Problems of International Crisis Management in the Nuclear Age

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When the topic to be discussed has to do with the dangers posed by international crisis and the threat of nuclear war, the very first thing we must talk about is the problem of hope. It is common knowledge that if we allow ourselves to adopt a hopeless outlook, we will not want to think or talk about the dangers of nuclear war at all, or listen to what anyone else has to say about these dangers. And those of us who do research and teaching will certainly not be willing to devote time and energy carrying out relevant research on conflict resolution or trying to educate others about the threat of nuclear war and about political actions that might be constructive ways to minimize it. My own conflict theory of decision making specifies that lack of hope is one of the major determinants of defensive avoidance—the tendency to avoid thinking about distressing issues that might require action.

But it is not easy to avoid feeling hopeless and demoralized when you consider the enormous disparity between what knowledgeable people say needs to be done to keep our civilization from being destroyed in a nuclear war and what is actually being done. It will not do to try to kid ourselves by relying on unrealistic, optimistic beliefs. Soon enough these beliefs are shattered and leave us more demoralized than ever. We need to find realistic bases for hope, but these are very hard to find.
Year after year, sensible recommendations have been made about how to curtail the nuclear arms race and how to reduce the danger that a nuclear holocaust will destroy our entire civilization. These sensible recommendations include a nuclear freeze as a first step toward working out comprehensive disarmament agreements; the development of an international system for controlling nuclear weapons and for negotiating disputes; the full implementation of antinuclear proliferation treaties; and the reorientation of technological research away from developing more destructive weapons toward constructing effective safety devices to reduce the chances of accidental nuclear explosions, misreadings of monitored radar screens, and inadvertent launchings of nuclear missiles.

And yet year after year, as we all painfully know, the nuclear arms race has continued to accelerate. This has happened not just at the increasing pace of the Reagan administration, but also during the Carter administration and all the preceding administrations since the end of the World War II. The same sort of acceleration has been going on in England and France, as well as in the Soviet Union and China.

So, where can we look to find hope for survival? Certainly not to the doctrine of deterrence from mutually assured destruction, which used to be held by government leaders in America as a source of reassurance. In recent years, many leading scientists and experts on international relations have become increasingly critical of the deterrence theory. They point out that sooner or later those tens of thousands of poised nuclear missiles—in the United States, the Soviet Union, China, France, England, and all the other countries that are already in or about to join the nuclear club—are very likely to be released. It may come about inadvertently, as a result of human error, or it may be a result of deliberate decisions during an international crisis, at a time when one or another group of national leaders believe their own country is about to be attacked and they can somehow decrease the destruction by launching their own missiles first. Many leading experts say the chances remain very high that sooner or later a devastating nuclear exchange will occur, unless sound international agreements are worked out that go far beyond the kind of items that have been on the agenda during the recent negotiations in Geneva.

So where can we look for hope? Let me give you my personal answer. Like most other psychologists and social scientists concerned about the nuclear arms race, I am not very optimistic. But for several years now, I have been trying to convince myself, as well as my colleagues and friends, that however bleak the outlook, there are still a few realistic bases for maintaining a bit of hope—I mean sufficient hope to plug away doing something that might prove to be constructive in the spheres of research, education, and political action.
One ray of hope glowed for a while but now seems barely perceptible. I am referring to the pro-peace movements that spontaneously arose in many European countries a few years ago, and then spread to America and other countries. Maybe that faint ray of hope will light again and provide political incentives to help induce policy makers in their respective countries to work out feasible proposals for disarmament and control of nuclear weapons.

Another slightly less faint ray of hope has to do with the reality-testing capabilities of the policy makers themselves. If the dangers of an all-out nuclear war are as horrendous as practically everyone I know thinks they are, then national leaders in the United States, the Soviet Union, and all the other countries that have nuclear weapons—or are about to have them—ought to become highly motivated to take steps to lessen these dangers. Of course, they might go in the direction of planning to win a nuclear war by a preemptive strike strategy designed to prevent the enemy from launching a full-scale nuclear attack. But that option could become less and less attractive, especially if Paul Ehrlich, Carl Sagan, and other scientists are correct in their analysis of the dangers posed by a prolonged “nuclear winter,” which would freeze all water supplies and destroy almost all food supplies essential for human life. If these forecasts turn out to be generally accepted by the scientific community, government leaders may acknowledge that the dangers of a nuclear winter, along with all the other dangers (such as destroying the ozone layer in the upper atmosphere), make it highly probable that launching nuclear missiles will destroy civilization, if not the entire human race. They may come to realize that launching a first nuclear strike will be completely suicidal even if the enemy does not retaliate at all. If so, is it unrealistic to hope that policy makers in all the countries that possess nuclear weapons will become strongly motivated to move toward genuine arms control and to make sincere efforts to work out negotiation procedures for handling international disputes?

At present, when practically none of the fundamental steps to control nuclear weapons and to prevent international disputes from escalating into all-out war are being taken by the nations that possess nuclear weapons, there is still another very faint glimmer of hope left, it seems to me. That slight ray of hope has to do with conflict management. The top policy makers of the major nuclear powers show many signs of being highly motivated to avoid misperceptions and miscalculations in making crucial decisions, especially in crises that pose a high risk of inadvertent nuclear war. So at least some policy makers may be in the market for improving their decision-making procedures in order to become more efficient crisis managers.

Now you will notice that the rays of hope that I have mentioned require attitude changes, effective decision making, and behavioral changes. They involve incentives that induce large numbers of people to become active partici-
pants in social movements and that induce top-level policy makers to unfreeze current commitments, overcome psychological resistances to new courses of action, and prevent errors in decision making under stress. These are topics that fall squarely within the domain of psychological theory and research. And, as you undoubtedly recognize, these topics are ones about which a bit of knowledge has accumulated, largely as a result of the pioneering contributions of Kurt Lewin.

It seems to me that psychologists and other social scientists can offer a little something to strengthen these faint rays of hope, to help dispel some of the bleak gloominess of the future as many of us now foresee it.

A Current Research Project

A few years ago I came to the conclusion that social psychologists, along with other social scientists, should give top priority to research problems that have some potential for contributing useful guidelines for preventing nuclear war. And I began redirecting my own research to concentrate on problems of crisis management in international conflicts—to focus on that third faint ray of hope.¹

At present I am working on comparative case studies involving about two-dozen major international crises faced by the United States government since the end of World War II. This research includes comparative analyses, using the approach elaborated by Alexander George and Richard Smoke (1974) in their applications of the "focused comparison" method. Much of what I am doing is in the discovery phase of research—formulating hypotheses in terms of testable relationships concerning circumstances that promote errors in policy making. Some of the hypotheses are derived from previously formulated theoretical models, such as those that specify the detrimental effects of psychological stress. I am also trying to discern new causal sequences concerning the detrimental effects of various constraints on policy making that are suggested by case studies and that cannot be fitted to known sequences. More about this later. My research also includes carrying out systematic correlational analyses, using fairly large samples in order to test hypotheses that appear promising.

As a strong proponent of the experimental method for testing hypotheses about causal relationships, I am keenly aware of the shortcomings of case studies and correlational analyses based on historical narratives and archival documents. But despite all the methodological difficulties, it seems possible to obtain some

¹These considerations led me to decide to take early retirement from Yale University in order to devote all my time to this type of research. I am now affiliated with the University of California at Berkeley, working full time on a research project on sources of error in policy making during international crises. The project is supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.
valuable evidence bearing on when, how, and why heads of nations make serious errors (see Oskamp, 1984; Tetlock, 1983).

The main goal of my research project is to develop empirically based theory to elucidate the conditions under which misjudgments and miscalculations are made by national leaders in crisis situations. Ultimately, this line of research may provide some useful guidelines for policy makers who want to avoid gross errors when making crucial decisions about momentous issues.

**Symptom of Defective Decision Making**

One of the first requirements essential for investigating defective policy making is to specify criteria that can be used as dependent variables. In our book on decision making, Leon Mann and I reviewed the extensive literature on decision making and extracted seven major criteria for judging whether a decision made by a person or a group is of high vs low quality (see Janis & Mann, 1977, chapter 1). The criteria for evaluating decision processes pertain to the problem-solving procedures that lead to the act of commitment to a final choice. My current research makes use of these criteria. The following are the seven symptoms of defective decision making that I watch for; they represent the lower end of the continuum for the seven criteria of sound decision making:

1. Gross omissions in the survey of goals or values implicated by the choice.
2. Gross omissions in the survey of alternatives.
3. Poor information search.
4. Selective bias in processing information at hand.
5. Failure to reconsider originally rejected alternatives.
6. Failure to examine some major costs and risks of the preferred choice.
7. Failure to work out detailed implementation, monitoring, and contingency plans.

In my comparative case studies of U.S. policy decisions made during international crises, I assess the quality of the decision-making processes of U.S. policy makers by examining the available observational reports and records to find out whether or not each of the seven symptoms was manifest at the time the final choice was made. For example, to evaluate the quality of decision making by national leaders during a crisis provoked by a destabilizing action taken by an adversary nation (such as a military invasion of a third country), I examine available accounts in secondary sources (which are usually scholarly works by modern historians and political scientists) along with whatever primary source materials are in the public domain—records or minutes of the policy-making group’s discussions, memoranda, memoirs, and interviews of the participants—to see whether or not there are manifestations of any of the seven symptoms.
A Jaundiced View of Policy Making

Does it really make any difference whether the policy makers show few or many symptoms of defective decision making? There are some social scientists who think it does not. It seems quite fashionable these days, especially among leading theorists in management studies and political science, to take a very jaundiced view of the prospects of improving policy making in government, business corporations, and other large organizations. For example, William Starbuck (1983, 1985), Professor of Management at New York University, argues in favor of two pessimistic generalizations about policy making on the basis of his own observations and his surmises from other research in the fields of organizational behavior and political science, drawing especially upon the critique of analytic problem solving by Charles E. Lindblom (1980).

One of Starbuck's generalizations is that policy makers seldom engage in reflective problem solving, even though the executives may pay lip service to the value of this approach and even though they may retrospectively try to make it look as if they had been conforming to it.

Another of Starbuck's generalizations is that the reflective problem-solving approach would not be effective even if it were often used by executives for major policy decisions. He gives several reasons why the quality of decision-making processes would be unrelated to outcomes. For example, organizational problems are much too complicated to solve and the use of reflective problem solving gives policy makers the illusion that their solution is a good one, which leads them to develop strong rationalizations that increase their inflexibility in response to policy failures.

Starbuck cites a number of empirical research studies to support his two generalizations, but the evidence from these studies is weak and inconsistent. From my own review of the available evidence, I think his first generalization is fairly correct—that is, policy makers seldom use a vigilant problem-solving approach. But despite the cogency of Starbuck's arguments, I disagree with his second generalization. I take an opposing view concerning the outcomes to be expected from reflective problem solving—a view in line with the position taken by a number of theorists and investigators of policy-making processes—for example, Alexander George (1980), Paul Lawrence (1985), and Richard Ned Lebow (1981). The specific hypothesis I propose as an alternative to Starbuck's generalization is as follows: For consequential decisions that implicate vital interests of the nation or organization, deliberate use of a problem-solving approach, with judicious information search and analysis that takes due account of the limited organizational resources, will generally result in fewer miscalculations and therefore better outcomes than any other approach. A more refined, research-oriented version of this hypothesis can be formulated in terms of the symptoms of defective decision-making: The fewer the steps of reflective prob-
lem solving that are carried out and the more incompletely those steps are carried out—as manifested by symptoms of defective decision making—the higher the probability of undesirable outcomes from the standpoint of the nation's or organization's goals and values.

It is an important theoretical as well as practical question whetherStarbuck's generalization about the lack of any relationship between process and outcome, or my opposing hypothesis, is closer to the truth most of the time for most policy making.

Evidence Concerning the Relationship Between Decision-Making Processes and Outcome

In looking over the research literature on policy making, I find some indirect evidence to support my position, but it is far from conclusive. In order to obtain more direct evidence, Gregory Herek of Yale University collaborated with me on a systematic correlational study of U.S. policy making in international crises (Herek, Janis, & Huth, in press). The main purpose of our study was to determine the extent to which unfavorable outcomes in international crises affecting the United States are related to poor-quality decision making by the nation's leaders. In order to investigate the relationship between outcome and quality of decision-making processes, we assessed the U.S. government's decision in each of 19 international crises by making detailed ratings of the presence or absence of each of the seven symptoms of defective decision making listed earlier.

One of the main methodological problems of comparative case studies of this type has to do with the selection of cases. If investigators were to pick the cases themselves, they could easily rig the selection—consciously or unconsciously—in such a way that the comparative study would yield the results expected. In order to avoid any such bias, we deliberately arranged to have the sample of cases selected by three independent investigators of international crises who were unaware of the purpose of the study.

We began with a list containing a large sample of crises since World War II, which had been published by investigators at the University of Michigan. The list was presented to two political scientists (professors Richard Ned Lebow of Cornell University and Bradford Westerfield of Yale University), both of whom have done a considerable amount of research on 20th century international crises. They were asked to select the most important crises (with regard to the threat of war with the Soviet Union or China) in each of five administrations since the end of World War II (Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon). The two experts showed fairly high agreement in their ratings of the importance of the various crises. They agreed in their ratings of 20 of the 24 crises in the sample. The four crises they disagreed about were given to a third expert
(Professor Gaddis Smith of Yale University) who was asked to rate their relative importance. His ratings were used to resolve the disagreements; we selected the crises that two of the three experts rated as being most important. One of the crises in the Kennedy administration (the Sino-Indian War) had to be eliminated from our sample of 20 crises because insufficient material was available in published sources to carry out the process ratings. Our sample, then, consists of 19 major crises (which are listed in the first column of Table 1).

In addition to having our sample of crises selected by social science scholars unaware of the hypothesis we were investigating, we also arranged for outside experts to select the sources to be used for analyzing the decision-making processes of U.S. policy makers and to rate the outcomes of the crisis decisions made by the U.S. policy makers.

Herek and I developed a set of systematic content analysis procedures to identify the presence or absence of each of the seven symptoms of defective decision making. With the help of Paul Huth, a graduate student in political science at Yale, we used these procedures to carry out a content analysis of the accounts that the three outside experts had selected as the best available sources concerning the way the U.S. policy makers arrived at their crisis decisions.

We found there was considerable variability in the quality of decision making by U.S. government leaders in their management of major international crises during the period of almost three decades following the end of World War II. Table 1 shows that in 42% of the crises the policy makers obtained ratings indicating a relatively high-quality decision-making process (displaying only one or no symptoms of defective decision making). In 21%, they obtained medium scores (displaying two to three symptoms). In 37%, they obtained ratings indicating relatively low-quality decision making (displaying four to seven symptoms).

We turn next to the main hypothesis investigated in the Herek, Janis, and Huth (in press) correlational study, namely that the symptoms of defective decision making, which reflect failures to carry out the essential steps of vigilant problem solving, are predictive of unfavorable outcomes.

Outcome ratings were obtained from two political scientists who had done extensive research on international crises. They were kept blind with regard to the process ratings and also with regard to the hypothesis being investigated. Taking account of the possibility that outcome ratings might be influenced by the ideological views of the raters, we deliberately chose two experts who come from opposite ends of the conservative–liberal continuum in their personal views about the cold war (Professor Paul Seabury of the University of California and Professor Richard Ned Lebow of Cornell University). We found a fair amount of agreement (on approximately 70% of the cases) in their outcome ratings, indicating a satisfactory degree of interanalyst reliability.

Each rater made two separate ratings of outcome. One rating involved the
Table 1. Quality of U.S. Policy Decision Making in 19 Major International Crises During 28 Years Following the End of World War II: Distribution of Gross Symptoms of Defective Decision-Making Processes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>International crisis</th>
<th>Date of crisis</th>
<th>Number of symptoms of defective decision-making processes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indochina: fall of Dienbienphu</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Taiwan Straits (Quemoy-Matsu)</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek Civil War</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Taiwan Straits (Quemoy-Matsu)</td>
<td>1954-1955</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berlin Wall</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soviet missiles in Cuba</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yom Kippur War</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invasion of South Korea</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suez War concurrent with U.S.S.R intervention in Hungary Jordanian Civil War</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berlin Blockade</td>
<td>1948-1949</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulf of Tonkin incident</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam ground war</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam air war</td>
<td>1964-1965</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab-Israel war</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean War: crossing of 38th parallel</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indo-Pakistani War</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

effectiveness of crisis management with regard to U.S. objectives, interests, and influence. Each rater was asked to judge whether or not during the days and weeks following the U.S. policy decision (or series of decisions) designed to deal with the crisis the immediate outcome was unfavorable for the United States. The second rating involved the effect on international conflict. Each rater was asked to judge whether during the days or weeks following the U.S. policy decision (or
series of decisions) there was an immediate increase in tension, instability, hostility, and/or likelihood of war between the United States and the Soviet Union or China.

The results show a strong relationship between quality of decision making as manifested by the number of symptoms of defective decision making and unfavorable outcome (based on the average ratings of the two experts). The correlation between number of symptoms and failing to satisfy U.S. objectives and interests was .64; the correlation between number of symptoms and increase in international conflict was .62.

Because we took the precaution of obtaining independent blind ratings so as to avoid contaminated judgments and other potential sources of artifactual results, it seems unlikely that the significant correlations we found are spurious. We also carefully checked on plausible third-factor explanations that might conceivably account for the observed correlations—such as severity of the crisis (as rated by independent experts). When these potential sources of confounding were partialed out in step-wise regression analyses, we still obtained significant relationships between quality of decision making and outcomes.

The findings bear out the surmises of those social scientists who have taken the position that when the high-quality procedures of reflective problem solving are used to arrive at a policy decision, the likelihood of making avoidable errors is decreased, which in turn decreases the likelihood of obtaining an unsatisfactory outcome.

Making Decisions by the Seat of Your Pants

But as I have already indicated, policy makers often do not use a reflective problem-solving approach. How do they usually arrive at their decisions? If you ask, they are likely to tell you that long ago they learned to disregard much of what the textbooks say about the desirability of a systematic rational approach, and instead they do it mostly by the seat of their pants. Many policy makers I have interviewed—in government, business, education, and public welfare—explain they are appallingly busy keeping their offices running, carrying out all sorts of daily routine chores, meeting regular deadlines for budget estimates, and putting out all sorts of little as well as big fires smoldering and raging concurrently. So when it comes to making a decision about a policy issue, they feel very little of their time and energy can be devoted to searching for the pertinent information and to deliberating about the pros and cons of alternative courses of action. When Robert McNamara was secretary of defense, Washington bureaucrats quipped that the reason he looked so good as a policy advisor at White House meetings, in comparison with the president's other cabinet members, was that the long drive from the Pentagon gave him eight extra minutes to do his homework in the back of the limousine (Cooper, 1970).
Sometimes a chief executive facing a policy problem makes a seat-of-the-pants decision so quickly he or she spends practically no time obtaining available pertinent information or going through any of the other steps of reflective problem solving.

What do policy makers mean when they say that in their circumstances you have to make most decisions by the seat of your pants? As far as I can tell, they mean that instead of approaching a crisis or any other challenge requiring a decision as a problem to be worked on in a systematic manner, with careful information search and deliberation about alternatives, they rely primarily on a few simple decision rules that enable them to arrive quickly at a solution that seems satisfactory.

One such rule is to accept the first alternative you think is "good enough" to meet the minimal requirements, without bothering to compare it with other viable alternatives. This strategy has been described in the well-known account of administrative behavior by Herbert Simon (1956/1976), who refers to it as "satisficing." Simon points out that this approach fits the needs for simplifying complicated decision problems that exceed the information-processing capabilities of human beings, all of whom are creatures of "bounded" or "limited rationality." (1976, p. xxxiii) A few other rules of thumb (or "heuristics" as they are labeled by cognitive psychologists) are likely to be combined with satisficing. For example, the availability heuristic is often used to arrive at a standard operating procedure (SOP) or an analogy that suggests a solution. Availability is influenced by whether a SOP or analogy evokes a vivid image, and by other factors that determine spontaneous salience, as described by Tversky and Kahneman (1973), Nisbett and Ross (1980), and Taylor (1982).

The decision rules that I have just mentioned are certainly not the only ones that policy makers rely upon when they adopt a seat-of-the-pants strategy. In my case study investigations there are many additional ones—which I shall speak about shortly. All such decision rules have a number of common features. In one way or another each of them provides a shortcut that helps speed decision making, sometimes resulting in satisfactory solutions to the problems at hand. But too often policy makers save time and effort at the expense of being stuck with an ill-conceived decision entailing disastrous consequences that could have been avoided. Relying on a few simple decision rules might generally work out fairly well when an executive is making routine choices or dealing with minor crises that do not entail the threat of any serious losses. But a seat-of-the-pants approach is likely to result in serious losses when used to make strategic policy decisions, when fundamental interests of the organization or the nation are at stake.

Going through the essential steps of problem solving in a way that meets the criteria for high-quality decision making does not by any means preclude the use of the heuristics I mentioned earlier and other decision rules. The difference
between a seat-of-the-pants approach (like one that relies primarily on satisficing) and the vigilant problem-solving approach is not that simple decision rules are used only in the former and never in the latter. Rather, the difference lies in the degree to which decision makers rely upon the decision rules. A seat-of-the-pants approach is dominated by them, whereas the reflective problem-solving approach is not. In the latter approach, the quick-and-dirty solutions or judgments suggested by the decision rules are regarded merely as preliminary ideas to be looked into further. The policy makers remain open to new information and are ready to change if the information does not bear out the expectations based on whatever decision rules they initially made use of.

"Retaliation," the "Wow" Imperative, and Other Emotive Rules

So far the decision rules I have been talking about are ones referred to as cognitive rules of thumb or heuristics, which simplify the intellectual tasks imposed by the complicated problems that beset executives who make policy decisions. When a dangerous crisis or unique opportunity arises, they must seek solutions that will avert threats to important values; that will not exceed the level of costs tolerable to the organization; that will not continue to create emotional tension and to cause them to lose sleep at night; that will not adversely affect their status, power, compensation, and esteem within the organization; and that will be accepted by others expected to implement the policy decision. Executives cope with these difficult requirements or constraints by using various additional types of decision rules (Janis, 1985).

In addition to cognitive heuristics, there are also what I call emotive decision rules that consist of allowing one's emotional reactions evoked by the dilemma to play a guiding role in deciding what to do. Actually, a fair amount is known about how, when, and why emotive rules are used—from experimental research on the psychology of emotions and from case studies in clinical psychology. The most extreme example is the simple rule to do whatever your gut feeling dictates at the moment—whether it be elation, depression, fear, relief, anger, affection, hatred, guilt, or whatever. This very crude emotive rule, which often results in impulsive, ill-conceived decisions, is seldom a dominant one relied upon by men and women who have managed to get to the top as leaders in government or in any other large organization. But similar emotive rules are probably used fairly often as a supplement to cognitive rules.

Like the cognitive heuristics, the emotive decision rules are not necessarily used with deliberate intent or verbalized to himself or herself by the decision maker. Emotive rules are most likely to operate at a preconscious level. Usually the emotive rules used in combination with other rules and procedures are instigated by negative emotional reactions, such as anger or fear. For example, when decision makers become angry as a result of being frustrated by a crisis created
by seemingly unwarranted aggressive action taken by an opponent, they are likely to include in their list of requirements for a satisfactory solution the added proviso that the course of action be some form of counteraggression that inflicts retaliatory suffering. The emotive rule, which I refer to as the "retaliation imperative," would be something like this if it were verbalized: "When you are thwarted, injured, or humiliated, don't let the bastards get away with it; do something to punish them in retaliation."

Although statesmen seldom acknowledge that their policy decisions are influenced by passion, they are far from immune. Impressive instances can be cited to illustrate how a national leader's anger can contribute to a shift to an aggressive policy that inflicts retaliatory punishment on another nation whose leaders are suddenly perceived as intolerably frustrating. One example I have encountered was a consequence of the series of poor-quality decisions made by the Eisenhower administration in 1960 concerning the U-2 flights over the Soviet Union. It appears to have led to a major shift in foreign policy, one that has been interpreted as a tragic loss of an opportunity to reverse the nuclear arms race as a result of a Soviet leader's retaliatory action fueled by his rage in response to the humiliating blow inflicted by President Eisenhower:

The story . . . of Eisenhower's struggle to reach an agreement with the Soviets on disarmament and an end to nuclear testing is little short of tragic. The President tried to enlist the Soviets in the Atoms for Peace and the Open Skies programs, but Nikita Khrushchev balked. . . . Then, just as he had succeeded in arranging a summit meeting to be held in Paris in 1960 to consider a test-ban agreement, the U-2 espionage plane piloted by Francis Gary Powers was shot down over Soviet territory. . . . An enraged Khrushchev demolished the meeting in Paris and withdrew an invitation to Eisenhower to visit the Soviet Union. (Donovan, 1984 p. 47)

Another emotive rule appears to be used especially by decision makers who pride themselves upon being capable and courageous leaders. It is used to overcome deterrents in circumstances that evoke emotional reactions of apprehensiveness about the enormous risks and considerable chances of failure of a desperate course of action that they feel obliged to carry out (Janis, 1985). This "can do!" directive, as I call it, goes like this: Concentrate all your available decision-making resources (time, funds for intelligence and research, use of experts, etc.) to seek ways to overcome the deterrents—the enormous obstacles and risks that make you feel apprehensive about carrying out whatever course of action is deemed necessary. This emotive rule has rather chilling implications with regard to the popular assumption that national leaders would always be deterred from launching a risky first strike against a seemingly intractable enemy.

I encountered an example of the "can do!" directive when I looked into the decision by President Carter and his advisors in April 1980 that led to the ill-fated attempt to use military force to rescue the American hostages in Iran, which the
news media called a fiasco comparable to the Bay of Pigs. From the available accounts by Brzezinski (1983) and others, I surmise that questions about the risks of the first phase of the mission (the ill-fated desert rendezvous) were never raised within the top-level planning group because the most obvious risks of the rescue mission that evoked apprehensiveness were in the later phases—the enormous chances of the invading U.S. forces being detected and attacked when they approached Teheran, of the hostages being killed before their would-be rescuers could reach them, and of U.S. aircraft being shot down as they attempted to depart from Teheran. Evidently, as the old saying goes, it is the squeaky wheel that gets the oil; any unsqueaky wheel is neglected.

From this case study, I surmise that when they are grappling with a complicated multistage plan, while planning to carry out a "mission impossible," policy makers with a "can do!" orientation are likely to focus their implementation and contingency planning on the extremely worrisome steps that pose the almost insurmountable risks. There appears to be a contrast effect whereby the least risky steps tend to be labeled as relatively easy to handle—"that's not where our main troubles will be." And so the policy makers neglect the unsqueaky wheels; they overlook the least obvious risks and fail to include them in their contingency plans. This is what I refer to as "the unsqueaky wheel trap." My analysis suggests that the tendency to neglect the unsqueaky wheels might be counteracted to some extent if policy makers were to assume that every wheel is potentially squeaky and could lead to failure if you assume it will be trouble free. Perhaps the "can do!" directive could sometimes be counteracted and replaced by a more comprehensive problem-solving approach if policy makers adopted the procedural rule of checking carefully to make sure that they do not overlook the potential dangers from the unsqueaky wheels, as well as from the squeaky ones. In some instances it might make them realize their entire "can do!" type of plan is too dangerous to be acceptable.

Various emotive rules also accompany positive emotional reactions, such as elation, and they too can exert a marked influence on decision making, without the policy maker being aware of it. One of these that I have noticed in several case studies of policy making is what I call the "Wow!" imperative. It is likely to be invoked when a policy maker who is feeling discouraged about finding a good solution suddenly becomes elated upon discovering a choice alternative that beautifully satisfies a few of the most essential requirements without having any apparently insurmountable defects. The decision maker's strong positive emotive state of exuberance is expressed by such phrases as "Wow! This is it! I'm raring to go!" The emotive rule that dominates the decision maker's thinking, if it could be verbalized, would be something like this: "When you have a rare opportunity to choose a wonderful solution, grab it; don't take any chance of losing it by wasting time looking into it any further."

When the "Wow!" imperative dominates their thoughts and feelings, pol-
icy makers are inclined to move rapidly toward closure even though their information search and deliberations are grossly incomplete. If they started by being vigilant in their efforts to find a good solution, they stop being so; they no longer try to find out about hidden costs and undetected ways in which essential requirements might fail to be met, which could lead them to continue to search for a better alternative. Instead, they discount and minimize any signs suggesting there might be high costs or potential risks. In an elated state about having found a wonderful solution, they maintain high optimism about overcoming all obstacles, even though such expectations may not be warranted. If they encounter unwelcome information indicating that the financial, political, or moral costs of carrying out the attractive course of action will be so excessively high as to exceed the limit that they had regarded from the outset as an essential requirement, they are willing to waive the original requirement. They feel it is entirely justifiable to do so in order to take advantage of the extraordinary "target of opportunity." 

The "Wow!" imperative appears to have played an important role in President Truman's approval of the use of America's first A-bombs to destroy Japanese cities in 1945. He and several of his close advisors saw the A-bombs as providing a unique opportunity to end the war without the huge losses of American lives required by prior military plans for invading the Japanese home islands. President Truman was told by Secretary of State James Byrnes that "the bomb might well put us in a position to dictate our own terms at the end of the war" (Truman, 1955, p. 87). Henry L. Stimson, secretary of war in Truman's cabinet, referred to the new weapon when he briefed the president as "a master card in our hand" (Feis, 1960, p. 80). There are numerous indications that in their planning to use the atomic bomb against Japanese cities, Truman and his advisors regarded it as a master card, not only for the purpose of bringing a rapid end to the war with Japan, but also for demonstrating U.S. arms superiority in a way that would help contain the Soviet Union after the war (Feis, 1960; Wyden, 1984). Apparently they were so enthusiastic about this attractive solution that they failed to take account of the government's intelligence reports indicating that Japanese leaders were already on the verge of surrendering before the A-bombs were dropped and that diplomatic maneuvers might succeed without killing tens of thousands of Japanese civilians.

Everyone knows that when you fall in love you walk around with your head in the clouds, you overidealize the loved object, and you overlook defects that might be obvious to other people—"love is blind." The popular culture also recognizes that people sometimes pay exorbitant costs for material goods because they fall in love with them—with a new piece of jewelry, a new leather jacket, a new apartment or ranch house with a sensational view. My observations suggest that top-level government leaders are capable of falling in love with new policies, especially those involving new technological developments that evoke a
"Wow!" reaction because they seem to provide a quick technological fix to solve seemingly insurmountable problems. If trustworthy accounts of policy making in the Reagan administration become available, I plan to examine them to see if the Star Wars policy is in this category.

Emotive decision rules arise not only from positive or negative feelings evoked by one or another of the choice alternatives but also from the emotional stress of facing a dilemma requiring a vital decision. Emotional stress is aroused whenever policy makers realize that whichever course of action they choose could turn out badly and that they are likely to be blamed, which evokes strong anticipatory reactions of anxiety, shame, or guilt (Janis & Mann, 1977). There appears to be a set of emotive rules corresponding to each dominant pattern of coping with the stress generated by decisional conflicts. For example, one particular emotive rule becomes dominant when a person displays defensive avoidance, which occurs in response to impressive warnings that create intense conflict about whatever action is contemplated when there are few signs of available resources that foster hope of finding a satisfactory solution. The rule, if it could be verbalized, would go something like this: "Avoid thinking about the distressing problem." An entirely different emotive rule becomes dominant when a person displays hypervigilance, which occurs in response to impressive warnings that create intense conflict when there are signs fostering hope of finding a satisfactory solution, but information about an imminent deadline evoke expectations of insufficient time to search and deliberate. If it were verbalized, the rule would go something like this: "Try anything that looks promising to get the hell out of this dilemma as fast as you can."

The "Avoid Recriminations" Directive, "Groupthink," and Other Affiliative Rules

Among the major constraints that policy makers are often keenly aware of when making vital policy decisions are those having to do with maintaining or enhancing their power, compensation, and status within the organization, and eliciting social support from their personal network. Even a very wise policy decision that beautifully solves a major problem created by threats from a hostile nation could get a group of top-level executives in serious trouble if the decision fails to take account of other powerful leaders' objections, no matter how mistaken those objections might be. Various decision rules are typically used to take account of such constraints. I call them affiliative decision rules because they pertain to the policy maker's affiliation with others in his or her organization. Most often these rules are used to preserve the policy maker's relationship with a primary group, such as a small planning committee that meets face to face to work on major policy recommendations. Sometimes affiliative rules are also used to deal with constraints arising from the policy maker's membership in
secondary groups, such as a corporation, a political party, the State Department, or the U.S. government. Our understanding of the functioning of affiliative decision rules comes mainly from the field of group dynamics, which as you know was originally developed by Kurt Lewin and the social psychologists he trained.

Probably the best known and most widely used of all affiliative decision rules is what is known throughout the Pentagon and elsewhere in Washington as the CYA ("cover-your-ass") rule. Here is a synopsis of what dozens of government officials in policy-planning roles have told me about applying this rule when they are asked to participate in policy planning:

The first thing you do before you open your mouth is to find out what your bosses think should be done. They might secretly favor continuing the present policy unchanged in order to keep a rival faction within the bureaucracy from encroaching on their territory, or they might want a particular modification of the policy in order to enlarge their empire. You had better do enough detective work to find out what it is they really want so that you can keep your ass covered by adopting their position. Arguing for anything else could antagonize them so much that your ass will be carved or chewed out. If you are quite sure they have no definite preference and really want innovative proposals, it is OK to try to earn brownie points by suggesting a new policy you think will be successful, but be careful to do it in a way that avoids exposing your behind for a whacking later on. The main thing is to avoid going all-out in advocating any new policy until you are sure the powers-that-be in your organization support it. If you suspect opposition or even mild misgivings from anyone who controls your fate within the organization, don't push very hard for whatever new policy you favor because if you convince them and it fails, you will be the fall guy; it will be your ass in a sling.

Although some executives may be capable of verbalizing the rule and its ramifications, they are likely to adhere to it from time to time as an inner directive without realizing that they are doing so. At a preconscious level they may cautiously restrict the policy choices they are considering to those that are "safe," that is to say, those they believe will not provoke recriminations from other power holders.

Any alternative that appears unsafe or risky with respect to eliciting antagonism is likely to be dropped from further consideration, even though it might meet all other requirements for a good solution to the problem at hand. This is one of the ways that using the "avoid recriminations" directive makes for very conservative policy making, keeping organizational changes to the bare minimum. Even more pernicious from the standpoint of making avoidable errors is the tendency to relax other requirements in order to select a course of action that the executive thinks will be most safe with regard to avoiding recriminations, irrespective of its actual consequences for the organization.

Recently I have come upon some clues, which I am now pursuing, suggesting that the cover-your-ass rule may have been a dominating factor among several top-level policy advisers in the Reagan administration who gave their approval to the ill-fated series of decisions to send U.S. troops to Lebanon in the fall of 1982 and to keep them there throughout 1983.
The "avoid recriminations" directive is not the only affiliative rule that contributes to poor-quality policies in government. A number of other affiliative rules are also frequently used in a seat-of-the-pants approach, usually in combination with cognitive rules of thumb.

If the executive is a member of a policy-planning committee that is highly cohesive and if certain other conditions are present, he or she is likely to adhere to an affiliative rule that makes for conformity of a different type than that entailed by the avoid recriminations directive (Janis, 1972/1982). Here is where groupthink enters into the picture. In my book on Groupthink (1982), I present a series of case studies of defective decision making on the part of U.S. policymaking groups in which there were strong internal pressures toward uniformity. The groupthink rule, which comes into play preconsciously, is essentially an inner command to set aside one's doubts and misgivings about whatever policy is favored by the emerging consensus of the group so as to be able to concord wholeheartedly with the other members. Instead of fear of recriminations, which is the main motivation for the avoid recriminations rule, the underlying motivation for the groupthink rule appears to be a strong desire to preserve the harmonious atmosphere of the group upon which each member has become dependent for coping with the stresses of external crises and for maintaining self-esteem. My analysis of case studies of historic fiascos suggests that among the White House groups of policy advisors dominated by the groupthink rule were: President Harry S. Truman's advisory group, whose members supported the decision to escalate the Korean War in 1950 despite firm warnings by the Chinese Communist government that United States entry into North Korea would be met with armed resistance from the Chinese; President John F. Kennedy's advisory group, whose members supported the decision to launch the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in May 1961 despite the availability of information indicating that it would be an unsuccessful venture and would damage the United States' relations with other countries; and President Lyndon B. Johnson's "Tuesday luncheon group," whose members supported the decision to escalate the war in Vietnam during the mid-1960s despite intelligence reports and other information indicating that this course of action would not defeat the Vietcong or the North Vietnamese and would entail unfavorable political consequences within the United States.

In my current series of case studies, I am also encountering other affiliative decision rules oriented toward maintaining social support, power, compensation, or status within the organization.

A Fundamental Question for Research

From my comparative studies of decision making in international crises, I believe I am learning a great deal about the conditions under which cognitive,
emotive, and affiliative constraints lead to overreliance on constricting decision rules rather than a more comprehensive problem-solving approach. This research, it seems to me, is starting to contribute answers to a fundamental theoretical question: Under what conditions are policy makers most likely to adopt a reflective problem-solving approach rather than resorting to a seat-of-the-pants approach when confronted with a crisis requiring a major policy decision? The answers emerging are likely to have some value in enabling us to develop a more comprehensive theory of policy making. They are also likely to have some practical value in suggesting ways for preventing avoidable errors in policy making during international crises. Perhaps they will brighten one of the faint rays of hope I spoke of at the beginning of this paper—reducing the chances of inadvertent nuclear war by improving the procedures for managing dangerous international conflicts.

References


