying that we had learned a lot of lessons out of Bosnia, where we had waited too long to do something, and that we would be judged very harshly if we allowed something like this to happen again” (Albright 2000). NATO bombing recommenced, and although it took much longer to get Milosevic to back down this time, he finally gave in after seventy-eight days.

There was at least one major difference this time, however: Kosovo was much more *valuable* to Milosevic politically than Bosnia had ever been, so his grip on the former was always likely to be firmer. Kosovo is “the cradle of Serb nationalism”, a site of deep religious and political importance to all Serbs (Daalder and O’Hanlon 2000: 92). But since many administration officials were relying heavily on the faulty comparison, it led to the dubious ‘quick war assumption’ (Daalder and O’Hanlon 2000: 92-93; Barthe and David 2007: 88). As some observers noted, “NATO did not expect a long war. Worse, it did not even prepare for the possibility” (Daalder and O’Hanlon 2000: 103). Most notably, Albright publicly stated on the

day the bombing campaign started that “I don’t see this as a long-term operation. I think that is something ... that is achievable within a relatively short period of time” (quoted in Daalder and O’Hanlon 2000: 91). Another difference which helped produce U.S. victory in Bosnia was the massive Croatian offensive that occurred in August of 1995, so NATO bombing alone was not necessarily what had produced success in 1995. In the end, though, Albright and Clinton prevailed.

Case IV: Robert Gates and the Bin Laden Raid 2011

The earlier Iran story has an interesting postscript, since the searing experience of the rescue mission itself became an emotional marker later on. At the beginning of his career in 1980, Robert Gates was working as assistant to CIA Director Stansfield Turner. One of Gates’s jobs involved finding intelligence on the exact whereabouts of the hostages, since it was still not confirmed until shortly before the mission went ahead whether or not they had been dispersed to other buildings. The distances involved in the mission meant that the available helicopters would need to be refueled. So the other main task was to find a spot in the Iranian desert where this could be done covertly, and where the planes and helicopters could rendezvous prior to the raid on the U.S. embassy. As noted earlier, ‘Desert One’ became this focal point (Gates 2007: 153-155).

On the day of the mission, Turner and Gates went to the Carter White House. But the news, once the mission had actually begun, was simply devastating. Sitting in the White House Situation Room, Gates and Turner learnt that two of the helicopters had encountered problems and flown back to the *Nimitz*. They then discovered that a third helicopter had malfunctioned in the heat and dust of the Iranian desert, and that the whole mission had then been cancelled. Moreover, the

‘Desert One’ site, it turned out, was not as private as Gates and the other planners had predicted, since an oil tanker and a chartered bus were both using an adjoining road.

The failure of the raid was personally devastating for Gates. “I remember to this day, vividly,” he later recalled in the documentary film *Desert One*, “I was driving home from Agency headquarters about 1 o’clock in the morning – *weeping* - because I was so convinced it would have worked, and then we lost all those brave people” (Kopple 2019). Thirty years later, Gates again sat in the White House Situation Room during the Bin Laden planning. He recalled the Iran raid, telling the other decision makers what can go wrong, and how they would actually feel if it did. Asked one final time whether he supported the raid in a poll of advisers, Gates voted against it. He wanted to take a shot at Bin Laden from a drone instead, and would would repeatedly refer to the lessons of ‘Desert One’ in justifying his opposition to a manned raid (Hodge 2011; Gates 2015: 541-42). As Bowden relates, Gates accepted that not going ahead was “a difficult call”, and that striking from the air would leave them not knowing whether or not they had killed Bin Laden. “He had visibly blanched the first time he had heard that McRaven was planning a helicopter-refuelling stop in a remote area outside Abbottabad, similar to the one inside Iran in 1980”, Bowden relates. “The contours of this mission looked so much like the earlier failure that it rattled him” (Bowden 2012: 201-202).

Tom Donilon suggests that “history was in the room” in 2011 (Donilon 2021), and Gates stressed that “it’s the unexpected that you have to fear the most” (Panetta 2015: 313). He specifically warned the other Obama planners against the overconfidence that had marred the plan in 1980. “‘They said that was a pretty good idea, too’”, Gates recalled (Hodge 2011). There were at least two other parallels, moreover, which must have occurred to the Defense Secretary almost immediately upon learning that a military raid was being considered. One, obviously, was that

the use of helicopters was again being proposed here, and the "blanched" comment relates to this. The other was the obvious lack of intelligence. Indeed, the planners were not even sure until the raid went ahead that Bin Laden was even in the compound, just as the CIA was not sure that the hostages were still inside the embassy compound in 1980.

Unlike Gates, however, many of those who supported going ahead in 2011 lacked a forceful or direct memory of the 1980 raid one way or another, and they might not have fully appreciated what a failure like Desert One would actually *feel* like. Most notably, President Obama had no personal experience of the Iran operation at all, and he was of course the one who made the final (and undeniably bold) decision to go ahead. Many of Obama's advisers were in the same boat. Deputy National Security Adviser Denis McDonough, for instance, was a ten-year-old high school student in 1980.

Case V: Susan Rice and Decision Making on Libya and Syria

Susan Rice's life story provides an interesting case study that illustrates the power of emotional memories in shaping future decision-making, not least because she was a member of the Clinton, Obama and Biden administrations over the course of three decades. As Rice recalls, "the first major crisis I faced in government was searing, and Somalia would shape my own perspective as well as U.S. policy for decades to come" (Rice 2019: 139). On the first Sunday of October 1993, Rice was a young, up-and-coming star of the National Security Council, in charge of the UN Peacekeeping desk and serving as a deputy to Anthony Lake. President Clinton had authorized an effort to hunt down and capture Somali warlord Mohammend Farah Aideed, but it all went badly wrong. Rice recalls receiving an unexpected call from the White House Situation Room that day, during which she discovered that two U.S. Black Hawk helicopters had been shot

down, and that several U.S. servicemen were captured, missing or presumed dead. As she recalls:

> I was disgusted and horrified to see on television the bodies of U.S. soldiers being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu as we watched the onscreen desecration of our own special forces ….. by the time that nightmare was over 18 American servicemen had been killed and 73 wounded. ….. I recall vividly the stunned realization in the White House that their efforts had backfired spectacularly (Rice 2019: 138).

There were countless Somali casualties as well, and Mogadishu was an unmitigated disaster for everyone concerned. Coming on the heels of the Persian Gulf War of 1991, the administration had arrived in office hoping that multilateralism could now be the watchword of American foreign policy, and that security burdens could now be shared. The U.S. military was distinctly unenthusiastic, but it was hoped that it could be induced to play a major role in bringing peace to a variety of troubled hotspots around the globe.

As Rice recalls, "Somalia provided me an early real-world case study of what not to do", and it resulted in a massive degree of political fallout (Rice 2019: 140). Secretary of State Warren Christopher, Defense Secretary Les Aspin and National Security Advisor Anthony Lake were all criticized relentlessly in Congress by both parties. As Rice later recalled. "it must have been one of the most brutal spankings of cabinet officials before members of a Congress led by their own party. Congressional Democrats and Republicans then turned their ire on President Clinton and the rest of his senior national security team. On the verge of mandating the near immediate return of U.S. forces, Congress was set to force a sudden and humiliating retreat," she remembered (Rice 2019: 139). This mandate was only averted when Clinton agreed to withdraw the military forces himself.

When another opportunity arose to intervene in Africa the following year - this time to stop a genocide in Rwanda – there were few takers. Indeed, so draining had the emotional experience of Somalia been that *no one* in the administration spoke out in favor of intervention this time. Over one hundred days, the U.S. government essentially stood by and watched as 800,000 people were murdered - roughly 10% of the entire population – in the fastest recorded genocide of the twentieth century. Ninety percent of the victims were Tutsi men, women and children, many of them hacked to death with machetes or bludgeoned with clubs.

The Rwandan experience was an even more powerful emotional marker for Rice, featuring personal events that she would never forget:

> To this day, I am haunted.
>
> When I stepped off the helicopter, I had no idea what I was about to see. It was December 1994, and I was among a small party of Washington officials who accompanied National Security Adviser Anthony Lake to a church and adjoining school in rural eastern Rwanda. A few yards from the landing site, the ground became thick with decomposed corpses. They were jammed so tight that it was treacherous to walk without stepping on one. Grown bodies. Children's bodies. Babies in mothers' arms. Shot up. Hacked up. Decaying faces. Frozen in the position they fell. All over the churchyard. In the church. Across the school grounds. Dead bodies everywhere. Hundreds, if not thousands. And the putrid smell, though ebbing, remained (Rice 2019: 143)[3].

It is clear that Rwanda was a very jarring emotional experience for the young NSC staffer. "After the genocide, Rice traveled to Rwanda several times", Julia Ioffe relates, "and she has spoken about her experience repeatedly. She recalls walking through a churchyard littered with bodies—

[3] Sense of smell is intimately connected to emotional memory, perhaps because olfactory signals enjoy 'privileged access' to the limbic system, and are therefore processed very quickly. See, for instance, Gillespie, 2021.

'think mummies'". Rice concluded that a rigorous NSC process should place all options and alternatives explicitly on the table (Ioffe, 2012). But the main lesson was of course one about morality and ethics. "This brutal question still loops in my brain: *how did we, the U.S. and the international community, let the genocide happen?*", she asks (Rice 2019: 143). "We never even actively considered or debated whether we should do anything to stop the genocide", she said later. "Now, maybe the answer to that would've been, should've been, no. But we never debated it, discussed it. It wasn't on anybody's mind, and it wasn't editorialized about, and it wasn't debated on the floor of Congress" (Rice, quoted in Ioffe 2012).

Many years later, in 2013, Rice now occupied the role of National Security Adviser. There was a heated debate under President Barack Obama about whether the administration should intervene to stop more acts of genocide, this time ordered by the brutal dictator Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Just two years previously, the United States had intervened in Libya, helping to depose its leader Muammar Qaddafi. But Syria was in many ways a more difficult nut to crack. While Libya had been completely isolated, both Russia (a nuclear-armed power) and Iran were offering close political and military support to Syria, raising real concerns about the possibility of a wider war. An additional worry was the apparent absence of friendly forces within Syria, since intelligence sources suggested that a 'moderate' force akin to the Northern Front in Afghanistan was absent here, and the relatively sophisticated nature of Syrian air defenses would further complicate things. On the other hand, the civil war in Syria had become a constant presence on the evening news in the United States, with harrowing images of human suffering filling the screen. One image of a little boy sitting bloodied in the back of an ambulance was especially memorable. Inaction in the face of moral outrage, too, might further embolden America's adversaries. Obama was also under considerable pressure to act from Congress. The late Senator John McCain, for

instance, had repeatedly urged the President to act, and Obama himself had suggested that the use of chemical weapons would represent a "red line" which would compel him to act. So when Assad gassed his own people in an effort to cling to power, it created a definite decision point for the administration.

Obama was face to face with a situation in which there were no good options. Ultimately he chose not to bomb in 2013, however, but to go along with a Russian compromise plan to remove Assad's chemical weapons capability. It apparently achieved this goal, but left the dictator in power. In reaching this decision, the President does appear to have engaged in a careful weighing up of the costs and benefits associated with different options. While bombing sites in Syria might make idealists feel better, it might not accomplish anything more than that, while the Russian plan would actually get the weapons out of Syria. Coupled with the risk to U.S. pilots that any airstrike would involve, Obama made the difficult but hard-headed calculation that getting the weapons out was ultimately the more important objective.

As Rice later noted, "I admired the president's logic, but disagreed with his assumptions …. as Obama polled the aides assembled in the Oval, all agreed with him ….. The lone dissenter, I argued for proceeding with military action, as planned. We had clearly signaled—most recently that morning in a strong speech by Secretary of State John Kerry—that we intended to hold Syria accountable through the use of force. Our military assets were in place. The UN had been warned. Our allies were waiting … Finally, I invoked the painful history of Rwanda and predicted we could long be blamed for inaction" (Rice 2019: 363; Lynch 2015).

Why did Rice stand alone amongst Barack Obama's top advisors in urging that the United States should intervene militarily in Syria in 2013? Why did she feel so strongly? Rather than seeing her as a blanket realist or idealist, the somatic marker approach adds complexity and detail as to

why Rice felt as she did. Guided by intense feelings that other, more 'pragmatic' members of the Obama White House arguably lacked, her experiences of Somalia and Rwanda were not second-hand, but extremely direct and deeply *visceral*. Both involved episodes which Rice, in her own words, would never forget.

Discussion

Does the situation ultimately 'overwhelm' disposition in decision-making, so that any individual would ultimately take the decision 'determined' by the former? It certainly appears this way in the McKinlay case, since the president ultimately decided to give in to those clamoring for war. This conclusion should be resisted, however. The point is that decision making at the top is very much like a 'roulette wheel'. Presidents, prime ministers and other chief executives come to office with a variety of cognitive and emotional baggage in tow. Individuals are not interchangeable, since it matters very much what emotional experiences a decision-maker has been exposed to, and what we are exposed to is essentially random (it consists of what life 'throws' at us). A president other than Carter or Obama might have taken very different decisions, then, had they been exposed to the kind of powerful feelings that Gates or Rice experienced directly and could feel bodily.

This randomized system of decision-making is very far away indeed from a situational approach, since the roulette wheel idea highlights the essentially arbitrary nature of foreign policy decision-making. If we assume that the RAM always obtains, decision makers are essentially interchangeable, since all decision makers are assumed to be comprehensively rational. But they are not interchangeable at all if we assume a somatic marker approach, since decisions may be heavily influenced by idiosyncratic experiences. Rice's voice happened to be heard in Syria case, for instance, because she happened to be National Security Adviser, and because she happened to

have experienced Rwanda first-hand. But her position might not have been heard at all if she had not been in the Clinton administration or had not served in the Obama one. Similarly, Gates's voice was heard in the Bin Laden meetings because he was Secretary of Defense, and he just happened to have been through the experience of Iran in 1980. What, though, if Gates had been President of the United States in 2011? And what if Theodore Roosevelt had been president in 1898, something which could easily have happened if McKinley had been assassinated three years earlier than he actually was? Would there not have been an even quicker, headlong rush into war with the Spanish? It makes one wonder how many decisions have *not* been overtly affected by somatic markers, merely because the decision-making group did not contain individuals with powerful experiences of direct relevance to the task at hand.

What is surprising here is not that people learn something from experience; that much has long been assumed or suspected. The surprise is that emotional markers as so powerful – lasting at least twenty, thirty or more years - and that their presence can be just as important (if more so) than any subsequent cost-benefit analysis of the various options (Damasio 2016). In the Rwanda decision making, there does not even seem to have been a listing of options, let alone a weighing of costs and benefits in each; instead, the potent marker of Somalia provided the blanket assumption that no analysis was necessary. While the Rational Actor Model is silent about how decision makers might predict the likely outcome of options, moreover, somatic markers provide a means of *prospection*, a method for peering into the future and estimating the likely results of a leading alternative (Gilbert and Wilson 2007).

The parallels between Rwanda and Syria probably seemed 'obvious' to Rice long before any cognitive picking apart of similarities and differences took place. Similarly, Gates seems to have been struck by the similarity between the Iranian mission and the Bin Laden operation. This

suggests, perhaps, that analogical reasoning is not fully cognitive, but that analogies simply 'pop' into mind as an instantaneous re-activation of an older bodily experience. Intuitive feeling and decision making, rather than ponderous analytical processes, seems to be involved here, and such initial feelings can be hard to dislodge in any later, more rigorous analysis.

Supposedly, somatic markers tend to improve decision-making, and Damasio himself has argued that "at their best, feelings point us in the proper direction" (Damasio 1994: xiii, 173-174). But the foregoing analysis gives us reason to doubt whether this is always so. We know that emotional markers are exceptionally blunt devices; they provide rapidity but not complexity, offering only a simplified version of reality. We may be especially likely to utilize markers, moreover, when we lack detailed knowledge about something, such as a region of the world (which was clearly the case with Africa during the first Clinton administration). As Rice notes, "neither the US nor the UN developed the capacity nor had the humility to try to comprehend the extraordinary political complexities of Somalia's clan structure and fiercely independent culture. We also failed to engage Somalia's neighbors early enough to learn from their far greater knowledge of the country" (Rice 2019: 140). The widespread assumption that Rwanda was 'similar' to Somalia really only obscured the many differences between them, moreover. As Albright recalls:

> Tragically, the lessons we thought we had just learned in Somalia simply did not apply in Rwanda. Somalia was something close to anarchy; Rwanda was planned mass murder. Somalia counseled caution; Rwanda demanded action …. Truly effective action would have required a heavily armed, almost certainly US-led coalition able to deploy quickly, intimidate extremists arrest leaders in the stablish security. I deeply regret not advocating this course (Albright 2003: 154-155).

It should also be noted that somatic markers seem to affect only a single option, albeit a crucial one. Once an alternative has been ruled in or out, moreover, a more comprehensive reasoning process might take place (Damasio 1994: 173). This neatly parallels Kahneman's popular distinction between System I and System II, suggesting that we think fast and then we think slow (Kahneman 2012).

When two highly emotional markers conflict in their perceived lessons, as Mogadishu and Rwanda did in Rice's early career, it seems that the most *intense* - that is, the one with the most visceral impact - carries the most force, as Damasio suggests. The availability heuristic suggests that recency or vividness enhances the availability of an event in the mind. But a body-based emotional approach like the somatic marker explanation would stress the sheer *impact* of physiological experiences, and the fact that Rice had personally experienced both the somatic markers noted above – one only through television, but the other at first hand - seems significant.

One problem with the somatic marker theory from our perspective, though, is that Damasio's theory is entirely geared towards individual decision making, not a situation in which a group decides, or where one member of it is 'primus inter pares'; and the latter, it seems, usually obtains in U.S. foreign policy decision making. This means that the eventual decision taken will not necessarily be consistent with a single emotional marker, and in most of the cases noted here, the individual involved is not the ultimate 'decider'. The reader should note that - of the various cases examined in this article - the Albright example is the only one where the somatic marker highlighted tallies with the *eventual* decision taken by the President. The Vietnam marker did not prevent Jimmy Carter making the decision to go ahead with the Iran mission, for instance, and the Iran marker itself did not prevent Obama from going ahead with the Bin Laden raid many

years later. By the same token, a *different* decision would probably have been taken if the president happened to be the one affected by the somatic experience.

Like Gates and Vance, Rice did not prevail in the Syria case because she was in what might be termed a 'somatic minority'. Almost no one within Obama's decision making circle shared her personal experiences. Only Rice had actually held a foreign policy position in the Clinton administration in 1994 and could say first-hand what the events of that time had felt like. President Obama was teaching constitutional law at the University of Chicago during the Somalia and Rwanda incidents. Secretary of State John Kerry, meanwhile, was in the Senate during both, but was obviously not as involved in the original decision making (Kerry 2018: 524-555). Defense Secretary Chuck Hegel, similarly, was working for a cellphone company and an investment banking firm in 1994, while Joint Chiefs' Chairman Martin Dempsey was on active duty in the Army in what was then West Germany.

This still leaves open an important question, though: how do members of the group who *lack* powerful experiences of a single event nevertheless take decisions? Here the somatic approach is less clear, but there may be other (perhaps less prominent) experiences which compete with the ones we notice after the fact. For instance, Obama listened not only to Gates but to the far more positive experiences of JSOC Commander Admiral William McRaven. The Iran raid had led to various *post mortem* inquires, and these fed through to the Goldwater-Nichols Amendment and the creation of a permanent special operations capability in JSOC itself, which replaced the hastily-convened Delta Force team which conducted the Iran raid years before. While Gates knew of these developments, of course, the negative marker of Iran seems to have been far more powerful in his own mind, while successful raids had created a positive marker for McRaven. On

one occasion early in the planning, Secretary Gates asked McRaven what he thought the prospects were for a successful raid. His reply is revealing:

> Sir, it's a compound. We do compound raids every night in Afghanistan. It's not tactically difficult. Getting to the target undetected will be challenging, but once were there, it's pretty straightforward (McRaven 2019: 271).

Moreover, even if there are no rival markers in the decision making process, *feelings* may still be critical. For each option, the other decision makers probably imagine how they might feel if that option achieves the objective set. We are reasonably good at guessing the valence of future choices, but we often get our predictions about emotional intensity wrong. A classic example is winning the lottery, which is very easy to imagine (indeed, this ease may be the real reason that people play it), but we downplay in our minds how rare such 'victories' are. Due to the optimism bias, though, we tend to overestimate the likelihood of good outcomes (Sharot 2011). Since we can easily imagine how good we will feel as a policymaker if a raid succeeds – picture the scenes of jubilation which followed the landing of the Entebbe hostages in Israel in 1976, for instance – we may be especially prone to give the green light to military raids of this sort.

Conclusions

We often like to think that we approach each decision making problem *sui generis*, but the perceived outcome of one decision of course affects another. The specter of 'another Somalia', for instance, presents a simple example of how a heavily negative and intense marker can affect decision making, even many years after the event. The analysis of somatic markers is of course in its infancy, not least within the study of foreign policy analysis. Time and space limit our

opportunities for further discussion here, but there are plenty of other concerns which future research might address. One concern is the relative weight to be ascribed to positive versus negative experiences. It seems easier to think of negative markers than it is positive ones, for instance, and this is possibly due to a 'negativity bias' within international relations (Johnson and Tierney 2019).

A second concern deals with the possibility that individuals may *differ* in their sensitivity to somatic markers. Does the use of somatic markers depend on personality and style, for instance? In the Syria case just highlighted, for example, Rice seems to act as an intuitive, somatic-driven, 'System I' thinker, but Obama is more 'System II', weighing up costs and benefits more slowly and deliberately (Kahneman 2012). Are all decision makers essentially similar in the role that that emotional memory plays within their style of decision-making, or do they differ markedly?

In the five cases highlighted, we have focused for empirical reasons on big, singular, life-changing emotional events, the significance of which is relatively easy to demonstrate. We have also focused for obvious reasons on events which are conscious, but a third concern is that we know that somatic markers may often operate non-consciously. We typically make very rapid, almost instantaneous choices in the supermarket, for instance, but the myriad experiences and associations which go into the formation of a somatic marker are not always apparent to us and therefore cannot always be reconstructed after the fact. We sometimes cannot say afterwards why we chose a particular brand of spaghetti sauce, for example, even if we know that a bodily feeling might have been integral to our decision-making.

Finally, related to this last issue is a fourth concern. What if a somatic marker cannot easily be ascribed to a single 'flashbulb' event within the decision-maker's personal biography? The associations which go into the creation of a marker may develop only slowly, over the course of

a whole lifetime. Still, emotional markers may play an even more commonplace role in decision-making than we have so far realized. As we can see in the supermarket example, for instance, even the most mundane and everyday decisions become impossible to make in the absence of markers, which tell us bodily and physically what it is that we want. In the end, there are no preferences without feelings to guide us.

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