

**R**ecent studies on human cognition confirm what parents have known intuitively for millennia: The part of the human brain that governs prudence in judgment and decision-making generally does not develop fully until well after the teenage years. The automotive insurance indus-



try figured that one out years ago. More surprising are studies suggesting that emotions play heavily even in the most analytical decision-making, that the repetition of a supposed fact is more important to its general acceptance than is the source of the fact, and that individuals' unique personalities, religions, health, surroundings and worldviews will shape how they perceive and define reality and rational behavior.

These arcane findings directly apply to U.S. debates about

# Fighting the 'Irrational'

## U.S. Must Reconsider Role for Strategic Defense

strategic forces, and they underscore a growing need to reconsider a role for strategic defenses. From the mid-1960s until the end of the century, consecutive Democratic and Republican administrations rejected the building of significant national defenses based largely on their beliefs about human cognition.

That decision was legally codified by the Nixon administration in the form of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which prohibited the deployment of any serious U.S. strategic ballistic missile defenses and also prohibited the most promising research-and-development options.

**Protection on Faith**  
Consecutive U.S. governments left the country essentially defenseless against strategic attack on the belief that rational opponents would be deterred by fear of U.S. strategic nuclear retaliation. Since such an act against the United States would be suicidal, and thus irrational, it was believed a rational enemy

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would never dare such an attack. The implication is that strategic defense programs are unnecessary because deterrence works. Why spend scarce money on strategic defenses when deterrence threatens work so predictably and relatively cheaply?

It is, of course, supremely comforting to believe that any rationally minded opponent can be deterred and that defensive capabilities are unnecessary. As Kenneth Waltz, one of America's most prominent political scientists, put it, "Why should anyone want to replace stable deterrence with unstable defense?"

A legacy of this policy direction

was seen on 9/11: The United States could manage to get only a handful of interceptor aircraft into the air, some of which were unarmed.

**How We Want the World to Be**  
We have now come to understand that these beliefs simply project comfortable Western ideas, fears and hopes onto the rest of the world. Behaviors that Western leaders label "unthinkable" can be considered quite reasonable to others, and vice versa. This does not make them irrational. But their unique personalities, religions, surroundings and general worldviews will lead their decision-making in directions that are considered unthinkable to Western sensibilities.

Deterrence is likely to fail, to our surprise, because we will have failed to understand how others define rational behavior. In that event, the defensive programs we have put in place to protect U.S. society will be extraordinarily valuable; to the extent that such programs are ab-

sent, the question will be, why? Such surprises are part of daily life for Americans in Iraq. John Agresti, the former president of St. John's College in New Mexico, served in Iraq in 2003 and 2004 as the senior adviser for the Coalition Provisional Authority to the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education. Upon returning to the United States, he observed that a fundamental U.S. challenge was to understand the role of religion in Iraq.

"We have so tamed and, in a sense, marginalized religion in the West that we consistently underestimate its ferocity and strength. ... We don't understand either killing for God or dying for God. But others do."

The old Cold War calculation that defenses are unnecessary because rationality ensures deterrence places hope over evidence. Can we break from that convenient, comforting, self-serving definition of rational and move forward with the strategic defensive measures that are available against the contemporary threats we face, including nuclear and biological terrorism?

There has been too little movement to date in that regard to give much room for optimism. 2008 would be a good time to get serious. ■