

Political Science 972: International Conflict
Discussion Questions for Week 7
Organizational and Cognitive Processes

1. What is the linkage between human conflict on the *individual* level (as expressed in biological and psychological theories) or the *group* level (as expressed in anthropological theories) and the highly organized, pre-meditated political activity of *war*? Same question for lethal *violence* (as distinct from conflict) at those sub-political levels? To what extent is war a cooperative rather than a conflictual activity?
2. Continuing with the above train of thought, is the question "Is war inevitable / is war intrinsic to human nature?" even worth debating, or is it one of those things where people simply make assumptions because there is no objective evidence that can be applied to it? Consider the various theories discussed in Chapter 2 of Cashman in this regard: is this evidence really relevant to the issue?
3. Based on the subpolitical evidence (biological, anthropological, psychological), at what levels of social aggregation (individual, family small group, community, state, nation, cultural area, etc) might one expect to be able to control, through social/political structures, lethal violence between humans? What are historical examples of violence that were once common but are now more or less under control? Could such controls be extended to the level of war (at some or all levels); why or why not?
4. The concept of "misperception" of a political situation implies that there is an accurate version of events that could be perceived in an ideal environment, a so-called "god's eye view". To what extent is it possible to obtain a perception of events that is different (and in some sense more accurate) than that of the decision-makers? How does the answer to this question differ depending on whether we are dealing with historical or contemporary events?
5. Consider some of the decisions that the United States has made to use military force in recent years (as well as the decisions not to use force—for example the long delay in becoming involved in the former Yugoslavia or the decision not to intervene at all in Rwanda) and assess the role of "image" in making those decisions. Base this assessment on your knowledge of the case as presented in the popular media (which is often a good place to look for image...) plus any other information you may have.
6. What is the linkage between the psychological characteristics of individual decision-making [questions above] and group decision-making [questions below]? To what extent do the group decision-making process reduce the effects of psychological problems ("problems" in the sense that the decision-makers later wish that they had made a different decision) and to what extent do they magnify those problems?
7. Consider the issue of the influence of individual "leaders"—to what extent do leaders determine the outcome of a collective decision, versus the collective choosing (or retaining) leaders who are making the decisions they want anyway. This obviously varies dramatically depending on the political structures of various states—Saddam Hussein didn't have to worry about elections; George Bush doesn't worry about military coups—so deal with this both with respect to broad categories of state systems (e.g. democracy vs autocracy) but also see if you can generalize it.

8. Allison's models were originally developed with reference to United States decision-making (specifically the Cuban Missile Crisis). To what extent are these models valid for other states (particularly non-major powers)? For other times? In considering this question, use whatever information you may know about decision-making in other countries (e.g. from POLS 150) and the non-US examples provided in Cashman, but also consider what aspects of the United States in the Cold War era are likely to make it unusual.

9. The groupthink model is usually presented as a type of decision-making pathology—something to be avoided. To what extent is it functional?—in other words, what are the positive contributions of the various components of groupthink to a decision-making situation, particularly during a crisis? Same question for the incremental decision-making model and Allison's governmental politics model.

10. The standard definition of a crisis is a period where there is a high level of threat and there are time constraints. An alternative definition—which may or may not be appropriate—is that a crisis occurs any time a problem occurs that cannot be solved incrementally or through standard operating procedures. Are these two definitions getting at the same thing, or are they different. Are there examples of "crises" that are solved with standard operating procedures?

11. The "organizational process" (Model II) and "bureaucratic politics" (Model III) models in Allison's framework have been criticized by as being insufficiently distinct or, alternatively, that virtually all decisions made within an organization contain significant aspects of both models. Agree or disagree? Cashman notes that Allison has tended to combine the two, though many people (including Cashman, and your instructor) tend to keep the two models separate. What sort of information would you need to differentiate between the two models?

12. To what extent is the importance of the bureaucratic politics model over-estimated by the tendency of decision-makers (particularly in their autobiographies and "war stories") to over-estimate their own importance. In other words, almost no one is going to write "In those critical moments when our nation's fate hung in balance, I was just a mindless cog in a bureaucratic machine, a mushroom who was kept in the dark and fed the residue product of the bovine digestive system". Allison—who has been Dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard—in turn may have been influenced by his extensive contacts with high-level decision-makers rather than the *Dilbert*-level drones who are providing information and implementing the policies. What sort of evidence could one use to get around this problem?

13. To what extent is it possible for a complex organization to get around the problems diagnosed by Allison and Janis when faced with a decision requiring a quick reaction? When faced with a decision that can be made slowly? Are there examples where organizations have clearly "learned from experience" and modified their decision-making process (not just the standard operating procedures) to avoid specific problems identified in the models?