

**Abstract: Rational Choice theory in early Cold War US defense policy –  
the role of ‘defense rationalists’**

Rational choice theorists first become the source of policy and scientific innovation as they got involved in the construction of the United States’ post-World War II defense policy in the late 1940s, based on the new weapon: the nuclear bomb. This devastating weapon rewrote the rules of traditional Clausewitzian warfare and presented a strategic puzzle to the United States – the only superpower possessing such weaponry. The question was how to use the weapon and what to use it for. To answer these difficult questions, the heavily restructured US military turned to civilian scientists who later became known as the “defense rationalists”. The defense rationalists came from various academic backgrounds – mostly physics, mathematics and strategic studies – and were assembled in the newly founded think tank, the RAND Corporation in 1948. RAND was unique in that although it was founded by the Air Force’s Strategic Air Command (SAC – the office responsible for nuclear arms), it was a private institution employing civilian scientists. Defense rationalists in the RAND Corporation figured prominently in the development of the SAC’s Cold War strategies using rational choice (in particular formalized game theoretical models) as a basis for many of their early studies on various strategies and their outcome. Among their works one can find many examples of other applications of game theory, the problem of inference, survivorship bias and, counterforce, systems analysis, mutually assured destruction and the Nash equilibrium.

This paper outlines my future research on the role of the defence rationalists in the policy innovation process, culminating in the US’s early Cold War policy. It tries to answer the central research question: Why did rational choice theory in particular become the foundation of early Cold War US nuclear defense policy? Looking beyond RAND, the paper employs an epistemic community (a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular issue-area and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain) framework to assess the plausibility of a supply-driven policy innovation process, i.e. the scientific experts framing the problem and presenting the policy answer favoured by the community as well. A positive answer would have implications for our understanding of the construction of the Cold War as a polarized conflict.