The book *Reasoning of State* by Brian C. Rathbun takes on the central concept of rationality in the field of international relations, and this response paper analyzes Rathbun’s arguments through the lens of its utility to practitioners of national security and leaders in strategic military settings. Rathbun begins by making three theoretical arguments. First, he argues that we can observe variations in the rational thought of individuals. Second, he argues that “rational leaders who combine foreign policy egoism with epistemic motivation are predisposed to be foreign policy realists” (p. 6). Finally, he argues that psychology elites must better understand romantic personalities and beliefs. After making these arguments throughout the book, Rathbun concludes with a clear warning to those studying rationalism in international relations by stating, “to save rational choice, rationalists must become more rational in their epistemological approach—open to disconfirming evidence, driven by empirical testing rather than paradigmatic confirmation, voracious in the collection of information about processes that have heretofore been simply assumed” (p. 309).

Throughout the book, Rathbun uses a plethora of terms to distinguish between individual’s thought processes, but to keep it simple, romanticism or System I (irrational) is a way of thinking that is based on emotion, impulse, and intuition, whereas rationalism or System II (rational) decision-making is realistic, pragmatic, and unsentimental. A caution to readers not familiar with international relations (IR) theory is to not assume that Rathbun’s widely used term “irrational” has the same meaning as that provided by Dictionary.com, which defines it as without normal mental clarity, crazy, foolish, or wrong. To establish this baseline between Systems I and II, Rathbun conducted lab experiments that included a series of dispositional questionnaires administered to students and professors in the field of psychology. He then measured the subjects’ social value orientation, epistemic motivation, and demographic characteristics. Next, he conducted a game of probability with the subjects to determine how much risk they were willing to assume in their decision-making. The results were scalable between System I and System II to prove that people indeed have different inherent thought processes that range across the less rational to more rational scale, but not fully rational or irrational. With significant variations in rational thought being established, Rathbun used another game of probability to validate that the level of risk people would assume is directly related to their level of rational thinking. This hypothesis was substantiated, not surprisingly, because risk analysis by its very
nature is a systematic cost-benefit analysis. However, this insight is useful to leaders in a strategic setting because it demonstrates the importance in recognizing not only how your teammates may be approaching a specific scenario, but also the lens through which an adversary may be viewing. This is not to imply that it is appropriate in the workplace to label and/or stereotype people as Rathbun does academically, but it is to imply that diversity in thoughts, personalities, beliefs, and emotions exist, and understanding these differences can be a very powerful leadership tool. The caution would be to remember that just because someone may be an extreme romantic thinker, does not mean they are necessarily irrational, nor is a realist thinker necessarily analyzing the correct information.

With a baseline established in a lab, Rathbun evaluates four historical leaders using his framework. The chapters analyzing Otto Von Bismark, Cardinal Richelieu, Winston Churchill, and Ronald Reagan are mostly a compilation of quotes from interviews, books, and documents to paint a historical narrative through a psychological lens to help the reader understand their personalities, beliefs, and emotions. On the realist side of the discussion, Bismark was a career politician in Germany during the second half of the eighteenth century. He is famously known as a great realist statesman who served the Persian king. Cardinal Richelieu was a French cardinal who rose to be minister to the French king. Richelieu was responsible for internal and external French policy. Interestingly, on several occasions, both Bismarck and Richelieu had to convince (or trick) their respective kings into war to serve their personal, “superior” rational thought process, and both had to make alliances with military forces whose ideology greatly differed just to achieve their political elite knowledge of the best path forward for their countries. On the romantic side of the discussion, Churchill was a soldier and then career politician, which ultimately led him to the position of prime minister of Britain during WWII. Churchill is well known for putting Britain in a position to win WWII, “if only by luck and highly improbable events—just those factors that no highly rational thinker would rely on” (p. 243). Ironically, Neville Chamberlain and Viscount Halifax (both realists) wanted to appease the Nazis and offer concessions, often undermining Churchill within Britain’s internal politics. Reagan was a movie actor whose only political experience prior to serving as the US president was as governor of California. He is known for his contributions toward ending the Cold War and the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Additionally, Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 250 that tasked the Joint Chiefs of Staff with developing a plan to eliminate all offensive ballistic missiles; however, his rationalist teammates in the National Security Council slow-rolled the NSDD until Reagan was out of office. As romantics, Churchill and Reagan were accused of being unintelligent leaders, yet both made significant positive impacts in world history.

This book highlights three takeaways that can be useful to practitioners of national security and leaders in a strategic setting. First, it is important to reiterate that nobody is purely rational or completely irrational. While history and science have proven that realists and romantics have very different instinctual personalities, beliefs, and emotions, both can be effective in leadership and policymaking. Having this diversity on a staff may indeed produce superior outcomes. Second, Rathbun demonstrates in all four case studies that realists often believe their superior intellectual thought process is wiser, and therefore their elite solutions trump loyalty. Leaders in strategic settings must be open to all ideas, but also remain vigilant for the perceptions or misperceptions of individuals who would undermine national security in the quest for their perfect rational solution. Possibly most important is Rathbun’s comment that “rationality should not be measured by outcome but rather by process, and even the greatest realists sometimes misjudge or make decisions based
on incomplete information that turn out poorly. This theme repeats itself when we transition to our romantics, who often had spectacular successes despite—or perhaps because of—their intuitive, nonrational cognitive styles” (p. 147). From an academic and even a military leadership perspective, this may be true at times, but when dealing with national security it is categorically incorrect. In great power competition, the process used for preventing a nuclear war between the US, Russia, and/or China means nothing when the outcome results in ballistic missiles flying around the globe—only outcomes matter in national security!

In conclusion, this book would be beneficial to leaders in a strategic setting because it provides historical examples to prove the role that rationality, personality, beliefs, heuristics, emotions, and perceptions play in daily decision-making.

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