



The 1914 Analogy at War

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Abstract: The centenary of the outbreak of the First World War has so far produced a great deal of attention from scholars, history buffs, and policymakers alike. Much of this attention says more about attitudes in 2014 than the actual events of 1914. This essay explores ways to use—and not use—analogy to 1914 in discussing present-day policy problems. It demolishes some traditional ways of viewing 1914 and focuses on the unusual and unexpected set of circumstances in that fateful summer. The article concludes by discussing some of the dangers inherent in simplifying history and looks closely at the ways that historians tend to use the past to develop insights for the present.

Many years ago when I was teaching an undergraduate class on the first World War, one of my students asked me if I thought that the dispute between Austria-Hungary and Serbia in 1914 resembled that between China and Taiwan in our times. I turned the question around and asked the class what they thought. One student replied by saying that he did not know enough about either China or Taiwan to make the comparison. The rest of the class shook their heads in approval. I stopped the class, asked the students to take out a sheet of paper and write the first three things they thought of when I said “Taiwan.” Then I asked them to turn the page over and write down the first three things they thought of when I said “China.”

Not surprisingly, Taiwan elicited words like democratic, capitalist, small, ally, friend, and threatened. China elicited words like huge, autocratic, expansionist, threatening, and rival. My point was not so much to prove or disprove my students’ preconceptions as to demonstrate that we all have preconceived notions whether we are aware of them or not. In this case, the students instinctively likened China to

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big, bullying Austria-Hungary and Taiwan to small, suffering Serbia. The academic term for this kind of thinking is “availability heuristic,” meaning that we draw the analogies most familiar to us, not necessarily those that are the most accurate.¹

So it is also with history. When policymakers see a complex problem they often try to simplify it by making comparisons to an available historical example that fits their mental conception. Thus, do so many policies with which people disagree become facile and inaccurate analogies for the behavior of Nazis. The power of that particular false analogy rests in the implications for its consequences; if one truly believes that a problem on the same scale of Nazi Germany exists, then one can justify almost any lengths to defeat it.

Such analogies can, therefore, have enormous consequences for policy. Even if policymakers do not know their history or do not think in consciously historical terms, they still use history to give them ready-made lessons for contemporary problems. Perhaps most famously, a quite historically-minded President John F. Kennedy read Barbara W. Tuchman’s *The Guns of August*, during the Cuban Missile Crisis to reinforce his sense that the events of those critical days in 1962 had the potential to take the world to catastrophe if not handled correctly.² Fortunately for us all, Kennedy evidently took the example of 1914 as a warning not to go to war unless every other option had been exhausted.

Yuen Foong Khong’s masterful book, *Analogies at War*, undertook an exhaustive study of the use of historical analogies among U.S. policymakers in 1965. The analogies a policymaker saw in Vietnam in that year proved to be a key determinant of his attitude toward American policy options toward the deteriorating strategic situation in Southeast Asia. Those who saw the situation of Vietnam in that year as akin to the French situation at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 argued for limiting American involvement in a situation unlikely to produce long-term success. Those who saw an analogy to Korea in 1950 argued in favor of preparing for a long, slow grind that would yield mixed results at best. Those who viewed the appeasement of the Munich conference of 1938 as the proper analogy argued for a massive commitment of resources and advanced a vision of the conflict as both global and existential.³

As this example shows, policymakers can find a certain level of psychological buttressing for their position by thinking that their policy decisions align with some seemingly eternal or abiding “lessons of history.” If arrived at by a process of careful analysis and study, this way of thinking about the past can yield insights, even if it is no guarantee of finding the “right” solution.⁴ When arrived at

¹ Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “Availability: A Heuristic for Judging Frequency and Probability,” *Cognitive Psychology*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1973), pp. 207-233.

² Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (London: Macmillan, 1962). For the book’s influence on Kennedy, see Maxwell Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (Boston: DaCapo, 1990), p. 205.

³ Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁴ I am especially grateful to Kate Epstein for her help in making this section of the paper clearer.

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