

THE POWER OF POSITIVE ILLUSIONS

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Christopher Shea

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ADMIT IT: YOU THINK you're a better-than-average driver. Of course, there's a lot of speeding, tailgating, and unsignaled lane- changing going on out there, but the hands behind your wheel are steady and competent. If only everyone were like you!

Unfortunately, your self-perceived excellence makes you remarkably ordinary: In general, psychologists have found, whether the category is driving skills, looks, intelligence, or charm, people rank themselves above average, usually substantially above. In one typical study, 70 percent of high school students reported that they possessed better-than-average leadership ability, while only 2 percent thought they were below average. In another, 94 percent of professors said their own scholarship was better than the norm.

Academic psychologists have been building the literature of self- puffery for years, recently adding this twist: These so-called positive illusions can be good for you. Positive illusions, UCLA psychologist Shelley E. Taylor and several of her colleagues have written, "are self-fulfilling, creating the world that we believe already exists." This productive optimism may have evolutionary roots: On the ancient African savanna, the homo erectus who stormed into the enemy tribe's camp, acting as if he could defeat their strongest warrior (even if he couldn't) might have scared his potential rivals off and thereby acquired their booty and women. We bluff our enemies and we bluff ourselves.

Dominic Johnson, who holds doctorates in both evolutionary biology and politics, opens his new book "Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions" (Harvard) with some extreme examples of self-assuredness in combat. In 1532, the Spanish explorer Francisco Pizarro and a force of 168 men defeated an army of 80,000 Peruvians. "What gave the Spaniard the audacity to stay and fight?" Johnson asks. Probably the same thing that led General Custer to cry out to his wildly outnumbered men at Little Big Horn, "Hurrah boys, we've got them!"

Once soldiers have committed to battle, positive illusions may in fact help the cause. (Napoleon thought morale was precisely three times as important as physical strength.) But when it comes to the initial decision to go to war, overconfidence can be a disaster - especially now that grinding mechanized combat has replaced raids on unsuspecting enemy tribes, which are far less likely to lead to bloody stalemates. Compounding the problem is that national leaders may be even more inclined to irrational optimism than other humans, since they are by definition strivers who have been victorious in past political struggles. (The book's cover shows George W. Bush in the infamous flight suit, giving the thumbs up.)

Adaptive overconfidence may be the X-factor explaining longstanding historical mysteries surrounding 20th-century conflicts, Johnson argues. Why did every side in

World War I think the conflict would be over in weeks? Why did the French, before the German assault in 1940, place such faith in their Maginot Line? Why did American strategists ignore the French defeat in Vietnam as they stumbled toward a very similar fate? ("That was the *French*," President Kennedy once snippily told a CBS reporter.) More recently, what led the Bush administration to play down warnings—as Johnson sees it—about how difficult the occupation of Iraq would be?

"Overconfidence and War" comes festooned with blurbs from leading lights in evolutionary thinking, including the Harvard anthropologist Richard Wrangham (who has also written about positive illusions and warfare) and the Rutgers biologist and anthropologist Robert Trivers (who will be teaching a graduate course on human self-deception next spring at Harvard).

"The bottom line is that all the biases in judgment that have been identified in the last 15 years tend to bias decision-making toward the hawkish side," says the Princeton psychologist Daniel Kahneman, awarded a Nobel Prize in economics in 2002 for his work on human cognitive errors. He mentions another bias that Johnson doesn't stress: the human tendency to view one's own aggressiveness simply as a reaction to the other guy's threatening moves, which by contrast are ipso facto proof of hostile intent.

The application of evolutionary psychology to complicated historical events invariably turns off some scholars. Niall Ferguson, the NYU historian who starts teaching at Harvard in the spring, hasn't read Johnson's book, but said via e-mail, "I don't feel we really need neo-Darwinism to explain the events of 1914. There was quite enough Social Darwinism around at that time, encouraging people to believe that war helped the process of natural selection."

The Columbia political scientist Robert Jervis, who has studied 20th-century military decision-making, believes Johnson is onto something, but raises some more specific objections. "Why would we be over-optimistic about war but not over-optimistic about other things like negotiation, or how the world will develop without war?" he asks.

Jervis also raises the proverbial question of the dog that doesn't bark: We can't study all the cases when pessimism, or realism, led people to decide not to take up arms in the first place—precisely because those wars never happened. Perhaps American strategists, he says, are too pessimistic about the possibility of knocking out North Korea's nuclear capability without inviting massive retaliation against South Korea. But "because we are pessimistic, we will never run that experiment" and so we'll never know.

Meanwhile, some psychologists question the notion that positive illusions are rampant among psychologically healthy humans. Ten years ago, Northeastern's Randall Colvin coauthored a paper in *Psychological Bulletin* poking holes in the data on positive illusions. One of his many objections was that the subjects of many key studies were university students, who may have defensible reasons to think they are, say, smarter than the average US citizen.

In both evolutionary terms and in everyday life, Colvin says, "Know thyself" is probably a better strategy for survival and success than "Think thyself the greatest." In a business

setting, he says "if you're promoting yourself as an extremely qualified person, smarter than you really are, possessing all of these talents that you don't have - when you are finally asked to work on a project that requires those talents, you are in deep [trouble]."

But Johnson, who is now teaching in Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, says there are by now "hundreds" of studies showing cognitive biases of various sorts. "We have to take them seriously," he says. "And we shouldn't assume our illustrious leaders are immune to them." To head off the potentially deadly effects of positive illusions, Johnson suggests that political leaders need to consciously foster as many open debates as possible during international crises, and perhaps even appoint an official devil's advocate.

Princeton's Daniel Kahneman, however, says political leaders are so naturally self-confident he can't imagine how they can be steered away from hubris. On this question, he says, "I'm a pessimist."

CRITICAL FACULTIES Christopher Shea's column appears in *Ideas* biweekly. E-mail: critical.faculties@verizon.net.