

Rhodes, Edward, "Do Bureaucratic Politics Matter?: Some Disconfirming Findings from the U.S. Navy." *World Politics*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Oct., 1994), pp. 1-41.

Graham Allison's Model III – the Bureaucratic Politics model – attempts to explain the sometimes incomprehensible actions of states by describing the state as a collection of individually rational bureaucrats, each of whom jealously guards her own fief. This resolves the dissonance between the ingrained scholarly belief in "rationality" and "interest" and the observed irrational outcomes that result from bargaining among the parochial bureaucrats.

As a critical test of this hypothesis, Rhodes examines the U.S. Navy, which is cleft between three mutually suspicious "unions" or cliques: the submariners, the aviators, and the surface sailors. (This is a critical test because it is clear-cut and especially promising for Allison's hypothesis; anecdotal evidence supports the theory, and indeed the navy has often been cited as the archetype of bureaucratic games.) The chief of naval operations (CNO), who largely establishes naval policy, has come alternately from the three unions; one would expect under Model III that funding and procurement decisions would skew towards the CNO's union, to which the CNO has personal and paradigmatic ties.

The evidence, however, is not supportive. Aircraft purchases do not increase during aviators' tenure as CNO, and the proportion of the naval procurement budget spent on air power is actually lower under aviator CNOs, though not significantly so. This holds even when one controls for wars and secular trends. Nor are the expected effects found in patterns of ship construction and fleet composition, or considering specialised subtypes of ship that the various unions would be expected to especially favour. Even in what should be an especially easy case for the Bureaucratic Politics model, it titubates.

Thus Rhodes, following Robert Art, tentatively turns towards an alternate hypothesis built on "shared ideas." This discards individual rationality completely, arguing that people respond not to reality, but instead to socially-constructed conceptions of reality. Employing the simplest such model – with images of naval warfare and foreign policy derived from Alfred Thayer Mahan and shared by the whole government – Rhodes expects the navy to maintain approximately fifteen "capital ships" (generally carriers in the postwar timeframe under consideration) with an associated support fleet. Anything else should be considered luxury, and therefore shed in periods of declining budgets and reacquired in flusher times. Further, the Vietnam war should mark a change: as a trauma, it should decrease subsequent interest in third-world operations, and thus reduce the demand for amphibious forces.

Rhodes finds support for this constructivist explanation of events, with healthy levels of statistical significance. Capital ships were roughly constant in number, and their proportion increased in eras of budgetary cutbacks. And following the Tet offensive, procurement of engines of amphibious warfare declined. He emphasizes, however, that this does not represent a critical test of the "shared images" hypothesis, which in any case is not here fully developed.