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A PRESCRIPTIVE MODEL FOR HANDLING NUCLEAR AGE CRISES IN THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE

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Professor Louis Koenig writes that “crisis is a crucible in which a president and his administration are tested as nowhere else.”¹ From a study primarily of the Cuban missile crisis and several similar type of crises² a prescriptive model³ will be offered to provide the President with a coherent strategy and a workable decision-making pattern to deal with possible future nuclear age crisis⁴ situations.

There are several reasons and objectives for undertaking this study. President Kennedy was aware of a deeply disturbed by the “miscalculations and misunderstandings” of the statesmen who brought about past wars. Our initial reasons is to determine what Kennedy did in order to avoid repeating the errors and miscalculations of these past statesmen in his management of the missile crisis. Our second reason is to examine the manner in which other recent Presidents have dealt with and handled similar types of crises⁵.

Third, in the nuclear age, a direct confrontation between world powers may lead to the destruction of civilization through nuclear war. The President must have available a strategy and institutional and structural capability to cope with such a confrontation.

Fourth, the rapid and dangerous build-up of crisis in nuclear age confrontations, due to the increased spread of communications and expansion of weapons technology, means that decisions must be made quickly and with the assurance that all possible alternatives have been considered.

Fifth, a nuclear age confrontation raises the challenge of providing alternatives and prompt decisions that do not quickly escalate the risks of total destruction, management that is handled expertly and competently, and institutions that are responsible and able to handle assigned tasks. An approach to crisis management during nuclear age confrontations that provides for the above factors must be developed.

Sixth, the capacity to deal with nuclear age confrontation cannot be left to the variable of Presidential personality alone. President Kennedy’s handling of the missile crisis confrontation avoided irreparable global damage. However, there is no assurance that in the future we or the Russians will have the right people in the right places at the right time.

There is a crucial need to develop a nuclear age crisis capability not solely dependent on Presidential personality factors. We must seek to provide structurally and institutionally for those aspects of the Kennedy personality that proved so effective in handling the missile crisis.

Finally, international tension areas continue to exist and the threat of nuclear confrontation and global war has not appreciably abated. The questionable and irregular nature of the “cease-fire alert” during the October 1973 Middle East War,⁶ the Mayaguez confrontation,⁷ and the failed hostage rescue mission in Iran⁸ demonstrate the necessity to pursue studies that will enable the President and his administration to better cope with similar possible crisis situations in the nuclear age.

The prescriptive model offered here emerged from a study that called the successful variable components from a number of nuclear age crisis situations. The Cuban missile crisis was the basic focus of the study. The other crises studied were used to obtain a comparative perspective to the missile crisis.

Components of the Model

The missile crisis contained all of the successful variable components of the model. Most of the other crises, having ended in a relatively unsatisfactory manner for the President and the key decision makers, either lacked numerous or most of the successful variable components. Those crises that were judged to have been resolved more successfully were found to contain a larger number of the successful variable components of the model. Our study revealed that there were two distinct parts to the prescriptive model that was evolved.⁹ The first part involved developing a “general strategy” for dealing with nuclear age crisis.

The components of the general strategy are:

Communications

Keep open all channels of communication.

Use of improvised channels of communication.

Widen number of parties involved in communication about the crisis, thereby maximizing time to develop all possible crisis solutions.

Pacing Crisis Events

Attempt to retard the pace of crisis events and reduce time pressure for decision-making.

Pursue a slow pace of diplomatic and military escalation.

The prudent application of “coercive diplomay.”¹⁰

Compel adversary to become aware of the impact of one’s resolve and firmness of position in confronting crisis.

Dealing with Adversary

Maintain flexibility in dealing with adversary.

Maintain restraint in dealing with adversary.

Avoid forcing adversary to choose either humiliating retreats or nuclear war.

Be aware of and sensitive to political calculations, internal needs, and perspectives of adversary.

International Law and Morality

Ensure that actions taken are in accord with a generally acceptable interpretation of international law in order to justify and legitimize these actions.

Ensure that actions taken are morally and historically defensible for the largest possible domestic and international audiences.

Present all evidence to world community in a clear and unequivocal manner, if possible at a prestigious forum, which can command media attention, to unmask the aggressive nature of adversary’s position and behavior.

Dealing with Allies

Encourage consultation and discussion with allies in order to receive the benefit of their advice, broaden one’s perspectives, keep them informed, show respect for them as allies and thus gain their support.

Crisis Supervision and Coordination

Have trusted, capable, and well informed aides maintain close supervision of the entire crisis scenario and report developments.

Maintain close control and coordination between those who have the responsibility for carrying out actions during the crisis and those who are formulating crisis plans and policy decisions.

The second part of our model involved developing a “decision-making pattern” for the management of nuclear age crisis.

The components of the decision-making pattern are:

Decision-Making Management Style

Use of the “collegial”¹¹ style of Presidential management and decision-making.

Composition of the Decision-Making Body

President must be free to choose decision-making group on an “ad hoc” basis and to change its composition relative to the specific problem under discussion.

President must be able to select advisers for decision-making group that he has personal confidence in.

President must be able to go outside the formal decision-making body and structure to secure advice, analysis and assistance.

President must be free to use a flexible decision-making body to deal with the crisis.

Possible inclusion in decision-making group of an “ombudsman” advocating the greater interests of humanity in a nuclear crisis.

The President should attempt to select stress resistant people for the decision-making group and provide access to mental health facilities for all decision makers.¹²

Operations of the Decision-Making Body

Use of “multiple advocacy”¹³ model by decision-making body to provide diversity of views and interests.

Decision-making group must avoid the “groupthink”¹⁴ phenomenon. There must be encouragement of impolite and tough questioning and a willingness to differ and disagree.

Procedures must be used to gather information and present data that goes against current policy and majority positions.

All possible lines of advisory reasoning and thinking, however implausible, must be explored.

Decision-making group must maintain flexibility and be able to shift positions as events change or as new facts come to light.

Inter-Governmental Coordination

The President must make certain that those agencies, actors, and branches of government concerned with the implementation of policy act in a cooperative and coordinated manner.

The President must be certain to consult with and gain support of those agencies, actors, and branches of government that are either involved with the implementation of the policy decisions or can in some way impede the crisis scenario.

Overview of the Model

The challenge of developing an appropriate general strategy and decision-making pattern for a President and his aides to employ in a nuclear age crisis is great. A new President, upon assuming office, is faced with a large and complex set of actors, agencies, and departments about which he most likely knows relatively little. Most recent Presidents (Harry Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan) have come to office with little prior experience in the foreign policy decision-making process. Few were able to give the proper attention to becoming versed in the decision-making process prior to assuming office. The policy and decision-making structures that do exist are often clogged with bureaucracy, are highly parochial, and are usually quite inflexible. In the Bay of Pigs operation, coming three months after President Kennedy assumed office, the President was ill-advised, misinformed, and misled by the formal advisory structure. Moreover, he can be faulted for his virtual dismemberment of the National Security Council.¹⁵ Fortunately President Kennedy had had the time and had been able, from the conclusion of the Bay of Pigs debacle onward, to begin developing a more effective and flexible advisory system for foreign policy decision-making.

President Jimmy Carter came to office without prior experience in foreign policy. He and most of those closest to him were “sectionally contained.” He knew little about those that had to advise him on foreign affairs. He came to Washington without intimate knowledge of most of the actors, agencies, and departments that represent the national security advisory structure. Further, it would appear that at the time of the attempted hostage rescue mission he had not gotten very far in bringing under his direction, properly coordinating, and mastering in time of crisis the most effective use of that advisory structure.¹⁶ The prescriptive model offered here would provide Presidents such as Jimmy Carter, as well as the others mentioned previously, and specifically would have provided John Kennedy prior to the Bay of Pigs, an available model for use in nuclear age crises and the overall foreign policy decision-making process.

An overview of the prescriptive model will be helpful to understanding how it can be applied to possible, similar nuclear age crises. The “general strategy” aspect of the model provides a President and his aides with a coherent, balanced, and constructive approach to foreign policy strategy development within a broad spectrum of crises that may arise.

The use of the “communications” component suggest to the President the advantages of keeping open all possible channels of communications. The use of this approach may extend the opportunities to communicate with the adversary in a variety of ways that may more quickly lead to a peaceful resolution of the crisis. Another part of the communications component that could prove advantageous to a President is widening the number of parties involved in communicating about the crisis. This can help the President in attaining additional time, during the consultation and response periods, to explore the various options that have been presented or to deepen the search for a possible crisis solution.

The implementation of the “pacing crisis events” component suggests to the President what gains may be attained from a prudent use of “coercive diplomacy,” slowing down the pace of diplomatic and military escalation. The President would be well advised to slow down the pace of the escalation of the crisis to permit the adversaries time to reflect on their next moves.

Further, the President should not take any extreme actions that would foreclose other measured responses at a later time. Prudent application of coercive diplomacy could be a most useful tool for the President. The objective of coercive diplomacy is to attain policy goals without excessive resort to threat or force. The President should not be rushed into making a crucial crisis decision, especially one that involves force, without using all the time he may have available to require his decision-making group to explore all possible aspects of the problem being faced from every possible angle.

The model also suggests to the President a useful strategy for “dealing with the adversary.” The President should maintain flexibility and restraint when dealing with the adversary. Further, the President must be sensitive to the calculations and internal needs of the adversary. Both sides must have a way to retreat from unwanted confrontations. The President should have his advisors consider what “non-aggressive” measures could be taken in the crisis. The model outlines a number of more specific ways in which this strategy can be implemented.

The model further suggest several useful ways in which “international law and morality” could be used by the President to further his strategic aims. To ensure support at home and abroad and to defend and legitimize the nation’s actions, the President must make certain that the nation’s actions are within a generally acceptable framework of

international law and are morally and historically justifiable. Further, the President should attempt to demonstrate the aggressive nature of the adversary's position and behavior. Domestic support for the President and world reaction to his actions can play important roles in the outcome of any nuclear age crisis.

A nuclear age crisis does not take place in a vacuum. Support or lack of support of a nation's allies can affect the outcome of a crisis. "Dealing with allies" is an important component of the general strategy aspect of the prescriptive model. The model suggests that it would be useful for the President to engage in consultation and discussions with allies to gain the benefit of their advice, analysis, and perspectives, and hopefully to attain their support for this actions.

A final component of the model deals with "crisis supervision and coordination." The President is directed to make certain that trusted, capable, and well informed aides maintain close supervision of crisis events and developments. The problem of properly translating the crisis scenario into correct action is vital. The President must make certain that actions are carried out as intended. Further, the President is directed to carefully oversee the coordination between those who are formulating crisis actions and policies and those who must carry them out.

The "decision-making pattern" aspect of the model gives the President and his aides an opportunity to best work out problems and generate the strongest solutions, best manage and organize, and most effectively coordinate the decision-making process. Further, it allows them to best implement the decisions that have been made.

The implementation of the "decision-making management style" component (use of the collegial style of Presidential management and decision-making) offers the President maximum opportunity to work out problems and obtain solutions, which bring together the best aspects of diverse points of view and approaches. The President has the benefit of constructive conflict and finding solutions that offer the strongest and most workable approach to a problem after the best arguments have been presented, in a structured fashion, by all contending sides.

The implementation of the "composition of the decision-making body" component of the model offers the President a flexibility and an expanded capacity to draw advice, counsel, judgments, insights, analysis, and general assistance from a variety of formal and informal sources. It frees a President from the restrictions of an overly formal advisory structure. In adopting an ad hoc style decision-making unit, the President is creating a decision-making environment that enables him to select for the decision-making body those people in which he has personal trust and confidence, those from whom he wants to obtain counsel, as well as those who serve on advisory structures because of their official positions

– the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, etc. It enables the President to gather together a broad and diverse collection of individuals who represent a “variety of personal and bureaucratic viewpoints.” The President is free to seek out the best group of advisors he can find without regard to political orientations or official titles. He can draw from all sources, including a “world source,” in the person of an “ombudsman” advocating the greater interests of humanity. He may also wish to select those whom he finds to be most stress-resistant. This recommendation is made in conjunction with the suggestion that the President provide mental health facilities, for times of greatest tension and stress, for all decision makers.

The “operations of the decision-making body” component, upon implementation, offers the President, through the creation of a multiple advocacy system, a “structured, balanced debate” between policy advisors coming from differing areas of the administration and, if desired, from without the administration. The President can then also use the ad hoc decision-making unit for the three “operating principles” here suggested by the prescriptive model – exploration, examination, and decisional analysis. It is vital for the President and the other decision makers not to become entrapped by the desire for “cohesiveness and concurrence-seeking tendency.” The prescriptive model suggests how they may avoid what is referred to as the “groupthink phenomenon” through a variety of devices. Among these devices is the encouragement of hard and probing questioning of alternative courses of action and the reinforcement of a positive attitude toward constructive disagreement and argument over policy matters. The model further suggests to the President and his aides how to create a decision-making environment that does not pre-judge or pre-determine the type of information, advice, or analysis that reaches the decision makers. In part, creating such an environment involves gathering data that goes against present policy and generally favored positions and explores all possible tracks of advisory council and suggestion.

It may appear self-evident that “inter-governmental coordinator” is vital to the handling of any foreign policy decision-making situation. However, a new President, especially one who has not gained control of the bureaucracy or who is not very familiar with the operations of various agencies of departments, may greatly benefit from adopting the measures suggested in the model to aid in the implementation of policy decisions and to avoid impeding the crisis scenario. These measures may include special attention to creating cooperative and coordinated efforts, making certain to obtain counsel and support of involved groups and individuals, and “bringing on board” all those who are necessary to crisis or general foreign policy activity.

Conclusion

Much of the focus of the above analysis has been on the usefulness of the prescriptive model to a new President. However, a President who has been in office for some time or one who comes into office with a degree of knowledge or experience in the foreign policy decision-making process can equally benefit from the model. No President has an assured ability in foreign policy decision-making. Further, the variable of Presidential personality is great. No two Presidents will react in a similar fashion to a crisis situation. The President may also, through handicap or disability, be limited in his ability to creatively or competently deal with a crisis situation or the foreign policy decision-making process in general. The President may further have become overly dependent on one type of response to foreign policy problems not applicable in a certain crisis or general situation.

For these and other similar situations, the model offers a coherent and readily implementable general strategy and decision-making pattern. NO real or substantive changes in the Presidential office are needed to implement the model. The component parts of the model are of an ad hoc nature and any institutionalization of them would be a negative rather than a positive factor to making the model work properly. The President cannot determine the exact composition of the decision-making group until he knows what is the nature of the crisis situation being faced. Further, the President, in organizing the operations of the decision-making body when needed, cannot be expected to predict the exact type of crisis situation or foreign policy problem that has developed, and cannot be able to prepare a multiple advocacy model with a diversity of views, orientations, and interest already laid out.

The strength of the model is in its comparatively simple and immediate application to a crisis situation or to the overall foreign policy decision-making process. The model can be implemented in whole or in part. The President may choose to ignore frequent consultation or discussions with the nation's allies or may not show high regard for making certain that actions taken are in accord with generally acceptable standards of international law. This approach will certainly lessen the impact of the overall application of the model. However, it will not prevent the other component variables of the model from being applied. The author cautions though that it is not advisable to selectively apply components of the model. The model may also be applied or implemented at almost any time. No prior preparation or commitment is required. The flexible, ad hoc nature of the model means that it can be applied to a wide and diverse group of crisis or general foreign policy-making situations in the nuclear age. Finally, the output from the model, through any number of its component parts, may provide a set of fresh ideas and approaches to problems that would assist and satisfy the most demanding and experienced of Presidents.

Notes

1. Louis Koenig, *The Chief Executive* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981), p. 371.

2. Among the other crises studied were the Truman decision to invade North Korea, the Kennedy Bay of Pigs decision, the Johnson decision to escalate the war in Vietnam, the Nixon decision to mine Haiphong Harbour in May, 1972, the Nixon response to the cease fire alert during the Yom Kippur War of October, 1973, the Ford Mayaguez crisis, and the Carter American Hostage Rescue Mission in Iran.
3. The definition of a proscriptive model used here is related to policy science and policy-relevant theory. It involves the effort to offer direction, guidance and insight “for action to the decision-makers” to handle both current and “expected future” decision-making situations. For further elaboration see Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence In American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp. 617-642; Richard Smoke, “Policy-Applicable Theory” in Alexander George et. al., “Towards A More Soundly Based Foreign Policy: Making Better Use of Information,” Vol. 2, Appendices, *Commission On the Organization Of The Government For the Conduct of Foreign Policy*, June, 1975 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), pp. 75-82; and Alexander George, *Presidential Decision Making in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use Of Information and Advice* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1980), Chapter 14.
4. “... a crisis is caused by a change in the international or domestic environment that generates a perception in the minds of policy makers of a threat to important goals or values, with significantly increased probability of hostilities, and a short time for response ... crises also tend to be characterized by surprise, unusually high levels of uncertainty, and a potential for escalation to higher levels of conflict.” This excellent definition of crisis is taken from Richard Head, Frisco Short, and Robert McFarlane, *Crisis Resolution: Presidential Decision-Making In the Mayaguez and Korean Confrontations* (Boulder, Colorado; Westview Press, 1978), p. 30. The above definition of crisis “builds” upon the work of several other scholars. See Michael Brecher, “The Theoretical Approach to International Crisis Behavior,” in *Studies In Crisis Behavior*, ed. Michael Brecher (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1978), pp. 5-9; James Robinson, “Crisis: An Appraisal of Concepts and Theories,” in *International Crises: Insights From Behavioral Research*, ed. Charles Hermann, “Maintaining the Quality of Decision-Making in Foreign Policy Crises: A Proposal,” in George, et. Al., *Commission On the Organization of Government*.
5. For an excellent account and analysis of Presidential “command decisions” in the Cuban missile crisis and other recent similar crises see R. Gordon Hoxie, *Command Decision and the Presidency: A Study In National Security Policy and Organization* (New York: Readers Digest Press, 1977). Hoxie develops the theme that Presidential command decisions “play a profound role in a nation’s life” and change the direction of national events. At the same time, he sees the President restrained by limited authority and struggling to obtain the political resources to command.
6. For an excellent account of the “cease-fire alert,” see Marvin Kalb and Bernard Kalb, *Kissinger* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974); “An Implied Soviet Threat Spurred U.S. Forces Alter” *New York Times*, November 25, 1973, pp. 1, 17; and “Anatomy Of The October Alert,” *New York Times*, November 25, 1973, Section 4, p.3.
7. For an informative account of the Mayaguez confrontation, see Head, Short and McFarlan, *Crisis Resolution*.

8. For a relevant account of the hostage rescue mission see Seymour Hersh, "The Iran Operation: Hard Questions That Need Answers Now," *New York Times*, May 1, 1980, p. 21; "Military Report Says Hostage Raid On Teheran Could Have Succeeded," *New York Times*, August 24, 1980, pp. 1, 19; "Report Charges "Major" Mistakes On Iran Mission," *New York Times*, June 6, 1980, pp. 1, 8; and Tom Wicker, "A Tale of Two Silences," *New York Times*, May 4, 1980, Section 4, p. 23.
9. There is some overlap between the two parts of the model. However, the overlap and the blurring are not extensive and present no real handicap to a clear differentiation both between and within the parts of the model. To illustrate, some overlap exists between the "crisis supervision and coordination" component of the general strategy and the "inter-governmental coordination" component of the decision-making pattern.
10. For a full definition of coercive diplomacy, see Alexander George, David Hall, and William Simons, *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), pp. 18-19. Also, see Oran Young, *The Politics of Force: Bargaining During International Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), Chapter 8.
11. For a full definition and discussion of the collegial style of Presidential management and decision-making, see Richard Tanner Johnson, *Managing the White House* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) and George, *Presidential Decision-Making In Foreign Policy*, Chapters 8 and 12.
12. The last two segments of the "composition of the decision-making body" segment are suggested by Joseph deRivera, *the Psychological Dimension Of Foreign Policy* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill, 1968), Chapter 5, 6 and Conclusion, and Thomas Milburn, *the Management of Crisis*," In Hermann, *International Crisis*, pp. 263-270. For further discussion of the impact of stress on crisis decision-making, see Ole Holsti and Alexander George, "The Effects of Stress on the Performance of Foreign Policy-Makers," In *Political Science Annual, Volume six – 1975*, ed. Cornelius Cotter (Indianapolis, Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), pp. 255-319; George, *Presidential Decision-Making In Foreign Policy*, Chapter 4; and Gerald Hopple, *Political Psychology and Bio Politics: Assessing and Predicting Elite Behavior In Foreign Policy Crises* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1980).
13. For a discussion of the multiple advocacy model, see Alexander George, "The Case For Multiple Advocacy in Making Foreign Policy," *American Political Science Review*, Volume. 66, No. 3 (September 1972), pp. 751-763 and George, *Presidential Decision-Making In Foreign Policy*, Chapters 9, 10 and 11.
14. For a discussion of the "groupthink phenomenon," see Irving Janis, *Victims of Group Think: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decision And Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972).
15. For excellent analyses on the reasons for the Bay of Pigs failure, see *Ibid.*, Chapter 2; Roger Hilsman, *To Move A Nation* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), Chapter 3; and Oval History Interview with Robert Amory, February, 1966, by Joseph E. O'Connor, John F. Kennedy Library. See also Hoxie, *op. cit.*, pp. 243-42, *passim*.
16. For a more detailed account of the President's difficulty with the hostage rescue mission, see again Hersh, "The Iran Operation" and Wicker, "A Tale of Two Silences."