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Explaining Foreign Policy: U.S. Decision-Making and the Persian Gulf War

Professor Steve A. Yetiv

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Scholars of international relations tend to prefer one model or another in explaining the foreign policy behavior of governments. Steve Yetiv, however, advocates an approach that applies five familiar models: rational actor, cognitive, domestic politics, groupthink, and bureaucratic politics.

Drawing on the widest set of primary sources and interviews with key actors to date, he applies each of these models to the 1990-91 Persian Gulf crisis and to the U.S. decision to go to war with Iraq in 2003. Probing the strengths and shortcomings of each model in explaining how and why the United States decided to proceed with the Persian Gulf War, he shows that all models (with the exception of the government politics model) contribute in some way to our understanding of the event. No one model provides the best explanation, but when all five are used, a fuller and more complete understanding emerges.

In the case of the Gulf War, Yetiv demonstrates the limits of models that presume rational decision-making as well as the crucial importance of using various perspectives. Drawing partly on the Gulf War case, he also develops innovative theories about when groupthink can actually produce a positive outcome and about the conditions under which government politics will likely be avoided. He shows that the best explanations for government behavior ultimately integrate empirical insights yielded from both international and domestic theory, which scholars have often seen as analytically separate. With its use of the Persian Gulf crisis as a teachable case study and coverage of the more recent Iraq war, Explaining Foreign Policy will be of interest to students and scholars of foreign policy, international relations, and related fields.

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