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PRESIDENTS AND CRISIS: DEVELOPING A CRISIS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM IN THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

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"There is no longer any such thing as strategy, only crisis management."
Robert S. McNamara

In the past, presidents have tended to deal with a crisis in an ad hoc, "I'll cross that bridge when I come to it" manner. In a nuclear age, the US can no longer afford such a luxury. As recent crises suggest, a more self-conscious, formal mechanism for crisis management is necessary. This paper* presents a crisis management system for the executive branch consisting of five components: (1) precrisis training seminars; (2) crisis control centers; (3) crisis communication; (4) crisis norms and procedures; and (5) institutionalizing a devil's advocate.

As recent crises—both potentially nuclear and nonnuclear—suggest, a more self-conscious, formal mechanism for crisis management is necessary at the executive level.

Foreign policy crises are recurring and exceedingly dangerous. A considerable amount of research has been done in a variety of academic disciplines which attempts to understand the nature of crisis, the pressures decision-makers face in a crisis, and what might be done to improve conflict resolution and crisis management skills. This paper attempts to focus that research on the American presidency.1 What pressures are a president and his top advisers likely to face during a crisis? What potential hazards must be avoided? How can leaders diffuse tension or better manage crises? While crisis management is not a panacea, there are a variety of skills which can be brought to bear on a crisis which are designed to reduce the likelihood that crises will lead to open warfare.

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Dealing with Crises

Crisis management has become a frequent style of interaction in world politics. The average number of crises has risen in this century compared with the last century, the frequency of crises confrontation rising more than fourfold between 1960 and 1976. Between 1946 and 1976, an average of 18.2 military conflicts were under way each year. Several of these conflicts threatened to engage the nuclear powers in a direct confrontation. In a way, the post-World War II period could be called an "age of crisis."

Do crises necessarily escalate into war? Since the First World War, 83 percent of all crises involved the use of force. But, although the proportion of crises which lead to the use of force among the major powers has actually declined in this period, the consequences of escalation to violence in a crisis involving nuclear armed superpowers have grown even more ominous. Particularly during the present period of transition in the international system, crisis can be expected to be an endemic feature of international life. This being the case, we must become more conscious of conflict resolution and crisis management techniques.

A crisis is an event which occurs suddenly and heightens tensions. It appears where stakes are high, where there is little time to decide and act, and where decision-makers are under intense pressure. The atmosphere is one of uncertainty and contains expectations of hostile action.

In a crisis, tradition calls for the president to step to the forefront and assume command. As the principal actor in the foreign policy process, the president, during a crisis, is granted and assumes wide prerogative powers. Rossiter criticized the separation of powers for its "crisis inefficiencies" and suggested that in a crisis we turn to the president as the "constitutional dictator." Whatever label one cares to place upon the crisis president, it is clear that during crises, the public, courts, and Congress generally look to the chief executive to assume control. As Klieman writes: "In an emergency, with the nation's fate possibly at stake, power will flow to the president. National peril creates the political and psychological conditions for the use of power by a determined, confident president. Emergencies evoke a psychological need for authority. They also present a need within government for centralized leadership and decisive action."

Nuclear versus Nonnuclear Crises

All crises are threatening, but a crisis with the potential use of nuclear weapons introduces threats of such a proportion as to produce unimaginable strain upon decision-makers. There is a fundamental difference between a nonnuclear crisis, such as the Iranian hostage situation, and a
potentially nuclear crisis, such as the Cuban missile crisis. A nonnuclear crisis threatens the national interest, whereas a nuclear crisis threatens the survival of the system itself.

With the advent of nuclear weapons, crisis management has been raised to a new level. In effect, the possession of nuclear weapons has made war between the superpowers unacceptable as an option. Thus, states are limited in their menu of possible responses when confronting an adversary who possesses nuclear weapons. As Richard Ned Lebow writes: "The prevailing wisdom is that war as an outcome of crisis between nuclear powers has become so disastrous as to be unacceptable. Concern for winning confrontations obviously remains and crisis bargaining still entails implicit or even explicit threats of war. However, nuclear adversaries must be extremely wary of losing control over events or of otherwise becoming irrevocably committed to war. Crisis bargaining, so the argument goes, has become more difficult because of the unclear boundaries between 'winning' and 'disaster avoidance.' Statesmen must walk a fine line between risking war in order to demonstrate resolve and actually pushing the confrontation to the point where war becomes likely. The need for caution makes it more difficult to impart credibility to any threat to go to war because the adversary knows the inherent irrationality of such threats." Lebow adds: "It follows from this paradoxical dynamic that a crisis between nuclear powers is, in the words of Thomas Schelling, an exercise in 'competitive risk-taking.' Schelling suggests that in practice the threshold of war is likely to be ambiguous. The side that 'wins' is most often the side that escalated to the point where a matching escalation is perceived by the leaders of the other side to entail greater risks of war than they are willing to assume. Put crudely, success hinges upon making an adversary believe that he is forced to choose between concession or war."

Crisis Management Defined

Hilliard Roderick suggests that "Crisis Management consists of contingency planning prior to a crisis and the active management of a crisis once it occurs." This definition contains the two primary components of crisis management: precrisis planning, and during-crisis steersage. While most definitions of crisis management concentrate exclusively on during-crisis steersage, it is also important to include those steps which can be taken prior to the outbreak of a crisis, which can better equip a leader to deal with the demands he or she is likely to face during the active management of a crisis.

Phil Williams adds another component to our definition of crisis management when he writes that: "Crisis management is concerned on the
one hand with the procedures for controlling and regulating a crisis so that it does not get out of hand and lead to war, and on the other hand with ensuring that the crisis is resolved on a satisfactory basis in which the vital interests of the state are secured and protected. The second aspect will almost invariably necessitate vigorous actions carrying substantial risks. One task of crisis management, therefore, is to temper these risks, to keep them as low and as controllable as possible, while the other is to ensure that the coercive diplomacy and risk-taking tactics are as effective as possible in gaining concessions from the adversary and maintaining one’s own position relatively intact.  

Williams’s concern for a satisfactory resolution of the crisis (short of war or surrender) becomes the third component of crisis management. The question then becomes, how does one prepare leaders before a crisis to meet the demands of crisis steerage better so as to increase the chances that the crisis will be resolved short of war or surrender? This paper will concentrate on precrisis planning in an effort to develop a better crisis management capacity in the executive branch.

At present, there is no formal, deliberate attempt to give the president precrisis training. While the National Security Council (NSC) has a Crisis Management Center, the efforts to bring top officials of the administration into a more formalized training program are quite limited. The lack of explicit precrisis training seems surprising in light of the importance of crisis decision-making in a nuclear age. After all, given the wrong move, leaders may not get a second chance to correct their mistakes. And yet, most nations seem willing to continue to run the risk of having leaders face the pressures of crisis decision-making with woefully little preparation.

Alexander George described the reaction of a senior member of the NSC in the Carter administration to its first crisis. He said that “the most staggering thing was walking into the White House during our first major crisis, wondering what to do, and then all of a sudden realizing that there are no rules, no books, and no procedures. One of your first thoughts is to ask the President; but the President doesn’t know; he only knows what the staff tells him.”

The need for a more self-conscious pre-crisis training vehicle was recently addressed by William Ury when he wrote: “One way to think about this question is to imagine yourself in the shoes of the president of the

The projected development of space weapons will have far-reaching implications for space and security.
United States on the day a new Middle East war broke out or when a nuclear missile was launched by accident. What might you wish you had talked about beforehand with your Soviet counterpart? What agreements to halt escalation would you wish you had reached? What procedures would you want to have in place to ensure you were able either to defuse the crisis or, better yet, prevent it in the first place? These steps must be taken ahead of time because once a crisis erupts it may be too late to create new procedures.

A functional precrisis training apparatus must therefore anticipate (by reviewing past crises) the problems a leader is likely to face in any crisis (generic dysfunctionalism) and better prepare decision-makers to face such challenges in the future. A word of caution is in order here. All precrisis training can do is attempt to make the process “better” and increase the likelihood that decision-makers will make wiser decisions in a crisis. Such training attempts to introduce more rationality into an atmosphere which often promotes irrationality. It seeks to give leaders slightly more control in a situation which often seems out of control. It attempts to highlight for the leader, those aspects of crisis decision-making most prone to pitfalls, and give the leader a more self-conscious approach. And hopefully, by having a more deliberate precrisis apparatus for the president, the institutional memory of the executive branch can help a leader learn from past crisis experiences.

**Dysfunctional Aspects of Crisis**

Among the many pressures a president is likely to face in a crisis are the following: shortness of time to decide and act; seriousness of consequences (high stakes); incomplete, incorrect or skewed information; psychological prejudices (e.g., misperception, fear, hatred, etc.); complexity; an atmosphere of uncertainty; poor communication with the adversary; stress or fatigue; bureaucratic-organizational resistance; limited options; and cognitive biases.

As Ury and Smoke point out, “These factors press decision-makers to take hasty, often escalatory, action to protect vital interests. Through action and reaction, miscalculation and miscommunication, a runaway crisis and war may result.”

**A. Time**

While a crisis may require a speedy response, the danger of a decision being made on faulty, incomplete or incorrect information is enormous. When the decision-maker feels there is no time to check on information, the leader may rush to judgment on the assumption that action is better
than inaction. If nothing else, doing something — anything — restores some sense of control over events. Was that bleep on the computer a sign of Soviet attack? If so, how much time do I have to respond? Eleven minutes? Six minutes? If I don’t decide now, will it be too late?

Because the dangers of a rash decision are so great for all involved, both sides have a stake in controlling the pace of crisis. If there can be a pause, a slowing down of events, then both sides will have an opportunity to verify information, exchange messages, explore alternatives, and develop options short of war. Almost by definition, if one can slow the pace of crisis it ceases to be a crisis. This is one of the premier goals of crisis management.

B. High Stakes
By its very nature, a crisis implies high stakes and serious consequences for a wrong move. Since a “perceived vital national interest” is involved, leaders may risk a great deal to protect that which they feel is central to their state’s future.

Since leaders are often willing to go to the brink to protect vital national interests, it is important for them to understand clearly which interests are vital, and which are secondary. For example, would the Soviet Union risk a nuclear war to come to the aid of the Marxist leaders of a small and politically insignificant island a few hundred miles from the coast of the US? Probably not. However, they probably would be more inclined to stand up — militarily if necessary — to a threat to their control of Poland which they feel is a vital buffer zone.

Likewise, the United States can do little in a direct way to aid Afghan rebels. Afghanistan is generally seen as not vital to the US national interest, and it would be foolish to risk nuclear war over Soviet intervention into that country. If, however, Marxist rebels began to make significant inroads in Mexico, the United States would be more inclined to intervene militarily.

C. Information
Sound, rational decision-making requires good information, properly presented, clearly understood. As important as good information is, there is probably nothing more difficult for a decision-maker than finding unambiguous and reliable information or getting a wide range of options from which to choose a course of action. There is nothing diabolical in this. Good information is a precious commodity, and even the president, who sits atop what, on the surface, appears to be the world’s most so-
phisticated information-gathering apparatus, has difficulty getting information in which he can place confidence.

The information problem is exaggerated in a crisis. When time is short, it is even more difficult to check up on the reliability of information. But in a crisis, reliable information is vital. While a decision-maker may get a sufficient quantity of data or even information overload, quality of information is the problem.

How can the decision-maker insure access to the necessary information? There is no foolproof system, but a leader who is aware of the potential pitfalls can gain a fighting chance in the search for good information.

In a crisis, traditional patterns of interaction break down, and the president is, in a sense, free of the bureaucratic-institutional restraints under which he must usually operate. The president is potentially free to set up the information processing system with which he feels most comfortable. There is no ironclad “best” system. In the case of the Cuban missile crisis, President Kennedy formed what was called the Executive Committee of the NSC (ExCom). This was a collection of trusted advisors and military personnel who Kennedy believed would give him a broad range of advice, and in whose judgments he generally trusted.19

Kennedy's decision to form ExCom, an ad hoc body of advisers, reflected his determination to get a broad range of advice, plus his recognition that the missile crisis required a different apparatus to gather and process information. This was not politics as usual, and, given the vast array of problems and level of uncertainty, Kennedy decided to go beyond the normal advisory process and set up a special unit. This allowed him to demand that the advice and information he received was the best possible, given the limitations of the situation. He constantly challenged the validity of the information given him, he repeatedly questioned the assumptions upon which advice was based, and he insisted that a wide range of alternatives be explored before a consensus was reached.

This process did not—could not—guarantee a good decision, but it did improve the chances that a rational decision could be reached. This process sought to check and recheck information, question and requestion assumptions, explore and reexplore alternatives, and walk and rewalk in the adversary's shoes.

While the ExCom style fit Kennedy, not all leaders may feel comfortable with such a process. Currently, the National Security Council has a Crisis Management Center which attempts to ready the administration for any possible crisis that may emerge. It gathers and analyzes data about potential crisis areas, serves as a clearinghouse for crisis management information, and is the “institutional memory” of the executive branch from which
decision-makers can draw information about past crises in an attempt to bring experience to bear on the current crisis. Two additional units assist the NSC in crisis management: the Special Situation Group (SSG), chaired by the vice president, and the Crisis Pre-Planning Group (CPPG), chaired by the deputy assistant to the president for National Security Affairs.20

Whatever apparatus a president employs, there are a variety of potential malfunctions in the advisory system which must be avoided. Decision-makers must be careful not to accept information, advice or assumptions too readily. Critical thinking in a crisis is essential. This is especially true where information is concerned. Presidents need to be suspicious when agreement comes too easily; avoid yes men who will too easily agree with the leader; be sure that all options are carefully reviewed; avoid isolation; be sure that a “devil’s advocate”921 is present (and listened to) who will challenge, question, and present unpopular ideas; avoid “group think”; and prevent the personality of the decision-maker23 from adversely affecting the way information-advice is processed.

D. Psychological Prejudice and Cognitive Biases

Perception, or misperception,24 plays an enormous role in decision-making. Given that both US and Soviet leaders have developed rather myopic, devil images of their adversaries,25 it is imperative that prejudices or cognitive rigidity do not dictate policy in a crisis. This is not to say that both sides enter into the process with a clean slate as regards their evaluations of the adversary. Past interactions, historic relations, patterns of behavior are all relevant in evaluating the likely response of an adversary, but it is too easy to slip into the trap of dehumanizing an adversary. Rational decision-making in a crisis requires resisting this temptation.

Misperception means that there is a discrepancy between image and reality. The further removed from reality, the more cognitive processing differs from the real world. There are a number of forms of misperception which could interfere with sound decision-making: overconfidence of a personal (e.g., excessively virile-macho self-image) or military (e.g., belief that a military solution is preferable over a diplomatic one) nature; diabolical image of the enemy (e.g., the view that there is a good guy-bad guy, devil-angel conflict);26 information problems (e.g., incomplete or inaccurate information); institutional forms of misperception (e.g., “group think”); denial (the tendency to block out unpleasant circumstances); dehumanization (the viewing of others as subhuman or without human qualities); projection (attributing our more undesirable traits and characteristics to the adversary); and overpersonalization (as Kennedy said of
Khrushchev at the outset of the Cuban missile crisis, "How could he do this to me?").

Can we create a crisis control system which forestalls all human error or folly? A structure that avoids misperception, miscommunication, panic or stupidity? Of course, there is no foolproof system, but ways can be found — institutional and individual — to reduce the dangers of misperception, misinformation, miscommunication, and rash action. To help achieve these goals, it is essential to slow down the pace of events, explore all options and how they will be viewed by the adversary, open lines of communication between adversaries, and give each side a chance to save face.

Additionally, to disengage emotions, a nonthreatening posture is essential. If one side issues a public ultimatum, offering only war or surrender, it forces the adversary into a position where it may be impossible to back away from the conflict. If one wishes to avoid war, the crisis must be viewed as a non-zero-sum game. When one or both sides see the conflict in zero-sum terms, where what one side wins, the other loses, the likelihood of war increases significantly. Crisis management must be conscious of supplying nonescalatory, nonthreatening options for both sides.

E. Complexity, Uncertainty, and Communication

Even under the best circumstances, problem solving is difficult and confusing. In a crisis, problems are compounded. Because of the added complexity and uncertainty involved in crisis decision-making, it is all the more important for leaders to identify clearly the specific nature of the perceived threat and its relationship to the national interest.

Once the nature of the threatened interests is made clear, and it is determined to what extent vital national interests are in jeopardy, the information process becomes the focal point. In an effort to reduce complexity to manageable proportions, good information is essential.

Additionally, communication with the adversary is necessary. Be it through direct leader-to-leader contact (via an improved Hot Line), diplomatic exchange, or informal contacts, both sides must keep talking. Only in this way can each side express its views in a clear and, it is hoped, nonthreatening manner. Only in this way can measures be devised which allow each side to move slowly away from crisis thinking and crisis behavior. The irony, however, is that, in a crisis, the temptation is to cut off communication, to stop talking.

F. Stress and Fatigue

In a crisis, decision-makers are put under an extraordinary amount of pressure. The stress and fatigue which result from seemingly endless hours
or days of high pressure situations will take a toll on leaders. The question is: What impact will this have on leaders?28

In these high pressure situations the decision-maker may be more vulnerable to error. Stress can impair the decision-maker’s judgment. The cumulative effect of both physical and emotional stress over a prolonged period of time can be devastating. As Robert F. Kennedy notes about the Cuban missile crisis, “That kind of pressure does strange things to a human being, even to brilliant, self-confident, mature, experienced men. For some it brings out characteristics and strengths that perhaps even they never knew they had, and for others the pressure is too overwhelming.”29 Ted Sorensen, another participant in the Cuban missile crisis, saw “during the long days and nights of the Cuban crisis, how brutally physical and mental fatigue can numb the good sense as well as the senses of normally articulate men.”30

**G. Bureaucratic Resistance**

As mentioned previously, in a crisis the traditional institutional and bureaucratic controls on a leader begin to fade, and individual or small group control emerges. However, this does not mean that the bureaucratic apparatus of government can be ignored. To the extent that bureaucratic organizations are involved in the process, they are likely to exhibit parochial perspectives, routine behavior, and bureaucratic inertia, and may thus retard the crisis decision and action process. And, once decisions are made, implementation is turned over to the bureaucracy. Therefore, if one is to ensure that the directives of the leadership are fully and accurately carried out, attention must be paid to how the permanent government receives and processes presidential decisions.

There is a tendency, once a crisis decision is made, to relax, to act as if the real work had been done. But such a temptation must be avoided. If decisions are not properly implemented, then all the good ideas and calculated moves may be undone by poor execution.

With these and many other problems multiplying and intensifying during a crisis, it is a wonder that a greater percentage of crises do not end in war. Crisis presents the leader with a greater need than ever to act rationally, and yet a crisis puts multiple pressures on the leader, which makes the always elusive goal of rational decision-making even more difficult.

Given that, even in the most calm and secure of circumstances, achieving complete rationality is difficult, is there a way during a crisis to promote the limited goal of greater rationality?

Crises are not entirely idiosyncratic. There are general patterns which
become the basis for prescriptive analysis. If the techniques of better crisis management are to be conveyed to top decision-makers, ways must be found to tailor the generalized knowledge of crisis decision-making to meet the particular needs of each crisis. Moreover, ways must be found to inform leaders as to what problems they are most likely to face during a crisis, and how they might better overcome these potential pitfalls. Richard Ned Lebow faces this when he writes: “The only way to combat the incredible pressures likely to confront national leaders facing the possibility of nuclear holocaust is to provide them with the preparation and training to overcome their human frailties. . . . In a nuclear crisis, a leader’s ability to cope successfully is likely to be increased by his willingness to adapt his policies to changing circumstances. Also, a leader’s decisions can be improved immeasurably by solid grounding in the technical issues likely to be confronted. Presidents who have not previously studied crisis management or who have not gone through crisis drills are likely to be insufficiently aware of the danger of loss of control associated with high alert levels. They are also likely to become captive to prepackaged options that bear little resemblance to their political needs at the time.”

Developing a Crisis Management System

Can decision-makers be trained to deal with crises more effectively? At present, there is little or no preparation to help leaders deal with crisis management. But there are steps which can be taken and which can increase the likelihood that, during a crisis, leaders will deal with the problem in a more rational manner. On the surface, such a qualified endorsement may appear to be a rather small step, but in a crisis, disasters are often made of small mistakes.

A more self-conscious, institutionalized precrisis approach needs to be developed which will better prepare an incoming president and top military and civilian officials to face the varied demands of crisis management. Such a crisis management program should include (at a minimum) the following:

A. Crisis Training Seminars

One of the most important steps which could be taken to improve the crisis management capability of the executive branch would be to institute a series of crisis training seminars for the president and other top administrative officials. Such seminars could be held before a new president takes office (during the preinaugural period) and also, periodically, during his tenure.
The precrisis briefing should have a fairly specific set of objectives. As Ury and Smoke suggest, it should include the following:

1. Understanding the range of possible nuclear crises scenarios, with some emphasis on crisis scenarios other than the “bolt from the blue” and Central European scenarios.
2. A review of past crises and their lessons (for instance, the Cuban missile crisis).
3. Understanding the current American crisis management system and crisis decision-making process, including its weaknesses and fragilities.
4. Understanding the Soviet crisis management system and style, including its weaknesses and fragilities.
5. Understanding joint Soviet-American institutional arrangements, such as the Hot Line, Accidents Agreement, etc.
6. Appreciating the range of possible strategies for negotiating with the USSR in times of crisis.
7. A previous opportunity to practice a decision sequence, to experiment, and to make mistakes.
8. Experiencing, at least in part, the sensations, stress, time constriction, and emotions of a nuclear crisis (so that leaders will not be wholly unfamiliar with them in the actual event.)

Ury and Smoke also suggest: “The briefing would not emphasize political and military decisions more than details of military capabilities or hardware (on which the president-elect would be officially briefed after inauguration). It would focus more on how a president should think about problems in managing crises and reaching decisions than on the technical details of airborne command posts or ‘pre-programmed nuclear options.’ Finally, it would attempt to communicate the accumulated body of precedents, amounting in a sense to unwritten ‘understandings’ about how the two superpowers will behave in crisis. It is not clear that this accumulated learning is fully passed on through changes of administration in Washington.”

In addition to giving the new administration the benefit of insights by past participants, the seminar’s briefings should also include films dealing with past crises (e.g., Berlin and the Cuban missile crisis); simulation exercises (in an effort to give the leaders some sense of the actual situational demands of a crisis); case study reviews (to show how crises started, how they were dealt with, etc.); crisis planning (charting out, in advance, the kinds of crises that might arise, and anticipating how such crises might be dealt with organizationally; and other shoes exercises (having top officials assume the roles of the Soviets in an effort to sensitize them to the demands and behavior patterns of a potential adversary).
B. Crises Control Centers

Presently under review in both Moscow and Washington is the proposal, championed by the late Senator Henry Jackson and recently promoted by Senators Nunn and Warner, to establish crisis control and risk reduction centers.

Such centers,\(^3\) to be located either in one neutral site, or two centers, one in the US and one in the Soviet Union, would be staffed by military and diplomatic personnel. Their primary mission would be to monitor possible crisis situations. But they could do much more.

The centers could be active with both precrisis management and during-crisis activities. Prior to a crisis, these centers could exchange information, clarify activities (e.g., troop movements), exchange technical information and problem solving, conduct high level discussions, maintain expertise, train officials in crisis management, and head off potential crisis situations. During a crisis, these centers could help carry out emergency safety procedures, verify information, exchange messages, keep lines of communication open, etc.

If such centers were taken seriously by both sides, and became the hub of an ongoing exchange process, they could prove invaluable in allowing each nation to stem the tide of crises, especially those involving accidents and third party confrontations. The potential for such centers to broaden their activities (e.g., to deal with terrorism) must also be considered.

C. Crisis Communication

During a crisis, the need for direct communication is strongest. Yet, it is in just such times that the tendency not to communicate is most pronounced. This being the case, conscious efforts must be made to deal with communication shutdowns before a crisis makes such steps unlikely.

In addition to the establishment of crisis control centers, several steps can be taken to improve communication between the superpowers. An improved Hot Line that takes advantage of state of the art technology could connect the White House to the Kremlin, and crisis control center to crisis control center. The Hot Line (or Direct Communications Link, DCL) would add to its satellite communications circuits a facsimile transmission capability, as well as a voice and video capability.

An additional way to supplement communication between the superpowers would be to regularize summit meetings. This should not be restricted to just the heads of state, but should also include establishing regular summits with Cabinet and ministerial level officials of the US and the Soviet Union.
D. Establishing Crisis Procedures

Is it possible to establish norms or procedures to be followed in the event of a crisis? Can rules of the game be developed? Such a notion has generated a great deal of interest in the last several years. Explicit, agreed-upon ground rules for crisis behavior which clarified expected actions, defined boundaries beyond which adversaries should not tread, and a set of understood signals, might have the effect of making wars less likely. Such rules are needed because the present system of communicating during crisis is often ambiguous, and because the existing mechanism or rules are too weak.

Coral Bell suggests the following as a basic set of precrisis guidelines to be followed in a crisis:

1. Communications with the adversary must and will be maintained and should grow closer and more intensive as the confrontation sharpens.
2. One should not seek to win too much, since the other side cannot afford to lose too much.
3. One must build “golden bridges” behind the adversary to facilitate his retreat. No situation could be more dangerous in the nuclear age than to box one of the nuclear powers into a corner.
4. Contingency plans must not be allowed to dictate the manner in which the crisis is managed.
5. Local crises shall be met in local terms, even a crisis of the central balance shall be met at least initially in conventional terms.
6. The other’s side of influence requires a special wariness and restraint when touched by intramural crises in the way of dissent.
7. The powers will not allow their signals to each other to become infected with an excess of misleading ambiguities through consultation with allies.
8. Surveillance by contemporary means is legitimate and will not be interfered with.

Establishing crisis rules is not a new concept. In 1972 the US and Soviet Union reached an “Incidents at Sea” agreement, which created a set of guidelines to be followed in order to avoid a crisis at sea. Such an agreement could be the base on which other ground rules could be established (dealing with air space, for example, which might have prevented an incident such as the Soviet shooting down of Korean Airlines Flight 007).

Ground rule agreements might include procedures for dealing with nuclear detonations of unknown origin; ways to signal peaceful intent (what Ury and Smoke call “Hands Off Holsters” signals); prearranged agreements establishing face-to-face meetings in times of crises; and contingency plans to establish a cease-fire during a crisis. As Ury and Smoke
note: “The essential value of these agreed-upon crisis procedures lies in making sure that when the leaders of each side want to avoid or defuse a crisis, they will not fail for simple lack of machinery to do so.”

E. Institutionalizing a Devil’s Advocate Function

While a discussion of all the organizational problems arising in crisis management is beyond the scope of this paper, a few proposals for improving the presidential capacity to deal with organizational difficulties in a crisis can be advanced.

Information, options, and advice are the most valuable decision-making components in a crisis. But, as we have already noted, in a crisis, there are a variety of roadblocks which make it less likely that good information, options, and advice will reach the president in a usable form. How might these impediments be circumvented?

In part, the problem of information stems from presidential personality. If a president does not demand good information—which means occasionally accepting critical advice or adverse information—he will not be likely to get it. But beyond the personality dimension, organizational problems inhibit the decision-making process. There is a tendency for the group to agree too readily, defer to the believed wishes of the president, not cover a sufficient range of alternatives, exclude unpopular viewpoints, rely on a narrow information source, leave assumptions unchallenged, cling to group identity, and fail to examine risks fully. In short, the problems—often referred to as “group think”—cloud the information-decision-making process.

As a possible solution to these problems, Alexander George suggests that presidents implement a system of “multiple advocacy.” Such a system would seek to institutionalize a “devil’s advocate” function in the presidential advisory system. This could be realized in the form of a lone individual or small department whose sole job would be to tear apart the assumptions and views of the consensus, to assume the contrary position(s), and to reexamine the goals, assumptions, and approaches of the group. The individual or head of such a group must be someone close to, and trusted by, the president, lest his functions degenerate into an “Oh, not this again!” type of role. For a devil’s advocate to work, the devil’s advocate must be respected and listened to.

In an effort to counteract the tendency toward “group think,” Irving Janis offers several prescriptions:

(1) The leader of a policy-forming group should assign the role of critical evaluator to each member, encouraging the group to give high priority to airing objections and doubts.
(2) The leaders in an organization’s hierarchy should be impartial instead of stating preferences and expectations at the outset.

(3) The organization should routinely follow the administrative practice of setting up several independent policy-planning and evaluation groups to work on the same policy question, each carrying out its deliberations under a different leader.

(4) The policy making group should from time to time divide into two or more subgroups to meet separately, under different chairmen, and then come together to hammer out their differences.

(5) Each member of the policy making group should discuss periodically the group’s deliberations with trusted associates in his own unit of the organization and report back their reactions.

(6) One or more outside experts or qualified colleagues within the organization should be encouraged to challenge the views of the core members.

(7) At every meeting devoted to evaluating policy alternatives, at least one member should be assigned to the role of devil’s advocate.

(8) A sizable bloc of time should be spent surveying all warning signals from the rivals and constructing alternate scenarios from the rivals’ intentions.

(9) After reaching a preliminary consensus, the policy making group should hold a “second chance” meeting at which every member is expected to express as vividly as he can all his residual doubts and rethink the entire issue before making a definitive choice.42

Institutionalizing the multiple advocacy role cannot guarantee that a thorough review of options, information, assumptions, and risks will take place. It does, however, increase the likelihood that this may take place.

Regardless of the method one uses to try to offset the pathologies of the decision-making process, there must be a willingness, especially on the part of the president, to face up to the criticisms of the devil’s advocate. These steps, to be effective, cannot be reduced to empty ritual.

Conclusion

No system of crisis management can replace good judgment; no system can substitute for wisdom; and no system—however good—can overcome human frailties. However, a solid crisis management system can improve the likelihood that good decisions are reached and that the grosser manifestations of irrationality become less pronounced.

While it is common to deal with decision-making from a “rational actor” perspective, it is clear that in a crisis, rationality is a far cry from reality. In a crisis, when leaders need to be their most rational, the dynamics of
the situation impose the most irrational of demands, and a variety of individual, psychological, and organizational roadblocks impede any hope of achieving full rationality. Crisis management does not promise to provide a rational atmosphere or a rational decision. Its goal — limited but very important — is simply to promote greater rationality at a time when it is most needed.

In general, we are aware of the problems which will most likely arise in a crisis. On the basis of reviews of past crises, we know what to watch out for. While each crisis has its own dynamic, there are lessons which emerge when examining crises in a generic sense. Knowing what problems are most likely to interfere with sound decision-making means that we may be able to correct for such problems and that we need not be victimized by them. In short, we can do better — if we think, if we are willing to learn.

If decision-makers are aware of the traps that they are most likely to fall into — and are aware of possible ways out — perhaps they can do better. The example of President Kennedy in the Cuban missile crisis, who, having just read Barbara Tuchman’s *The Guns of August*, was determined not to repeat the same mistakes which led to the outbreak of World War I, should serve as an example of our ability to learn from the past. Kennedy acted as if he knew what to do, what to avoid. Reading *The Guns of August* alerted him to a variety of problems which he took great pains to overcome.

The crisis management system herein proposed consists of five components: 1) precrisis training seminars; 2) crisis control centers; 3) crisis communication; 4) crisis norms or procedures; and 5) institutionalizing a devil’s advocate function. Together, they make up a system which is designed to provide the opportunity for more rationality in crisis decision-making. Such a system is designed to try and offset many of the problems which a decision-maker is likely to face in a crisis (see Figure 1).

No crisis management system should be viewed as a panacea. But because of the danger of a crisis escalating into war, it is imperative that we develop better ways to deal with such situations. Much can be done to make crises more manageable. If presidents will continue to face crises which threaten to lead to war, it is important that we give the president better tools with which to manage such problems.

NOTES

* Adapted from a paper prepared for delivery at the 1986 annual meeting of the Western Political Science Association, Eugene, Oregon, March 20-22, 1986.
FIGURE 1

Selected Dysfunctional Aspects of Crisis and Crisis Management System Remedies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Possible Remedy</th>
<th>Crisis Management System Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shortness of time</td>
<td>Slow pace of crisis</td>
<td>Crisis norms and procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information: Misperception</td>
<td>Explore wide range of information options; see from “other shoes” perspective</td>
<td>Crisis communication; devil’s advocate; training seminars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skewed information</td>
<td>Wide range of information sources</td>
<td>Devil’s advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited options</td>
<td>Wide range of advice</td>
<td>Devil’s advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual blinders</td>
<td>“Other shoes” approach</td>
<td>Communication; training seminar; devil’s advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of communication with adversary</td>
<td>Keep channels open and varied</td>
<td>Crisis control centers: communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>Slow pace of crisis; disengage emotions</td>
<td>All categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureaucratic: group think</td>
<td>Challenge assumptions</td>
<td>Devil’s advocate; training seminars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes men</td>
<td>Wide range of options-alternatives</td>
<td>Devil’s advocate; training seminars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective compliance</td>
<td>Vigilance; monitoring</td>
<td>Training seminars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of risks</td>
<td>Wide range of advice</td>
<td>Training seminars; devil’s advocate; communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Special thanks are due to Seth Thompson, of Loyola Marymount University, and Ron Hinckley, of the National Security Council, Office of Crisis Management, for comments on portions of this paper.


6 Gochman and Moaz, op. cit.

7 Genovese, op. cit.


10 Klieman, op. cit., p. 246.


17 This section is adapted from Michael Genovese, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, op. cit., pp. 301-306.


29 Robert Kennedy, op. cit., p. 22.


41 George, *loc. cit.*

Within the field of political science, especially in the United States, there has been much written on decision-making. In fact, some theorists have seen it as the primary area of concern. An influential monograph was drafted at Princeton University in 1962 titled Foreign Policy Decision-Making: An Approach to the Study of International Politics. In it the authors stated: “State action is the action taken by those acting in the name of the state. Hence, the state is its decision-makers. . . . It is one of our basic choices to take as our prime analytical objective the recreation of the ‘world’ of the decision-makers as they view it.”¹

Within the field of decision-making theory, crisis decisions become a major object of study. Major decisions to sign treaties, declare war, intervene in police conflict, fire generals, withdraw aid, and so forth became the subject matter of books and articles in the 1960’s. Since then, much has been written and learned about perception, choice, expectations, the limits of rationality, and the decision-making environment. Despite much available knowledge about how to handle or manage crises, each new administration seems to come to the White House to learn by trial and error.

Michael A. Genovese is right to question why there has been no formal method of handling crises available to the president, especially when, as Robert McNamara said, “There is no longer any such thing as strategy, only crisis management.” Genovese’s viewpoint has also been tempered by the lessons learned from the mistakes of reductionism in the 1960’s, thus stating that, “While crisis management is not a panacea, there are a variety of skills that can be brought to bear on a crisis.”

Genovese points to two components of crisis management: pre-crisis planning and during-crisis steerage. Most available research is aimed at the during-crisis steerage component. Genovese focuses his attention on the less discussed precrisis planning. He argues that such planning can improve decision-making when serious situations arise. Good information, rational decisions, walking in the adversary’s shoes, and knowledge of the right priorities are all important. Precrisis planning can help ensure that all these factors are present when a crisis arises.

The crisis management system that Genovese proposes consists of
DEVELOPING A CRISIS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM IN THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

five components: precrisis training, crisis control centers, crisis communication, crisis norms, and a devil’s advocate function. These are not spurious suggestions but reflect serious reading and thought about the above mentioned literature. I really have little argument with this proposal. We would all feel more secure if we knew that our president was equipped to make the best decision possible in times of crisis.

All leaders in peaceful societies, from primitive tribes to complex societies, are required to undergo a ritual process to gain the confidence of those who are to be led or protected. In this dimension, the United States has not achieved a high level of maturity. I would like to see some form of precrisis training as part of the ritual process through which one goes to become a national leader. In the era of nuclear weapons, wise leadership is more important than in any other period of history. We cannot rely on the fact that a leader was successful in local politics, is a good religious person, has oratorical skills, or was chosen because of loyalty to his party. These factors, while all good assets, are not adequate for national leadership in an unpredictable international climate.

Beyond a crisis management system, two factors are important to keep in mind. First, we should remember that, even with the greatest amount of information available to the human mind, decisions are still largely based (perhaps 90 percent) on nonrational factors. Second, we should strive to find ways to prevent crises from arising at all.

With respect to the first point, habit and conditioning are the most important factors in shaping human response to events. A crisis training seminar might be able to run new officeholders through a few simulated experiences which can aid in habit formation. However, the will, values, and character of the individual leader are largely determined by the family, education, and the culture from which he comes. I believe Aristotle was essentially correct in arguing that knowledge is hollow unless it is applied by virtuous people.

This leads to my second point. If, as Genovese has stated, the frequency of crises rose fourfold between 1960 and 1976, then we have an even more serious problem than that which crisis management can help to solve. Why is it that so many crises arise? One factor, I believe, is the nature of modern bureaucratic states. In the Soviet Union, one of the most centrally managed societies to exist, it is virtually impossible for major change to take place without a problem developing into a crisis of major proportions. In the United States we have developed
the terms “incrementalism” and “the art of muddling through” to describe how crisis forces decision-making. Rather than leaders creating healthy, relatively crisis-free environments, we witness environments on the brink of chaos pushing government officials to act. This is almost the reverse of leadership. It is precisely the function of a bureaucrat to “manage.” Hence, crisis “management” becomes the approach of one working within a system where one responds to problems when they affect the life of the system. One can hardly say that those people in positions of power and prestige that respond in this fashion really have national destinies under their control. “Precrisis planning” could even be preceded by a “crisis-avoidance philosophy.” This is easier to develop on the domestic than the international level.

In conclusion, major social and political transformation in the present era is even more urgently required than a crisis management system. However, regardless of what type of state we have, the crisis management system which Genovese proposes can only be of positive value. It may not be able to save cultures in decline or those with fundamental systemic flaws; however, it can avert a disaster which could arise from misperceptions, misinformation, “group think,” and other symptoms of unqualified decision-makers.

NOTE