Chapter 5

A Few Case Studies

Constructing a theory of foreign relations is often justified on the grounds that the theory can provide a lens through which to analyze events. That lens can then supposedly be used to explain past behavior and make predictions about future events. As was mentioned previously, making foreign policy is sufficiently complicated and involved that multiple explanations are possible. All have some validity, since examples can be found to support almost any theory, and it would be difficult to “disprove” any of them.

The policymaking process described in the previous chapter does not lend itself to being reduced to a “theory,” but it does provide a way to look at events and explain them. Whether such explanations are convincing or whether they add anything to the understanding of what happens in Washington is left to the reader to judge.

Certainly those who are part of the policymaking process would deny they are motivated by anything but the highest ideals and the national interest. They have to be judged by what they do in addition to what they say, however. The following examples won’t include Iraq, as that has been discussed at various points thus far. Given the way that war was launched and the way it has been waged, it would not take a complete cynic to believe that 90 percent of politics is theater and that foreign policy has become just one more prop for the actors.

These examples will deal with international issues, but a similar argument could be made about any number of domestic policy problems as well. Take the proposed privatization of Social Security. Democrats were unanimously opposed to it, while Republicans were equally united in supporting major changes in the system. The argument was made that the Social Security trust fund was going to be exhausted by
sometime in the 2040s and that an immediate solution was essential. In Washington, long-range planning is Tuesday. When the government announces an initiative that is to bear fruit more than a decade in the future—for example, automobiles powered by fuel cells by 2025—it simply means that no serious action will be taken anytime soon and that addressing the problem will be left to future administrations.

Conversely, if a problem that is three or four decades away is said to demand an immediate solution, there must be immediate benefits to the politicians making the argument. In the case of Social Security, one need only know that the financial services industry has been one of the most generous contributors to President Bush and other Republicans. If allowed to take a percentage off the top of all the funds collected for Social Security for administrative fees, it would amount to a multibillion-dollar windfall. And a significant portion of that money would be recycled to the politicians who made it possible.

All the rhetoric about saving Social Security, according to the “theory” that politicians are mainly interested in their own political future, can be reduced to one simple fact: Privatization of the system will benefit those politicians who make that happen. Republicans, interested in granting such an enormous windfall to the financial services industry, therefore support the idea. Democrats, knowing at what a great disadvantage they would be placed with a portion of the profits filling the Republicans’ coffers, uniformly oppose it.

And what happens to those individuals who make the wrong investment decisions and years from now reach retirement age without sufficient funds to allow them to retire? According to the politics of personal responsibility, that is their problem. It’s not the government’s problem, nor is it something that society as a whole should care about. As the following examples will attempt to demonstrate, there are also foreign policy issues for which the short-term political benefit is more important to the policymakers than the long-term implications for the country.

**Public Diplomacy**

There are those in power in Washington, along with their supporters in the media, who would argue that American foreign policy alienates so many abroad because it is not understood or articulated properly. This variation on the “blame-the-bureaucracy excuse” holds that better public diplomacy will help other countries understand the policy and be less hostile to it. Rather than accept any responsibility for the failure of the policy, their suggested response is not to change the policy, but to hire a new salesman.