

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 19
Number 1 *Parameters* 1989

Article 6

7-4-1989

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Dan Caldwell

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Recommended Citation

Caldwell, Dan. "THE CUBAN MISSILE AFFAIR AND THE AMERICAN STYLE OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 19, 1 (1989). <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol19/iss1/6>

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The Cuban Missile Affair and the American Style of Crisis Management

DAN CALDWELL

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During the last several years, the already voluminous historical record of the Cuban missile crisis has been supplemented by the release of a number of significant, formerly classified documents, including CIA intelligence reports, State and Defense Department papers, and even the secretly taped transcripts of meetings of the Executive Committee (ExCom) of the National Security Council and Soviet accounts of the crisis.¹ Many of these materials shed new light on the issues, participants, and decisionmaking of the crisis. For example, in his book *Thirteen Days* Robert Kennedy portrayed himself as consistently supporting the quarantine option during the ExCom discussions. In Arthur Schlesinger's biography, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, Schlesinger characterized his subject as the principal opponent of a military attack on Cuba and said he "was a dove from the start."² Despite these accounts, the transcript of the 16 October evening meeting of the ExCom indicates that Robert Kennedy in fact advocated forceful measures, including possibly sinking Soviet ships and engineering a pretext for going to war with Cuba, even mentioning as a precedent the sinking of the *Maine*, which catalyzed US involvement in the Spanish-American war.³ In this and many other instances, the newly released documents are opening the door to clearer interpretations of the events of the Cuban missile crisis. As a result, previous analyses of the crisis and the lessons derived therefrom need to be reassessed on the basis of the newly disclosed information.

Following the crisis, analysts characterized President Kennedy's behavior during the event as a paragon of crisis management. The President had asserted his control over military options, coordinated military action with political action, given Khrushchev time to think about and respond to US

initiatives, avoided actions that would motivate the Soviets to escalate, and avoided giving the Soviet leaders the impression that the United States was going to resort to large-scale warfare.⁴ The Cuban missile crisis, more than any other single episode in the history of post-World War II American foreign policy, contributed to the development of an American style of crisis management. The objectives for this article are to describe and then evaluate the principal elements of this style.

The American Style of Crisis Management

I suggest that there are seven elements of the American style of crisis management, and will discuss each in turn.

*1. Crises are assumed to be manageable.*⁵

In contrast to decisionmakers in a number of other cultures, American policymakers have consistently believed that they can assert control over particular events and situations. Part of this belief derives from Americans' dual faith in the positive attributes of the development of technology and in their own ability to exploit technological developments. Beyond this general cultural belief, American decisionmakers have portrayed foreign leaders as "rational actors." According to Robert Kennedy, his brother "believed from the start that the Soviet Chairman [Khrushchev] was a rational, intelligent man who, if given sufficient time and shown our determination, would alter his position."⁶ If Khrushchev was "like us" in being able to rationally calculate costs and benefits, then American policymakers assumed crises could be managed and "played." This belief was underscored by the widespread acceptance among analysts and policymakers of game theory and elaborate models based on this approach.

2. As soon as crises begin, there is a strong tendency for previous plans and expectations to be ignored.

Before the spring of 1950, few people thought that the United States would defend South Korea; however, following the North Korean attack on South Korea in June 1950, President Truman and his advisors quickly reversed this position with almost no discussion of their action. During the Cuban missile crisis, a number of contingency plans were suspended by the ExCom. For

Dr. Dan Caldwell is a professor of political science at Pepperdine University, Malibu, California. He has received A.B., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees from Stanford University and a master's degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. Dr. Caldwell is the author of *American-Soviet Relations: From 1947 to the Nixon-Khrushchev Grand Design and Grand Strategy* and editor of *Soviet International Behavior and US Policy Options*. The present article is based on research supported by the Rand/UCLA Center for the Study of Soviet International Behavior and the Reassigned Time Committee of Pepperdine University. The author wishes to thank James G. Blight, Richard Smoke, and William L. Ury for their assistance.

example, President Kennedy would not permit the execution of the plan calling for retaliatory attack on Cuba if an American plane were shot down.

3. During crises, presidents convene ad hoc decisionmaking groups with a limited number of members to advise them.

Following the North Korean attack on South Korea, President Truman asked Dean Acheson to convene a small group of advisors to meet with him at Blair House.⁷ This group then advised the President throughout the early weeks of the Korean War. This pattern was repeated during the Indo-China crisis of 1954 and throughout the years of American involvement in Vietnam (e.g. President Johnson's Tuesday Lunch Group). The use (and success) of the ExCom in the Cuban missile crisis underscored the value of a small, ad hoc group of advisors to American policymakers.

President Reagan continued the tradition of appointing small groups to advise him during crises. He created a special NSC committee called the Special Situation Group, headed by Vice President George Bush, with the announced purpose of managing crises. Contrary to some reports, however, this group did not play a central role in the management of serious crises. That role was played by the National Security Planning Group, chaired by President Reagan. In keeping with the tradition of limiting the membership of crisis management groups, the members of this group were the President, Vice President, White House Counselor, White House Chief of Staff, Deputy Chief of Staff, Director of Central Intelligence, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, National Security Advisor, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Defense.⁸

4. During crises, spokesmen with unpopular ideas are often excluded from the group making the important decisions.

During the Cuban missile crisis, Adlai Stevenson, who was the US representative to the United Nations, suggested to the ExCom that the United States should consider withdrawing its military forces from Guantanamo and removing 15 Jupiter missiles from Turkey in exchange for the Soviets' removal of their missiles from Cuba. Stevenson's recommendation was rejected outright. Not only that, but President Kennedy asked both Arthur Schlesinger and a long-time, hard-line advisor to US presidents, John McCloy, to accompany Stevenson to the UN to make sure that he would accurately represent the Administration's position and not present his own ideas for resolving the crisis. Schlesinger later reported that Robert Kennedy took him aside as he was leaving for the United Nations and told him, "We're counting on you to watch things in New York . . . That fellow [Stevenson] is ready to give everything away. We will have to make a deal in the end; but we must stand firm now. Our concessions must come at the end of negotiation, not at the start."⁹ Following the crisis, Stevenson's suggestions were leaked to journalists Stewart Alsop and Charles Bartlett, and Stevenson was widely criticized for his dovish position.¹⁰ Ironically, it is now clear from a 1987 disclosure by Dean Rusk that President Kennedy had directed Rusk to prepare to have UN

Secretary General U Thant propose a trade of the missiles in Turkey for those in Cuba.¹¹

During the Vietnam War, President Johnson's advisors who did not strongly support the Administration's war policies were criticized and isolated. After George Ball opposed the bombing of North Vietnam, President Johnson would greet him as "Mr. Stop-the-Bombing." Irving Janis has described the dysfunctional aspects of small-group decisionmaking; to counter the phenomenon of groupthink, Alexander George has proposed that policymakers routinely consider multiple positions before selecting a course of action.¹²

5. During crises, presidents assert direct control over the tactical operations of military units.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, ambassadors had a great deal of freedom to negotiate on behalf of the particular country they represented. However, with the invention of the telegraph and telephone, this freedom was drastically reduced. The further development of communications technology has had a similar effect on military commanders. By 1962, President Kennedy had the capability to communicate with and issue orders to local military commanders. General David Burchinal, Director of Plans of the Air Staff in 1962, described how the quarantine was implemented:

So about that time . . . we decided to impose a blockade, and we put our naval vessels out on picket—no more ships coming into Cuba. They would be challenged on the high seas regardless of flag, and they'd be searched, and if they had anything that falls under war material they will be turned around or they will be sunk. So, we set it up. And, there was control in detail, so there was a phone from the Secretary of Defense's office right to the deck of the damn destroyer on patrol in this blockade. So, the first ship comes up to the blockade line. He's a Swede. They give him the signal "heave-to." "Standby, what is your cargo?" And he said, "Go to hell!" Full steam ahead and right through the damn blockade and right on into Havana. Nobody stopped him. He just said, "The hell with you—nobody tells me what to do on the high seas with my ship." So, they just looked at each other, these people who were now learning to "manage crises" and run wars. "That didn't work very well. What do we do now?" And so our signal caller had said, "Don't shoot," and the destroyer had said, "I'm ready to stop him." "No, no, let him go. Let him go." So the next ship comes along and he's Lebanese—he's flying a Lebanese flag. So, they challenge him. And he said, "Oh, I'm very happy to comply. I'll stop, come aboard, here I am, I'm just a poor Lebanese out here running my ship into Cuba." So they went aboard and opened up his hatches, and he's got a bunch of military electronic gear, and they shut the hatches down, pretended it wasn't there, and said, "Pass friend." And he steamed merrily into Havana. That was our naval blockade. And that's the way it was being run under the kind of civilian control we had.¹³

Direct presidential control over military operations was clearly exercised in the Cuban missile crisis. It was also exercised during the Vietnam

War, and the practice has persisted. President Johnson had a scale model of Khe Sanh built in the basement of the White House and followed the battle on this model. President Ford gave long-distance orders to military commanders on the scene during the 1975 *Mayaguez* crisis. And during the 1976 evacuation of Americans from Beirut, according to an account by Ned Lebow, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld from the Pentagon personally supervised the movements of a boat sent to shore to pick up a number of Americans:

Off in a corner, [an unseen] major, who had served in Lebanon, was desperately trying to attract the attention of someone on center stage. Finally he blurted out, "You can't do that!" Rumsfeld looked up from his microphone and all eyes turned toward the major who explained that he knew this particular harbor like the back of his hand and that the course Rumsfeld had directed the launch to follow was very dangerous at low tide. The major was invited to come up front and join the secretary, who parroted the major's instructions to the bosun nominally in command of the launch.¹⁴

Interestingly, perhaps in reaction to the micro-management that previous presidents had exercised over tactical military operations, President Carter refused to interfere with operational military decisions during the attempted rescue of the American hostages in Iran.¹⁵ This example, however, is an exception to the general presidential practice since the Cuban missile crisis.

6. US decisionmaking during crises is characterized by imperfect information and overloaded communication channels.

During the Cuban crisis, a wide variety of communication channels was used—from secret government-to-government communications to openly broadcast messages. One of the most unusual Soviet messages during the crisis—an offer to remove the missiles in Cuba in exchange for an American promise not to invade Cuba—was relayed from the KGB station chief in Washington to the ABC White House correspondent, John Scali.

Communications within a government will of course intensify during crises, and, as Henry Kissinger has pointed out, "You have to remember that when any crisis occurs, there is total confusion even in the White House. Though most people would expect that intelligence information puts one ahead of the information curve, you can generally assume that in the middle of a crisis

"You can generally assume that in the middle of a crisis the newspaper reports may be slightly ahead of the intelligence information."

—Henry Kissinger

the newspaper reports may be slightly ahead of the intelligence information.”¹⁶ Gary Sick, who was the principal National Security Council staff person working on Iran during the Iranian hostage crisis, has noted that the NSC staff often depended heavily on newspaper reports for information on the crisis.¹⁷

It is no wonder that communication channels become overloaded. The Department of Defense has reported that it transmitted 56.7 million messages in 1984, a total that excludes transmissions by voice and data processing systems.¹⁸ That is equal to more than 155,000 messages per day.

During crises imperfect information and overloaded communication channels tend to result in either little or no communication between the adversaries. Additionally, communication is often attempted through extraordinary channels, such as the Soviet offer given to John Scali. During the negotiations to obtain the release of American hostages in Iran, the United States adopted the unusual channel of intermediaries in France.

7. During certain crises, the United States has increased the alert levels of its nuclear forces as a means of communicating the seriousness of crises.

The United States has five levels of alert or Defense Conditions (DEFCONs) for its military forces, as follows:¹⁹

- DEFCON 5—Normal peacetime level
- DEFCON 4—Normal peacetime level (used in some theaters to permit direct shift to DEFCON 3)
- DEFCON 3—Forces on standby to await further orders
- DEFCON 2—Forces ready for combat
- DEFCON 1—Forces deployed for combat

On 22 October when President Kennedy delivered his televised speech publicly announcing the discovery of the missiles and the imposition of the quarantine, the DEFCON was shifted from level 4 to level 3. The United States went to DEFCON 3 again in 1973 during the Arab-Israeli October War. Interestingly, the Soviet Union has never alerted its nuclear forces.²⁰

Criticisms of the American Style of Crisis Management

While one or more of the elements above characterize the crisis behavior of other states, when taken together they describe the behavior of the United States alone. And as noted, the Cuban missile crisis was influential, if not critical, in establishing these elements as the earmarks of the American style of crisis management. But what do recent disclosures tell us about this style? And are these elements appropriate for managing contemporary crises?

Consider the first assumption of the American style of crisis management: that crises are manageable. The ExCom was able to resolve the Cuban missile crisis, but it is now clear that the crisis imposed extreme mental and physical demands on the participants. At the height of the crisis, one ExCom

member had an automobile accident at 4 a.m. as he was going home to sleep for several hours. Robert Kennedy told Arthur Schlesinger in 1965 that he believed Dean Rusk "had a virtually complete breakdown mentally and physically."²¹ Given the tremendous inherent stresses and pressures of the moment, crises simply may not always be humanly manageable.²²

In addition, unforeseen events may make crises unmanageable. An event during the Cuban missile crisis involving Soviet army Colonel Oleg Penkovsky illustrates the point. From April 1961 through September 1962, Penkovsky had sent a large quantity of significant military information to the United States and Great Britain.²³ Western intelligence had provided Penkovsky with several telephonic codes that were to be used in the event of a number of different occurrences. One code indicated that Penkovsky was about to be arrested. On 22 October, Penkovsky was arrested; however, before he was taken into custody, he sent his last coded message: "War is imminent!"²⁴ If President Kennedy and his advisors had taken this seriously, the results of the Cuban missile crisis might have been far different.

What of the presidential use of ad hoc decisionmaking groups with a small number of advisors for counsel? Crises obviously involve the issue of war or peace. The Constitution grants the power to declare war to the Congress. Interestingly, however, there were no members of Congress on the ExCom, and none were consulted on a systematic basis during the Vietnam War. This lack of consultation led to congressional frustration and eventual passage of the War Powers Resolution in 1973 over President Nixon's veto. Since its passage, the act has been invoked by Congress only once, authorizing US troops in Lebanon in 1983. During the summer of 1987, there was substantial debate over whether to invoke the War Powers Resolution in connection with the US reflagging of Kuwaiti tankers. The Senate avoided a direct confrontation with the White House by passing a separate resolution requiring the President to report on the operation and deferring further congressional action.²⁵ In May 1988, a group of influential senators introduced legislation to overhaul the War Powers Resolution. The new legislation would result in two prominent revisions. First, the act proposes the establishment of a special consultative body of 18 congressional leaders and key committee chairmen. Second, American troops would be allowed to remain in hostile areas unless a majority of Congress voted specifically to recall them.²⁶

Presidential control over tactical military operations is another of the rudimentary elements of the American style of crisis management, and in the Cuban missile crisis President Kennedy and his advisors exercised such control. Both the President and the Secretary of Defense issued orders to the ships participating in the quarantine. But there were other instances in which military units, without the knowledge of the President and the ExCom, engaged in activities that could easily have resulted in serious escalation of the crisis. On 27 October, for example, a U-2 on a routine air-sampling mission to detect nuclear

test explosions in the USSR strayed off course due to a navigational error and flew over Soviet territory. President Kennedy dismissed the incident by saying, "There's always some so-and-so who doesn't get the word."²⁷ Khrushchev's reaction was stronger; the next day, in a letter to President Kennedy, he wrote:

A . . . dangerous case occurred . . . when one of your reconnaissance planes intruded over Soviet borders in the Chukotka Peninsula area in the north and flew over our territory. The question is, Mr. President: How should we regard this? What is this: A provocation? . . . Is it not a fact that an intruding American plane could be easily taken for a nuclear bomber, which might push us to a fateful step?²⁸

Early in their discussions, the members of the ExCom had agreed that the United States would retaliate militarily if an American reconnaissance plane were shot down over Cuba. On 27 October, such an event in fact occurred, and the pilot of the U-2, Air Force Major Rudolf Anderson, Jr., was killed. Because the crisis was at its height and because Khrushchev's first letter proposing a resolution of the crisis had arrived on the morning of the same day (indeed, the President and the ExCom were informed of the letter and the shoot-down of the U-2 within the mere space of 15 minutes), President Kennedy ordered the military not to retaliate as had been planned earlier. In a recent book, however, Raymond Garthoff notes: "The president's decision became known at the operating level in the Pentagon barely in time to prevent a planned air strike on the probable offending air defense missile site that was about to be made in accordance with earlier-approved contingency plans."²⁹ In contrast to the traditional view, then, President Kennedy's control of tactical military operations was incomplete and therefore precarious.

Regarding the US proclivity for employing alerts to send political signals, President Kennedy, as already noted, ordered military forces to go to DEFCON 3 on 22 October. Two days later, Strategic Air Command forces went to the DEFCON 2 alert level, placing more B-52 bombers on airborne alert and more ICBM silos on alert, and putting to sea any Polaris submarines that had been in port. In short, the United States made preparations for nuclear war. Unknown to members of the ExCom until 1987—a quarter century after the event—was the fact that the SAC DEFCON 2 alert was conducted "in the clear" with no codes used to send the messages, which the Soviets could therefore easily pick up. Astonishingly, the decision to send the alert message in the clear was made by the Commander-in-Chief of SAC, General Thomas Powers, without the authorization of the President, Secretary of Defense, or the ExCom.³⁰

Some observers (most notably General Maxwell Taylor) have argued that the Cuban missile crisis was a conventional crisis and that a nuclear confrontation was not involved.³¹ While it is true that neither Kennedy nor Khrushchev wanted the crisis to escalate, both leaders ordered actions that made escalation to the nuclear level more likely. Khrushchev's shipment of Soviet missiles to Cuba catalyzed the crisis, and Kennedy's increased alert

Air Force Major Rudolf Anderson, Jr., shot down while flying a U-2 reconnaissance mission over Cuba, was the only casualty of the missile crisis. His death prompted President Kennedy to remark in sorrow that it is always the brave and the best who die.



DOD Still Media Records Center

levels heightened the seriousness of the crisis. These actions underscore the dilemma facing decisionmakers during crises: actions ordered to achieve military objectives may increase the probability of escalation and decrease the probability of achieving (or maintaining) certain political-military goals such as avoiding nuclear war. In contrast to General Taylor, President Kennedy believed that the possibility of a Soviet-American war resulting from the Cuban missile crisis was between one out of three and even.³²

A number of observers have noted that shortly before the Cuban missile crisis, President Kennedy had read Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*, which recounts the period immediately preceding the outbreak of World War I. According to Tuchman, neither Kaiser Wilhelm nor his cousin Tsar Nicholas wanted war between their two countries, but the military leaders of each country pressed their political leaders to proceed with preparations for war (such as shipping war materiel to the front on trains) so that they would be prepared if war broke out. The action-reaction spiral of escalation contributed to the outbreak of World War I. According to traditional accounts of the Cuban missile crisis, Tuchman's book had made Kennedy acutely aware of this danger, and he took effective action to prevent such a succession of events in 1962. It now appears that even though he was aware of the danger of escalation resulting from increased alert levels, he was not able to control all the important aspects of implementing the alert. This underscores the possible loss of presidential control of decisions and events during crises.

Conclusions

The Cuban missile crisis was the most serious Soviet-American confrontation in the post-World War II era. Because of the seriousness of the crisis and because it was resolved relatively peacefully (Major Anderson being the only casualty), most participants, journalists, historians, and political scientists have considered it to be the paragon of crisis management. But recent disclosures call into question many of the lessons of the crisis based on earlier, less-complete, and biased information. What lessons, then, can be drawn from the crisis today?

First, perhaps due primarily to the Cuban missile crisis, American analysts and policymakers have focused almost exclusively on crisis *management* and have all but ignored crisis *prevention*. According to Alexander George, "Crisis prevention may well be considered the orphan of strategic studies."³³ George and his colleagues have produced several works that fill significant gaps in this previously neglected subject area.³⁴ Raymond Garthoff has noted that while Americans have emphasized crisis management, the Soviets have emphasized crisis prevention. "Curiously reversing the usual stereotypes, the Americans have been sober, pessimistic realists, assuming that, regrettably, crises will occur and must be safely managed, while the Soviets have appeared to be more optimistic, if not hopelessly idealistic, in arguing that crises can and must be prevented by political collaboration."³⁵

A second lesson challenges the fundamental assumption of crisis management, i.e. that crises can in fact be effectively managed. New disclosures reveal that President Kennedy's control over events in the Cuban missile crisis was far more precarious and incomplete than previously had been assumed. Following the publication of Robert Kennedy's account of the crisis, Dean Acheson, who had participated in some of the ExCom discussions, wrote a critique of Kennedy's account, subtitled "Homage to Plain Dumb Luck."³⁶ At the time Acheson's article was published, it appeared that Acheson was bitter that the hawkish advice he and others had offered President Kennedy (Acheson had favored the air-strike option) had been rejected. However, in retrospect and with the benefit of information now available, it appears that Acheson was right: The Cuban missile crisis was managed, but it required a great deal of "plain dumb luck." Based on information disclosed at a meeting at Harvard in October 1987, two of the participants concluded: "We now have reason to believe that on October 24, 1962, the world may have been only minutes from a superpower naval war at the quarantine line the Americans had placed around Cuba."³⁷ Khrushchev initially wanted to attempt to run the blockade, and apparently it was only because of last-minute "frantic maneuvering within the Kremlin" that the Soviets rescinded an earlier order to their naval commanders to ignore the American "quarantine."³⁸

Resolution of the Cuban missile crisis thus required, among other things: that the ExCom ignore Penkovsky's warning that war was imminent;

that the Soviets discount the significance of the DEFCON 2 alert broadcast by the SAC commander in the clear; that the Soviets assume a US plane over Soviet territory at the height of the crisis was not the vanguard of an American attack; and that Soviet leaders order their naval commanders not to run the blockade.

In the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy and Khrushchev moved to reduce the threat of nuclear war by concluding the Hot Line Agreement and Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963. Thus the most serious US-Soviet foreign policy crisis of the postwar era had the paradoxical result of ushering in a new period of detente between the two superpowers. It is difficult, if not impossible, to answer "what if" questions in history. This caveat aside, what if President Kennedy had not insisted on the removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba? It is very likely that had President Kennedy accepted the missiles or even explicitly traded the US missiles in Turkey for the Soviet missiles in Cuba, the result would have been an increased risk of nuclear war. Had the missiles remained in Cuba, American nuclear forces likely would have been placed at a higher stage of alert and Congress likely would have demanded a greater military buildup. Thus, a less confrontational solution to the immediate crisis could have resulted in a more dangerous world.

Quite clearly, crises are manageable only to a degree, and many have dramatic unintended and unforeseen consequences.

NOTES

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