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What Biden and Netanyahu are Thinking is the Wrong

Question



A Tribute to Daniel Kahneman and Adversarial Collaboration

“What is Biden thinking about Bibi?” *Foreign Policy (FP)* headlined in a recent issue. Indeed, one would like to ask President Biden as well as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu what they are thinking as the humanitarian catastrophe continues in Gaza with over 30,000 fatalities, over 70,000 wounded, and children and other vulnerable groups starving. But is questioning their thinking the right approach? Ever since René Descartes wrote “I think, therefore I am,” in his 1637 *Discourse on the Method*, people have assumed that thinking is the key to understanding human existence. Descartes’ first principle, *je pense, donc je suis*, became a foundation of Western thought. But contemporary work, such as that by the Nobel Prize-winning psychologist/economist Daniel Kahneman, might give us better

answers to what is going on with Biden and Netanyahu. It might also give new avenues for finding solutions about what is to be done.

Kahneman was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2002 for “contributions to understanding human judgment and decision-making under uncertainty.” While Descartes’ *cogito, ergo sum* has come to associate thinking with rationality – it was one of the pillars of the Enlightenment – Kahneman’s insights were a direct challenge to simplistic supply and demand curves. He was a leader of behavioral economics, a more complex, revolutionary way of understanding how the mind works than how traditional economics transformed human thinking into lines and curves plotted on two-dimensional graphs.

Rationally, both Biden and Netanyahu face political and legal consequences for the horrors unfolding. Both face domestic and foreign criticism. Netanyahu is facing rising protests within his country, potentially causing him to lose his power in an election, with an eventual corruption charge landing him in prison as well as international condemnation with possible criminal indictment for genocide. Biden is also facing growing protests in the United States, also potentially causing him to lose the 2024 election as well as a criminal accusation for complicity in genocide.

This is all very rational, but it has not changed their behavior. It does not explain what or how they are thinking.

Harvard Law Professor Cass Sunstein, one of the co-authors with Kahneman of *Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment*, wrote a moving tribute to Kahneman, who recently died: “Professor Kahneman, is best known for his pathbreaking explorations of human judgment and decision-making and of how people deviate from perfect rationality. He should also be remembered for a living and working philosophy that has never been more relevant: his enthusiasm for collaborating with his intellectual adversaries. This enthusiasm was deeply personal. He experienced real joy working with others to discover the truth, even if he learned that he was wrong (something that often delighted him).”

How to get Netanyahu and Biden to change? How to get Netanyahu, Biden, and Hamas into “adversarial collaboration” as Sunstein described Kahneman’s personal method. Instead of win-lose, Sunstein portrayed Kahneman’s method as “When people who disagree work together to test a hypothesis, they are involved in a common endeavor. They are trying not to win but to figure out what’s true. They might even become friends.”

That may be okay for science, but what about politics? What about political decisions affecting war or apartheid?

I had the opportunity to ask Robert McNamara and Frederik de Klerk why they changed positions, McNamara on the Vietnam War, and de Klerk about South African apartheid. McNamara said he was profoundly influenced by his daughter and her friends, more so than the millions marching in the streets protesting the war. When McNamara admitted “We were wrong, very wrong,” it seemed more a personal catharsis than a political, rational calculation. McNamara’s revelation came in a book and interview almost three decades after the war ended. It had no influence on how the war was conducted. But it was still a reckoning. “I deeply regret that I did not force a probing debate about whether it would ever be possible to forge a winning military effort on a foundation of political quicksand,” he wrote in *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*.

De Klerk also told me it was a personal reckoning when he realized that apartheid was “just wrong.” De Klerk’s change occurred while he was in office. It had a profound influence on his government’s policy.

Helinna Ayalew wrote the following concerning de Klerk’s unexpected change in a 2010 article on political leadership and transformation: “Undoubtedly the most important moment of de Klerk’s political career came on February 2, 1990, when, in dramatic fashion, de Klerk delivered a speech at the opening of Parliament —unbanning the ANC and thirty-one other organizations, as well as announcing the unconditional release of famed political prisoner Nelson Mandela. This speech set in motion a process of transferring power to majority vote on the principle of —one-man, one-vote, which brought Mandela to power in 1994.”

She states quite clearly; “no one can dispute that under his watch, South Africa turned the historical corner and entered into a new era.”

What is disconcerting is that both transformations were personal. The question for us today is: What can *we* do to change Biden and Netanyahu’s tragic policies? “What is to Be Done,” using Vladimir Lenin’s 1902 pamphlet’s title, is the better question to ask rather than what Biden and Netanyahu are thinking. Is there anything *we* can do to change Biden and Netanyahu?

Behavioral economics is just beginning. Sophisticated computer modelling still predominates economic studies. Behavioral politics is still playing a secondary role to game theory, prisoner’s dilemma, and mathematical models in political science. Kahneman’s behavioral economics has not yet gained traction in the study of politics.

The question concerning what Biden thinks about Bibi is outdated. With all due respect to Descartes and *FP*, thanks to Daniel Kahneman, new questions are being raised about the psychology behind decision-making, questions that go beyond traditional concepts of

“thinking.” How to go from the rational, binary win-lose to “adversarial collaboration” is necessary and urgent as we move from intractable international state-centric problems to finding collaborative global solutions.

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