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War and Human Nature

Martin L. Cook

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Rosen, Stephen Peter. *War and Human Nature*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005. 224pp. \$23.95

Stephen Peter Rosen is Michael Kaneb Professor of National Security and Military Affairs at Harvard University. In this ambitious volume he attempts to counter the view that economic-rationality models of human behavior adequately explain human decision making. He defines economic rationality as the assumption that people “have a stable, ordered, and consistent set of preferences and that they have a stable way of making choices about how to use scarce resources in a manner that gives them the most utility for a given expenditure of resources.” Rosen attempts to demonstrate the inadequacy of economic rationality to explain or predict human behavior by drawing on a wide range of empirical research.

The book is organized into four major chapters. The first explores brain structure from an evolutionary perspective and in some depth. The central finding here is that for very good evolutionary reasons much of human decision making is performed by the nonconscious portion of the brain. This clearly is a survival mechanism in an environment where danger and challenge must be rapidly assessed and action must be taken much more quickly than a linear and consciously analytical process would allow. The implication of this research for the overall project is a need to contemplate more deeply the limits of conscious and cognitive aspects of decision making—we must think more on the role of economic rationality in human choice.

The second chapter explores the genetic and personality variations among individuals, stressing the degree to which such variables cause individuals to make different choices in the same situation and fact set. The third looks at the various ways different societies organize themselves and explores the degree to which varying forms of social organization cause different types of individuals with different styles of decision making to emerge as leaders. The last major section explores the mechanisms of determining political behavior of states. Rosen argues that in some forms of social organization, the decision-making styles and personality traits of individuals may be dampened by mechanisms of social control, whereas in others they may be amplified.

Along the way, the book looks at the effects of emotion, memory, dominance, testosterone, distress, depression, and varying time horizons, and the decision-making styles of tyrants (as contrasted with leaders in other forms of government). It is, in short, an attempt to synthesize a wide range of information from the biological and psychological disciplines to cause us to think more critically about the role of rationality in political decision making. Because of the work's broad and synthetic approach, the reader may sometimes be less than thoroughly convinced of the implications of such diverse studies for political decision making. The author acknowledges as much in stressing the book's tentative and exploratory nature. As a preliminary effort to temper excessively rationalistic narratives, however, Rosen has provided a valuable contribution and corrective to much political theory.

MARTIN L. COOK
Stockdale Professor of Professional Military Ethics
Naval War College