

Sense and Insensibility in the Cuban Missile Crisis

BLAKE GILLMAN

Deterrence is a theory concerned with the skillful nonuse of military force. Throughout much of the Cold War, the concept of mutually assured destruction was thought to have deterred the two great powers, Russia and the United States, from nuclear warfare. The problem, however, was that mutually assured destruction (or MAD) rested on contingent strategies that would not be rational for the two countries to carry out (Skyrms 24). In order to avoid the problem of modular irrationality inherent in MAD, the two countries had to somehow convey their commitment to perform the threat against their interests. This process involved the removal of choice and loss of control. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Russia and the United States played the game of chicken against this deadly background. Chicken enhanced the credibility of MAD by creating the fear that the opposing country would follow through with its threat of annihilation. As the crisis escalated and the threat's fulfillment became imminent, Russia and the United States desperately sought a way to correlate their subjective utilities. Nobody would actually perform an act that promised damage on a nuclear scale. But who could be sure? Strong commitments, decomposed threats and promises, and empathy were all essential elements to avoid disaster. Not even then was the avoidance of general war guaranteed.

In mid October 1962, a U-2 plane had completed a photographic mission convincing the Intelligence Community that Russia was placing missiles and nuclear weapons in Cuba (Kennedy 19). The Cuban Missile Crisis had begun. A month earlier Moscow had publicly disclaimed any intention of introducing offensive weapons of any kind into Cuba (Kennedy 22). As it turned out, that had all been “one gigantic fabric of lies” (Kennedy 22). President Kennedy knew he would have to act. The question was how?

Three options were discussed: (1) “a diplomatic option,” in which the US would appeal to the UN without first threatening an attack; (2) a blockade of Cuba that would prevent Soviet supplies and men from reaching the island, which would entail the risk of heightened aggression; and (3) an air strike against missile sites and likely invasion (Blight and Lang 62). The first action was deemed insufficient because few believed diplomacy could persuade the Soviets to remove the missiles (Blight and Lang 62). Secretary McNamara, the strongest advocate of the second option, argued that a blockade constituted limited pressure that could be increased or limited as the situation developed. Most importantly, McNamara believed it would still leave the US in control of events (Kennedy 27). The last option, spearheaded by General Curtis LeMay, insisted that a mere blockade would neither remove the missiles from Cuba nor stop the work from going ahead on the missile sites themselves (Kennedy 27). The strongest argument in favor of option three was that a blockade around Cuba would tempt the Russians to implement a blockade around Berlin. In effect, the promise to lift the blockade in Cuba contingent upon the removal of missiles would demand the reciprocal act of removing the missiles surrounding the Soviet Union (Kennedy 28). As General LeMay put it, “This blockade and political action, I see leading into war. I don’t see any other solution for it... This is almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich” (Blight and Lang 65).

After the sides presented their arguments, President Kennedy had to decide the final course of action. What crystallized the decision in Kennedy’s mind was the warning from General Sweeney, Commander in Chief of the Tactical Air Command, that there was some doubt as to whether a major surprise air attack would destroy all the nuclear weapons and missile sites in Cuba (Kennedy 38). President Kennedy gave the thumbs up for the blockade. Justifying the stance, the Organization of American States, France, West Germany, and Britain unanimously supported the blockade (Kennedy 40).

Pressure mounted immediately after the blockade was enforced. A Russian tanker with little probability of carrying nuclear weapons was allowed to pass through, but was shadowed by American warships (Kennedy 57). The Air Force sent eight low-flying planes over Cuba morning and afternoon as US warships forced all six Russian submarines in the area to surface (Kennedy 59). As for President Kennedy’s strategy, “I don’t want to put him [Khrushchev] in a corner from which he cannot escape” (Kennedy 59). In the meantime, President Kennedy kept routine communications with Khrushchev. President Kennedy made clear his fear and accompanying threat that “[the Russians] would not correctly

understand the will and determination of the United States in any given situation” (Kennedy 61). Along similar lines, Khrushchev “resolved to take the measures which [the Russian people] deem necessary and adequate in order to protect our rights” (Kennedy 63).

Toward the end of the crisis, the level of pressure on both governments was extraordinary. In a letter many regard as incoherent, Khrushchev expressed his fear over the gravity of the situation: “This [fear over mutual annihilation] indicates that we are normal people, that we correctly understand and correctly evaluate the situation...Only lunatics or suicides, who themselves want to perish and to destroy the whole world before they die, could do this” (Kennedy 67). To bring the crisis to a peaceful conclusion, Khrushchev proposed the removal of the weapons already in Cuba in exchange for withdrawing the blockade and promising not to invade Cuba (Kennedy 68). The next day, however, Khrushchev amended his proposal with the additional stipulation that the United States removes its missiles from Turkey. Russia would then promise not to invade Turkey (Kennedy 71). The NATO countries wanted the US to stand firm and accept Khrushchev’s initial proposal, but not his second. By giving in to Khrushchev’s second proposal, the United States and NATO would demonstrate a weakness and damage their credibility. President Kennedy decided to accept the first letter and agreed to “work toward a more general arrangement regarding ‘other armaments’ (Kennedy 78).” Khrushchev accepted. The Cuban Missile Crisis came to an end....but barely.

In order for a threat to be effective, it must be costly to the side that issues it (Jarosz and Nye 154). The question is just how costly must it be in order to compel another party to perform or refrain from performing an act. For surely, a threat that entails mutual annihilation would not be believed by the threatened party unless the threatener was mad. Feigning madness is actually a quite effective way of convincing an opponent that it is in its best interests to back down (Kahn 45). The point is that each side to a threat must convince the other that it is committed to pursuing a course of action that is highly destructive to its own interests. The hope for each side is that the other will be rational and back down. Russia and the United States played this game of chicken during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Its aim was to put enough pressure on each other to settle the dispute without going to war (Kahn 187).

If a threat is not rational to commit in the first place, it seems highly unlikely that the threatened party will perceive the threat as credible. Each side in a threat has an incentive to bluff (Jarosz and Nye 154). The trick to convincing the threatened party of the immi-

nence of a threat is to deprive the threatening party of its ability to renege its commitment. Commitment essentially removes choice; a rational process. To commit to a threat against one's interest, one could "convey a revenge motivation very strong to overcome the prospect of self-damage" (Schelling 36). During the Cuban Missile Crisis, both the United States and Russia employed this tactic. On the day that Kennedy revealed the crisis to the United States in a televised speech, Kennedy also sent a statement to Khrushchev threatening "the will and determination of the United States in any given situation" (Kennedy 61). The Soviet Chairman replied with the threat that the Russians have "all that is necessary" to protect the rights of the Russians (Kennedy 62). Whether or not both sides really were committed to a revenge motivation is questionable. The transcripts of the Ex Comm discussions revealed sharply divided commitments (Jarosz and Nye 154). More than communication is required to convince someone of the credibility of a threat that would not be in one's interest to carry out (Schelling 35).

Another method of commitment is staking one's reputation on the fulfillment of a threat. If backing down from a commitment would entail "intolerable loss of personal prestige or bargaining reputation," the reliance on one's reputation could convey commitment effectively (Schelling 25). After deciding to implement the blockade against Cuba, the United States garnered unanimous support from the Organization of American States, France, West Germany, and Britain. Latin America and the United States' Western allies had given their pledge of support for the blockade. Implicit in this pledge of support was an approval of American values. The commitment now included the possibility of tarnishing American ideals at home and abroad if the United States were to back down. This possibility provided the "qualitative rationale" for the United States to maintain its commitment (Schelling 34).

Conversely, commitment may lead the other side to believe that preemptive war is the best way to reduce the damage from the imminent fulfillment of a threat. If a country regards war as inevitable, it may actually be safer for itself and the world to seize an opportunity rather than to wait (Kahn 54). The reciprocal fear of surprise attack may make it rational for both sides to strike even if the fear emanates from mutual misunderstanding (Kahn 52). The object of the game of chicken is the peaceful conclusion of negotiations "against the background of a threatened mutual homicide" (Kahn 135). However, when it is clear that the game of chicken has led to the brink of a nuclear conflict spiraling out of control, the least destructive response might very well be a preemptive strike. The commitment on both sides is so sound that the prospect of mutually assured destruction is actually a genuine pos-

sibility. This series of events unfolded during the Cuban Missile Crisis: a blockade was enforced around Cuba, a U2 plane was shot down, six submarines were forced to surface, and a Soviet-chartered Liberty ship was inspected (Kennedy 59, 64). President Kennedy was at the brink of war and about to invade. As it turned out, so were the Russians.

Still, if war broke out why should someone automatically assume it would lead to mutual annihilation? After one round of strikes both sides would perhaps come to their senses and realize tit-for-tat is an irrational strategy. Even with the certitude of an invasion, why presuppose the credibility of MAD? The Joint Chiefs of Staff were unanimous in this modularly rational view (Kennedy 28). As Air Force Chief of Staff, General Curtis LeMay assured President Kennedy there would be no response by the Russians to a preemptive US strike: "I don't think they're going to make any reprisal...I just don't see any other solution except direct military intervention right now" (Blight and Lang 65). President Kennedy was skeptical of General LeMay's confidence: "They, no more than we, can let these things go by without doing something" (Kennedy 28). General LeMay and President Kennedy differ on their convictions of Russian commitment. But as Thomas Schelling points out, it does not really matter who was right in terms of mutually assured destruction. The chance variable that a preemptive strike could lead to the escalation of war creates sufficient fear to make the threat of mutually assured destruction binding (Schelling 188). The final decision about what happens is not completely under the threatener's control and the threatened party knows it (Schelling 188). Whether intended or not, the risk of all out war rises with conflict. It is essentially a matter of chance based on the nature and context of limited war that determines the likelihood of general war (Schelling 191). As such, it is vital that both sides can coordinate their expectations to conclude the conflict without bloodshed.

In order for a commitment to a threat to work there has to be empathy between both sides. Otherwise, the threat cannot serve its purpose. As Robert McNamara describes it in the *Fog of War*, empathy involves "put[ting] ourselves inside their skin and look[ing] at us through their eyes, just to understand the thoughts that lie behind their decisions and actions" (Blight and Lang 27). Just because the United States valued the lives of its citizens to a considerable degree did not mean the Russians ascribed to the same value system. During World War II, the Russians killed thousands of their own people to emerge victorious. Maybe the blockade against the greater threat of escalation was not enough to deter further Soviet aggression if Russia thought it could achieve a strategic goal by striking. Even if Khrushchev was highly sensitive to the lives of his people, perhaps others in the

Kremlin with significant sway were not as humane. The final decision sometimes reflects “individuals who do not have identical value systems and whose organizational arrangement and communications systems do not cause them to act like a single entity” (Schelling 16). That certainly was the case in the United States. As Attorney General Robert Kennedy recalled, “We had perhaps amongst the most able in the country and if any one of half a dozen of them were President the world would have been very likely plunged into catastrophic war” (Kennedy, 15).

Chairman Khrushchev demonstrated his desire to coordinate expectations with the letter he sent on October 26, 1962. To convey his appreciation of and repulsion to war, he said, “I have taken part in two wars, and I know that war ends only when it has rolled through the cities and villages, sowing death and destruction everywhere” (Blight and Lang 33). Khrushchev, however, was unsure whether President Kennedy was just as concerned about the gravity of the situation: “I do not know whether you can understand me and believe me” (Blight and Lang 33). Khrushchev’s letter is an instance of coordinating intentions and expectations (Schelling 57). It provided insight into the goals of the Soviets, the costs of action, and the condition of the military balance (Jarosz and Nye 155). Khrushchev was clearly not nearly as interested in hurting the United States as members of Ex Comm may have thought. He was trying to achieve a military objective and escape destruction at the same time (Kahn 61). Khrushchev, like Kennedy, was desperate to find a signal on which to converge his expectations. In such circumstances, “even a poor signal and discriminatory one may command recognition, in default of any other” (Schelling 70).

President Kennedy had understood the importance of empathy in drawing the Cuban Missile Crisis to a peaceful conclusion. In 1960 he had reviewed Basil Liddell Hart’s book Deterrent or Defense, which advocated the motto: “Keep strong, if possible. In any case, keep cool. Have unlimited patience. Never corner an opponent and always assist him to save his face. Put yourself in his shoes...” (Kennedy 11). During the deliberations with Ex Comm, Kennedy repeatedly reminded everyone to “think why the Russians did this” (Kennedy 11). Kennedy employed a strategy of “flexible response” (Jarosz and Nye 158). He recognized the necessity of denying the United States too great a reward from the Soviet’s concession (Schelling 35). Decomposition of a great threat into smaller threats enabled President Kennedy to convey both the credibility of his threats and his willingness to negotiate. By punishing the first few transgressions of the smaller threats, the larger threat becomes more credible (Schelling 41). When the United States imposed their block-

ade around Cuba, they did in fact board and search a Soviet run ship, shadow others with warships, and force submarines to surface. The fulfillment of these smaller threats strengthened the credibility of the larger though irrational threat of mutual annihilation. It also heightened the anxiety over the crisis, prompting a coordination of expectations between the United States and Russia that ended in *détente* (Kahn 135).

When Chairman Khrushchev, with obvious influence from hard line members of the Kremlin, sent a second letter requiring the United States to remove its Turkish missiles, NATO countries wanted the United States to stand firm with respect to the provisions of the first proposal. NATO countries understandably feared that a concession at this point would be interpreted as capitulation, designating a prior commitment as a fraud (Schelling 34). Giving in at this point could damage the larger threat credibility of mutual annihilation. Attorney General Robert Kennedy thought about ignoring the second letter altogether. Ignoring the letter at this stage might not have been such a bad idea because cutting off communication this late in the game of chicken would necessitate agreement at the risk of heightening aggression (Schelling 60). The letter President Kennedy wrote back to Khrushchev turned the threat of a possible Turkish Missile Crisis into a promise to “work toward a more general arrangement regarding other armaments” contingent upon the Soviets first removing the missiles from Cuba (Kennedy 78). President Kennedy essentially applied the tactic of decomposition to the area of promises. After Khrushchev removed the missiles from Cuba, President Kennedy would promise to lift the blockade and not invade Cuba (even though Cuba would now be strategically vulnerable and the CIA had wanted Castro out of power for quite some time). As an additional safeguard, Kennedy would also promise to remove the United States’ missiles from Turkey. This latter promise enhanced the promise to not invade Cuba because it was also an implicit threat. The Kremlin implicitly acknowledged that the United States would be in danger of provoking a Turkish Missile Crisis if it did not obey its promise to lift the blockade without invading Cuba. Thus the Cuban Missile Crisis came to a close with neither side really losing face and jeopardizing their balance of power. If anything, both sides had coordinated their expectations for peace that paved the way for *détente*.

If the United States had followed General LeMay and the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s advice there is a good reason to believe nuclear war would have been the result. General LeMay assumed the blockade and political action would lead to war (Blight and Lang 65). The only alternative in General LeMay’s mind was to initiate a preemptive strike. He was con-

vinced the Russians would obey modular rationality and concede right away. General LeMay was wrong, however. He had underestimated the subjective utility calculations of the Cubans. Fidel Castro was convinced the actions of the United States would result in war. In a letter on October 26, 1962, Castro expressed to Khrushchev his personal opinion: if “the imperialists invade Cuba with the goal of occupying it, the danger that that aggressive policy poses for humanity is so great that following that event the Soviet Union must never allow the circumstances in which the imperialists could launch the first nuclear strike against it” (Blight and Lang 68). Castro wanted to go down as a martyr. Since he concluded an American air strike and invasion of the island were inevitable, the best outcome Cuba could hope for was to also “pull the temple down on [the Americans’] heads” (Blight and Lang 80). The important point is that what may seem highly irrational to great powers may seem honorable and unavoidable to weaker nations (Blight and Lang 85). President Kennedy’s strategy of flexible response was effective against the Russians, but served no purpose against Fidel Castro. Cuba was so sure that the United States would strike, that Kennedy’s threat was meaningless. If the Cubans were resigned to the fate of destruction, seeking retribution in the process might be the best response- a *rational* response in light of their subjective utilities.

What country would ever place retribution above the security interests of its people? Castro said, “in the event of an invasion with 1,190 sorties...I would have agreed to the use of nuclear weapons. Because, in any case, we took it for granted that it would become a nuclear war anyway, and that we were going to disappear” (Blight and Lang 79). Castro misunderstood the game of chicken and tit-for-tat. Escalation could have occurred to the point of nuclear attack, but it did not have to. If Castro valued the lives of his people, he would have exploited every opportunity at concluding the game of chicken as peacefully as possible-even if it meant suffering damage to Cuba’s reputation and the loss of lives from limited reprisal. Instead Castro skipped to the horrible catastrophic conclusion that nuclear war inevitable. Herman Kahn points out, “it can make sense to commit oneself irrevocably to do something in a particular eventuality, and at the same time it may not make sense to carry out the commitment if the eventuality occurs” (Kahn 45). Fidel Castro thought otherwise. He really did “get in the car drunk, wear dark glasses, and throw the steering wheel out of the window as soon as the car got up to speed” (Kahn 188).

Why were Chairman Khrushchev and President Kennedy so sensitive to the implications of the game of chicken while Fidel Castro was so quick to jump to the conclusion of

mutually assured destruction? Perhaps the answer lies in the evolution of the three cultures. The evolutionary process occurs whenever there is significant variation in fitness (Dupre 329). Cultural evolution has provided variation consistent with the biological variation created by Darwinian evolution (Dupre 337). Features of the cultural environment could determine human behavior (Dupre 337). The specific behavioral repertoire in a social environment constrains the evolutionary possibilities of behavior in that environment (Dupre 335). Evolution has structured the mind, but it has only constrained the proximate causes of behavior (Dupre 340). The cultural contexts of individuals ultimately determine the behaviors that evolve. Is cultural evolution strong enough to overpower the biological instinct for survival? Castro had created the perfect environment for a culture to evolve. As dictator he himself constrained the behavior possibilities available in Cuba. He might even have indoctrinated the Cubans with sufficient nationalism to sacrifice their lives for a higher cause. After all, heroes are born exactly when self-interests get ignored.

Sometimes empathy is not possible. Even if all the right steps are taken to avoid disaster, catastrophe may nonetheless strike. Rationality applies to the decision makers. One person's rationality is another person's irrationality. The problem is that there are a number of subjective factors that go into one's utilities in rational decision-making. When dealing with the destructive power of nuclear weapons, the possibility that expectations cannot be coordinated is a risk too great for mankind. If nuclear weapons are to exist at all, we must be certain that those who have them share the same values and rationality.

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