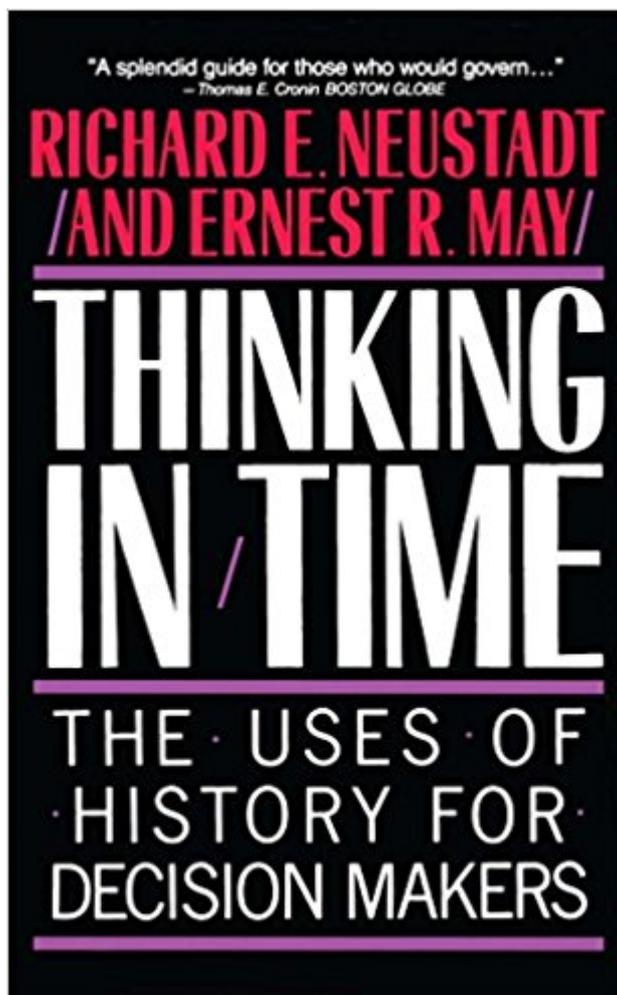


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Thinking In Time: The Uses Of History For Decision-Makers



Synopsis

“A convincing case that careful analysis of the history, issues, individuals, and institutions can lead to better decisions” in business as well as in government • (BusinessWeek). Two noted professors offer easily remembered rules for using history effectively in day-to-day management of governmental and corporate affairs to avoid costly blunders. “An illuminating guide to the use and abuse of history in affairs of state” • (Arthur Schlesinger).

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As an avid reader of history, I've long struggled with putting my learning to use in day-to-day situations, whether that be in evaluating critical business decisions or in helping me better observe and understand the world around me. On the one hand, there is the familiar aphorism attributed to George Santayana that those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. But, on the other hand, each situation is truly unique, and the use of historical analogies is clearly fraught with pitfalls. "Thinking in Time" addresses this conundrum and provides a sound basis for using historical knowledge intelligently and responsibly. To overcome the temptation of using history incorrectly, the authors put forward a specific process for decision makers in crisis situations, and they use case studies to highlight successes and failures in the use of history as guide to decision making. The case studies are all drawn from domestic and foreign policy scenarios, but the lessons are applicable to any organization (private sector, non-profit, etc.). The authors' decision making methodology may seem a bit didactic or formulaic at first, but it is meant to be used with the greatest

flexibility. The heart of the process is to establish a system of critical inquiry and resist the temptation to jump to the "options phase" of decision making immediately. Rather, the authors argue, focus clearly on the situation at hand and confirm the intended objective. This can be started by listing what is known, what is unclear and what is presumed about the situation. Next, analogies will come to mind or will likely be invoked for advocacy (intentionally or otherwise), so quickly highlight all the "likenesses" and "differences" between the present situation and the historical analogies.

This book is an essential point of reference for understanding the analogies and other devices that decision makers use to evaluate information. The bottom line is both straight-forward and scary: policymakers see everything in terms of their own (usually limited and largely domestic) historical experiences, and they interpret what they are given by intelligence professionals in the context of their own personal perspectives. This has several implications, and I regard this book as one of perhaps five that are long-term essential building blocks for the new craft of analytic tradecraft being devised by the CIA's Kent Center and Jack Davis: 1) Intelligence is remedial education for policymakers. There is no getting around this. While the authors are much more diplomatic than I could ever be, the raw fact is that most policy makers are very loosely-educated and generally do not have a high-quality international affairs education or substantive experience dealing with foreign affairs or even national affairs. They are local lawyers, businessmen, "friends of the President," etcetera. 2) Objective, internationalist intelligence will always be in conflict with subjective, domestic politics unless--and this is the other new theme just now emerging, years after the author's published their work--there is a public intelligence community and the citizen-voters are receiving sufficiently compelling intelligence they can use to demand and vote for early and thoughtful action instead of in extremis reaction.

For years, Richard Neustadt and Ernest May taught a course in Decision Making at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. It must have been one heck of a course. The subtitle of this book is "The Uses of History for Decision-Makers." That could actually be broadened a bit to something like "The Uses of Precedents and Analogies for Decision-Makers." Remember when we were debating going to war in Iraq? How many times did you hear the precedent of Viet Nam invoked? And, if you're old enough, remember Viet Nam? How many times did you hear about Munich? How many times in business have you heard a colleague invoke a historical precedent to justify a particular course of action? We use historical precedents and analogies all the time. Most of

the time we use them as if history repeats itself. It doesn't. Mark Twain's aphorism captures best what really happens. "History does not repeat, but it does rhyme." This book will give you tools that you can use to sort out what's the same (the rhymes) and what's different and then use your analysis to make better decisions. The authors introduce you to methods that will help you sort things out in all kinds of different situations. They teach you about separating "facts" into known, unknown, and presumed. They discuss analyzing precedents that you're about to base a decision on in terms of likes and differences from the current situation. By itself, no individual idea or tool is unique. None of this is rocket science. But the authors give you a systematic application of common sense and proven techniques. That system gives you power. There are lots of little "sidebar" points as well. For example, there's the Goldberg Rule.

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