Book Proposal

Madman Theory:
The Causes and Effects of Reputations for Madness in International Politics

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Overview

This book manuscript revisits the "Madman Theory," the argument that being perceived as irrational gives a leader an advantage in international coercive bargaining. The logic of the Madman Theory was first articulated by Daniel Ellsberg in 1959 and then by Thomas Schelling in his 1960 and 1966 books. The phrase "Madman Theory" itself comes from a statement by Richard Nixon, recorded in a memoire by his aide. In the decades since the Madman Theory was first articulated, it has continued to intrigue scholars and policymakers. Donald Trump's election as US president caused a flurry of speculation about whether Trump would be able to use the perception that he was irrational to gain leverage in confrontations with US adversaries. More recently, there has been speculation about whether Russian President Putin is a madman who would actually follow through on his nuclear threats. Other leaders with madman reputations, including Kim Jong-un, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Saddam Hussein, have also greatly influenced international politics in recent years, and more leaders who are perceived as madmen are likely to come to power in the future.

Despite considerable interest in the Madman Theory, academic research has very little to say about it. Only a handful of academic works have engaged with the Madman Theory at all in the decades since it was first articulated, and there have been no systematic theoretical or empirical evaluations of how madness reputations form or exactly how these reputations influence the outcome of international confrontations. My book manuscript addresses these gaps.

My book manuscript approaches the topic of madness from a primarily rationalist (although not game theoretic) perspective, which is in line with the roots of the theory. While it does engage with the political psychology literature, it deliberately avoids any attempt to diagnose the true mental health conditions of leaders. Instead, it focuses on *perceived* madness and seeks to define madness in a way that is useful for analyzing international relations. I define madness along two dimensions, which I first introduced in an article published in *Security Studies*. The first dimension is whether a leader is (a) perceived to make rational calculations, but based on extreme preferences, or (b) is perceived to actually deviate from rational consequence-based decision-making. The second dimension is whether a leader's madness is perceived to be (a) situational, that is, limited to particular circumstances or issue areas, or (b) dispositional, that is, applying to all circumstances and issues. Together, these two dimensions form a two-by-two typology of types of perceived madness.

After defining perceived madness, the book addresses two main questions. First, it considers how perceptions that a leader is mad develop among observers. I argue that observers will view past international conflict behavior as the best indicator of whether a leader will act madly in a present international confrontation. However, when a leader lacks a sufficient history of conflict behavior to analyze, observers will rely more on indices – that is, behavior in non-conflict situations that observers believe is unmanipulated. Importantly, the information that observers gain from a leader's behavior is filtered through the lens of human perception. I argue that due to motivated reasoning, less powerful leaders will be more likely to develop reputations for dispositional forms of madness. Yet this does not happen independently of a leader's behavior. Ultimately, I bridge the rationalist and political psychology literatures by arguing that both leaders' own behavior and the motivated reasoning of observers combine to create perceptions of madness.

The second main question addressed in the book is how perceived madness influences coercive bargaining outcomes. I argue that Ellsberg's and Schelling's original articulations of the Madman Theory, which held that madness is helpful in coercive bargaining, are overly simplistic. Instead of arguing that perceived madness is always helpful or always harmful, I theorize that the effect depends upon the particular type of madness. Leaders who are perceived to have situational extreme preferences do the best in coercive bargaining because they can credibly commit to fight over a particular issue without raising concerns among bargaining partners that acquiescing to their demands will lead to future aggression. Situational deviation from consequence-based decision-making can also be an asset, but the dispositional types of perceived madness are harmful in coercive bargaining.

The theoretical arguments in the book are supported by quantitative as well as qualitative evidence. The main quantitative analysis is based on an original dataset that ranks the strength of world leaders' madness reputations based on the adjectives used to describe them in the press. This ranking measures how leaders are *perceived* by the international community, not the state of their actual mental health. I use the quantitative data to analyze the predictors of madness reputations cross-nationally as well as the effect of madness reputations on general deterrence and crisis bargaining. I have already published an early version of the latter analysis in the *British Journal of Political Science*.

The book also presents seven leader case studies. Among historical leaders, I present the cases of one leader who tried and failed to obtain a reputation for madness (Richard Nixon), one leader who was perceived to have situational extreme preferences (Adolf Hitler), one leader who was perceived to situationally deviate from consequence-based decision-making (Nikita Khrushchev), one leader who was perceived to have dispositional extreme preferences (Saddam Hussein), and one leader who was perceived to dispositionally deviate from consequence-based decision-making (Muammar Qaddafi). I also discuss the cases of two more recent leaders, Kim Jong-un and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The book has one chapter about each of the leaders above. Each chapter first analyzes how the leader's madness reputation developed and then analyzes how the reputation influenced the leader's coercive bargaining success (except in the case of Nixon, who failed to develop a madness reputation). For the five historical leaders, I draw on primary and secondary historical

sources that provide direct evidence of how their adversaries perceived them. I included shorter case studies about four of these leaders – Hitler, Khrushchev, Saddam, and Qaddafi – in my *Security Studies* article, but the analysis of how these leaders' reputations developed will be entirely new for the book, and even the analysis of their coercive success will be expanded. The same type of direct evidence is not available for the two more modern leaders, but I am instead able to quantitatively code press coverage of them, which enables me to combine quantitative and qualitative evidence of the causes and effects of their madness reputations.

Ultimately, the book takes a mostly skeptical view of the Madman Theory. The findings suggest that situational forms of perceived madness are an asset in coercive bargaining, but dispositional forms are not. Moreover, I show that acquiring a madness reputation is difficult and often very costly, suggesting that there are better ways to achieve credibility.

This book is well-timed to make an impact. As noted above, the Trump presidency increased interest in the Madman Theory among both scholars and the public. Recent speculation that Russian President Putin is a madman has further increased interest in the topic and resulted in several media interviews for me. Furthermore, the scholarly literature on coercive bargaining is increasingly incorporating analysis of the role of individual leaders and political psychology. My book manuscript reflects the same general theme that leaders matter, and can speak to scholars working in both the rational choice and political psychology traditions.

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and it will be hard to find a signal costly enough to convey madness. I argue that observers will view past international conflict behavior as the best indicator of whether the leader will behave madly in a present international confrontation. However, when a leader lacks a sufficient history of conflict behavior to analyze, observers will rely more on indices – that is, behavior in non-conflict situations that observers believe is unmanipulated. Importantly, the information that observers gain from past conflict behavior and indices is filtered through the lens of human perception. I discuss several observer biases that might influence leaders' madness reputation, placing the most emphasis on motivated reasoning. I argue that due to motivated reasoning, less powerful leaders will be more likely to develop reputations for dispositional forms of madness. Importantly though, this does not happen independently of a leader's behavior. Ultimately, I argue that both leaders' own behavior and the motivated reasoning of observers combine to create perceptions of madness.

Chapter 4: Theory of the Effect of Perceived Madness on Coercive Success
This chapter theorizes about how each type of perceived madness in my two-by-two typology affects a leader's probability of achieving success in coercive bargaining (i.e., deterrence or compellence). It argues that leaders who are perceived to have situational extreme preferences will do the best in coercive bargaining because they can credibly commit to fight over a particular issue without raising concerns among bargaining partners that acquiescing to their demands will lead to future aggression. The perception of situational deviation from consequence-based decision-making can also be helpful, but to a lesser extent because it creates less certainty about a leader's likelihood of following through on threats. In contrast, having a reputation for any type of dispositional madness is expected to reduce the likelihood of coercive success because this will undermine a leader's ability to commit to not attacking if his demands are met. This chapter overlaps with my article published in *Security Studies*.

PART 2: CROSS-NATIONAL ANALYSIS

Chapter 5: Cross-National Evidence of How Madness Reputations Develop
This chapter introduces my quantitative dataset of leaders' madness reputation rankings, coded based on the adjectives used to describe them in the press. It describes the data in a way that is intelligible to readers without a quantitative background and then statistically analyzes the predictors of a madness reputation.

Chapter 6: Quantitative Evidence of the Effect of Perceived Madness on Coercive Success
This chapter analyzes the effect of perceived madness on coercive success by combining my original data on leaders' madness reputation rankings with the Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) dataset, a widely used dataset that I have personally helped to update and maintain. It investigates the effect of perceived madness on deterrence by analyzing whether countries governed by perceived madmen are more or less likely to be targeted in a militarized dispute. It investigates the effect of perceived madness on compellence by analyzing whether perceived madmen are more or less likely to face resistance when initiating disputes.

PART 3: CASE STUDIES

Chapter 7: Nixon
Drawing on primary and secondary historical sources, this chapter analyzes how Nixon tried to establish a madness reputation and why the Soviets and North Vietnamese were unpersuaded that Nixon was a madman.

Chapter 8: Hitler
Drawing on primary and secondary historical sources, this chapter analyzes how Hitler developed a reputation for situational extreme preferences in the eyes of British officials and how this aided Hitler's coercive success in the Sudetenland Crisis.

Chapter 9: Khrushchev
Drawing on primary and secondary historical sources, this chapter analyzes how Khrushchev developed a reputation for situational deviation from consequence-based decision-making in the eyes of US and British officials and how this reputation eventually faded. It also argues that this reputation enhanced Khrushchev's coercive credibility in the 1958 Berlin Crisis, even though his adversaries stood firm.

Chapter 10: Saddam
Drawing on primary and secondary historical sources, this chapter analyzes how Saddam Hussein developed a reputation for dispositional extreme preferences among US and British officials and how this undermined his ability to deter a US attack in the dispute over WMD inspections.

Chapter 11: Qaddafi
Drawing on primary and secondary historical sources, this chapter analyzes how Qaddafi developed a reputation for dispositional deviation from consequence-based decision-making among US officials and how this undermined his ability to prevail in a dispute with the US over the Gulf of Sidra.

Chapter 12: Kim
Using qualitative and quantitative analysis of media reports, this chapter analyzes how Kim Jong-un developed a reputation for dispositional deviation from consequence-based decision-making among US officials and how this has affected preferences about policies toward North Korea within the US.

Chapter 13: Ahmadinejad
Using qualitative and quantitative analysis of media reports, this chapter analyzes how Mahmoud Ahmadinejad developed a reputation for dispositional extreme preferences among US officials and how this has affected preferences about policies toward Iran within the US.

Chapter 14: Conclusion
This chapter summarizes the arguments of the book and discusses the implications for policy and future research.

Market and Competition

As a book about coercion and reputation, this book deals with similar themes to other recently published books, including:
- *Who Fights for Reputation* by Keren Yarhi-Milo (2018, Princeton University Press)
- *Resolve in International Politics* by Joshua Kertzer (2016, Princeton University Press)
- *Reputation for Resolve* by Danielle Lupton (2020, Cornell University Press)
- *Diplomacy* by Robert Trager (2017, Cambridge University Press)
- *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* by Todd Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann (2017, Cambridge University Press)
- *Statements of Resolve* by Roseanne McManus (2017, Cambridge University Press)

As a book about leaders, it also deals with some themes that are similar to those in *Why Leaders Fight* by Michael Horowitz, Allan Stam, and Cali Elllis (2015, Cambridge University Press). As a book about deviations from rationality, it may also compete in the same market as *Emotional Choices* by Robin Markwica (2018, Cambridge University Press) and *Reasoning of State* by Brian Rathbun (2019, Cambridge University Press).

Like all academic books, this book is likely to be purchased by academic libraries and assigned in graduate courses. However, given the timeliness and uniqueness of the topic, I believe that it has more potential than the average academic book to be read by undergraduates and the general public as well. The book is written in an accessible manner, and it has more pages devoted to historical case studies than quantitative analysis, which will make it appealing to non-technical readers. Colleagues at other universities have already reported to me that they are assigning my *Security Studies* and *BJPS* articles on Madman Theory in their graduate and undergraduate classes.

Furthermore, my research on this topic has already received considerable media attention. I have published articles on Madman Theory in *Newsweek.com* and the *Washington Post*. I have been interviewed about this topic by BBC, the German television stations ARD and RTL, and journalist Malcolm Gladwell for his Revisionist History podcast.

Author Credentials

I am an Associate Professor in the Political Science Department and a faculty affiliate in the School of International Affairs at the Pennsylvania State University. I was granted tenure in 2018, four years after receiving my Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. In a previous career, I was a Senior Intelligence Analyst at the US Defense Intelligence Agency.

I am the author of eleven peer-reviewed journal articles, appearing in journals including the *Journal of Politics* and *International Organization*. As noted above, I have published two articles related to the Madman Theory in *Security Studies* and the *British Journal of Political Science*. Most of my research deals with the question of how countries can credibly signal their intentions to each other in the context of ongoing or potential conflict. In addition to my articles on the Madman Theory, I have published considerable research on the role of statements of resolve in international conflict and how major powers signal resolve to protect their client states.

My first book, *Statements of Resolve*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2017. It won the ISA Foreign Policy Analysis section best book award and was named as runner up for the APSA Conflict Processes section best book award. It was also favorably reviewed by Joshua Kertzer in *Perspectives on Politics* and by Robert Jervis, Keren Yarhi-Milo, and Don Casler in *World Politics*. In addition, the book was the subject of a *[Washington Post](...)* blog post and was mentioned in *[USA Today](...)* and the *[Christian Science Monitor](...)*. In September 2017, the book was showcased to an audience of approximately 55,000 people when I appeared on a local news broadcast in New York City to discuss President Trump's United Nations address.