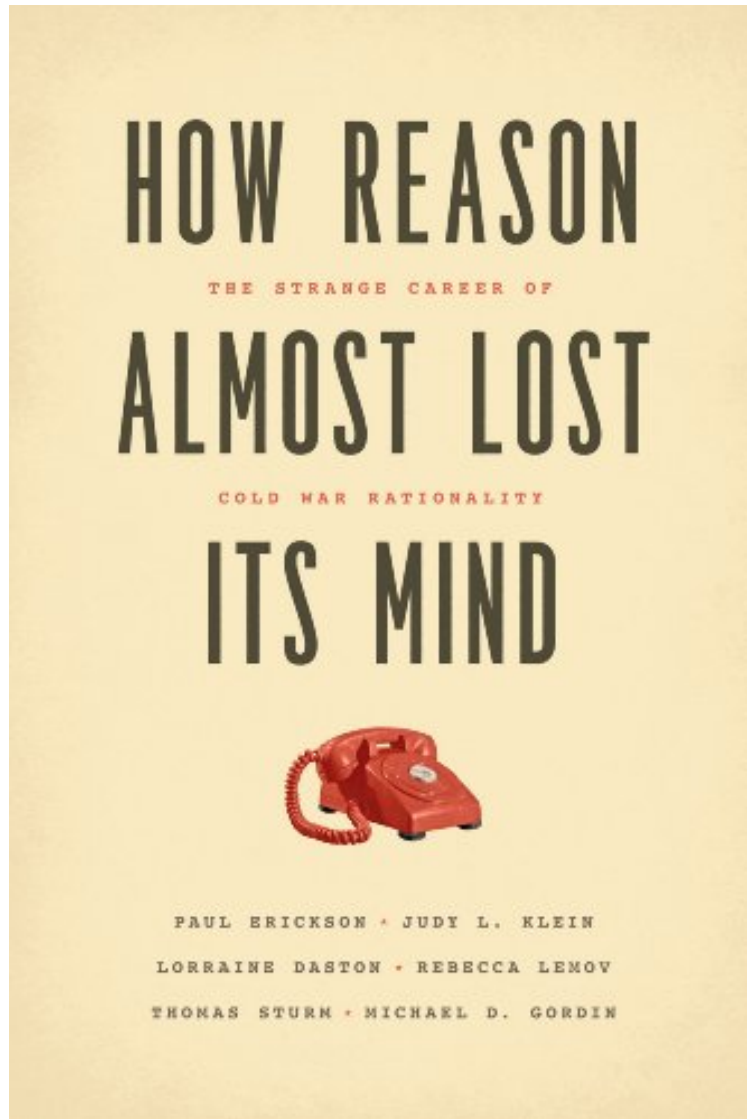


(Mobile ebook) How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality

How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality

Paul Erickson, Judy L. Klein, Lorraine Daston, Rebecca Lemov, Thomas Sturm, Michael D. Gordin
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0 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy Brian D. LabatteExcellent overview of how major foreign policy challenges were addressed by the changing and emerging decision paradigms.19 of 25 people found the

following review helpful. DisappointingBy Jon ElsterDisappointing - a missed opportunity to explain the impact of rational-choice theory (quantifying probabilities and utilities with absurd precision) and game theory on Cold War decision-making, especially in Vietnam. The Bundy brothers are not even mentioned; McNamara only in passing, with a retrospective comment from 1989.17 of 19 people found the following review helpful. Shoddy and Chaotic ScholarshipBy Herbert GintisThe message of this book is eloquently expressed by a blurb on the back cover of the book: "In the wake of World War II, a generation of self-proclaimed 'action intellectuals' fought to save the world from nuclear Armageddon. They nearly destroyed it. This extraordinary book explains how and why a generation of American social scientists reconceived human reason as algorithmic rationality---and how, when they did, they delivered us into a world that remains anything but rational."In fact, and despite the almost unethically misleading title, the book does no such thing. Indeed, it could not because there is no systematic discussion of actual Cold War nuclear policy in the book, and the academics involved did not advocate disastrous policies at all. The issue of algorithmic rationality was extremely important for defense reasons, because nuclear alerts were signaled by computers with sophisticated sensors. But the rational decision theorists and game theorists did not suggest that rule-bound computers should dictate when to launch thermonuclear war.The book does suggest that these "action intellectuals" conceived of the Cold War as a prisoner's dilemma in which the only rational action was to defect (launch the bombs), but in fact (a) the Cold War was closer to a game of chicken than a prisoner's dilemma; (b) most of the intellectual participants recognized this fact; and (c) very few, except the extreme hard-liners, motivated not by a crazy academic theory but rather by their hatred of Communism, suggested a preemptive nuclear attack.It would be difficult for me to convey to you, dear reader, the vast gulf between the intellectual credentials of the authors of this book and the quality of the final product. A couple of chapters are perceptive and well written, but most are just a hodge-podge of mundane description and speculative excess. The book should not have been published, and Chicago University Press should be censured for allowing so misleading a title.

In the United States at the height of the Cold War, roughly between the end of World War II and the early 1980s, a new project of redefining rationality commanded the attention of sharp minds, powerful politicians, wealthy foundations, and top military brass. Its home was the human sciences---psychology, sociology, political science, and economics, among others---and its participants enlisted in an intellectual campaign to figure out what rationality should mean and how it could be deployed.

ldquo;Broadly revelatory. . . . The authors show how dangerous our behavioral scientists (and by implication their human and social science kin) might have been, co-opted as they were into the military and political decision-making in crisis situations just as physicists were co-opted into the construction of the bomb.rdqquo;