

## Expert Adjustments

"Theory-Driven Reasoning about Plausible Pasts and Probable Futures in World Politics: Are We Prisoners of Our Preconceptions?" by Philip E. Tetlock, in *American Journal of Political Science* (Apr. 1999), Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2537 Daniels St., Madison, Wis. 53718.

"When the facts change, I change my mind," British economist John Maynard Keynes once said. "What do you do, Sir?"

The honest answer that many specialists in political, economic, and military affairs would have to give would be: "I change the facts." At least that's what Tetlock's studies of "experts" in a variety of fields seem to suggest.

In one study, the Ohio State University psychologist asked 75 specialists on the former Soviet Union to suppose that researchers unearthed new evidence in the Kremlin archives. The fresh evidence showed that history could have been different at three junctures: that Stalinism could have been averted in the 1920s, that the Cold War could have been ended in the mid-1950s, and that President Ronald Reagan's hardline anti-communist policies in the early 1980s almost provoked a dangerous confrontation with the Soviets. Besides that "liberal" scenario, Tetlock also presented a "conservative" one, asking the specialists to suppose that new evidence showed that history could *not* have taken a different turn at those three junctures: that Stalinism could not have been averted in the 1920s, etc.

Tetlock found that the liberal specialists rated the imagined "liberal" evidence highly credible and the imagined "conservative" evidence relatively incredible. The conservative specialists took precisely the opposite view. In one version of Tetlock's test, some specialists did change their minds. But in general, he says, the experts "switched on

the high-intensity search light of skepticism" only for the results that ran counter to their ideological inclination.

If experts seem less than open-minded when considering the past, they also do not come off too well when dealing with the future. In the late 1980s and early '90s, Tetlock asked 199 professors, policy wonks, intelligence analysts, journalists, and other experts for predictions on various subjects, from the 1992 presidential race to the fate of South Africa. The experts, he says, "were only slightly more accurate" than the toss of a coin would have been. For instance, "almost as many experts as not thought [in 1988] that the Soviet Communist Party would remain firmly in the saddle of power in 1993." Most of the experts "thought they knew more than they did." Those with 80 percent or higher confidence in their predictions proved correct only 45 percent of the time.

The experts were not eager to admit their errors. The predicted outcome "almost occurred," many said. Or it still would occur eventually. Or "other things" (as in "other things being equal") were not equal.

Are even experts, being human, naturally inclined to resist learning from events that run counter to their expectations? Perhaps, says Tetlock. But it is also possible that they have simply adapted to "a professional culture in which one's reputation hinges on appearing approximately right most of the time and on never appearing clearly wrong."

## FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

### *Two Utopias*

"A World Imagined" by Charles Krauthammer, in *The New Republic* (Mar. 15, 1999), 1220 19th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036; "History Repeating Itself: Liberalism and Foreign Policy" by Robert Kagan, in *The New Criterion* (Apr. 1999), 850 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10019.

The foreign policy favored by liberalism and pursued by the Clinton administration, columnist Krauthammer argues, reflects a

coherent vision of the world—"coherent, consistent, and dangerously at odds with the realities of the international system."