Crisis Decision Making Reconsidered

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Serious problems may be found in Herek, Janis, and Huth's 1987 study of the relationship between the quality of the decision-making process in an international crisis and the desirability of its outcome. A closer look at the best understood and most thoroughly documented case used in their study (the Cuban missile crisis of 1962) reveals the chief cause of those problems to be the use of sources that appear to be incomplete in the light of new evidence. Both the conclusions of the Herek, Janis, and Huth study and the criteria with which they assess the quality of a decision-making process are called into question.

Gregory Herek, Irving Janis, and Paul Huth (1987) argue that a "high quality" decision-making process during an international crisis is more likely to lead to an outcome favorable to vital American interests and less likely to aggravate international conflict than a flawed decision-making process. A "high quality" decision-making process, they suggest, is one that exhibits the characteristics of "vigilant problem-solving" (Janis and Mann, 1977): The actors carefully search for relevant information, examine the entire range of viable policy alternatives, carefully plan to meet likely contingencies, and exercise caution to avoid mistakes (Herek et al., 1987: 204). The authors identify seven symptoms of "defective decision making" in the executive, and look to the best available scholarship for evidence of their presence or absence in 19 postwar crises, divided approximately evenly among the Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations. By analyzing the correlations between the number of symptoms exhibited in a crisis and subjective estimates of the immediate (although not long-term—see Herek et al., 1987: 213n) effects of the crisis on international conflict and U.S. interests, the authors conclude, contra Starbuck...
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(1983, 1985), that decision makers can and do engage in vigilant problem solving, and that doing so improves their crisis management performance (Herek et al., 1987: 218).

Herek, Janis, and Huth code a symptom present if the scholarly accounts of a crisis used in their study suggest that "two or more major avoidable errors" occurred with respect to the relevant aspect of the decision making (Herek et al., 1987: 211n). Under the worst imaginable circumstances, all seven symptoms would be present: gross omissions in surveying alternatives; gross omissions in surveying objectives; failure to examine major costs and risks of the preferred choice; poor information search; selective bias in processing information at hand; failure to reconsider alternatives previously rejected; and failure to work out detailed implementation, monitoring, and contingency plans (Herek et al., 1987: 204-205). Of the 19 crises examined, all seven symptoms are coded present only once—during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War. In three cases—Indochina (1954), Quemoy-Matsu II (1958), and Laos (1961)—no symptoms are coded present. Only one symptom is coded present in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962: the failure to reconsider alternatives previously rejected (Herek et al., 1987: 212).

Because of its unprecedented severity, the Cuban missile crisis is the most widely studied crisis of the postwar period. In sheer volume, the scholarly treatment of the event easily eclipses that of the other 18 crises considered in the Herek, Janis, and Huth study. Moreover, scholars now have access to a large body of declassified documents relating to decision making during the crisis, transcripts of discussions secretly recorded in the Cabinet Room at the White House both at the beginning of the crisis (October 16, 1962) and at its climax (October 27), and several detailed oral histories and conference proceedings (Bundy and Blight, 1987; Chang et al., 1987; Trachtenberg, 1985; Welch, 1989a, 1989b). Unfortunately, the works employed by Herek, Janis, and Huth to evaluate decision making during this pivotal event antedate this material (Allison, 1971; Bernstein, 1980; George, 1971; Holsti, 1972; Lebow, 1983; Nathan, 1975).

Had Herek, Janis, and Huth coded for the Cuban missile crisis on the basis of the most recent information, they might have coded five symptoms present. Insufficient information exists to provide a coding for one of the symptoms, but the lone symptom they coded "present" would have been coded "absent." According to their own criteria, therefore, they would have concluded that decision making during the Cuban missile crisis was poor. Yet the case can be made that Herek,
Janis, and Huth’s conception of a high-quality decision-making process is more seriously flawed than was the Kennedy administration’s handling of the crisis. Let us begin by examining each symptom in turn.

**GROSS OMISSIONS IN SURVEYING ALTERNATIVES**

“The group fails to consider a number of viable alternative policies, either concentrating its deliberations entirely on the course of action preferred from the outset or confining its discussions to only one alternative. If any of the additional viable alternatives are mentioned at all, they are immediately excluded or dropped without discussion.” This symptom is coded “absent” (Herek et al., 1987: 204, 212).

When President Kennedy was informed on October 16, 1962, that U.S. intelligence had detected the deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, he immediately assembled a group of advisors to work out a response (the group later to become known as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or “ExComm”). Three broad alternatives quickly surfaced in the discussions, and several variants of each were at least mentioned for consideration:

1. A diplomatic approach—to the Soviets, to the Cubans, to the United Nations, or to the Organization of American States—seeking the withdrawal of Soviet missiles, perhaps in return for the withdrawal of American Jupiter missiles in Turkey and/or withdrawal from the U.S. base at Guantanamo in southeastern Cuba.
2. Military action—a surprise surgical air strike against the missile sites under construction; a broader air strike against an extensive network of military targets in Cuba; commando raids; or an invasion of the island.
3. A blockade (later called a “quarantine”) prohibiting virtually all Soviet bloc shipments to Cuba, or prohibiting only the shipment of offensive military hardware (Abel, 1966; Sorensen, 1962a, 1962b, 1962c; Trachtenberg, 1985).

Despite the range of alternatives tabled for discussion, only two received sustained scrutiny by the president and his advisors: the limited quarantine and the massive air strike. *All* diplomatic options were quickly dismissed because the president’s advisors could not imagine a nonmilitary first move that did not unacceptably relinquish the initiative to Soviet Chairman Nikita Khrushchev, and consequently none of the possible diplomatic approaches received the kind of scrutiny given to the quarantine and the air strike (Sorensen, 1962c; Welch, 1989b: 55).
The missile trade proposal, first suggested by U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson on October 20, was rejected out of hand (Allison, 1971: 209), even though it would emerge as a serious option after the initial response was chosen. The surgical air strike option was never seriously examined, possibly because the Air Force never prepared a plan for one (Allison, 1971: 124-125). Finally, at least two other major alternatives seem never to have been examined: putting on a suitable show of protest and indignation without threatening military action, or issuing an inflexible ultimatum, with a strict time limit for compliance, unequivocally demanding the uncompensated withdrawal of the missiles. It would seem that according to their own criteria, therefore, Herek, Janis, and Huth should have coded this symptom “present.”

GROSS OMISSIONS IN SURVEYING OBJECTIVES

“The group never explicitly discusses objectives or gives them such brief or cursory consideration that the decision makers fail to take into account a number of the major goals or values implicated by the choice.” This symptom is also coded “absent” (Herek et al., 1987: 204, 212).

President Kennedy and his advisors agreed that their objective in 1962 was to secure the withdrawal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba. There is no evidence, however, of debate on the necessity of this objective. Nor is there any evidence of sustained consideration of why Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba were unacceptable, although it is evident that different advisors had different opinions on the matter. Among the many “goals or values implicated by the choice” of objectives was avoiding nuclear war, preserving the cohesion of the NATO alliance, preventing future Soviet penetration of the Western Hemisphere, and safeguarding the political fortunes of the president and his party. Although the record of deliberations during the crisis shows that these issues arose from time to time in various contexts, at no time did the president and his advisors discuss their ultimate objectives as such, nor did they attain closure on the relationships between the various means available and the goals or values they sought to further, as evidenced by the unresolved tension between “hawks” and “doves.”

1. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell Taylor, for example, held them to be unacceptable because of their military significance; Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara held them to be unacceptable for purely political reasons (cf., Trachtenberg, 1985: 184).
(Blight and Welch, 1989: 201-221). This symptom should therefore have been coded “present.”

**FAILURE TO EXAMINE MAJOR COSTS AND RISKS OF THE PREFERRED CHOICE**

“The group fails to consider the negative consequences of the preferred alternative or examines them so incompletely that its members overlook a number of important negative consequences even though information about those consequences is available.” This symptom is coded “absent” (Herek et al., 1987: 204, 212).

Although it would be accurate to say that the president and his advisors were aware of most of the main costs and risks associated with the quarantine—that it would permit ongoing construction of the missile sites in Cuba, that it might be challenged, and that a superpower confrontation at sea might escalate—there is reason to believe that the ExComm had not gauged them accurately, and there is no evidence of sustained examination of contingency plans should a confrontation at sea occur.

The quarantine was selected in part because of the expectation that it would reduce time pressures. In his speech to the nation on October 22 revealing the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba and proclaiming his intention to establish the quarantine, President Kennedy declared that “many months of sacrifice and self discipline lie ahead” (Larson, 1986: 63). Yet information existed suggesting that the quarantine had an extremely limited window of effectiveness. Very early in the crisis, the CIA reported that all of the SS-4 missiles would be operational within a matter of weeks, and that the longer-range SS-5 missiles would be operational in December (Central Intelligence Agency, 1962). In his opening remarks on October 16, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara insisted that if military action were to be undertaken against the missile sites in Cuba, it would be scheduled prior to the time when the missiles became operational (Trachtenberg, 1985: 173-174). It would seem that the ExComm should have expected the crisis to last a couple of weeks at most, not “many months,” for if the missiles became operational before the quarantine had successfully pressured the Soviets into withdrawing them, the president would be under tremendous pressure to resolve the crisis quickly and peacefully. Indeed, scarcely three days after the quarantine became effective, the president was clearly desper-
ate to bring the confrontation to a peaceful conclusion (Welch and Blight, 1987: 25-27). If Kennedy and his advisors overestimated the amount of time they had available at the outset, and if they saw the quarantine's ability to reduce time pressures as one of its chief assets, then they clearly misjudged its costs and benefits.

Moreover, it is now believed that an order from Khrushchev to the captains of Soviet ships to run the quarantine was narrowly averted by a member of the Soviet Presidium at the last minute (Medvedev, 1985: 52; Blight and Welch, 1989: 306). It is also believed now that, despite its concern with managing the quarantine precisely, the Kennedy administration was unaware of the fact that at least one Soviet submarine was crippled by the U.S. Navy during the crisis (Sagan, 1985: 117; Welch, 1989a: 92). War may therefore have been closer than the president and his colleagues knew. Because contingency plans were not formulated for eventualities such as these, several costs and risks of the quarantine escaped more than cursory scrutiny. It would seem that Herek, Janis, and Huth should therefore have coded this symptom "present" as well.

POOR INFORMATION SEARCH

"The group fails to obtain available information necessary for critically evaluating the pros and cons of the preferred course of action and other alternatives. If the group engages in any information search at all, it does so in such a perfunctory and incomplete manner that it fails to obtain a number of important pieces of information that would have been available if requested from experts or other appropriate persons inside or outside their organization." This symptom is coded "absent" (Herek et al., 1987: 204, 212).

Three examples will suffice to show that the ExComm engaged in poor information search as Herek, Janis, and Huth define it. First, as suggested above, President Kennedy and his advisors considered the status of the Soviet missiles in Cuba to be a crucial factor in their deliberations. Most of them apparently believed that if the missiles were operational, then the risks of a launch from Cuba either during or in response to an American air strike would have been unacceptably high, strongly inclining them against an attack (e.g., see Trachtenberg, 1985: 173-174). The main source of the ExComm's concern was uncertainty as to whether the Soviets had warheads in Cuba. At each day's intelli-
gence briefing, the president's first question was, "What about the warheads? Are they there or not?" There was no evidence of Soviet warheads in Cuba, but the Central Intelligence Agency continued to report increasing numbers of Soviet missiles to be "operational." Although the term "operational" had a technical meaning in the intelligence community, and even though the CIA was using the term correctly in its briefs, not once did the ExComm request an explanation of the terminology (Welch and Blight, 1987: 26; Welch, 1989a: 71-74.)

In fact, the CIA had information suggesting that warheads were on the way, aboard the freighter Poltava out of Odessa, and that the shipment was interdicted by the quarantine (Garthoff, 1987: 22). This information appears never to have been communicated to the ExComm, nor does there appear to have been any request from the ExComm that it be kept informed of possible warhead shipments.

Finally, it appears that the ExComm's concern about the operational status of the missiles in Cuba was largely associated with the fear that at least one missile would be launched during an American air strike, possibly resulting in millions of American deaths. In fact, there was sufficient information available to suggest that the risks of a launch during the envisioned air strike were negligible. Even with assumptions of ample warning and unrealistically high attrition rates by Cuban air defenses, and granting all benefits of the doubt to the Soviet crews manning the missile sites, the odds against a launch-under-attack were overwhelming because of the extensive period of time needed to fuel, arm, and target an SS-4 missile (8 to 20 hours), the complexity of the task (requiring 20 calm men), and the vulnerability of the sites (Blight and Welch, 1989: 209-212). This information was all available in 1962; the ExComm never assimilated it, and consequently feared a virtually impossible contingency.

SELECTIVE BIAS IN PROCESSING INFORMATION AT HAND

"The group shows a definite tendency to accept new information from experts, the mass media, and outside critics only when it supports the preferred alternative. As a result, the members generally ignore or
refute a number of important pieces of nonsupporting information to which they are exposed" (Herek et al., 1987: 205).

It is difficult to know why Herek, Janis, and Huth code for this symptom at all, let alone choose to code it "absent." It would seem impossible in principle to determine whether information from experts, the mass media, and outside critics was properly or improperly processed by the various members of the ExComm, because insufficient data exist to enable us to reconstruct the subtleties of their cognitive thought processes. In any case, most of the information reaching the ExComm was unreliable (Blight et al., 1987: 180-184). There is little doubt that different individuals within the ExComm would have been persuaded by different considerations to different degrees for a wide variety of reasons, and it would be impossible to determine precisely how the various pieces of information and opinion worked their way through the judgments of individual members to the collective choice of the quarantine. An analyst claiming to be able to distinguish "biased" from "unbiased" information processing under circumstances such as these would be making an epistemologically untenable claim.

As the crisis reached its crescendo (October 27), as the quarantine began to look like a failure, and as the debate about options opened anew, no single "preferred course of action" existed because the limited consensus the quarantine had hitherto enjoyed broke down (Welch, 1989a). It would not have been possible, therefore, for information to be processed in a way improperly supporting the "preferred course of action" at that point. But even well before that point, the constituency favoring the quarantine varied in membership and strength of commitment. It was never supported unanimously. This is, of course, what should be expected in a dynamic crisis. To suppose that there is a static "preferred course of action" is to misunderstand the nature of a political decision-making process.

Although there is a considerable body of literature devoted to cognitive distortions in decision making (e.g., Jervis, 1976; Lebow, 1981), the clinical data are far more persuasive than the anecdotal and highly subjective data from the real world of crisis management. Rarely is it sound epistemologically to make judgments about biases in information processing in historical events, and the Cuban missile crisis is not one of those cases amenable to judgments of that kind. The only safe option, therefore, is to forego coding for this symptom.
FAILURE TO RECONSIDER ORIGINALLY REJECTED ALTERNATIVES

“The group fails to reexamine the consequences of a number of previously considered alternatives, or reexamines rejected alternatives in a biased manner by discounting favorable information and giving disproportionate weight to information about their negative consequences.” This symptom is coded “present” (Herek et al., 1987: 205, 212).

In fact, as the transcripts of the October 27 ExComm meetings clearly show, the options originally dismissed in the first week of the crisis were put back on the table. One of the options most quickly dismissed in the early stages of the negotiations—offering to withdraw Jupiter missiles from Turkey in return for the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba—dominated the discussion. The president himself became its strongest advocate, and secretly set in motion the machinery for a possible public trade (Bundy and Blight, 1987; Welch and Blight, 1987: 12-18). Military options were discussed as well. It is possible to suppose that previously rejected alternatives were considered “in a biased manner by discounting favorable information and giving disproportionate weight to information about their negative consequences,” but doing so is as epistemologically unsound as asserting that the ExComm did (or did not) process information in a biased way (among other things, it implies that the analyst knows what “unbiased” assessments and “proportionate weights” are when decision makers themselves do not). If this symptom is to be coded at all, therefore, it would seem that it should have been coded “absent.”

FAILURE TO WORK OUT DETAILED IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING, AND CONTINGENCY PLANS

“The group ignores possible problems in implementation and does not develop any monitoring or contingency plans; or the group discusses implementation, monitoring, and contingency plans in such a vague or incomplete manner that a number of important difficulties or contingencies that are likely to materialize are overlooked.” This symptom is coded “absent” (Herek et al., 1987: 205, 212).

As previously mentioned, the ExComm as a whole seems not to have been aware of certain antisubmarine activities during the implementa-
tion of the quarantine (Sagan, 1985). Perhaps more significant, when the events of October 26 and 27 seemed to suggest the crisis was entering a more dangerous phase and further action might be required, it is astonishing to note that the ExComm engaged in no meaningful discussion of contingency plans in the event hostilities with the Soviets broke out (Bundy and Blight, 1987; Welch and Blight, 1987: 27-28; Blight and Welch, 1989: 123-125). This symptom should therefore have been coded “present.”

DISCUSSION

It is not difficult to imagine why Herek, Janis, and Huth coded symptoms for the Cuban missile crisis in the way they did. Although the authors were careful not to rely on memoirs and autobiographies for their accounts of decision making because they might contain “self-serving justifications and distortions” (p. 219), the works they did rely on, in turn, relied substantially on those same memoirs and autobiographies. This was unavoidable because useful alternative sources of information were not available when those works were written.

The Cuban missile crisis has always been comparatively well understood because of the attention it has attracted. There are grounds, therefore, for wondering about the confidence we can place in the codings used by Herek, Janis, and Huth for the other cases they consider. Consequently, there are grounds for questioning the conclusions of their study. But instead of attempting to fine-tune their codings, perhaps we should ask larger questions raised by the foregoing survey of “flaws” in the ExComm’s handling of the Cuban missile crisis: Is Herek, Janis, and Huth’s conception of a “high quality” decision-making process realistic? Is it useful?

It would be counterintuitive to deny that “vigilant problem solving, which requires the fullest use of available information and judgmental resources, increases the likelihood that the course of action chosen will anticipate the consequences as well as possible and that contingency plans will be ready for counteracting or minimizing setbacks and threats of serious losses when they occur” (Herek et al., 1987: 221). It would certainly be odd to hear someone advocate a process that does not make full use of available information and judgment, all other things being equal. But Herek, Janis, and Huth acknowledge that “when a national government faces international crises, the outcomes result from a com-
bination of the leaders' decision making and implementation, external variables including the decisions made by adversaries, and chance factors" (p. 221). One side's decision-making process, therefore, will never determine absolutely the outcome. Moreover, if "external variables and chance factors" are sufficiently important, they may condition a decision-making process so powerfully that it will be impossible or undesirable to model it after the vigilant problem-solving ideal. Under certain circumstances, a favorable outcome may depend upon a process that does not exhibit the characteristics of vigilant problem solving. The Cuban missile crisis is a case in point.

To substantiate this, it is necessary to establish that the outcome of the Cuban missile crisis was indeed favorable. Those who provided the subjective evaluations of the effects of the crisis on U.S. interests and international hostility for the Herek, Janis, and Huth study—conservative and liberal alike—agreed that it was (Herek et al., 1987: 214, Table 3). Students of the crisis overwhelmingly concur; so do members of the ExComm, as well as knowledgeable Soviets (Blight and Welch, 1989: 93-111, 225-230, 279-290). Even President Kennedy and Chairman Khrushchev regarded it as a positive turning point in the Cold War (Kennedy, 1969: 128; Khrushchev, 1970: 505). The reasons for these evaluations are not difficult to discern. Among other things, the crisis brought home the potentially catastrophic consequences of misjudgments, miscalculations, and adventurist foreign policies in the nuclear age; it demonstrated the dangers and difficulties of superpower crisis management; and it clarified the terms on which the superpowers could safely pursue their geopolitical competition, reinforcing the associated norms. The relaxation of tensions following the resolution of the crisis also facilitated the 1963 Hotline Agreement, the Limited Test Ban Treaty, and a peaceful stabilization of the situation in Berlin (Blight and Welch, 1989: 317-323). In these various ways, serious

2. Of course, decision making itself is also affected to some extent by factors independent of process as characterized by vigilant problem solving (the identification of goals, the canvassing of alternatives, the search for information, the formulation of contingencies, and so forth). For example, decision making may be powerfully affected by individuals' concepts, needs, wishes, and biases (Jervis, 1976; Lebow, 1981; Jervis et al., 1985; Lebow, 1987), although it is extremely difficult to identify these influences from the historical record.

3. Even if one were to question the method used by Herek, Janis, and Huth to evaluate the quality of crisis outcomes in general, the impressive scholarly consensus in this case would be difficult to resist. Not a single source cited in the reference section below argues that the crisis had primarily negative effects on either U.S. national interests or on the general level of international conflict in either the short or long run. The vast majority of them conclude that the crisis had strongly positive effects on both counts.
threats to U.S. alliance and hemispheric interests were abated or forestalled, and both the number and severity of U.S.-Soviet disputes dropped noticeably.

If the outcome of the crisis was favorable, and if the Kennedy administration's decision-making process failed to meet the standards of vigilant problem solving, then we must conclude that, at least in this case, the quality of the process as Herek, Janis, and Huth conceive it was not related to the quality of the outcome. Again, it is not difficult to discern why. Close study of the event and of the participants' reports of their own decision making reveals that external variables and chance factors indeed proved to be too powerful to permit operation of a finely tuned, vigilant problem-solving process. The political, strategic, and psychological contexts in which decision making took place, the premium on reaction (rather than action) during the public phase of the crisis, and unavoidable time constraints powerfully affected the decision-making process itself. Managing the crisis required less of a sense of strategy than a capacity to muddle through, and the ExComm's decision-making process reflected that requirement (Blight and Welch, 1989: 112-134). What Herek, Janis, and Huth consider to be signs of pathological decision making were, under these conditions, necessary and appropriate adaptations to circumstance. Let us once again examine each symptom in turn.

First, with respect to surveying alternatives, the ExComm had finite resources and could not explore all conceivable or all viable options. The Kennedy administration was politically astute enough to realize ahead of time that the NATO alliance and the American electorate as a whole could not tolerate Soviet missiles in Cuba with only mild protest, nor could they tolerate an aggressive response unduly risking nuclear war. One course put American credibility at risk, and with it the entire foundation of the delicate postwar European status quo (as well as an older, more stable Latin American status quo). The other course put the

4. An alternative interpretation of the Cuban missile crisis might hold that the shared fear of nuclear war by both parties was such an overwhelming contextual determinant that the decision-making process itself was virtually irrelevant to the outcome. According to this interpretation, errors in that process were simply swamped by a constraint of the strategic environment. (I am indebted to Janice Gross Stein for drawing this point to my attention.) The implication that the decision-making process was virtually irrelevant to the outcome seems controversial, of course, because it logically entails that the outcome of the crisis was foreordained and that there was no real risk of nuclear war. As an alternative historical interpretation, however, it shares with the analysis below a challenge to Herek, Janis, and Huth's claim that a particular type of decision-making process powerfully affects the likelihood of a desirable outcome.
entire world at risk. If one of the statesperson’s chief skills is the ability to identify and deal with problems quickly, we should hope and expect that a decision maker will be able to identify a fairly narrow range of alternatives promptly, and devote scarce resources to their proper exploration. In principle, therefore, it is not unreasonable for a decision maker to focus quickly on a small set of basic alternatives under conditions such as these, perhaps even only two. Although by their own criteria Herek, Janis, and Huth should have faulted the Kennedy administration for failing to survey the alternatives adequately, the speed with which the ExComm concentrated its deliberations in the Cuban missile crisis was probably a virtue, not a vice.

Second, with respect to surveying objectives, the ExComm was able to apprehend the stakes in the crisis quickly and intuitively. They did not require an extended debate on the subject. Moreover, given the uncertainties inherent in any dynamic two- or n-party interaction marked by significant conflicts of interests, decision makers should not necessarily expect themselves (or others) to be able to fully take into account all of the major goals or values implicated by their choices of actions, if by this we mean that they should be able to assess useful probabilities and costs to the long-run consequences of their acts. The short run was all that the ExComm could hope to apprehend in the Cuban missile crisis, and even then its grasp of the situation was unavoidably tenuous. It proved to be more important that the ExComm was guided by certain features of the types of policies under consideration (such as whether they were flexible, reversible, and provided the adversary with a face-saving and nonescalatory way out) than with their likely long-term costs and benefits as assessed by rational actor analysis.

Herek, Janis, and Huth’s third and fourth symptoms imply that a decision maker can acquire, assimilate, and use a larger body of information than was humanly possible in the Cuban missile crisis. Human beings and governments are fallible, and it is inevitable that potentially useful information and potentially important assessments of costs and risks will be lost in the shuffle—more so under the pressures of a crisis than at any other time. The ExComm wisely chose to pursue a course of action that minimized the costs of failures of this kind rather than a policy whose success turned critically upon the flawless (or nearly flawless) performance of individuals and bureaucracies. The ExComm’s healthy knowledge of human limitations more than compensated for those limitations themselves.
While in most cases it would be useful and proper to reconsider alternatives rejected earlier (if time and circumstances permit), it would be misleading to read a failure to do so as a symptom of deficient decision making in every case. In the Cuban missile crisis, the Kennedy administration properly reconsidered several rejected alternatives when the time was ripe to do so. But not all alternatives should be reconsidered, for some are quite properly rejected at the outset, just as some, quite properly, are never considered at all.

Finally, although the ability to anticipate the consequences of one’s acts is extremely important for effective crisis management, the argument can be made that there are limits to the extent to which decision makers can and should attempt to do so. The universe of possible repercussions following an air strike on the missile sites in Cuba was too large to be worked through, and too indeterminate to allow much in the way of useful pre-planning. The ExComm would have been wasting its valuable time attempting to map out that universe. Instead, appropriately, the uncertainties surrounding an air strike merely weighed heavily in the balance against it.

It is easy to point to instances of what an ideally rational observer would call “failings” in the Kennedy administration’s handling of the Cuban missile crisis. Those canvassed here are just a small sample of the possibilities. Moreover, a student of the crisis who is used to reading the polished retrospective accounts of the event written by participants or persons close to participants can only react with shock to the discovery that the actual discussions of the ExComm, captured on audio tape, were disorganized, disjointed, sometimes rambling, often ill-informed, largely inarticulate, and seemingly directionless. But this serves only to illustrate that an “ideally rational observer” might have entirely unrealistic assumptions about the capabilities and limitations of decision makers in circumstances of this kind. Without doubt, crisis management requires a sense of strategy and instrumental rationality; but equally, if not more so, it may require an awareness of fallibility, and an ability to handle the unexpected.

One should not, of course, too eagerly draw general conclusions about crisis decision making from a detailed look at only one case. It may be that, because of its intensity, its unusually high stakes, and its particular circumstances, the Cuban missile crisis was indeed exceptional. Until many more crises are examined in detail as thoroughly as the Cuban missile crisis has been, we cannot know. But the fact that it
is the most widely studied and most deeply understood postwar crisis suggests that the flaws in Herek, Janis, and Huth's coding decisions in this case cast doubt on the accuracy of their coding decisions in other cases and undercut confidence in their more general conclusions. At the very least, therefore, we should suspend judgment on the relationship between the quality of a decision-making process in an international crisis (as Herek, Janis, and Huth conceive it) and the quality of its outcome; and if further study indicates that the Cuban missile crisis is not exceptional in this regard, we should reject their findings altogether.

REFERENCES