

Painful Choices: A Theory of Foreign Policy Change.

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— Maria Fanis, *Ohio University*

In this book, David A. Welch delivers a nuanced and parsimonious theory of foreign policymaking and policy change. Welch also addresses a perennial concern in international relations, namely whether the search for a general IR theory is futile. His answer, and a persuasive one at that, is that such a search can be fruitful if we ask the right questions.

Why countries change their foreign policy, then, is the book's focal question. Welch uses organization theory, cognitive and motivational psychology, and prospect theory to assert that continuity in foreign policy is the norm and change is the exception, and also to explain under what conditions change is nonetheless possible. The theory he develops predicts that highly bureaucratized and democratic regimes will be less likely to change their foreign policy. Change will be more likely if the policy at hand is failing catastrophically. Finally, change will more likely be sought to avert great losses rather than for securing gains of the same magnitude. Welch tests these expectations with the method of "paired, focused, structured" case studies and conducts exemplary comparisons of cases whose foreign policies vary across issue areas. He compares Argentina's decision to militarize the Malvinas–Falkland Islands dispute with Great Britain to Japan's continued reliance on diplomacy for recovering the Northern Territories from Russia; Lyndon Johnson's decision in 1965 to involve the United States militarily in Vietnam to Nixon's 1973 decision to exit the war "with honor"; and Canada's decision not to proceed with free trade policies with the United States in 1911 and 1948 to its decision to do so in 1988.

Arguably, there is nothing counterintuitive about contemplating a change in foreign policy if the existing policy is clearly a disastrous one. Welch's theory thus illuminates the specific conditions under which change, although inevitable, is more likely to take place. He convincingly demonstrates that change will mostly likely occur when "current policy fails either repeatedly or catastrophically" (Hypothesis 2, p. 221). More importantly, change is more likely to occur to avoid losses than to realize gains of equal value (Hypothesis 3). The significance of perceived failure and the anticipation of even greater losses for predicting change is persuasively borne out by all cases except two: Japan's unwillingness to adapt a risky foreign policy change in the face of a continuously failing foreign policy regarding the Northern Territories and Canada's rejection of a reciprocity agreement with the United States in 1911. However, because Canada's attempt, albeit unsuccessful, to change its foreign policy in 1911 is not directly ruled out by the

third hypothesis of the theory (which is also the most important of the three hypotheses in the book), these two detractions do not greatly undermine confidence in what the theory says produces foreign policy change.

Where Welch does not offer a very persuasive account is in explaining foreign policy inaction as a result of state characteristics including organizational inertia, high degrees of bureaucratization, and democratic institutions (Hypothesis 1). According to Welch, these three elements conspire to stall much-needed change and, thus, to perpetuate continuity in foreign policy even when such policy is problematic. A closer look at the cases leaves doubt as to the robustness of this theoretical claim. For example, Welch argues in the two cases on Vietnam that the two policy changes that occurred—the "Americanization" of the Vietnam war in 1965 and Nixon's "exit with honor" policy in 1973—came about only after long periods of pursuing failing policies due to bureaucratic and domestic politics. However, there is scant evidence for the pre-1965 period (other than a paragraph on p. 122) to support the argument that change in the nature of American involvement prior to 1965 was due to bureaucratic stickiness. More decidedly, in the core part of the first Vietnam case, which focuses on LBJ's foreign policy between 1965 and 1973, it is obvious that domestic politics or bureaucratic lethargy did not drive the continued, albeit failing, Americanization of the war at all costs through 1973. Rather, one could persuasively argue that the policy persisted because the prevailing security perception during this period mistook communism to be monolithic and portrayed falling dominoes, loss of American credibility, and godless communism to be lethal security threats. Arguably then, it was the near consensus around the president, and much beyond, about the security threats to the U.S. environment that made the particular foreign policies persist for as long as they did, rather than bureaucratic stickiness.

Moreover, Nixon's 1973 reversal of the policy of Americanization clearly indicates that democratic politics and highly bureaucratized nations have the ability to enact change, even one as dramatic as Nixon's decision to exit the very war that had epitomized America's understanding of the Cold War.

A closer look at another case Welch evokes in support of his theory reveals a second shortcoming of his case analysis. The fact that dictatorial Argentina was able to change course of action over the Malvidas–Falkland Islands aligns neatly with the theory's expectation that policy change is more likely when democratic deliberations and a multiplicity of interests are not present to stall decisions. However, if we were to have real confidence in what the theory says causes foreign policy inaction, the important question is not whether "dramatic changes . . . happen[ed] in part because they *could* happen quite easily" (p. 218), but whether this dramatic change would have been much less likely to happen in a nondictatorial

Argentina. A counterfactual analysis of the pre-1982 period, therefore, should have been conducted.

Overall, one is tempted to say that the theory is asked to perform too much. By taking on the challenge of explaining inertia, Welch risks averting attention from the great strength and definite contribution of *Painful Choices* to the IR discipline. In my view, it is not necessary that the theory can accurately predict, and explain, the inertia that precedes dramatic changes in foreign policy for dramatic changes to be what they are by definition, namely “dramatic” and, thus, rare and consequential. Where the theory

performs superbly is in providing a parsimonious explanation for why unprecedented changes occur in foreign policy. According to the theory, policymakers choose change over continuity in foreign policy to avert catastrophic losses rather than to realize gains of equal value. As such, Welch’s theory confirms the applicability of prospect theory to explaining foreign policy, adds an exceedingly readable book to the literature on foreign policy analysis, and produces a persuasive theory of foreign policy change for incorporation in IR’s theoretical arsenal.