



# Blinders, Blunders, and Wars

What America and China Can Learn

David C. Gompert, Hans Binnendijk, Bonny Lin



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## Preface

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The premise of this study is that the likelihood of governments committing strategic blunders—starting wars by misjudgment—depends on how well they use information available to them. The thought behind this, coming from neuroscience, is that information processing is at the heart of decisionmaking. This begs two questions:

- What is the role of information in strategic decisionmaking?
- Why are bad strategic decisions made?

The answers could shed light on how strategic blunders can be avoided. Answering them requires a blend of information science and empirical research: the former by a tour of decision theory, behavioral psychology, organizational theory, and information technology, and the latter by a tour of historical cases of strategic decisions, bad and good. When the two answers are combined, it may be possible to see how enhancing the *value* of information can counter the tendency of governments to blunder. Or so we hope.

This inquiry is important because the possibility of governments causing wars by blunder does not seem to be receding—the twentieth century was the worst yet. It is also timely, for war between twenty-first-century great powers, especially China and the United States, is most likely to be the result of misjudgment by one, the other, or both, but could be terribly destructive nonetheless. If anything, the danger of bad decisions leading to Sino-American hostilities is rising because of China’s growing military might and increasing tensions between China and U.S. allies and partners in Asia. When these words were written, China and the United States were in a state of elevated tension precipitated, it is fair to say, by China’s attempt to gain control of the airspace above the East China Sea by claiming an expansive Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). Although China warned that it may take “defensive” action to enforce the ADIZ, the United States has defied this warning. It is doubtful that the Chinese would go to war, least of all with the United States, over these particular claims. Still, this flare-up has called attention to the potential for conflict involving the world’s strongest powers, not because either one has more to gain than to lose from war, but because one or the other commits a blunder.

The study is not about how to eliminate the possibility of conflict by freeing Sino-American relations of disagreements and creating perfect accord. Rather, it accepts that discord, misunderstanding, and occasional confrontation are likely, and it seeks to understand how, nonetheless, to avoid decisionmaking errors that could lead to a conflict neither side really wants. Although China and the United States have strong reasons to remain at peace, history shows us—as this study reminds us—that war can happen by misjudgment. Indeed, so damaging would war between China and the United States be, to both countries and to the rest of the world, that misjudgment may be the most plausible way one could start. So it is important to understand how that could happen.

The authors believe that it is helpful to apply to the Sino-American case lessons from the history of wars started by bad decisions. Much of the death and destruction from war over the past two centuries resulted from blunders. Napoleon invaded Russia expecting to destroy its army in a climactic battle that never happened; he retreated months later with remnants of his half-million-man force. Where Napoleon failed, Hitler thought he could succeed; he too lost. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor unleashed enough American anger and military-industrial might to inflict unspeakable destruction and total defeat on Japan four years later. Argentina's military junta ordered the occupation of the Falkland Islands, convinced the British would not fight to recover them; the result was a humiliating defeat. When Soviet leaders decided to invade Afghanistan, they set in motion a chain of events that would end Soviet communism a decade later.

These and other cases examined in this study show that national leaders, their advisors, and their bureaucracies are capable of gross overconfidence, sloppy analysis, lapses of objectivity, wrong-headed preconceptions, disregard of facts that cast doubt on those preconceptions, zeal at the cost of rationality, suppression of debate, punishment of dissent, and other failures, fallacies, and fantasies that can lead to wrong choices and bad results. The propensity of human beings to blunder seems as great in matters of war and peace as it is in daily life.

Not every decision to go to war is a blunder: sometimes it is a rational, even best, choice. Similarly, not all wars are avoidable or, for that matter, ought to be avoided: the decisions of Britain and France to fight Hitler after his invasion of Poland were if anything overdue. But history offers us—indeed, it bludgeons us with—enough examples of wars by blunder to warrant deeper analysis of why they occur and what, if anything, can be done to prevent them.

Chinese decisionmaking in setting up the ADIZ, from what we know of it, is instructive. Aside from the merits of the competing claims to the islands, waters, and airspace of the East China Sea, Chinese leaders were wrong if they thought that Washington would not react forcefully to their move, which it did by promptly sending strategic (no less) bombers through the disputed zone. Or, if they expected such a U.S. reaction and decided to establish the zone anyway, Chinese decisionmakers could have

precipitated a crisis that could turn violent unless they backed down, which they have in a manner done. Either way, although conflict with the United States would produce more harm than good for China, its leaders made a choice that could have made it more likely. Whether this was a smart or dumb gamble is yet to be seen. Why Chinese leaders—or, for that matter, American leaders—would miscalculate is a question to which we will return after seeking to learn why strategic blunders have occurred in the past.

This study integrates historical, political, psychological, organizational, and technological analyses, including recent advances in explaining human decisionmaking. Its cases span two hundred years and involve blunders committed and blunders averted. Again, special attention is given to how the use of information, including intelligence, affects strategic decisions. The world is in the midst of an information revolution, and it is fair to think that this could lead to better decisionmaking. However, far more innovation and investment have gone into enhancing the *supply* of information than its *use*, including in deciding matters of war and peace.

In studying complex matters of strategic choice, personal experience is no substitute for research. But experience can complement research. We should note that two of the authors—David Gompert and Hans Binnendijk—have between them served as officials in every U.S. administration from Richard Nixon’s through Barack Obama’s, including four tours on the staff of the National Security Council. They have witnessed and been involved in numerous strategic decisions. With the limits of personal observation in mind, they have attempted to impart judgment from experience to this study’s analysis and recommendations.

This study has been made possible because of RAND’s policy of commissioning research of importance to the American public and the world. More than that, it touches the core value of an institution dedicated to rationality in public decisionmaking—to paraphrase the late James Q. Wilson, a longtime RAND trustee, to “extend the reach of reason.” The authors hope their work will add knowledge to the specific historical cases analyzed, to theory and analytic methods concerning strategic decisionmaking, to the promise of information in improving such decisionmaking, and to peace and security in Sino-American relations.

While meeting RAND’s high standards of quality, the authors have tried to write in a style that is accessible and interesting to a wide range of readers. Our hope is that both the examples and the analysis of blunders will cause leaders and others who may be involved in decisions of war and peace to reflect on how they approach and make decisions. We try to break new methodological ground, but we also think that relating a history of bad choices by seemingly smart people could have an impact.

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## Summary

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War between the United States and China could gravely harm both countries. While this makes premeditated attack by either one against the other improbable, it also underscores the need to prevent war from occurring by misjudgment. Although the United States and China collaborate on many global issues, they are increasingly at loggerheads in the Western Pacific, where China's drive to recover lost territories and attain regional leadership, if not hegemony, conflicts with America's resolve to maintain regional equilibrium, reassure allies, and preserve freedom of the seas. As Chinese military capabilities improve and the rivalry intensifies, there is a growing danger that the United States, China, or both will misjudge the other and make choices that lead to crises and even a war from which both stand to lose more than they gain. This danger warrants analysis of why and how states blunder into war.

Our study of eight strategic blunders, together with four cases in which blunders were not made, reveals a common theme: Individuals and institutions faced with complex strategic choices rely on simplified representations of reality—cognitive models—without which complexity could overwhelm them. The more these models diverge from objective reality, the more decisionmakers are prone to blunder, including on matters of war and peace. Leaders and staffs with great confidence in their models tend to dismiss or discount new information that would threaten—and improve—those models. Because use of information is central to decisionmaking, it is important and should be possible to learn how this process can break down or lead decisionmakers astray.

Napoleon's flawed model was that he could impose his political will on any opponent by defeating him in war, thanks to his matchless military genius and his Grande Armée. His legendary ego and belief in destiny were blinders to reality. Napoleon convinced himself and his fawning aides that by invading Russia in 1812 he could force Czar Alexander into a climactic and losing battle. Instead, Alexander had his forces retreat and thus drew Napoleon's deep into Russia's vast interior, where they would be destroyed by cold, hunger, and Cossack raids. The French emperor assumed that the Russian czar would conform to his plan for victory even though Alexander also knew that doing so would lead to defeat. Napoleon could have known better.

German military leaders during World War I were fixed by their Prussian roots in the belief that complete victory could be won, even as their troops were stalemated in the trenches of the Western Front. So in 1917 they persuaded the pliable Kaiser Wilhelm II, against the pleas of German statesmen, that the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare against U.S. and other neutral shipping would starve Great Britain into surrender at least a year before U.S. troops could reach Europe. Within months of the German decision, U.S. convoys with antisubmarine escorts were actually increasing deliveries to Britain, and the first U.S. forces landed in Europe a year before the Germans had forecast. Though they had ample information, German generals and admirals, steeped in and committed to outright military victory, had failed to think through possibilities other than the success of their (far-fetched) plan.

The clay of Hitler's model consisted of his contempt for the Soviet Union, belief in Aryan supremacy, and faith in his own infallibility (which may have masked a deeper inferiority complex). He was impelled by the idea of destroying the Soviet Union so that Germans could live, farm, and multiply in the East. Certain that Soviet troops, willpower, and administration would collapse in the Wehrmacht's path, he invaded in 1941. Having studied Napoleon's mistakes, he then repeated them, with similar results. Although German intelligence and the campaign were flawed, the more basic causes of Hitler's misjudgment were his unbounded hubris and habit of making decisions in isolation. Hitler's circle of advisors epitomized a common weakness of authoritarian states: a paucity of people with both the nerve and the access to speak truth to power. Owing to Hitler's blunder, the "Thousand-Year Reich" would last another four years.

Japan's military leaders reasoned in the course of 1941 that by the time the United States could rebound from the destruction of its fleet at Pearl Harbor, Japan would complete its conquest of Southeast Asia and then negotiate from strength. Behind this reasoning stood the certainty of Japanese racial fitness, military prowess, and destiny to command Asia. Voices of caution went silent. By launching a deadly surprise attack on American territory, the Japanese enraged, unified, and energized an enemy with preponderant military-industrial power—as they could have expected. The United States regained the upper hand by the Battle of Midway six months later, opening the way to the devastation of Japan and the hanging of the authors of the Pearl Harbor blunder.

Deng Xiaoping decided in 1979 that China could teach Vietnam a lesson through a brief but decisive invasion, forcing the diversion of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia and delivering a blow to the Vietnamese-Soviet (anti-China) alliance. His low opinion of the Vietnamese ignored the fact that they had routed France and outlasted the United States. The Chinese miscalculation was not an unmitigated blunder: Deng cut his losses by keeping the conflict short, and the war exposed China's military weakness, allowing him to consolidate power and reform the People's Liberation Army. Operationally, though, the war was a military disaster for China: China suffered massive losses and failed to draw the Vietnamese out of Cambodia.



That same year, Soviet leaders decided that a limited military intervention to support government forces in Afghanistan would bring a quick end to political chaos, Islamist extremism, and American machinations. Based on faith in force, their model ignored information indicating that force would fail this time. All it would take was controlling major Afghan cities and the country could be pacified—so they thought. Though warned by their top military leader that the Red Army was unprepared for a counterinsurgency campaign, Soviet leaders underestimated their adversaries' capabilities, fanaticism, stamina, and refusal to fight the way Moscow expected. Soviet forces were promptly forced into direct combat with an insurgency that swelled in response to the intervention. By the time its forces withdrew a decade later, the Soviet Union was reeling from costs, casualties, and international isolation, and would soon collapse. Yet when the decision was made, habits of intimidation blinded the Kremlin to the risks of such possibilities. Predecision warnings from Soviet officers and agents in the field were suppressed or ignored, and the army chief was reminded that the Politburo was boss.

Argentina's military dictators decided in 1982 to occupy Great Britain's Falkland Islands in order to reverse the decline in their domestic standing by exciting Argentine patriotism. The junta's cognitive model was virtually untethered from reality, starting with the belief that UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (of all people!) would not dispatch British forces to retake the islands and the assumption that United States would not back the British. For analysis of probable Anglo-Saxon reactions, the military leaders relied on diplomats whose frustration and fury from years of British stonewalling impaired their objectivity. The outcome was the opposite of what the junta had in mind: forcible removal of Argentine troops, national humiliation, firmer British resolve not to cede the Falklands, and an immediate popular backlash that ousted the junta. The Argentines were so sure the UK would not fight that they did not prepare their occupation troops for combat; surrender was swift.

In the charged atmosphere following al Qaeda's September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, American policymakers saw an opportunity to remove Iraq's Saddam Hussein and to create in his place a prototype for a democratic Arab world. President George W. Bush and his aides misconstrued sketchy and, as it turned out, erroneous intelligence that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction and had close ties to al Qaeda. They also brushed aside warnings about postinvasion risks and costs in order to avoid doubts and delays about the decision to go to war. At great cost—in lives, treasure, regional stability, global image, and loss of focus on al Qaeda—the United States would fight in Iraq for eight years. Iraq remains a cauldron of sectarian strife.

We find from these cases that decisionmakers are especially prone to blunder into war when:

- information is ignored, filtered, misconstrued, or manipulated to fit predispositions
- excessive reliance is placed on intuition and experience

- arrogance, egotism, or hubris causes unwarranted confidence
- a rigid but wrong strategic concept or vision prevails
- contingencies are not considered
- enemy will or capabilities are underestimated
- operational difficulty or duration is underestimated
- dissent and debate are stifled.

One finds excessive risk taking woven through these causes of poor strategic decisionmaking. Blundering leaders and those around them were too confident in their ability to script the future, even to the point of expecting adversaries to play their assigned parts. Across the cases, decisionmakers were more inclined to take risks than average people. This fits a general pattern in which highly successful people have unwarranted faith in their ability to control. It also dovetails with Barbara Tuchman's argument in *The March of Folly* that concentrated government power not only corrupts but also causes bad thinking.

We also discover throughout the study a strong correlation between strategic misjudgments and flawed cognitive models, when compared with objective reality. Those who blundered could have known better, for information seems to have been available at the time to have improved their models and supported better decisions. In contrast, when sound choices were made—Woodrow Wilson's 1917 decision to enter World War I, Henry Kissinger's handling of the 1973 U.S.-Soviet showdown, the Soviet decision of 1982 not to invade Poland to crush Solidarity—decisionmakers made good use of available information and so operated with sound models of reality. The fact that the propensity to blunder persists, even into the twenty-first century, despite exponential growth in the amount of and improvement in the accuracy of intelligence and other information available to decisionmakers, supports our argument that poor use of information is the principal culprit.

It follows that improvements are needed in how leaders and institutions use information, so that their cognitive models reflect objective reality and enable them to choose well. While this prescription is simple in theory, implementing it is anything but. Ensnared in their own models, leaders may be disinclined to admit that they filter, much less distort, information to conform to their predispositions and wishes. In this respect, they are like most people—they prefer information that supports what they already believe. The surer decisionmakers are of themselves, and the more decisive they like to think they are, the less receptive they may be to indications that they are wrong. Yet the very institutions and advisors that might know better are beholden and therefore disinclined to tell leaders what they do not want to hear. Time and again, our cases show that institutional checks on decisionmakers with blinders were nonexistent or too weak to prevent blunders.

In order to reduce the likelihood and severity of strategic misjudgments, governments need sources of *independent* policy analysis and advice, at least on matters of

war and peace. These must be disinterested yet have standing with and direct access to decisionmakers. (Military leaders cannot be counted on for this because they are under civilian control; and intelligence officials cannot because they should not advise on policy.) In the United States, this independent source could take the form of a strategic advisory body with access to all relevant information and to the best possible analytic capabilities. Such a body could and should be circumscribed in mission and activated only when independent review is needed on matters of war and peace. It need not and should not have its own bureaucracy. In effect, it would institutionalize a common ad hoc practice of red teaming and devil's advocacy that many presidents have used.

By virtue of its proximity to the president and pursuant to its statutory duty to “assess and appraise the objectives, commitments, and risks of the United States in relation to . . . actual and potential military power,” the National Security Council (NSC) is a suitable institution into which to plug such a body. It would be best to get its impartial analytic support of the highest quality from outside the government. Although this body would have no policymaking authority, it would be obligated to provide the President and the rest of the NSC with fiercely objective analysis of strategic theories, objectives, assumptions, adversary capabilities and will, implementation obstacles, prospects for success, options, and contingencies before a decision is made. Presidents should be obligated to receive this input whether or not it reaffirms existing policy. Though covered by executive privilege, the process should be a matter of historical and preferably public record, thus bolstering accountability.

In parallel, governments should set and abide by *standards* of analytic objectivity and rigor—akin to best practices of quality assurance—at least when it comes to decisions bearing on war and peace. Analysis should be complete, balanced, logical, evidence based, replicable, and documented—by which standards all eight blunders we studied would have failed. The ultimate benefit would be to foster objective use of available information and thus bring decisionmakers' models in line with reality. An independent strategic advisory body would be the natural steward of such standards.

For this body, as well as for mainstream institutions, analysis bearing on strategic decisions should make use of demonstrated advances in analyst-computer teaming. It is relatively simple, with the help of readily available technology, to explore any number of what-ifs that decisionmakers and their advisors may otherwise fail to anticipate—to confront uncertainty rather than assume it away. Such methods and tools could allow decisionmakers and analysts to investigate complexities that cognitive models, being simplifications, do not. Cultural and psychological resistance to using computers to improve strategic analysis and decisionmaking is likely but can be overcome. Many complex matters of public policy are already being informed by advanced analytic tools. It makes no sense to exempt matters of war and peace.

How do these lessons and prescriptions apply to the case of China and the United States? This case is if anything more complex than any of the historical ones studied here for two reasons. First, Chinese and American decisionmakers could both be rely-

ing on cognitive models that are at least somewhat misaligned with objective reality; these can reinforce each other and thus heighten the probability of misjudgment causing crises and the possibility of war:

- The Chinese tend to think that China's growing strength entitles it to recover territory lost when China was weak and, beyond that, to be East Asia's leading power. But, as they see it, the United States wants to obstruct China's rightful claims and retain its own regional hegemony. To these ends, the United States is seen to maintain offensive forces and alliances in the Western Pacific. This model discounts Americans' assurances that they do not wish to encircle and contain China. At the same time, Chinese decisionmakers may underestimate U.S. will to use force on matters of less importance to it than to China, and they may overestimate their ability to control a conflict should one occur.
- Americans tend to extrapolate from China's territorial claims and increasing anti-access and area denial (A2AD) capabilities an intention to use intimidation and, if need be, force to achieve regional dominance at the expense of U.S. interests, allies' security, and regional equilibrium. Americans may underestimate how threatening U.S. strike forces appear to China and how existing alliances and new security relationships validate Chinese fears of encirclement. Yet, like the Chinese, Americans might overestimate their ability to control a conflict should one occur.

While their respective models of reality could lead Chinese or American decisionmakers to bad strategic choices, each capital on its own does not seem to have the deep defects of unchecked ego, blindingly bad ideas, contempt for the other side, faith in scripting, bias toward risk taking, or the aversion to debate and conflicting advice that account for so many of history's blunders. Yet the dynamic interaction of these imperfect models could lower inhibitions, such as economic interdependence, that otherwise would prevent Sino-U.S. war. This danger is compounded by the proximity of forces in the Western Pacific and by adoption by both sides of military-operational strategies that reward attacking the other's forces first.

Add to this another risk: A third party, perhaps a U.S. ally, such as Japan or the Philippines, could act imprudently over a territorial dispute and bring the two great powers into confrontation. All in all, it appears that the danger of Sino-U.S. conflict by misjudgment, while no cause for alarm, is rising and, given the stakes, too high to ignore.

In this case, even more than the blunders of history, the best way to bring perceptions in line with reality is to communicate openly and continuously between the two states and two societies. American and Chinese leaders should form the sort of relationship that goes well beyond occasional summits and hotlines of adversaries. A better model is the connection between the White House and Downing Street that American presidents and British prime ministers have, obviously taking into account

that the United States and China are not allies and cannot be entirely open with one another. Regular and frank communication would improve the information each has about the other's fears, aims, perceptions, and problems, and would thus help to bring decisionmakers' cognitive models into closer accord with objective reality. Of course, it would also facilitate crisis management if strategic distrust is treated in quiet times. That the Chinese may be wary of such close contacts at the top means that American leaders should be patient and persistent in seeking them, though without suggesting that the United States needs them more than China.

At the urging of the United States, it and China now have in place a forum known as the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, which provides for annual cabinet-level meetings to discuss a wide range of issues that weigh on the relationship. Official connections should go beyond this mechanism not because it has been unsuccessful but because it is promising. Constant communications between national-security institutions is critical, as much to promote cooperation as to deepen understanding. Military contacts have been irregular, mainly because of the Chinese military's wariness, but are obviously important. The United States should keep up the pressure to expand military-to-military relations, for avoiding miscalculations and possibly hostilities could depend on it. Although both states will gather as much intelligence as they can from official and military contacts, so be it: there is less danger that China and the United States gain too much knowledge about each other than that they have too little.

Nongovernmental connectivity should also be increased, especially involving Chinese and American strategic communities (think tanks, universities, and retired officials and officers). There is much afoot already in this domain, but there is no way to do too much. One especially valuable practice is to conduct and learn from joint crisis "games" involving nonofficials with knowledge of how U.S. and Chinese leaders and institutions think. In addition, because Chinese and American decisionmaking models have roots in popular suspicions of the other, every sort of educational exchange should be fostered.

More Sino-American communications, from general officers to general public, may not be enough to dispel strategic distrust, for the two powers have undeniable differences, not just of perception but of interests in the objective world, especially in East Asia. These differences are not worth the cost of conflict to either country. Therefore, in addition to more communication, it is important for both governments to institute general decisionmaking safeguards along the lines recommend earlier.

History warns us not to underestimate the potential of leaders and institutions to blunder into war. Prudence demands that we not be too sure that war between China and the United States is precluded by awareness of its terrible consequences—for if such a war were to happen, it would likely be by misjudgment, like those made time and again. Information, well used, has the potential to improve decisionmaking and prevent blunders. China and the United States have the opportunity as well as the responsibility to avoid repeating history.



## Acknowledgments

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The authors discovered that colleagues and friends—people in general—are fascinated by blunders by important leaders. As we told others about what we were up to, we received plenty of ideas about which blunders to study—those ideas of Stuart Johnson and William Blair being especially valuable. Celene von Dutzman deserves special thanks for her creative research assistance from start to finish. As the work proceeded, more colleagues got engaged and offered invaluable advice: Seth Jones, Olga Oliker, Eric Peltz, Richard Neu, Susan Marquis, and others helped shape our thinking about why, how, and which leaders have made bad decisions, as well as good ones. In the late innings, Rebecca Gibbons and Rucker Culpepper came in from the bullpen to provide helpful criticism and research assistance. As important was the exceptional administrative and editorial help we received from Cassandra Tate and Lovancy Ingram.

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If, despite all the help we got, this study of how to avoid mistakes contains any, the responsibility is ours alone.





## Abbreviations

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A2AD	antiaccess and area denial
ADIZ	Air Defense Identification Zone
C4ISR	Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance
CENTCOM	Central Command
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
DEFCON	Defense Condition
DMZ	demilitarized zone
DNI	director of national intelligence
IDF	Israeli Defense Force
MOLINK	Moscow Link
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
NSA	National Security Agency
NSC	National Security Council
ORHA	Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance
OPLAN	operation plan
PLA	People's Liberation Army
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitation Talks
SS	Schutzstaffel
WMDs	weapons of mass destruction



## Introduction

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### Blunders

A phenomenon noticeable throughout history . . . is the pursuit by governments of policies contrary to their own interests. Mankind, it seems, makes a poorer performance of government than of almost any other human activity. In this sphere, wisdom, which may be defined as the exercise of judgment acting on experience, common sense and available information, is less operative and more frustrated than it should be. Why do holders of high office so often act contrary to the way reason points and enlightened self-interest suggests? Why does intelligent mental process seem so often not to function?

This is the opening paragraph of Barbara Tuchman's classic *The March of Folly*. Of the strategic blunders she describes to make her point, two of the more spectacular are Napoleon's invasion of Russia and Hitler's invasion of the USSR—the former ignoring the prior failure of King Charles XII of Sweden, and the latter ignoring the failure of Napoleon. That both Napoleon and Hitler had ample information to have foreseen calamity prompts the question: What were they thinking? Tuchman attributes such “wooden-headedness” to profound and inherent human shortcomings in the field of government: tyranny, excessive ambition, conceit, arrogance, lack of accountability, decadence.<sup>1</sup>

Tuchman argues that folly is “the child of power,” that power not only corrupts but also “causes failure to think,” and that the “responsibility of power often fades” the more it is exercised. It follows from this, in her view, that powerful leaders of powerful states may be especially blunder-prone. Think not only of Napoleon and Hitler but also of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the American wars in Vietnam and Iraq. As Tuchman saw it—and we tend to agree—the more authority is concentrated in one decisionmaker, whether by constitution, personality, or coercion, the harder it may be for inconvenient information and impertinent advice to penetrate and so avert misjudgment. If powerful misguided leaders are a primary cause of strategic blundering, timid staffs are often their accomplices.

Looking in a rearview mirror, the historian Tuchman offers little reason to hope that folly by governments and those who lead them can be eradicated. The problem,

as she sees it, originates in the crania of leaders. While their eyes, ears, and staffs give them access to objective reality, their egos and tempers see it differently. In a nutshell, *blinders cause blunders*.

Having said this, by inferring a bad decision from a bad outcome, today's analysts could be guilty of "hindsight bias."<sup>2</sup> At a minimum, hindsight offers clarity and order where decisionmakers saw fog and disorder. The way to avoid this bias is to consider what information yesterday's decisionmakers had available to them if they had sought it, following Tuchman's dictum that bad choices are blunders when those who make them could have known better. At the same time, a bad outcome may serve as a smoking gun of a bad decision if, on further investigation, it appears that available information could have supported better judgment. As we will see, blunders may occur when decisionmakers fail to seek, refuse to accept, or willfully distort information that does not conform to their preconceptions and beliefs.

A study with *blunders* in its title cannot get far without defining what one is. As we use the term, it is a decision with results that are much worse than those intended and expected. In addition, an option offering better results must be available; otherwise the decisionmaker is constrained to choose a given course even though it could end badly. Most of us have been in predicaments with no good options. But a blunder is when we pick a particularly bad one while better ones are available, thinking that we have picked the best. As we will see, some blunders occur because the worst of a set of bad options is chosen (note the Argentine-Falklands and Soviet-Afghanistan cases). In contrast, some occur because decisionmakers believe that great goals can be achieved (note Napoleon's invasion of Russia and Hitler's of the Soviet Union). In such cases, the results may be nearly the opposite of those intended and expected. In any case, a blunder involves misjudgment or miscalculation with regrettable consequences.

Wars can be triggered by "accident"—some incident, collision at sea, misread radar signature, unauthorized military initiative, or misinterpretation of an innocent action may cause hostilities to ignite and escalate. Such sparks are not the same as a decisionmaking blunder. For this reason, we sometimes use *strategic mistakes*—as opposed to *tactical mistakes*—as synonymous with *blunders*. Likewise, we sometimes refer to *misjudgments* and *miscalculations*, which are different from accidents. Obviously, the combination of accident and bad decisionmaking can be dangerous, in that either one can lead to the other. In most of the cases we consider, blunders were premeditated.

It is possible that a good decision can have bad results: A field general botches the execution of a sound decision to go to war, whereas a different officer could have delivered victory. A third party intervenes in a way that could not have been anticipated. Weather turns unforeseeably foul and produces a bad result from what otherwise could have been a good choice. Are these blunders? Perhaps not unmitigated ones. But the fact remains: "Stuff happens" (in the iconic, and ironic, words of former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld), and decisions may be faulted if they fail to anticipate plausible developments that produce bad results. Flawed execution is a favorite alibi

when the intentions of decisionmakers are thwarted. Decisionmakers, including some we study, may claim, and even believe, that things beyond their control caused bad results from good decisions. Be wary of such claims: For as we will see, decisionmakers who commit blunders often overestimate their ability to control events and to script the future. Our presumption is that flawed execution can often be laid at least partly at the feet of decisionmakers who assumed flawless execution.

While a bad decision may occur despite the availability of information that would have supported a better one, it is also possible that deficient or defective information is at play. The distinction between situations in which decisionmakers could have known better and those in which they had wrong or too little information is important by definition: *blunder* implies blameworthy decisionmaking; therefore, having no way to know better—if true—is a different problem, with different solutions. The main argument we will expose to empirical analysis is that flawed use of information causes blunders. In order to do that, we also have to consider whether available information could have supported a better decision. We will not argue that poor supply and poor use of information are the only reasons that strategic decisions turn out badly: unforeseeable developments may also be factors. However, because the processing of information is central to decisionmaking, bad decisions can generally be attributed to information failures.<sup>3</sup>

Blunders come in shades of gray, not black versus white. Some are more stunning than others in that they involved especially faulty reasoning and had disastrous results. We will characterize the severity in each case presented. The reader can be the judge, but the authors think that Argentina's 1982 seizure of the Falkland Islands, assuming no war would follow, is as bad as it can get. Some blunders may be mitigated, as China's 1979 invasion of Vietnam was. While obvious, the point that blunders come in shades is important, for we find a correlation between how disastrous the results were and how flawed the decisionmaking was.

This study seeks to learn *why* and *how* government leaders and institutions have committed strategic blunders in the past and could commit them in the future. It meets head-on Tuchman's question of why the "intelligent mental process" performs so badly, with a view to identifying ways to reduce the dangers of misjudgment when the stakes are greatest, in matters of war and peace. While considering historical cases, as Tuchman and others have done, this report also applies what can be known about human decisionmaking, especially under conditions of uncertainty and abundant information.

Tuchman's remedy is to encourage good decisions by offering painful accounts of the consequences of bad ones, including the demise of those who made them. Beyond this tourniquet, she offers no prescription to stanch the blundering. The historian's usual advice about how humans should behave is to learn history's lessons. Unfortunately, such advice, like history's lessons, is often ignored. Hitler was confident that he could avoid Napoleon's fatal mistakes in invading Russia, only to repeat them. The

Soviets invaded Afghanistan despite history's warning that subjugating those peoples would be impossible.

In an age when weapons have never been so destructive and societies so vulnerable—to nuclear war, economic war, and now cyber war—urging that history's verdicts should be respected is not good enough. We are especially concerned about the possibility that today's two strongest powers, the United States and China, could blunder into a conflict that would harm them both enormously. So our intention is to go beyond admonition. Taking Tuchman's criterion that an error is "folly" only if those who committed it could have known better, we will especially look at how information can better overcome the barriers, biases, and blinders of decisionmakers and lead them to rational choices.

While this is not the first effort to analyze strategic mistakes, earlier ones do not seem to have prevented leaders from committing blunders. *The March of Folly* dwells on U.S. decisionmaking up to and during the Vietnam War. Since then, the propensity of leaders and states to blunder has persisted. Indeed, two of the strategic mistakes we study might have been averted if Vietnam's lessons had only been learned—by China before it invaded Vietnam in 1979 and by the Soviet Union before it invaded Afghanistan that same year. The U.S. decision to invade Iraq—flawed in using intelligence, flawed in thinking through contingencies, and flawed in preparing for implementation—suggests that the potential for strategic mistake still lurks.

## A Brief History of Blunders

The authors largely agree with Tuchman that "folly's appearance is independent to era or locality[,] . . . timeless and universal."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as Vietnam and Iraq suggest, no form of government is immune from bad strategic decisionmaking. At the same time, democratic states are generally more inclined or obliged than autocratic ones to tolerate diverse views and embrace objective facts, whether or not such information supports their preferences and preconceptions. Yet, even in democracies, single-minded or close-minded pursuit of short-term advantage can lead to adverse long-term results.<sup>5</sup>

The potential for fallibility in decisions of war and peace is inherent in individuals, institutions, and nation-states, regardless of how sophisticated they are and whether the stakes are trivial or huge. Our concern is not with the everyday shortcomings of governments but with misjudgments that cause large-scale violence, death, and destruction. The magnitude of blunders can be measured not only in the scale of harm done but also in the proportion of that harm that is suffered by the states that commit them. The damage from blunders may go well beyond failure to achieve desired results. At the risk of piling on Napoleon, his decision to invade Russia in 1812 qualifies as a colossal blunder: It should have occurred to him that the Russian army might withdraw rather than take a stand and lose a conclusive battle; because it did not, his

Grande Armée lost more than 500,000 of 600,000 men, more than twice the Russian casualties. He paid with his army and before long with his throne and freedom.

Blunders have persisted since 1812, and the costs have grown. During the past two hundred years, more than thirty million soldiers have been slain in wars caused by misjudgment and miscalculation.<sup>6</sup> Roughly as many noncombatants have died.<sup>7</sup> Especially striking are self-destructive blunders in which most of those killed were from the state that started the war: Roughly 99 percent of deaths in the First Gulf War were Iraqis; 90 percent Argentines in the Falklands War; 90 percent Japanese in the Pacific theater of World War II; 60 percent Napoleon's side in his invasion of Russia; 60 percent North Koreans in the Korean War.<sup>8</sup> Then there are cases in which the initiating side came away with a relatively small ratio of casualties: About 3 percent of those killed during and after the U.S. invasion of Iraq were American. Ten times as many Vietnamese as Americans died during the U.S. intervention in Vietnam; a similar ratio applied to Soviet versus Afghan deaths during the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

It is not uncommon for a strategic blunder to lead to the political or personal termination of those who committed it. Invading Russia led to Napoleon's exile. Hitler could not recover from his defeat in the USSR. Many of the authors of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor were executed when the war ended. Lyndon Johnson's presidency, if not also his vitality, was sapped by U.S. failure in Vietnam. The Argentine military junta that invaded the Falkland Islands was tossed out of office upon defeat by the UK. The Soviet Union collapsed a few years after the end of its intervention in Afghanistan.

Because, as Tuchman says, power can interfere with the ability to think straight, powerful leaders of powerful states have been as likely as any to make strategic mistakes. Moreover, because of their outsized war-making capacities, the most destructive misjudgments are made by great powers: The cases we examine include Napoleonic France, Imperial Germany, Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, China, the Soviet Union, and the United States. It is uncommon for a state to blunder into war with another that clearly has superior military capabilities; when it occurs it may be because the weaker state underestimates the stronger one's *will* to fight—a misjudgment made by Japan regarding the United States and by Argentina regarding the United Kingdom. When wrong about enemy will, as the Japanese were in attacking Pearl Harbor, the Argentines were in invading the Falklands, and Saddam Hussein was in invading Kuwait (a case not studied here), the lopsided outcomes are as one would expect—and as the blunderers could have known. Of course, powerful states contemplating war can also underestimate the will, resilience, and cunning of weaker ones. For reasons we will ferret out, China underestimated the difficulty of defeating the Vietnamese after they had defeated France and the United States in succession.

When enemies are underestimated, the ensuing war can be harder, longer, and costlier than anticipated. Indeed, had the difficulties, duration, and chance of failure been correctly gauged, the state might have decided against war in the first place. The

renowned scholar of war Klaus Knorr observed that if the outcome could be accurately predicted by both sides, no war would occur because the parties could proceed directly to the settlement table without all the carnage.<sup>9</sup> When available information leaves room for doubt about the outcome, the prospect of significant gain or significant loss invites risk taking (which, as we will discuss, is a major if somewhat perplexing factor in blunders). While this may be obvious, it speaks to the value of good information, reliable intelligence, and objective analysis when deciding to go to war.

Napoleon and Hitler were right to think that their armies overmatched those of Alexander and Stalin, respectively. But they both badly underestimated Russians' will, skill, and perseverance and the cunning exploitation of Russia's barren vastness and bitter-cold winters. Likewise, the United States and then China underestimated Vietnamese toughness and smartness. Great powers have repeatedly misjudged the difficulty of controlling Afghanistan, yet they keep trying. Underestimating adversaries and difficulties tends to lengthen wars, which those who start them often expect to be short. Quick invasions evolve into wars of grinding attrition, such as that which ended in Japan's defeat in 1945. Interventions can encounter, and fuel, stubborn insurgencies—the nemesis of great powers, such as France in Vietnam and Algeria, the USSR in Afghanistan, and the United States in Vietnam, Iraq, and, yet again, in Afghanistan. Empirically, the average duration of a counterinsurgency campaign is a decade, with the insurgents winning at least half the time.<sup>10</sup> Great powers repeatedly wade into such campaigns as if theirs will be the short and cheap exception, ignoring intelligence that suggests otherwise.

Time and again, decisionmakers choosing war fail to anticipate how their choices can change the adversary or the landscape in ways that diminish prospects for success. We will see that Germany's 1917 decision to unleash U-boats against neutral shipping turned a Franco-British adversary into a Franco-British-American one and gave Britain more reason to fight on, rather than to seek peace as Berlin expected. Japan's decision to attack Pearl Harbor and Argentina's decision to snatch the Falklands transformed the United States and the UK, respectively, into enemies they could not defeat.

When powerful states are defeated in wars they start, it may be because the weaker enemy has behaved in a way that was not expected, but could have been. Malcolm Gladwell's entertaining piece explains, allegorically, "how David beats Goliath" by being forced into a strategy—slinging a rock—by Goliath's overwhelming superiority in brute force.<sup>11</sup> (Did Goliath really expect a slugging match?) In our cases: Russia refuses to fight the decisive battle Napoleon seeks, and needs; Vietnam refuses to shift forces out of Cambodia to help repel the Chinese invasion; Afghan resistance fighters refuse to attack cities held by Soviet forces; Sunni insurgents resort to improvised explosive devices instead of face-to-face fighting with U.S. forces.<sup>12</sup> Had such fierce resistance been anticipated by France, the Soviet Union, and the United States, respectively, they might have decided against going to war.



The common failure to anticipate what the adversary will do is puzzling: If the stronger side knows it can defeat the weaker side by fighting the way it, the stronger, would prefer, is it not reasonable to presume that the weaker side also knows it? If so, the stronger side should know that odds are the war will *not* go as planned. Yet the stronger side often ignores this simple logic both in choosing and in preparing for war. This study wrestles throughout with failure to consider several obvious questions when considering war: What if the conflict does not go as intended? What if it drags on? What if the adversary does not behave as expected? When the answers suggest that failure is a real possibility, blunder can be averted.

As we will see, bad strategic decisions may come down to overconfidence in capabilities and plans, resulting in inadequate attention to the possibility and consequences of miscalculation, detours, and failure. Estimating the odds of success in deciding to go to war is a bit like setting the point spread in betting on the outcome of a sports contest, with one important difference: Las Vegas bookies, being disinterested, are more objective and thus better at gambling than state leaders may be. For reasons we will explore, getting the odds wrong—underestimating risks—is a common factor in strategic blunders. At first blush, this seems strange, in that ordinary people facing ordinary choices *tend* to be risk averse, perhaps even more than rationally warranted. Their decisionmaking reflects a bias in favor of avoiding pain more than achieving gain. Investing in speculative stocks and junk bonds is not for the many but for the few who are informed and tough-minded enough to weigh expectations of pain and gain objectively.<sup>13</sup>

Why the usual tendency to avoid risks goes missing when governments blunder into war is a critical question, obviously. Two explanations are worth considering. First, it is known that people on average are less risk averse when contemplating losses than when contemplating gains; that is to say, they would rather take a big chance to avoid a bad outcome even if doing so may lead to an even worse outcome. Thus, Japan's leaders opted for a surprise attack on the U.S. fleet in order to prevent U.S. intervention against the Japanese conquest of Southeast Asia, only to bring on a war that devastated Japan itself.

A second explanation is that people with high confidence in their ability to control situations perceive lower risks than others; when their confidence is too high, they perceive risks to be lower than they really are. If achieving top leadership posts implies past success, and if past success leads to over-confidence, it follows that certain leaders involved in strategic decisions could be uncommonly, if not dangerously, risk averse. There may be something to Tuchman's argument that "folly is the child of power." We will return to the question of why strategic decisionmakers may discount risks.

A particularly egregious yet common type of blunder is to start a war that can *only* be won quickly, ignoring the likelihood that it will drag on (perhaps because the enemy will not fight as scripted). Decisionmakers predisposed toward war can be seduced by the belief that victory will come quickly if otherwise victory may not come

at all. Although their belief may be little more than a wish, it can become accepted wisdom or conviction—whatever it takes to confirm their predisposition, rationalize their decision, and refute their skeptics. Moreover, the blunder of starting a war based on unwarranted confidence that it will be a short one may be compounded by the failure to prepare for the long one that occurs, as Napoleon's experience in Russia, Japan's experience attacking Pearl Harbor, and America's invasion of Iraq show. Defeat, or at least unexpectedly high costs, can be traced to a presumption (hope?) of quick success needed to choose war in the first place.

Just as not all decisions to go to war are flawed, not all involve the underestimation of risk. Strong states attacking weak ones may anticipate little risk and, sure enough, achieve swift victory. Although the U.S. leaders who sought war with Spain in 1898 were anything but cautious, they were fundamentally rational and right to believe that the decaying, overstretched Spanish empire could be defeated promptly. But when the odds are not so obviously favorable, a decision to go to war is more likely to prove correct if taken deliberately and objectively. Woodrow Wilson reluctantly took the United States into World War I in the expectation that this would decide the conflict in favor of the Allies, and he was right. Of course, decisions *not* to go to war—such as the Soviet decision not to invade Poland in 1981, in contradiction of its Brezhnev Doctrine—may be based on a properly conservative view of the perils, such as the adversary's will, capability, and acumen. Caution, being a function of risk aversion, is a common feature of blunder aversion.

A core policy such as the Brezhnev Doctrine is not jettisoned lightly. As a number of cases reveal, states, statesmen, and institutions are captivated by some Big Idea, whether received or of their own creation: geostrategic or economic imperative, existential fear, powerful ideology, competitive impulse, lust for empire, martial-ethos biased, jingoistic enthusiasm for victory, grandiose vision, Manifest Destiny. While subjectivity is inherent in politics and policies, it can also subvert rationality, degrade analysis, discourage dissent, discount risk, ignore contingencies, and short-circuit analysis of options other than war. Such factors may be aggravated by psychiatric issues of leaders, such as megalomania, mysticism, visions, unwarranted self-confidence, the lack of self-awareness, and even mental disorder. At the same time, to diagnose those who commit strategic blunders as mentally unsound is to imply that sound-minded leaders are incapable of committing them, which would be a serious error.

Returning to our core idea, because the definition of a blunder implies that information available at the time could have supported a better choice, we will especially look at why better choices were not made. This in turn will enable us to consider how better use of information could improve strategic decisionmaking.

## Strategic Decisionmaking

The first step in this analysis is to explain how strategic decisions—defined here as those involving war and peace—get made. Analysis of decisionmaking is found in numerous fields and is based on numerous disciplines (neuroscience, psychology, political science, economics, information science, business). Our interest is in strategic decisions by states and their leaders. While there are many ways to describe this (Graham Allison’s seminal work on the Cuban Missile Crisis being one),<sup>14</sup> we employ a simple *strategic decisionmaking system* consisting of:

- Individuals
- Institutions
- Information flows.

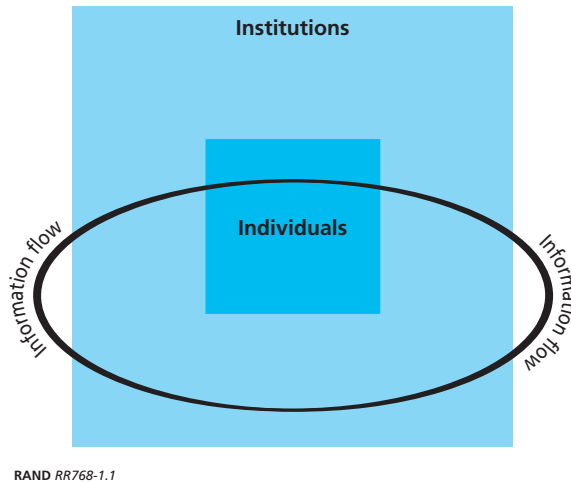
In this system, individuals and institutions are assumed to be static, whereas information flow, as the term suggests, is dynamic. By this we mean that in the course of a given decision and what leads up to it, individuals and institutions do not change, but information does.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it can be assumed that the body of available information expands throughout the process. The soundness of the decision depends on the ability and rationality of those involved to absorb, process, and use information flowing through the system.<sup>16</sup> This observation will become important to our analysis insofar as the flow of information—the sensing, sharing, and use of it—might be improved. Conversely, poor sensing, sharing, and use of information may cause errors or, as our cases indicate, compound shortcomings in the individuals and institutions involved.

Figure 1.1 is a simple depiction of such a strategic decision system, showing the individual decisionmaker in an institutional context through which information flows.

*Individuals*, in this system, are those with the responsibility and authority to make the war-and-peace decisions with which we are concerned—typically chiefs of state, ranging from first among equals, such as prime ministers, to democratically chosen presidents (often also commanders-in-chief), to dictators. They are surrounded and supported by *institutions*—staffs and advisors, ministers and department heads, military commanders and planners, parliaments and bureaucracies, processes and protocols. They include people and organizations that are part of the decisionmaking apparatus and others with responsibility for collecting, analyzing, and supplying intelligence to that apparatus. Depending on how dominated they are by or, alternatively, independent of the top individual decisionmaker, these institutions may have reinforcing or countervailing views and pressures, as well as diverse opinions of their own.

Institutions help leaders make good or bad decisions,<sup>17</sup> and of course they tend to reflect the leader’s views and wishes. Just as individual decisionmakers may be not be entirely rational, owing to emotional or psychological distortions, institutions are susceptible to their own pathologies, such as erroneous but reinforcing collective thought patterns, cult worship of the leader, group ethos, careerism, and fear of dire conse-

**Figure 1.1**  
**Simple Strategic Decisionmaking System**



quences of challenging the leader or the group.<sup>18</sup> In the best of all worlds, rational decisionmakers look to institutions to provide objective information, analysis, and advice, regardless of whether it threatens their preconceptions—even *because* it threatens their preconceptions. In the worst of all worlds, irrational and arbitrary leaders are, often by design, surrounded by ministers, staffs, commanders, and organizations that amplify their poor judgment, such as by discouraging diverse and independent views and by squelching debate. In between are cases in which a leader’s weaknesses, biases, and knowledge gaps are offset by the surrounding institutions, thus mitigating the risk of bad decisions.

Leaders of exceptional intellect and self-confidence might ignore or dominate their institutions and thus deprive themselves and their states of the benefit of diverse views in making good and avoiding bad decisions. The cases of this study reveal striking examples of this, notably Napoleon and Hitler. There are also cases—the Argentine invasion of the Falklands and the U.S. invasion of Iraq—in which those with responsibility and authority to make war-and-peace decisions rely on but are let down or led astray by the very institutions that should improve their knowledge and judgment.

*Information flow*, the most dynamic part of the system, can aggravate or mitigate shortcomings of individual decisionmakers and the institutions surrounding them. We credit Yaacov Y. I. Vertzberger, an Israeli political scientist, with explaining decisionmaking in international policy and crises as “information processing”—all the more so because he did so before the advent of distributed computing and the Internet made this a common notion.<sup>19</sup> This observation is based on a central concept of neuroscience that “information processing is the fundamental activity of the brain.”<sup>20</sup> Our premise—that blunders result from poor supply or use of information—flows from the thought that decisionmaking is information processing.

In Vertzberger's words, "A common element in many failures is that they did not stem from a dearth of information but rather incorrect judgment and evaluation of available information."<sup>21</sup> This argument tracks with Tuchman's. While we agree, we cannot help but wonder whether dramatic improvements in the availability, quality, sharing, and processing of information could be exploited to make strategic mistakes less likely or less disastrous. It may be that even the faculty to Google all the information in the world could not help leaders who have lost their objectivity, will not listen to reason, and make irrational decisions, nor save the victims of those decisions. An abundance of good information may be necessary but is not sufficient to avoid strategic mistakes.

More than a medium for strategic decisionmaking, information is the oxygen that enables the system to work. Of course, the benefit of oxygen depends not only on its supply but also on how efficiently and productively the body uses it. In a strategic decisionmaking system, it is possible that the supply of information is ample to support sound choices but is underused or misused. Throughout, when we speak of the role of information in strategic decisionmaking, we mean it in the broad sense of both its supply and use.

Information may have many sources: official intelligence, diplomatic reporting, the media, personal recollection, archives, digital memory, and open sources (e.g., web searches, social networking, and other Internet-based outlets). It may also involve communication with other parties, including the adversary. In addition to the utility of such communication in managing crises—clearing up misconceptions, exploring alternatives, sending and receiving warnings—it may also provide valuable information not otherwise available. Yet as crises develop, and especially when surprise is deemed important, such communication can be constricted or manipulated. More generally, when secrecy or insulation reduces the flow of information through the decisionmaking system, the chances of ill-informed and ill-considered choices may increase. One of the most common, harmful, and avoidable ways of constricting information—thus, of reducing knowledge—is to penalize, marginalize, and demotivate those who could provide facts or views that do not fit those of the decisionmaker and advisors.

Although we have not built it into our simple system, another important factor in decisionmaking—a fourth dimension, if you will—is *time*. Time can have complex and opposing effects on the quality of decisions. If decisionmakers and those around them have strong preconceptions, their views may be unified, amplified, and hardened over time as convictions firm up, new information is sifted for evidence that supports preconceptions, dissenters are marginalized, ranks are closed, and the deal is sealed. As time goes by, attention may shift from *whether* to fight to *how* to fight; implementation planning crowds out critical thinking. Because of Russian weather, Napoleon had months to think through the pros and cons of invasion. Instead, he and his staff conducted extraordinarily detailed planning (as was their practice in their earlier successful campaigns). Unfortunately for him, the planning did not include what to do

if the Russian army retreated, despite the logic that it would. In the end, time did in Napoleon's army as much as Russian weather and Cossacks did: by the time he concluded that the invasion had stalled deep in Russia, cold and hunger were taking a growing toll.

Sound decisionmaking can also suffer when time is short. In a midst of a crisis, or if surprise is important, a sense of urgency can grow, allowing less time, less patience, and less tolerance for analysis and debate. Urgency may result from technical and operational requirements associated with successful implementation; it might even be self-imposed as a way of ending deliberation and closing ranks. If for whatever reason the individuals and institutions involved in a strategic decision are starved for time, this can also limit their knowledge, since more time can mean more information to be gathered, analyzed, and used to think through what-ifs, revisit assumptions, and devise options.

When time is short, decisionmakers tend to rely heavily on intuition, which, being experience based, can fail them when faced with unfamiliar circumstances.<sup>22</sup> Put differently, shortage of time can result in shortage of analysis, which is more time-consuming than intuition. But time and information can work together to enhance decisionmaking: "Time can be made more valuable if it is used to gather, evaluate, and exploit information. Conversely, the ready availability of credible and useful information can, in effect, make time more productive, compensate for lack of it—in effect, make it last longer."<sup>23</sup>

It may be critical to buy time when facing war-and-peace decisions. The Soviets spent most of 1980 and 1981 considering whether or not to invade Poland to crush Lech Walesa's Solidarity movement. Over that period they concluded that the risks of invading outweighed the risks of leaving it to the Polish regime to do the crushing on its own. Suspending their own Brezhnev Doctrine of defending fellow communist regimes with force did not come easily for Soviet leaders; they needed a year to come to what turned out to be the right choice. They also acquired critical additional information in the course of 1980–1981—namely that the intervention in Afghanistan was far more protracted, costly, and difficult than they had expected in 1979. In general, time and information are closely related, in that the greatest value of additional time may be in acquiring more information, whereas information may be used to gain time. Whether time is scarce or abundant, a strategic decisionmaking system can use it to analyze fresh information and improve knowledge, thus reducing dependence on intuition.

In sum, figuring out why individuals and institutions commit blunders when they could have known better begs the question of why they did *not* know better—thus, our investigation into the supply and use of information in strategic decisionmaking.

## Models of Reality

Ask a roomful of historians what causes strategic blunders and you might get sundry answers spanning a wide range:

- lack of information, perhaps because of poor intelligence collection
- poor processing of collected intelligence into useful information
- failure to share intelligence and other information with decisionmakers
- misinterpretation of intelligence
- failure to absorb and convert information into sound knowledge
- bias of decisionmakers against information that does not conform to their beliefs
- failure to relate knowledge to choices at hand
- insufficient or unclear communications with the adversary or other parties
- underestimating the adversary's capabilities to make war
- underestimating the adversary's will
- assuming the ally will conform to one's own plans
- underestimating operational difficulties in implementing a decision
- overestimating the value of surprise or when the enemy can recover
- overestimating the effects of surprise or how long it will take the adversary to rebound
- underestimating the duration and costs of conflict
- overlooking or refusing to consider options before making a decision
- stifling of dissent, discouraging independent thinking, and cutting off debate
- lack of candor on the part of advisors and commanders
- megalomaniacal, messianic, or psychologically unbalanced leaders
- arrogance or hubris
- paranoia
- powerful emotions and loss of objectivity: nationalism, grievance, revenge
- demonizing the adversary
- dehumanizing the adversary
- equating the leader's interests with the state's interests
- harmfully excessive secrecy or compartmentalization
- insulation from reality
- rigid adherence to ideology or principles
- enthrallment with a flawed vision or strategy
- excessive reliance on successful experience, especially if recent
- misreading or discounting history
- relying too heavily on history
- belief that there is no other choice consistent with the state's well-being
- haste
- a hardening of views and closing of ranks over time

- unwarranted confidence in intuition, instinct, gut feeling
- disinclination to reconsider a decision despite evidence against it.

Faced with a blizzard of possible explanations for why blunders occur, we need to ask which are most common, which are most basic, and which lead to the worst outcomes. As a method for isolating the causes of strategic blunders, we suggest that they relate to flawed *cognitive models*—that is, simplifications of reality devised and used by individual decisionmakers and institutions to cope with complexity. If flaws in such cognitive models are deep, pervasive, and unacknowledged, they can produce bad decisions: the more flawed, the worse the decision. A central idea of this study, as we will see, is that *improving the use of information* is the key to correcting flawed models of reality.

In the mid-twentieth century, the Nobel Prize–winning economist (and psychologist, political scientist, and computer scientist) Herbert Simon put his finger on a key problem of real-world complexity:

The capacity of the human mind for formulating and solving complex problems is very small compared with the size of the problem whose solution is required for objectively rational behavior in the real world or even for a reasonable approximation to such objective rationality.<sup>24</sup>

Simon explained that because the world can boggle the mind, humans form models to simplify it.<sup>25</sup> Models of reality can be conscious or subconscious; humans rely on them whether or not they articulate them. For our purposes, decisionmakers rely on models individually and collectively—within a leader’s mind or throughout a particular institution. Simon went on to point out that such models are, by definition, incomplete and thus quite possibly wrong and misleading. It follows that decisions based on them can be flawed.

While devising and relying on models of reality is a normal way of coping with complexity, this mechanism is indispensable when leaders of states and those around them are dealing with complicated strategic matters: threats, crises, disputes, adversaries, allies, diplomacy, politics, capabilities, war, and peace. This study deals with models of reality that affect decisions in the context of strategic complexity and uncertainty—call them *strategic-decision models*. Consider, for instance, the jumble of possibilities caused by the surprise 1973 Arab attack on Israel, coming in the midst of East-West rivalry, with détente in place but fragile, causing an Arab oil boycott, at a moment when the U.S. presidency was being consumed by Watergate. Facing a need to act in the face of such complexity, Henry Kissinger and his staff had model conditions, knowledge of other actors’ behavior, contingencies, and goals. As we will see, they got it just about right, in contrast to the erroneous models and resulting blunders with which this study is mainly concerned.



Institutions may be predisposed to share models with individual decisionmakers if under the sway or dictate of strong ones (e.g., Napoleon or Hitler), or if the individual is under the influence of a powerful group or organization (e.g., Kaiser Wilhelm II and Germany's military leadership). Thus, a strategic-decision model can be *institutionalized*, whereby resources and plans, goals and aversions, rewards and penalties, and the collection and analysis of new information are aligned. Of course, this can reinforce the thinking of individuals. For example, Soviet state institutions for most of the Cold War were infused with the belief that any reform movement in a satellite state that could threaten communism's survival had to be crushed, if necessary by the combined forces of the Warsaw Pact. The resulting Brezhnev Doctrine, predicated on this model, became established policy within the Soviet state, imposed order on otherwise unruly Eastern European societies, and was an accepted mission of Warsaw Pact armed forces. The Kremlin, Soviet institutions, satellite states, and even the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) accepted the model, saw the world through its lens, and behaved accordingly—until the Solidarity crisis of 1980–1981, when the Kremlin, as we will see, realized that intervention could do the Soviet Union more harm than restraint could. The time had come to jettison the model: blunder averted.

Experience, in the form of recollection or intuition, obviously plays a major role in shaping models of reality. Experience predisposes. It forms the frame of reference, or default setting, for perceiving the world, interpreting information, and making decisions.<sup>26</sup> So it is with strategic-decision models. Napoleon's defeat of Austria and Prussia predisposed him to use force again when Russia resisted his will. Simon explained that fresh information may trigger one's memory and summon one's model. Such information should then be incorporated, leading to a revised, updated, and newly valid representation of reality. Of course, fresh information can cast doubt on predisposition and thus on the model, warranting its overhaul, abandonment, or replacement. Failing this, the established model can lead the decisionmaker to bad strategic judgment—thus, Napoleon's decision to invade Russia, expecting a climactic battle that never came.

Cognitive models and intuition are not the same, but they are closely related. Just as experience shapes models, it is the basis for intuition. For all the importance intuition has in human decisionmaking, including on matters of war and peace, it is different from reasoning.<sup>27</sup> While the two mental processes may complement one another—and in sound decisionmaking, they often do—they may also be at odds: decisionmakers who are confident in their intuition, whether warranted or not, may be less apt to rely on analysis, their own or that of others.<sup>28</sup> When gut instinct short-circuits reasoning, important information may be overlooked. As we will see, the best cure for a faulty cognitive model is fresh information that allows it to be brought into closer accord with reality. Yet information that belies or endangers a leader's model—especially if rooted in beliefs, experience, and self-assurance—may be blocked, filtered, or warped to fit, and even validate, the model. If the leader does not perform this

screening, those around him or her might, though we will see that they are often too beholden to the boss to serve this crucial function.

Among other problems, unfamiliar conditions are subjectively perceived as being familiar, thus reconciled with intuition: Napoleon imagined the challenge of defeating Russia to be comparable to defeating his previous adversaries, in decisive battles of army against army (not army against nature). This danger may be prevalent when decision models are held with especially strong conviction, perhaps because of ideology, rigid principles, powerful emotion, bold vision, belief in destiny, superstition, or just plain stubbornness.

Leaders are not alone in favoring information that reinforces their beliefs. A tenet of behavioral and decision theory is that people generally like to get information that fits and confirms what they already think. This penchant is the opposite of what is needed to correct flaws in one's model of reality—that is, to absorb and use information that suggests the model is in need of correction. More than average persons, powerful and unchallenged decisionmakers may be susceptible to having bad models of reality, and thus to blundering, because of their confidence of being right, their inexperience with being told when they are wrong, and their resistance to information that cast doubts on their strategies. Because powerful decisionmakers may dispose of immense destructive power, this can be dangerous, as it was in most of our cases.

The ideal decisionmaker actively *seeks* input to test beliefs, assumptions, and preconceptions—even to uncover biases. The confident, but not overconfident, leader will welcome devil's advocates, Socratic questioning, and contrary thinking. After all, subjecting a cognitive model—a representation of reality—to salvo upon salvo of fresh information is the best way to test its robustness and adapt it if need be. Receptivity to information that may cast doubt on one's convictions is a quality of good decisionmakers and predictor of good decisions.

In contrast, attributes often associated with strong, inspiring decisionmakers—persuasiveness, resolve, boldness, certitude, command of loyalty, unity, absence of doubt, clarity amid confusion—may instead overpower reasoning. That George W. Bush cast himself as “the decider” suggests admirable accountability but also more self-confidence than circumstances, and flaky intelligence, warranted in opting to invade Iraq. Of course, in unstable and unfamiliar conditions, precisely when a strategic-decision model might need to be rethought, the urge to cling to it may be powerful. Japan's military leaders were so convinced that war with the United States was unavoidable without great harm to Japanese interests and honor that a gamble to attack Pearl Harbor became attractive and ultimately irresistible and beyond challenge.

Strategic-decision models can lack fidelity, reliability, and flexibility at the very time when decisionmakers call on them in the face of new challenges, changes, and choices. When this happens, major errors can be made in assessing the costs, benefits, and feasibility of alternative courses of action. Because war and peace are at stake, one would like to think that models of reality on which decisions are made will be sub-

ject to some sort of quality assurance. Not so: Some of the worst decisions this study examines were never critically reviewed and reconsidered. The historical record of wars suggests that blunders are as likely when the stakes are huge as when they are trivial. World War I, for example, is widely regarded as the result of flawed thinking on the part of nearly all European leaders concerning the need to act offensively to prevail in modern warfare and the likely duration of a conflict.

Because strategic-decision models centrally figure in this study of blunders, we will generalize about their content. Such models are used to order and interpret information, form judgments, consider options, and make choices. They can encompass a full range of thoughts—rational and irrational—outlooks, beliefs, worldviews, assumptions, ideas, ideologies, principles, biases, reflexes, impulses, motivations, likes, dislikes, goals, aversions, objectives, strategies, calculations, plans, what-ifs, and so on. For analytic purposes, think of such a model as having a strategic agenda, a theory of success in pursuit of that agenda, and a set of operational particulars on which that theory of success depends (as shown in Figure 1.2).

Models, good and bad, tend to be internally consistent. The decisionmaker's view of operational particulars is informed by the theory of success, which in turn is informed by the underlying strategic agenda. At the same time, operational particulars may constrain or contradict the theory of success, which may in turn cast doubt on the underlying strategic agenda. The basic belief of German military leaders during World War I that outright victory could be won led to an elaborate (yet dubious) scheme to win it. Because of this interdependence among the parts of a strategic-decision model, misjudgments can happen if information that contradicts *any* aspect of the model is ignored or distorted to conform. To take the German case, analysis showing that the United States could foil U-boat tactics would have indicated that the war itself could not be won—and might be lost if those tactics were chosen—and was discounted because it did not fit the model.

Models can have considerable gravity, in the sense of not being easily altered. Nothing lends more gravity to a strategic-decision model than confidence in one's vision or destiny, whether that of a decisionmaker (Napoleon) or of a state (the Third

**Figure 1.2**  
**Generic Strategic-Decision Model**

**Strategic Agenda:** Worldview, vision, beliefs, assumptions, principles, impulses, biases, ideas, goals, fears

**Theory of Success:** Ways of meeting challenges and opportunities to further one's strategic agenda—e.g., objectives, requirements, main obstacles, options, pros and cons

**Operational Particulars:** Factors bearing on the feasibility of fulfilling one's theory of success—e.g., difficulties, adversaries' (and allies') objectives, capabilities and will, action plans, timetables, contingencies, preparations

Reich, Imperial Japan). The stronger the belief is that the future is predestined, the weaker is the force of new information and the greater are the probability and scale of blunder. If not destiny, any beliefs that propel action or restrict flexibility, such as strong religious, ideological, or messianic impulses, can cause misjudgment. While not all strongly held models are flawed, and not all flawed models are strongly held, the sorts of leaders whose judgment might be skewed by ego, intuition, vision, and the like are, generally speaking, the sorts with high confidence in their particular views of reality. In such cases, the model's powerful subjectivity vanquishes objectivity.

To illustrate how badly flawed but strongly held strategic-decision models can lead to blunders, consider briefly the example of the Vietnam War in Figure 1.3.

The bloodshed and costs to both countries of American mistakes in Vietnam might have been avoided or reduced if the Washington decisionmakers who held this model—if not them, the institutions serving them—asked a simple but profound question at any point: What if the North Vietnamese and their Southern sympathizers were motivated by a desire to create a unified and independent country, rather than by some urge to spread communism at the behest of the Soviet Union? After all, this was what anticolonial movements were pursuing throughout the Third World, and what the Vietnamese themselves had been pursuing since the end of World War II.<sup>29</sup> Instead, U.S. leaders and commanders interpreted body-count information as progress, in accordance with their theory of success, and their enemies' fanaticism and resilience as ideological, in accordance with the assumptions, beliefs, and worldview of their strategic agenda. The model became vested. It resisted, repelled, and reshaped fresh information, which, instead, should have caused growing doubts (as it did among the American public).

Short of some sort of transcendental revelation, a decisionmaker needs to absorb new information to bring a flawed strategic-decision model in line with objective reality in order to avoid making a bad decision (as the simple diagram in Figure 1.4 shows).

**Figure 1.3**  
**Vietnam War Strategic-Decision Model**

**Strategic Agenda:** The United States must defend the Free World from communism and must therefore combat Soviet and Chinese attempts to impose and spread it. This, not Vietnamese independence from colonialism and unification, was at stake in Vietnam.

**Theory of Success:** The United States must and could defeat the insurgent and Northern threats to South Vietnam through a combination of superior military force and support for political reform, despite the weakness of the Southern state and its forces and the strengths and will of the Northern state and its forces, which stood for national unity and independence.

**Operational Particulars:** Holding population centers, killing as many insurgents as possible, blocking supply routes (even if it meant invading adjacent states), conducting strategic bombing of the North, tolerating failure and abuses of the South, and causing collateral death and destruction in the South, all were either dictated or justified by the theory of success, which was to inflict military defeat on North Vietnam and the Viet Cong.

Because such models are simplifications of reality, their fidelity can suffer when important information is overlooked or distorted. The greater the confidence in the model, the less receptive the decisionmaker may be to information that would repair and shift it toward objective reality. Conversely, the better the use and thus the greater the value of new information, the greater the force exerted to improve the model's representation of reality.

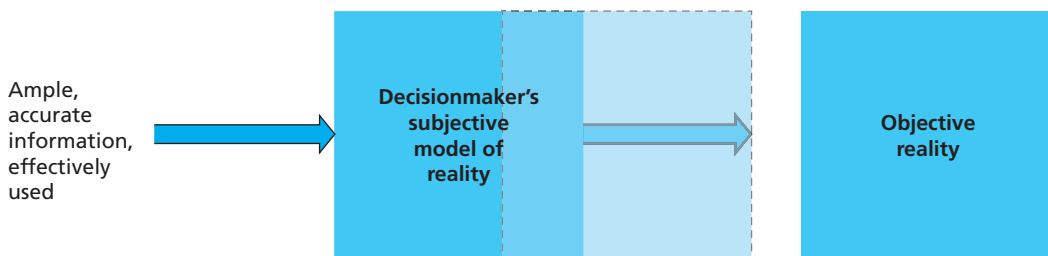
A central analytic question in this study is whether and how failures in the use of information allow flawed strategic-decision models to cause blunders. In this study's cases, we will dissect numerous blunders that occurred, and some that did not, in order to understand better how and why strategic-decision models fail and the role of information in those failures. Each case will compare the model of reality that decisionmakers held and used with objective reality. In cases where blunders occur, we expect to discover sizeable gaps between models and reality—the bigger the gap, the bigger the blunder. We are especially interested in what happened to information that could have bridged the gap between model and reality. If decisionmakers could have known better, what can we learn from the cases about why did they not?

## Blunders and Information

The hunch behind this study is that improving the use of information in strategic decisionmaking should lead to better models and thus better choices concerning war and peace. While this might seem obvious, it is worth explaining why we think it may be rewarding to focus on the *information* element of our three-part decisionmaking system. In essence, information is easier to improve than individuals and institutions.

Human brains are improving very slowly, if at all.<sup>30</sup> Of course, we would prefer that those who decide matters of war and peace be objective, rational, open-minded, tolerant of dissent, and receptive to new information. However, this is not likely to come about because people, including leaders, get smarter. To be clear, such low expectation of humans getting smarter should not rule out better screening of leaders so that

**Figure 1.4**  
Using Information to Improve a Decisionmaker's Model of Reality



war-and-peace choices are not being made by psychotics, visionaries, megalomaniacs, or other sufferers from mental disorders.<sup>31</sup> However, aside from keeping madness away from power, do not count on avoiding blunders by finding or grooming smarter leaders.<sup>32</sup> As it is, leaders tend to have high intelligence, as measured by accepted standards.<sup>33</sup> So even if a way could be found to make geniuses leaders—or make leaders geniuses—it is unrealistic to think that this would preclude strategic blunders. (We will return at the end of this study to the question of whether there is promise for human-computer “teaming,” whereby information technology to explore complexity can do better than people can, freeing people, including decisionmakers, to concentrate on what their minds can do better.<sup>34</sup>)

Likewise, institutions are imperfect and hard to reform—slow, at best. When Tuchman says that humans are especially bad at government, she means not only individuals but also institutions. There is an incessant barrage of opinions to the effect that government is patently unproductive, inefficient, and sluggish—indeed, that the more of its function can be privatized the better. While we will not join that debate, the authors agree (having spent considerable time in both government and private industry) that government is difficult and that people are not consistently good at it. Where institutions involved in strategic decisionmaking are concerned, the record is not encouraging. The German decision to resume U-boat attacks on U.S. vessels, the Japanese decision to attack Pearl Harbor, and the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan were essentially institutional blunders.

Authoritarian regimes—from Nazi to Soviet to Argentine dictators—are prone to big errors because their institutions, like the people who staff them, are designed, populated, purged, and browbeaten by their leaders. Moreover, it is not just the quality but also the independence of people in such institutions that determine their value in strategic decisionmaking. Though institutions may be composed of outstanding people, those whom leaders trust most to support strategic decisions tend not to be independent. Even democratic leaders preferentially rely on, reward, and promote those who are cautious, conforming, and even comforting in the information and advice they furnish. Dictatorships have no monopoly when it comes to staff loyalty.

In contrast to individuals and institutions, information can be, and is being, readily enhanced. Indeed, we are in the midst of a revolution propelled by technologies that expand the supply, increase the stock, and improve the processing of information. Because decisionmaking is essentially information processing,<sup>35</sup> it follows that enhancing the former should improve the latter. If this is true for decisionmaking in general, why should it not be true for strategic decisionmaking? We think it is because the use of information has advanced much less than the supply of it.

As the next chapter will explain, the information revolution thus far has been driven by steady and rapid progress, punctuated by stunning breakthroughs, in the technologies associated with sensing, filtering, gathering, processing, storing, recalling, transmitting, receiving, pooling, molding, and enhancing information. These include

microelectronics, various communications media (satellites, fiber optics, wireless), software, and integrated systems that perform complex functions. While information is reduced to bits of data for ease, speed, and volume of movement and manipulation, its usable forms include whatever humans want: text, numbers, image, and audio. In parallel, the cost of producing these information technologies has declined and keeps declining steeply. Over the last thirty years or so, functions that use information have shown revolutionary improvement in cost performance, with huge and continuing positive—and, yes, some negative—economic and societal effects.

Positive results in the information age typically involve reforms in the way individuals and institutions operate, such as by more collaboration, more specialization, greater scale, more precision, and fewer bad choices.<sup>36</sup> Such reforms are both needed to better exploit information and helpful in their own right (e.g., enabling more ideas to be applied to a given problem). The revolution has sped along and paid off not only because of the supply of more and better information but also because of improvements in how it is used—leading in turn to greater demand for information, advances in technology, further reforms, and so on. This raises the question of whether better provision and use of information, thus its value, can lead to greater knowledge, better judgment, and more wisdom on the part of leaders and institutions involved in decisionmaking that bears on matters of war and peace.

To answer this question, we substitute the idea of information as *value chain* for that of information as flow. In affecting a decisionmaking system, information does not simply circulate; rather it can be and ordinarily is continuously enhanced. One way to appreciate this is to describe the stages through which information passes and *gains value* in order to support a strategic decision—gathered data, processed data (or information), analyzed information, shared and retained information (or knowledge), calculation and judgment, debate and criticism, choice among options.

Thus, the performance of a strategic decisionmaking system—of individual leaders and institutions—depends on the value added by the information flowing through it. Because this is fundamental, we will describe an information value chain in the next chapter, before proceeding to the historical cases. Doing so will allow the cases to be read with an eye toward how and why information value chains were not exploited, became choked, were misused, or otherwise failed, and how this affected the decisionmaking and decisions in question. After analyzing the cases and assessing the causes of blunders, we will return to the concept of the information value chain with a view to whether and how it can be enhanced.

## Structure of the Study

Again, the aim of this work is to explore whether and how improvements in using information could prevent wars from occurring by misjudgment and miscalculation.

As this introductory chapter has established, that requires analysis of two basic matters: the role of information in decisionmaking and the cause of strategic blunders. That analysis begins with a look at the supply and use of information in decisionmaking, then turns to why blunders have happened, and then considers how the propensity to blunder can be remedied, with the Sino-U.S. case foremost in mind.

More specifically, the method to be used involves five steps:

- Offer general propositions as to how the value of information affects strategic decisions, taking into account the accelerating growth of information that is happening.
- Use historical cases to gain empirical insights into the role of information, and also compare decisionmakers' cognitive models with objective reality, both when blunders occur and do not occur.
- Derive and generalize from these cases explanations of why blunders occur and particularly whether and how inadequacies in the use of information might have caused or contributed to them.
- Identify how the value of information can be enhanced—for example, by reforming institutions or applying technology, in order to reduce the probability and severity of blunders.
- Apply these findings to the case of China and the United States.

This book is organized accordingly. Chapter Two explains how information affects strategic decisions—not merely as a flow through the decisionmaking system but as a value chain that affords opportunities to enhance knowledge, analysis, and judgment.

Chapters Three through Fourteen are twelve case studies, presented chronologically. Eight of these involve decisionmaking errors leading to war. Two involve the avoidance of such errors and thus of war. Two involve decisions to go to war that were not wrong. The cases were chosen on the basis of a priori judgments that outcomes could be traced back to the quality of original decisions, for better or worse. Not every blunder that springs to mind is analyzed: Upon reflection, we opted not to do a case on U.S. intervention in Vietnam, which was arguably the result of snowballing blunders over several U.S. administrations and has, in any case, been exhaustively analyzed (including, admirably, in *The March of Folly*). The outbreak of World War I is not analyzed, in part because of the sheer multitude of errors by virtually every main actor, and in part because there has been a flood of centennial books and articles. On the other hand, we have included decisions taken in the U.S.-Soviet crisis during the 1973 Yom Kippur War in the belief that it could shed some light on how two states, both with nuclear weapons, could have but did not blunder into war—of interest for the U.S.-China case. Although the chapters are written as narratives, for the reader's sake, they are designed to test and develop ideas about how the supply and use of information and reliance on models of reality bear on the potential to blunder.



Chapter Fifteen diagnoses these cases using common criteria, from which we will offer findings about the causes of blunders, the significance of cognitive models, and how information was used. From this analysis, the chapter suggests several families of blunders.

Applying these diagnostic findings, Chapter Sixteen prescribes remedies, with special stress on how to enhance the value of information. Chapter Seventeen analyzes and applies lessons to the most important contemporary case: Sino-U.S. strategic decisionmaking. Here a caveat is in order: We embarked on this study without strong views about whether and how the lessons of history and analysis of the role of information may apply to China and the United States. Because this case involves two actors—with two cognitive models and two decisionmaking systems—we will assess the propensity of each to make bad strategic decisions, but also their possible interaction. In this respect, the Sino-American case involves not only applying lessons from the cases but also stretching the analysis of why blunders occur into the two-actor realm.

Chapter Eighteen summarizes our practical recommendations.

## Conclusion

To summarize, individuals and institutions that compose decisionmaking systems rely on cognitive models of reality to cope with complexity. These models may contain strategic goals, theories of how to achieve those goals, and details of operationalizing those theories, all predicated on experience, assumptions, and interpretations of reality. Models that poorly reflect reality can lead to poor judgments. The flow of information through decisionmaking systems is critical in forming, refreshing, and correcting models. This suggests that it is better to think of information as a value chain.

When information in that value chain is blocked, distorted, misconstrued, misused, or wasted, the fidelity of the model in reflecting reality is diminished, and blunders may result, no less when the stakes are immense (e.g., war and peace) than when they are petty. The need to correct defective cognitive models competes with the human predilection to favor information that confirms rather than contradicts given beliefs.

A pivotal question then is: If those who committed blunders could have known better, why did they not? As the next chapter explains, understanding where in the information value chain problems occur that account for bad decision models—thus, bad decisions—is a key empirical task that the cases will address. The answer will inform our thinking about how to improve the decisionmaking systems—the individuals, institutions, and information—that produce strategic choices, good and bad.



## The Information Value Chain and the Use of Information for Strategic Decisionmaking

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If the use of information is at the root of decisionmaking, and yet modern history is fraught with bad decisions concerning war and peace, understanding how information is used is of fundamental importance in the study of blunders and how to prevent them. In turn, the use of information can only be understood if its supply is taken into account, especially since the quantity and quality of information available to decisionmakers has been increasing at an accelerating clip for a century or more. If, as it appears, the virtual big bang in information supply is not improving strategic decisionmaking, we have to analyze what goes wrong with its use. A useful concept in this regard is *information value*—how it is created and how it can be squandered by those empowered to make war-and-peace choices.

This chapter examines how information is supplied to and used by policymakers. It begins by describing what is known about decisions to go to war and the role of information in those decisions. It then offers a multistage information value chain that shows how information is supplied and used in such decisionmaking. At the low end of the chain, data are gathered. After analyzing and processing the data, information reaches policymakers and can contribute to a leader's knowledge of the situation, potentially influencing his or her judgment and decision. Problems in any of the stages can lead to a decisionmaking error.

Of course, leaders who receive poor-quality information or who are not provided with sufficient information may not be able to accurately assess options and decide on courses of action. By our definition (using the historian Barbara Tuchman's), this not a blunder. While leaders are unlikely to have complete and perfect information, technological innovations have enhanced people's ability to see, hear, detect, capture, verify, and analyze data. This has increased the total supply and quality of information that policymakers can use.

Instead, leaders may blunder by interpreting and using information incorrectly. Technology has not made it easier for leaders to reason and make tough policy judgments. Leaders also face a variety of constraints and stresses that may undercut their ability to make sound decisions.

## The Role of Information in War and Peace

Scholars have long studied the causes of war and peace and have examined the role of information or intelligence.<sup>1</sup> Recounting the Peloponnesian War of the fifth century BCE, Thucydides explained how the quest for power, along with human passions of fear, greed, and ambition, was the underlying cause of the war between Sparta and Athens.<sup>2</sup> He saw how these passions mixed with two other powerful forces to shape events: intelligence—which included foresight, reason, and planning—and chance.<sup>3</sup>

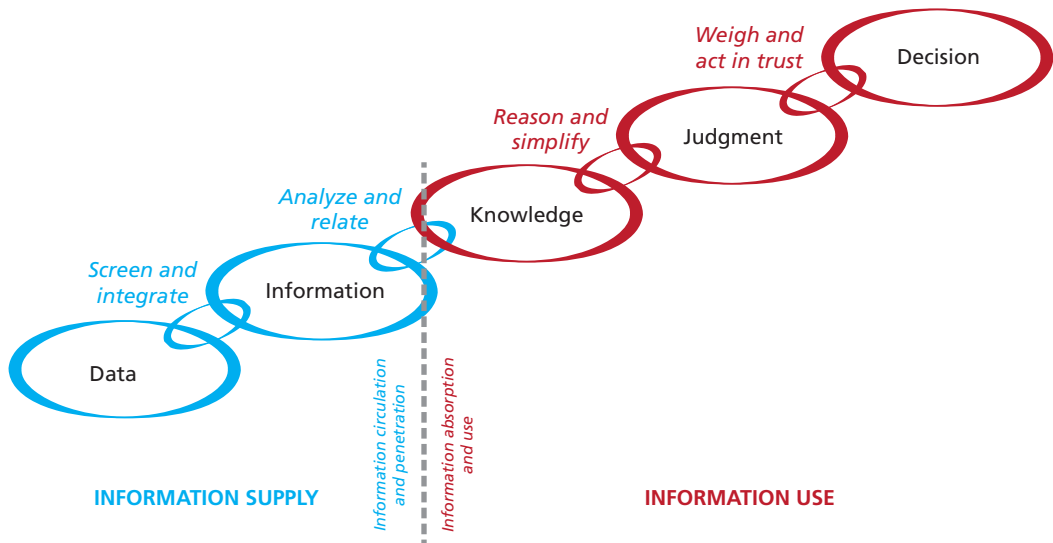
Recent works have highlighted how the interpretation of information affects decisions to go to war. During the 1960s and 1970s, leading scholars pointed out that elite views of war were influenced by their interpretations of history. The lessons of Munich, Korea, and Vietnam cast long shadows over U.S. foreign policy deliberations, and U.S. leaders vowed to never again repeat those mistakes.<sup>4</sup> In 1985 and as mentioned earlier, Tuchman argued that smart leaders have repeatedly made foreign-policy follies because of their “wooden-headedness,” or inability to accept or relate to new information.<sup>5</sup> In this same vein, as already noted, Yaacov Vertzberger blamed poor use of information.<sup>6</sup> This insight is the compass for our study.

By 1995, the political scientist James Fearon approached the problem from a different angle by posing a puzzle: Why would rational states ever choose to fight costly wars? Countries that know they would lose should just avoid the cost of the war and negotiate a settlement. Instead, he noted that rational states may fight because there is private information that is not captured or states do not believe that a deal can be upheld.<sup>7</sup> States are also not unitary actors; they are composed of different government actors. Government actors that can control or manipulate the information flow may significantly mold how countries wage wars.<sup>8</sup> Political leaders may also face various constraints on their decisions and may be loss averse, or more willing to take risks, initiate conflict, and even continue fighting losing wars due to fear of losing territory or office.<sup>9</sup> While there may be a host of reasons why countries go to war, “misperception almost always accompanies” war.<sup>10</sup>

## The Information Value Chain

Given how important information is to decisions of war and peace, might there be ways to improve its supply to or use by policymakers—that is, to enhance its value? We consider this by means of an information value chain, derived from information science, psychology, business, and economics.<sup>11</sup> Figure 2.1 depicts five stages of the chain, the lower three indicating how information is supplied, and the upper three indicating how policymakers use that information. Figure 2.1 also illustrates the added value (in italics) that allows the inputs to move from lower to higher stages. For example, data that are screened and integrated become information. While the value chain is

**Figure 2.1**  
**The Basic Information Value Chain**



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depicted as a sequence, decisionmakers can reach back to lower stages to obtain or to influence what information is supplied. Leaders, for instance, can create or terminate particular intelligence-collection requests.

### Lower Portion of the Value Chain: Information Supply

The value chain is divided into two halves based on the type of actors involved and the information flow process. Information is supplied in the lower two stages (shown in blue). Technology is used in these stages to help detect, capture, and analyze data.<sup>12</sup> These stages typically involve lower- or midlevel government actors—especially but not only intelligence agencies—that provide input for a slice or fraction of the data or information.

On the lowest end of the value chain, *data* can include images, texts, sounds, facts, figures, tables, and descriptions. Data are screened and integrated into a coherent understanding to result in *information*.

### Barriers to Information Use

In between the two halves of the value chain are barriers that information must penetrate before policymakers can use it.<sup>13</sup> The first barrier is access. Policymakers must have access to the information in order to use it. Information thus needs to overcome and travel across organizational and bureaucratic hurdles to reach the designated policymaker. The second barrier is selection. People are not equally willing to accept and appreciate all types of information. Instead, policymakers and receivers of the infor-

mation are likely to selectively accept information based on their own experiences, beliefs, information, and other cognitive bases. The third is recall. Even if information can penetrate and be absorbed by policymakers, policymakers may have to recall the information in order to apply it. Recalling information, including lessons learned from history and interpretations of historical information, may vary significantly over time.<sup>14</sup>

### **Top Portion of the Value Chain: Information Use**

Information is used by decisionmakers in the top portion of the value chain (shown in red). Information needs to be analyzed and contextualized to be useful for policymakers. Policymakers must also be able to relate to the information before it can become part of the policymaker's *knowledge*, or enhanced capability to understand and assess situations and problems. Policymakers use knowledge to help them use *judgment*. Knowledge is a necessary but not sufficient condition for good judgment. Judgment also involves the use of experience, beliefs, rational thinking, and political dialogue to critique, debate, review, and assess options. Knowledge contributes to judgment if it can help leaders reason through and simplify the complex problems and situations they face. Finally, after policymakers have used their judgment to assess and eliminate options, policymakers make a *decision* by choosing one final course of action. Policymakers must weigh the various options and contingencies and act, trusting that they are making the best policy for their country and people.

This part of the value chain typically involves top government officials. Most of these leaders are users of information and may not be directly involved in collecting or processing data and analyzing information. Their strategic and policy needs, however, may directly guide the information they receive, and they can exert appreciable influence on lower-level supporting activities. Political leaders may thus be able to (knowingly or unknowingly) positively or negatively shape information supplied to them by reaching back down into the information value chain. By 1812, for example, Napoleon was determined to invade Russia. He surrounded himself with flatterers, dependents, and victims of bullying who were not willing to bring up information or intelligence that contradicted his plans.

### **Information and Strategic Blunders**

Based on the information value chain, we posit that poor use of information is a primary cause of strategic blunders. Problems encountered in the top portion of the information value chain—the use of knowledge and judgment to choose a final course of action—may significantly hinder decisionmaking for several reasons. First, correct information may exist but may not penetrate bureaucratic barriers to reach the designated policymaker, thus having little influence on the final decisionmaking. Second,

even if policymakers had valuable information, their cognitive biases may cause them to disregard the information or use the information incorrectly. Third, while all individuals are prone to cognitive biases, technological innovations can help partially shield the lower portion of the information value chain from human error by automating data collection and processing. Technology plays a lesser role in preventing human error in the top portion of the value chain. Fourth, policymakers could correctly assess the information available and still choose courses of action with significant negative ramifications because of various internal and external constraints.

Although inadequacy in the quality or quantity of information supplied does not constitute bad decisionmaking, as we define it, having plenty of good information is obviously important. Policymakers lacking a complete picture and understanding of the situation may not be able to correctly assess options and choose the best course of action. Policymakers should be able to make wiser decisions and avoid miscalculations if they are provided with timely, correct, and valuable information. For this reason, in the historical cases that follow, we will look for evidence that poor supply of information explains decisions that went awry. Absent such evidence, the prime suspect is how information is used.

But first we examine how technology and people affect the supply, the use, and thus the value of information available to leaders.

## Technology and the Information Value Chain

Nearly two centuries ago, writing in the 1820s, after the Napoleonic wars, the Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz discounted the importance of information or intelligence on decisions related to war. “Many intelligence reports in war are contradictory,” he wrote, and “even more are false, and most are uncertain.”<sup>15</sup> Technological improvements, however, are equipping political leaders with increasingly sophisticated technology to see, hear, detect, intercept, verify, and process data, which in turn should improve the supply of information available to leaders. This section discusses five major waves of technological development: the communications revolution (mid-nineteenth century), the digital and computing revolution (1950), the network and wireless revolution (1980), the social network revolution (2000), and “big data” (2005).

This section also points out that technological developments have accentuated the differences between the lower and upper portions of the information value chain: Technology has facilitated data explosion, capture, and analysis but hardly helped senior policymakers make decisions of war and peace. Since technology can automate processes and partially shield certain activities from human error, this lack of technological contribution to the upper portion of the value chain may provide more reasons why errors in strategic decisionmaking could occur due to the use of information.

## **Technological Revolutions in the Last Two Centuries**

Looking back at the last two centuries, five major technological revolutions have fundamentally changed communications, data processing, transmission, and sharing, as well as the variety, quantity, and quality of data available.

### ***The Communications Revolution (1840–)***

In the mid-nineteenth century, technological innovations revolutionized communications, allowing governments to obtain faster and improved information about adversaries. In 1838, Samuel F. B. Morse invented the telegraph, which allowed instantaneous communication across distances through wired technology. The telegraph enhanced strategic communications during the American Civil War, aiding President Abraham Lincoln's victorious fight.<sup>16</sup> It also laid the foundation for telecommunications and broadcasting, with the creation of talking telegraphs (telephones), wireless telegraphs (radio broadcasting), and, eventually, television.<sup>17</sup> During the Boer War of 1899 to 1902, Britain used electronic interception and code breakers to collect enemy information. By World War II, signals intelligence advanced significantly with the proliferation of radio interception outposts and tactical mobile signals interception units. This growth in volume of signals data and complexity of coding led intelligence agencies to search for machines to help human code breaking, paving the way for the invention of the digital computer.<sup>18</sup>

### ***The Digital and Computing Revolution (1950–)***

The advent of computers in the 1950s brought about a digital revolution that transformed data processing. The mass production of digital technology, including computers, fax machines, cell phones, video recorders, cameras, and televisions, facilitated fast and large-volume electronic data capture, storage, and analysis. Computing also enabled complex calculations and modeling. In 2011, the world's largest supercomputer (the K computer in Japan) processed data four times faster than the human brain and stored ten times as much data on its hard drives.<sup>19</sup>

### ***The Network and Wireless Revolution (1980–)***

By the 1980s, a network and wireless revolution accelerated data transmission. In 1973, young developers in Palo Alto, California, created the Ethernet, which allowed for faster connectivity of more computers, printers, and machines on one network. This facilitated two inventions that improved the quality and quantity of information that could be printed (the laser printer in 1974) and how messages could be transmitted (email in 1976).<sup>20</sup> Six years later, in 1979, the first commercial cellular phone network was launched in Japan, and the United States followed suit in 1982.<sup>21</sup> These changes paved the way for ubiquitous news: In 1980, CNN became the first television station to offer breaking news on a twenty-four-hour basis, setting a model for subsequent media outlets.<sup>22</sup>



Since then, technologies, sensors, and programs connected via wireless networks have sharpened people's ability to hear and detect, as well as to distinguish and identify. First launched in the late 1950s, satellites now provide policymakers with access to real-time, high-quality imagery around the globe. High-resolution satellites are currently able to distinguish ground-based objects smaller than fifty centimeters. Observers can further penetrate beyond the surface with thermal infrared imagery.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, people can "hear" and identify noise from afar with acoustic sensors. These sensors, for instance, can pinpoint normal conversation from up to fifty meters away and various types of gunshots forty kilometers away from the source.<sup>24</sup> Facial and voice recognition software as well as DNA fingerprinting also enable authorities to identify individuals by their unique characteristics even when individuals are no longer at a given scene.<sup>25</sup>

### **Social Network Revolution (2000–)**

By 2000, the invention of the Internet (1969) and subsequent technologies fundamentally altered how people communicate, transact, and share, ushering in the age of social networks. Globally in 2011, nearly eight trillion dollars were exchanged via electronic commerce, and two-thirds of all businesses had some web presence.<sup>26</sup> In 2012, 32 percent of the world population was connected to the Internet, and this number may reach 48 percent in 2017.<sup>27</sup> Web-based social media applications—such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram—further capitalized on the trend of sharing more and different types of information instantaneously (see Figure 2.2).<sup>28</sup>

### **Big Data (2005–)**






The explosive growth in data available from online sources and social media, data sent through mobile devices, and data generated from sensors has led to the phenomenon that experts coined in 2005 as *big data*. In 2014, the McKinsey expert Dominic Barton estimated that 90 percent of the world's total data were created in the last two years, and the quantity of stored data in 2020 will be fifty times greater than in 2010.<sup>29</sup> Figure 2.3 illustrates this extraordinary growth.<sup>30</sup>

For political leaders, this data explosion has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, this has diminished the ability of governments to control what is made public. Hackers have exploited loopholes in Internet security to illegally steal data and money. On the other hand, governments have more data they can intercept, track, and analyze. Coupling electronic data with advanced nano- and biosensors, for instance, can allow governments to track the location of an individual if he or she is carrying a cell phone and by patterns in the way the individual walks.<sup>31</sup> Human-generated electronic data, including from online purchases, web browsing history, and social media websites, can further create a wealth of data for exploitation.

### **Technology's Impact on the Information Value Chain**

Technology and technological innovations—particularly the five waves of technological innovations—have had an uneven impact on the information value chain. Activi-

**Figure 2.2**  
**The Internet, Social Media, and Communications Data and Usage (2013)**

	<b>Google</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; 100 petabytes (PBs) of data</li> <li>&gt; 1 trillion indexed URLs</li> <li>&gt; 3 million servers</li> <li>&gt; 7.2 billion page views/day</li> </ul>
	<b>Facebook</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; 1 billion users</li> <li>&gt; 300 PBs of data, growing by &gt; 500 terabytes/day</li> <li>&gt; 35 percent of world's photographs</li> </ul>
	<b>YouTube</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; 1,000 PBs of data, growing by 72 hours/minute</li> <li>&gt; 37 million hours/year</li> <li>&gt; 4 billion views/day</li> </ul>
	<b>Twitter</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt;124 billion tweets/year</li> <li>&gt; 390 million/day</li> <li>~ 4,500/second</li> </ul>
	<b>Text messages</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; 6.1 trillion per year</li> <li>&gt; 139,000/second</li> <li>&gt; 876 per person/year</li> </ul>

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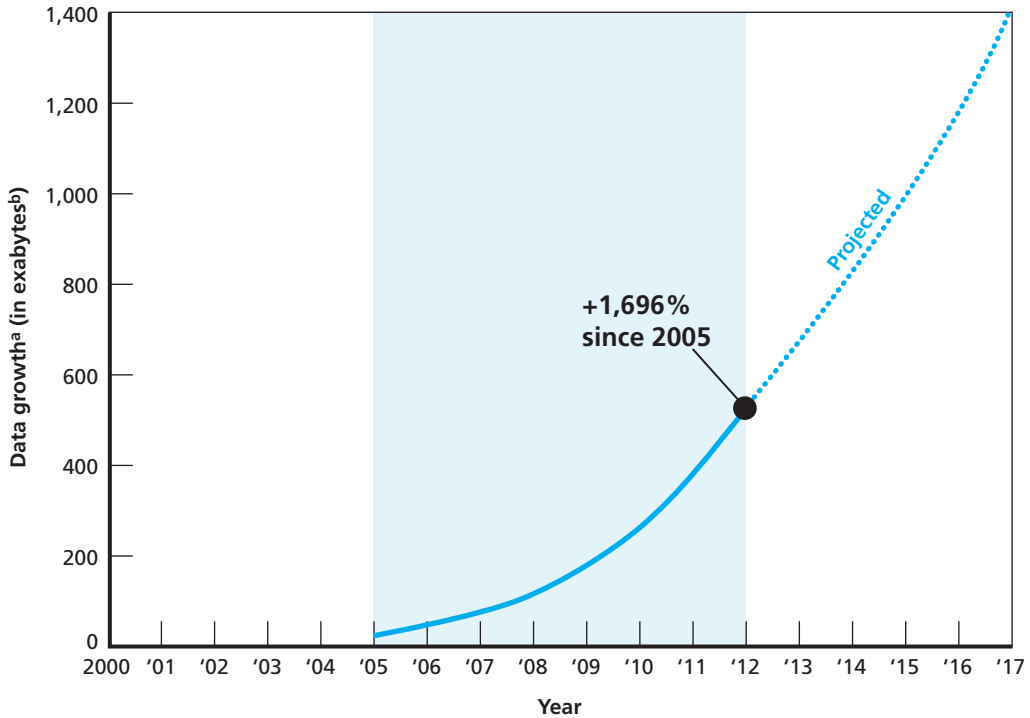
SOURCE: Adapted from Michael Kelley, "CIA Chief Tech Officer: Big Data Is the Future and We Own It," *Business Insider*, March 21, 2013.

ties on the lower end of the value chain are increasingly automated and facilitated by improved technology, providing some buffer from human error.<sup>32</sup>

On the lower end of the value chain, technology has led to the explosive growth in the available data over time, allowing governments to improve their intelligence-collection capabilities and acquire significantly more types of data. Governments no longer have to primarily rely on human spying; they can instead leverage signals intelligence, news and media analysis, digital overhead surveillance, electronic data, and open source data. Governments can capture and collect more-accurate and precise data using advanced sensors and interceptors. Sophisticated computers, tools, and programs have also helped governments process information more effectively. Figure 2.4 depicts the advances in technology, the exponential growth in data, and the increases in government capabilities to collect intelligence.

In contrast, in the upper portion of the information value chain, strategic decisions of war and peace are still determined by small groups of leaders. At most, technology has facilitated the presentation and delivery of information and intelligence to government leaders. Even though technology can enhance the information supply, leaders are likely to still operate "under conditions of acute uncertainty and pressure."<sup>33</sup>

**Figure 2.3**  
**Internet Data Explosion**



<sup>a</sup>The amount of data coursing through the global Internet, annually.

<sup>b</sup>An exabyte is one billion gigabytes of information.

SOURCE: Data from James Glanz, "Is Big Data an Economic Big Dud?" *The New York Times*, August 17, 2013.

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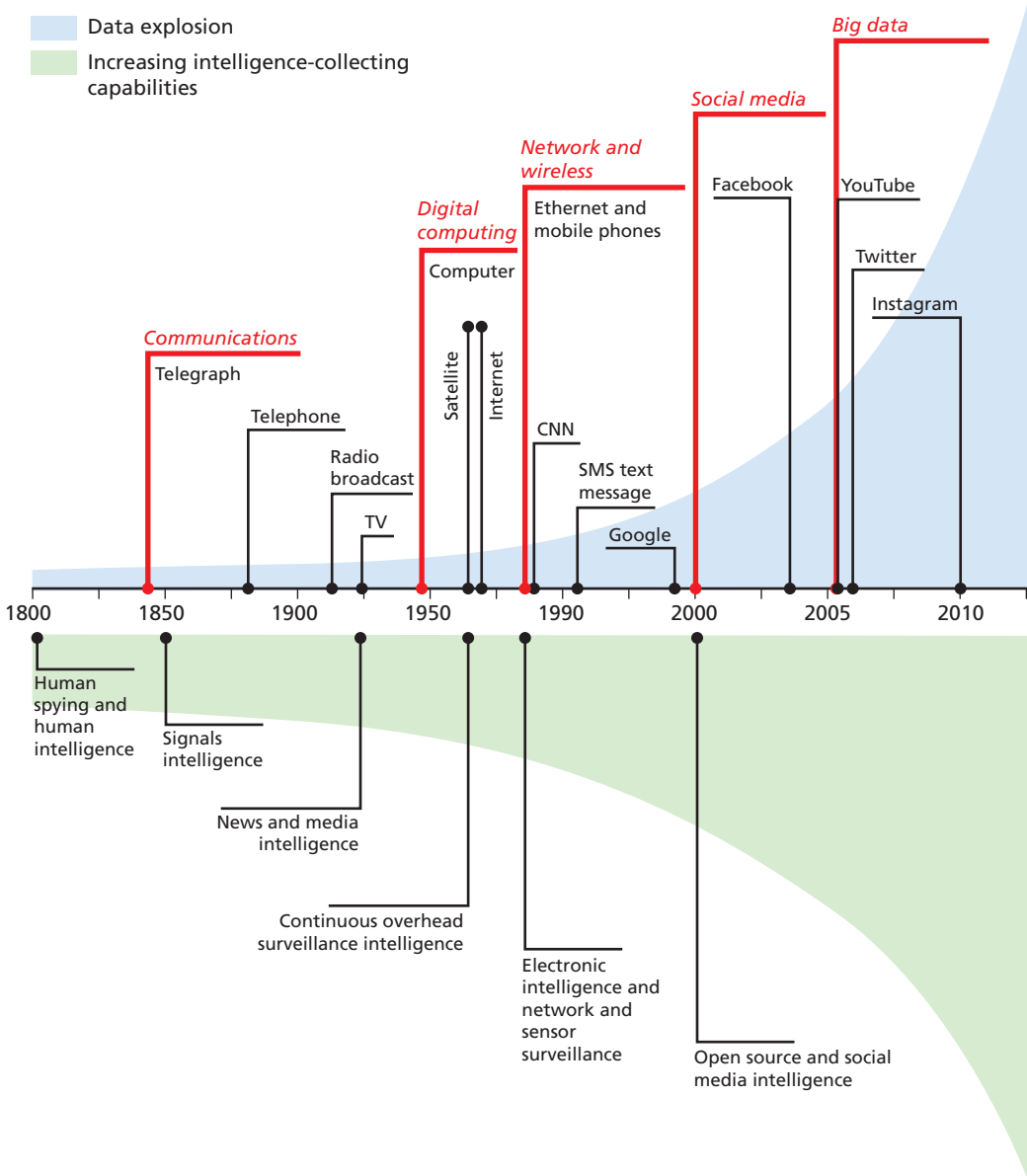
Leaders also have to make a judgment beyond the information available and have to weigh competing values, priorities, and interests.<sup>34</sup>

Figure 2.5 characterizes the relative role of technology versus people at each stage of the information value chain. It shows the uneven impact of technology on the information value chain. Technology is less capable of shielding the upper levels of the chain from human error, leaving them more vulnerable to cognitive biases.

### Individuals and Institutions in the Information Value Chain

Indeed, while technology has enhanced the availability of information and the ability to collect, process, and analyze information, individuals and institutions play a significant role in how information is supplied and used by policymakers. Excellent studies

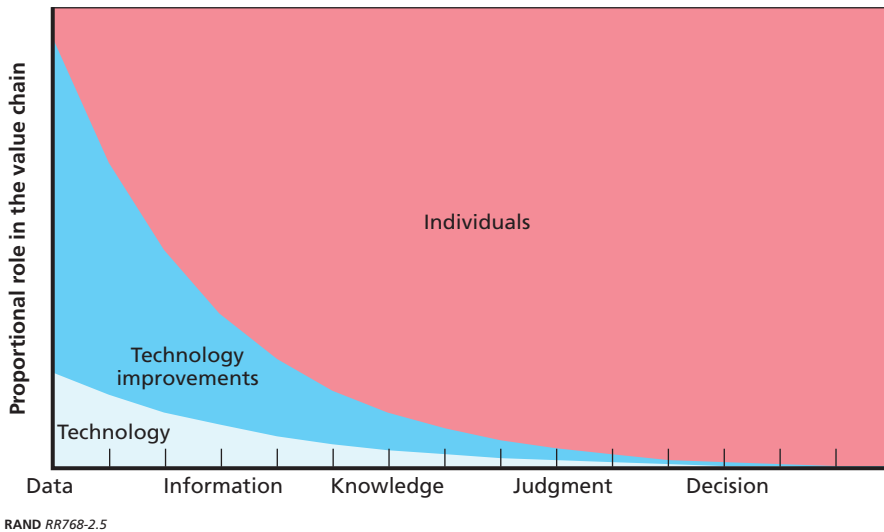
**Figure 2.4**  
**Technology, Data, and Intelligence over Time**



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have already examined the role of institutions on policymaking, and thus we focus on the role institutions have on the information value chain via their influence on individuals supplying or using information.<sup>35</sup>

**Figure 2.5**  
**Technology's Role at Each Stage of the Information Value Chain**



All individuals exhibit cognitive biases, but individuals have varied responsibilities and face different stresses along the information value chain. Compared with intelligence analysts operating at the lower end of the value chain, political leaders face significant obstacles—less detailed subject matter knowledge, less time, greater stress and moral weight of the decision, and more competing pressures, demands, and goals—to incorporating and using information successfully. This suggests, importantly, that the use of information may be especially degraded as it approaches the decision stage. Moreover, decisionmakers can be burdened with the accumulation of failures, including their own, by the time they make choices. In essence, the value of information may be depleted instead of increased.

### Lower Portion of the Value Chain

At the lower end of the value chain, a number of problems can arise as data are collected and processed to become information. Studies of problems with U.S. intelligence analysis highlight the cognitive and institutional barriers to producing accurate and usable information.<sup>36</sup> Data can be incomplete, fragmented, overlooked, or cherry-picked. Analysts may pay more attention to information that confirms their prior assumptions or experience.<sup>37</sup> Further, problems in data collection, completeness, and analysis can be caused by lack of data sharing between various information-processing agencies, such as actors within the U.S. intelligence community.<sup>38</sup> After the initial evidence is collected, analysts may still fail to correctly evaluate it, estimate cause and effect, and estimate probabilities. For example, individuals may erroneously use mirror imaging and cognitive shortcuts to understand adversaries or complex situations.<sup>39</sup>

### Information and Knowledge

At the higher end, similar and additional cognitive and institutional challenges make it difficult for policymakers to absorb new information and transform the information into knowledge. Studies show that people are often slow or incapable of updating their understandings of known topics.<sup>40</sup> People may have strong biases that prevent them from accepting new information. Once a person has decided on a course of action, he or she may no longer be open to alternative ways of evaluating the problem.<sup>41</sup>

This unwillingness to accept new information is exacerbated with time. A recent study argues that leaders are more likely to deliberate options, approximating a rational actor, early in the decisionmaking process. Later into a crisis, leaders are more likely to adopt “an implemental mind-set, and may display a range of biases that deviate from rationality.”<sup>42</sup> This switch partially explains the observations that leaders waging war are often overconfident, particularly during the eve of war.<sup>43</sup> This overconfidence may be exacerbated when the decision is made by a group of people and there are not verifiably correct choices.<sup>44</sup>

Even when leaders can relate to and are willing to accept new information, they are not always able to correctly use all the information. In many ways, government leaders suffer the same problems that intelligence analysts suffer when looking at data and information. They may cherry-pick more-familiar information and make incorrect use of cognitive shortcuts and historical analogies. They may also disregard known and accepted information in order to seek cognitive consistency. In contrast to the intelligence analyst who may spend most of his or her work time examining a particular country, political leaders have less specialized knowledge and may depend more on cognitive shortcuts to help simplify the information received.

Institutional factors may also account for why leaders either receive incorrect information or do not receive needed information. It takes time for information to be analyzed and processed to help leaders assess the situation and have a more complete picture. Even if leaders are willing and capable of using all available information, they may not have the luxury of time. U.S. presidents, for instance, often want to achieve certain foreign policy goals before reelection or stepping down from office. Presidents may also have to deal with a number of challenges simultaneously and may not have the time or the will to thoroughly debate or review all the relevant information. Instead, they may prefer quick decisions based on readily available information.

Different institutional actors may also have bureaucratic interests that exaggerate or minimize the importance of particular information to policymakers, making it difficult for policymakers to assess the complete accuracy of the information. An agency may, for example, overstate threats that it focuses on in order to elevate the importance of the agency and secure more federal funding.<sup>45</sup> Actors may also avoid presenting alternative information and perspectives to leaders due to fear of the potential negative ramifications associated with voicing dissent.

## Judgment and Decision

Even when policymakers have an adequate understanding of the situation, they may have limited capacity to make sound judgments.<sup>46</sup> Knowledge is only one of the deciding inputs for judgment, and people often assess different options based on their own experiences and beliefs. Good judgment also requires going beyond the information available and “entails integrating and balancing competing values and considerations to come up with a practical course of action.”<sup>47</sup> Judgment is improved with the capability to entertain multiple options simultaneously, but “is not necessarily associated with academic knowledge or theoretic expertise.”<sup>48</sup> It requires political communication with domestic and international stakeholders as well as with adversaries.

Trade-offs are central to exercising good judgment. Leaders may have to balance the quality of a decision against the time available to make decisions. Increased time and effort may not yield better results since leaders may make mistakes due to overwork and fatigue. Presidents may also appear “indecisive, inefficient, or overwhelmed” if they spend too much time making a decision.<sup>49</sup> Due to increasing public awareness through news channels and other sources of information, present-day leaders are generally afforded less time to deal with problems and need to react rapidly. As Graham Allison and Phillip Zelikow note, “changes in technology like CNN have combined with the new rules of the game to make the Kennedy Administration’s week of secret deliberations during the missile crisis appear almost antique in Washington today.”<sup>50</sup>

In general, political judgments are inherently subjective: They are influenced by a leader’s party platform and other external and internal constraints. When exercising judgment, leaders often weigh the political, economic, and social payoffs of particular courses of action.<sup>51</sup> This involves balancing short-term versus long-term payoffs and the need to satisfice (choosing based on the first option to meet a certain criterion) versus optimize (choosing the best out of all the options).<sup>52</sup> Leaders will also need to carefully calibrate when a decision should be made in order to leave sufficient time to mobilize the government and public, but not too much time for an opposition to form and undermine the decision. Leaders must also determine whether decisions should be announced publicly or kept private.<sup>53</sup>

A variety of problems can emerge at the judgment stage and contribute to strategic blunders. Leaders may exhibit complex emotional influences that prevent them from accurately and rationally assessing situations. Studies, for instance, show that anger is typically associated with risk taking, whereas anxiety is associated with a search for more information and risk avoidance.<sup>54</sup> Historical examples and laboratory experiments also indicate that people tend to exaggerate their strengths.<sup>55</sup> This optimistic bias makes leaders “receptive to advisors who offer highly favorable estimates of the outcomes of war” and incline them “to exaggerate the evil intentions of adversaries, to misjudge how adversaries perceive them, to be overly sanguine when hostilities start, and overly reluctant to make necessary concessions in negotiations.”<sup>56</sup> While risk profiles vary, people are generally more likely to be incited to action by potential loss than

by potential gain.<sup>57</sup> Culture, beliefs, and values may impose additional constraints on how individual leaders think and may limit what options are seen as reasonable and acceptable.<sup>58</sup> Given the many problems leaders must deal with every day, limited attention spans and memories as well as a high-stress environment may further challenge a leader's ability to fully exercise good judgment.<sup>59</sup>

Institutionally, leaders are embedded in government bureaucracies that may influence their thinking. Government organizations are designed to support decisionmakers and are not entities that can provide independent opinions and views to government leaders. On the one hand, leaders may be surrounded by strongly opinionated advisors who influence them to think in particular ways. These advisors may have either personal or organizational interests to maximize their voice and influence over the leader by minimizing those of others. There may be little room for dissenting views. On the other hand, advisors may be afraid to challenge a leader's views and instead merely echo his or her views. Both of these situations may create problems of groupthink and lack of alternative analysis. Research has shown that diverse and independent views are important for quality decisions.<sup>60</sup>

There may also be external political, social, and economic constraints on choices that leaders are allowed to make.<sup>61</sup> Leaders need to balance choosing the best course of action with actions that are publicly (domestically and internationally) acceptable. In order to embrace a particular course of action, leaders may need to justify to their domestic and international audiences why the selected course of action should be supported. To gain public support and favorable press coverage, for example, leaders may be tempted to demonize the enemy.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, it is important to note that leaders may also adversely shape their own supply of information and decisionmaking by reaching back and influencing the information flow process. For example, leaders could—either knowingly or unknowingly—misdirect intelligence gathering or skew intelligence analysis to serve their own political agendas and goals.

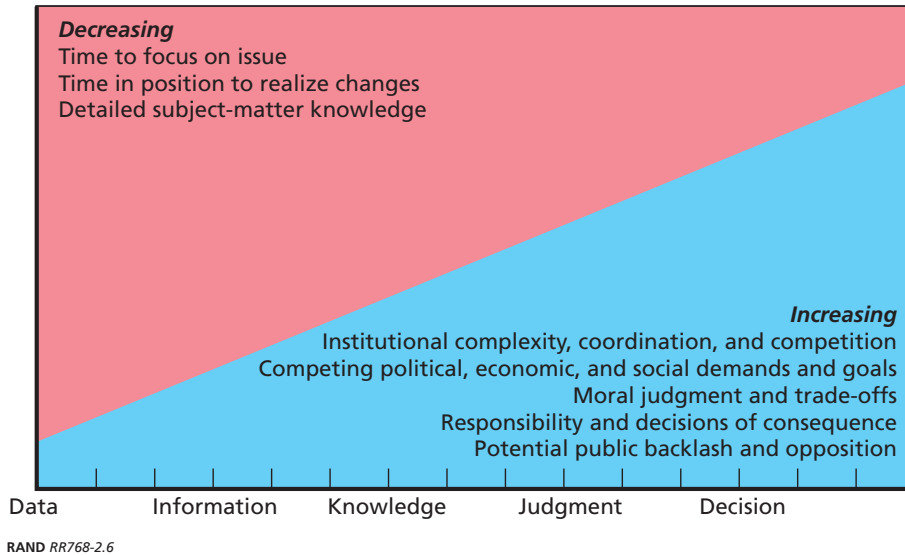
Figure 2.6 summarizes some of the different stresses individuals along the information value chain—from analysts at the lower end to political leaders on the higher end—face. The figure shows that political leaders have difficult jobs and face a number of challenges that may further impair their ability to make sound decisions in a crisis or conflict. The figure thus suggests why even if leaders have valuable information, they may not be able to use it correctly.

## Road Map

Again, it would seem that understanding decisionmakers' use of information is key to learning why strategic blunders occur and how to prevent them. We argue that technology and individuals (as well as institutions) play different roles in the informa-



**Figure 2.6**  
**Different Stresses to Individual Involvement in the Information Value Chain**



tion value chain. Technological developments have produced more data and provided governments with more tools to generate a better supply of information. Technology, however, has barely shielded activities at the higher end of the value chain from human error. In contrast, individuals at the higher end of the value chain (mainly government leaders) not only face similar cognitive biases as those operating at the lower end but also suffer additional time pressures and other stresses that can exacerbate their decisionmaking capabilities.

To analyze how the use of information impacts strategic decisionmaking, the subsequent chapters examine twelve historical cases of strategic blunders and nonblunders. The cases span nearly two hundred years, and we look at the detailed decisionmaking process in each case to identify if and how errors occurred due to the use of information. We thus examine if emotion, poor judgment, lack of objectivity, or other such factors led to a poor decision, which in turn resulted in a strategic blunder.

While each case follows its own narrative, all are designed to illuminate critical issues bearing on the quality of decisionmaking and decisions, based on the concepts in Chapters One and Two. First, the three aspects of our strategic decisionmaking system—individuals, institutions, and information—are exposed. For example, were top leaders dismissive of contrary advice and information from the institutions around them or, instead, little more than agents of those institutions? Second, failures along the information value chain are highlighted. For example, if there was adequate information available, was it translated into useful knowledge, and was that knowledge then used in objective analysis and rational consideration of options and contingencies?

Third, cognitive models of reality are inferred and compared with what would have been correct representations of reality. To the degree to which such models are out of line, or out of touch, with the real world, chances are that decisions informed by them will be unsound. Fourth, each case involving a strategic mistake will attempt to isolate the main reason or reasons for that mistake, permitting us to assess the cases side by side and as a whole.

## Napoleon's Invasion of Russia, 1812

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*Let destiny be accomplished.*

—Napoleon Bonaparte, quoted in Theodore Ayrault Dodge, *Napoleon's Invasion of Russia*

*Rarely, if ever, has so murderous a war been fought over such flimsy issues.*

—J. Christopher Herold, *The Age of Napoleon*

### Man of Destiny

When he invaded Russia in 1812, Napoleon Bonaparte was Europe's most powerful politician and leading military commander. Invincible in his mind if not on his record, he had grown used to defeating states and rulers who dared oppose him and his goals of controlling the Continent (at least), tearing down the scaffolding of hereditary privilege, and building a pan-European bourgeois-centric society. His instrument was the first truly national, popular army—superb, bold, meritocratic (like the new French order), and seemingly inexhaustible. Most of Napoleon's adversaries—mercenary armies in the hire of aristocrats—were no match.<sup>1</sup> Never fond of routine governing (at which he is said to have been so-so), it was at war when Napoleon excelled and was himself. His military brilliance has stood the test of two centuries: a concept and an era of warfare were named for him. Napoleon's war-fighting prowess was the keystone of his political power.

Russia's Czar Alexander resisted Napoleon's persistent effort to dominate Europe after what he, Alexander, had thought was a firm and final settlement in the 1807 Treaty of Tilsit.<sup>2</sup> As Russia shifted from ally to troublemaker, Napoleon instinctively tilted toward forcibly imposing his will on Alexander. That Napoleon's forces were bogged down fighting the British in the Iberian Peninsula frustrated him and caused him to redirect his attention toward a weaker foe.<sup>3</sup>

Napoleon saw negotiations not as an alternative to fighting but as the dictation of terms to beaten opponents. By invading Russia at the head of Europe's finest and biggest army, with towering confidence in it and in himself, Napoleon made an irrecoverable misjudgment that would lead to the destruction of that army, the undoing of his conquests, the end of his reign, and exile. Russia presented no threat to France or its dominions. Rather, it was a roadblock on Napoleon's historical path—his destiny—as well as a stepping stone to the defeat of archenemy England. Although Russia's challenge was not of existential importance to him, Napoleon made an existential gamble in invading Russia, and lost. This begs the question this case study tries to answer: What was he thinking, literally?

By 1811, France had gained control of much of Europe by conquest or coercion. The two notable exceptions were England, protected by the Royal Navy, and that hovering hulk on Europe's frontier, Russia. With Austria and Prussia now allies—though, in defeat, ambivalent ones—Napoleon was determined to defeat England. However, given the difficulty of a cross-Channel invasion (daunting even to him), Napoleon instead tried to isolate the British by excluding them from his Continental System and thus most intra-European trade. Even then the British had the advantage of sea control, which both gave them access to non-Continental trade and allowed them to deny others such access. Russia, on the other hand, was a tempting enemy, even if a detour to the final battle with Britain. As political troubles with Alexander arose, instead of considering nonmilitary ways to resolve them, the central question in Napoleon's mind was which adversary would be easier to defeat.

## The Russia Problem

Feudal, oppressive, anachronistic Romanov Russia was the antithesis of the Europe that revolutionary France was out to build. Moreover, Russian relations with France, historically close, were souring. Alexander was increasingly suspicious of Napoleon's accumulation of power and insatiability, especially fearing that France would support Polish independence and thus exclude Russia from Europe. Russian suspicions were not without foundation: Napoleon told his new ambassador in Moscow, Narbonne, that he intended to “put an end to the fatal influence which Russia has exerted . . . on the affairs of Europe.”<sup>4</sup> After Alexander proposed to Polish barons that he be crowned their king, Napoleon refused to disclaim French support for Polish independence. So central was Poland in the deterioration of Franco-Russian relations that Napoleon, in heralding the impending invasion to his troops, stated that the “war of Poland has begun.”<sup>5</sup> Just as the czar felt his resistance was warranted in response to the emperor's greed for dominion, the emperor came to view the czar as a turncoat.

As confrontation over Poland heated up, Russian commerce was being ruined by the Continental System's ban on trade with Britain; in turn, Russian smuggling

threatened to undermine the Continental System.<sup>6</sup> With economic conflict worsening and Alexander's hostility deepening, Napoleon decided that Franco-Russian differences had to be settled by force. For Napoleon, war was a first reflex, not a last resort. It was, after all, how Napoleon had settled other European opposition to his goals of a new, French-led order. Moreover, war with Russia was a more promising option since by then Prussia and Austria were French allies. So instead of concentrating on defeating England in Iberia, Napoleon chose to invade Russia.<sup>7</sup>

Having determined that war was the way to solve his problem with the czar, it followed that Napoleon would need to invade Russia. This seminal and, as it turned out, irreversible decision was made in early 1812 without debate or analysis of its feasibility. Although "Napoleon had no preconceived ideas of a plan of campaign[,] . . . he was certain that no army the Russians had raised could resist him in battle."<sup>8</sup> After that, attention turned to implementation planning, preparations, and hailing his troops, with no possibility for reconsideration by Napoleon, let alone by his subordinates.

Napoleon's specific demand was closure of Russian ports to English vessels, thus plugging the hole in his exclusive, anti-English economic bloc. His strategic aims, again, were to make Russia subservient and to consolidate Continental power for England's subsequent defeat. Napoleon never contemplated occupation, much less annexation, of Russian territory. Taking Moscow was not a strategic goal; rather, it was an operational and political prize, seizure of which would force the Russian army to fight, lose, and be destroyed. Given that France and its allies had superior forces, doctrine, and leadership, the expectation of rapid and complete victory seemed reasonable, at least to Napoleon—assuming that Russia would stand and fight.

The decision to invade Russia was described by Napoleon in prophetic language: "War will come despite me, despite [Alexander], despite the interests of France and Russia. I have seen this happen so often that *my experience of the past reveals these future events to me.*"<sup>9</sup> Later, he said, "Russia is drawn away [from France] by fatality; her destiny is about to be accomplished."<sup>10</sup> Partial neither to mysticism nor religion, the former corporal came to believe that he had history on his side—indeed, that he had it in his grasp. Repeated military success, owing to total national commitment and the new "Napoleonic" method of war fighting, reinforced this.<sup>11</sup> What Napoleon saw more and more as destiny was more correctly expectation governed by experience.

Temperament—animus, really—also affected Napoleon's judgment. The Treaty of Tilsit, written by Napoleon, provided for Russian acceptance of France's victory over Prussia, territorial concessions to France, creation of the puppet Grand Duchy of Warsaw, and, more vaguely, Russian support against England. On the basis of a three-hour meeting with Alexander, without witnesses or notes, Napoleon thought that the czar had "sworn eternal alliance to France and war to England."<sup>12</sup> By 1812, as Napoleon saw it, Russia "violat[e] these oaths."<sup>13</sup> Napoleon was not one to double-cross. The invasion of Russia was meant to punish this perfidy and, by leaving Russia defenseless, carry a guarantee that Napoleon would not be betrayed a second time.

Having trusted Alexander once, Napoleon was determined to bring him to his knees. Such determination translated into absolute confidence. Whether such thinking was rooted in rage, ego, or belief in fate, it had a psychiatric quality, and it led to blunder.

## Planning for the Best

Napoleon led not just a French army but a European one that included Italian, Austrian, German, and Polish forces into Russia. He was, after all, the “warlord of Europe.”<sup>14</sup> His top subordinate commanders were battle-tested and exceptional. Because the scale and scope of the invasion demanded that Napoleon distribute his forces and cut a wide swath in search of battle, he necessarily granted considerable autonomy in his commanders. Of course, he intended to be there directing his forces in detail, as he always was, when the great battles came. As it turned out, neither too much nor too little reliance on subordinates had any bearing on the invasion’s course and outcome, since battles were few and inconclusive. For that matter, defeat in Russia did not tarnish posterity’s view of Napoleon’s fighting talent, in that he hardly used it.

Napoleon stated later, in exile, that Russia’s size and weather made it safe from invasion nine months of the year—roughly all but summer—which meant that he had to win promptly. This he meant and expected to do by forcing Alexander into large-scale combat against the superior invasion force. If necessary, Napoleon would take Moscow, which would surely bring a climactic battle and then peace on his terms. Guilty of mirror imaging, it was incomprehensible to him that a sovereign would not oppose an invading force at the first opportunity. Then again, Napoleon identified his person with France more than Alexander did Russia. Napoleon banked on his Russian counterpart not only to do what he would do in Alexander’s shoes but also to play his part in Napoleon’s script. So great was Napoleon’s self-confidence—his belief that he could *will* the results he sought—that he did not consider what would happen and what he would do if events did not conform to his plan. This mistake was fatal to his army.

Napoleon’s expectation of decisive victory and poor contingency planning also reflected his low opinion of Russia, Russians, and Russia’s leader. When questioned by an advisor about Russia’s hugeness, he replied: “A single blow delivered at the heart of the Russian Empire, at Moscow, the Great, Moscow the Holy, will in a single instant put that whole blind and apathetic mass at my mercy. I know Alexander. . . . Perhaps he will yield at the sole sight of the Grande Armée. If not, . . . let Russia be crushed under my hatred of England!”<sup>15</sup> Strategically and tactically, Napoleon conceived and used this decisive-blow idea, whereby maneuvering superior forces into the right position at the right moment would not just crack but destroy an enemy’s ability and will to fight. It certainly fit this case of a weak opponent leading what he called an “apathetic mass.”

That Napoleon expected Alexander to play a scripted role suggests not only Napoleon's outsized confidence in his degree of control but also that he did not know the czar as well as he thought. One historian describes Alexander as "an unpredictable and unstable compound of idealism and shrewdness, liberalism and mysticism, moral rectitude and unscrupulous ambition."<sup>16</sup> Yet Napoleon, having been misled before by Alexander, now thought that he could steer him to total defeat. As it happened, Alexander outfoxed one of history's shrewdest military minds. He refused to engage in the "war of armies" on which Napoleon was counting.

Napoleon's 600,000-strong Grande Armée cut a three-hundred-mile-wide, six-hundred-mile-deep gash into Russia, always seeking battle. But Russia's smaller, weaker army did not accommodate; it retreated deeper and deeper into the bleak Russian vastness. Even when Russian troops lost pitched battles—notably at Borodino near Moscow, where Russian forces actually performed well—Alexander refused either to throw his entire force into combat or to sue for peace. To Napoleon's disappointment upon entering Moscow, Russian forces and much of the population had left; and to Napoleon's shock, Alexander refused negotiations. Napoleon's prolonged occupation of the Russian capital was fruitless if not pointless, left him with little time before the cold set in, and necessitated what would be a long, disastrous retreat. He admitted in exile that he should have left Moscow far sooner than he did, though that would not have saved the army.

The Russian czar understood as well as the French emperor did that the Grande Armée would defeat and quite possibly destroy Russia's forces in outright combat. Facing a stronger enemy, Alexander followed the example of David and Goliath: If overmatched, the last thing one ought to do is fight the way the enemy does, or the way the enemy prefers one to fight. Malcolm Gladwell, citing the empirical work of the political scientist Ivan Arreguin-Toft on strong versus weak combatants, reports that Davids defeat Goliaths 30 percent of the time—a surprisingly high percentage considering the lopsided capabilities of the two sides. More important, when underdogs recognize their weaknesses and follow unconventional, unexpected strategies, their winning percentage rises to above 60 percent.<sup>17</sup> Even as Alexander succeeded by adopting the unorthodox approach of abandoning his sovereign territory, including his capital, Napoleon failed by not anticipating—or, evidence suggests, not even imagining—Alexander's strategy. It is especially odd that the emperor assumed that the czar was predictable and malleable to his invasion plan, given Napoleon's view that Alexander had deceived him at Tilsit.

Napoleon evidently did not think through the obvious logic chain:<sup>18</sup>

- I (Napoleon) know the Russian army cannot survive a decisive battle against mine.
- If I know this, presumably so does Alexander.
- It follows that he would want to avoid such a battle.

- So I must consider whether Alexander has an option better than to fight or surrender.
- One such option is to retreat and draw my army into Russia's barren enormity.
- Because Alexander is more likely to pick that option than the one I would have him pick, I must prepare for that contingency.
- If I cannot win in the event of that contingency, I must reconsider my decision to invade.
- That in turn requires me to consider how to achieve or revise my goals without imposing my will by force.

Napoleon did not dwell on how vastly different war in Russia would be compared with the wars that formed his experience and conditioned his thinking. Intuition is no match for unfamiliar situations.<sup>19</sup> Evidently, self-doubt and reflection were as difficult for Napoleon as humility was. One might think that refusal to second-guess or to be second-guessed is a hallmark of “decisiveness” and thus of great decisionmakers. This case suggests otherwise: If decisiveness prevents rethinking in the light of fresh information and careful reasoning, blunder may result. Compounding this, Napoleon lacked the self-awareness to see that his cognitive model could misguide him in the conditions he faced.

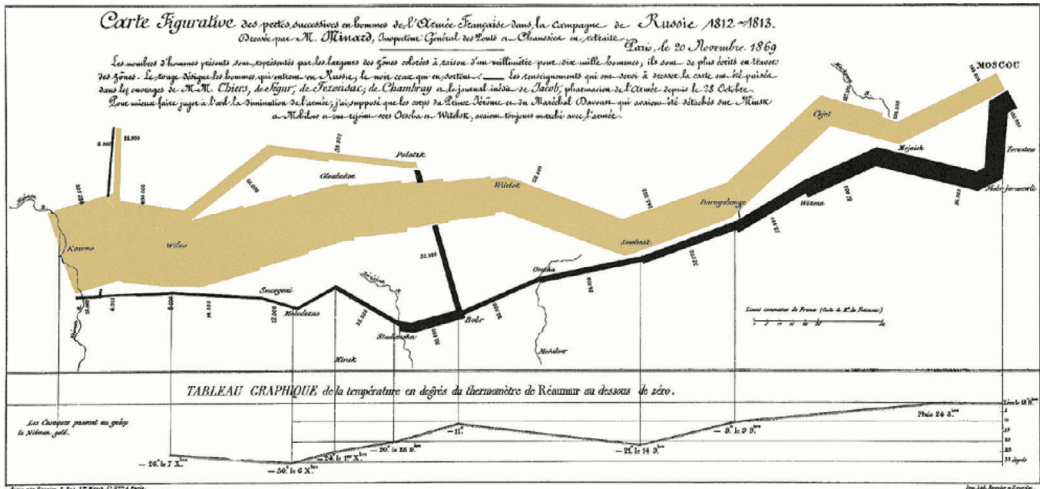
### Hunger, Cold, and Cossacks

Feeding the Grande Armée was a critical problem from the outset and got much worse. Master of logistics, Napoleon had never faced a provisioning problem he could not solve. But this was different. As one historian comments, an army large enough to *conquer* Russia is too large to *feed* in Russia—a prospect that could have been foreseen at the time of the decision.<sup>20</sup> The deeper Russian forces retreated without giving battle, the further the Grande Armée marched into Russia, the longer it would take to get out, and the more desperate the food problem became. By going so far into Russia and then sitting in Moscow, Napoleon missed his three-month window of tolerable weather. As Alexander intended, hunger and exposure caused losses in Napoleon's army far beyond what Russian forces could and did cause. By the time Napoleon took Moscow, the Grande Armée was at half strength, while Russian forces—in retreat but not defeated—were growing stronger.<sup>21</sup> What began in October as an orderly westward retirement became a retreat on a biblical scale, attended by incessant Cossack raids. Less than 10 percent of the Grande Armée left Russian soil a month later. The map in Figure 3.1 depicts Napoleon's forces as a dramatically narrowing band, between the time they entered and left Russia.

One can only speculate—the record is ambiguous—about when it dawned on Napoleon that his assumption about the Russian strategy was wrong and that the



**Figure 3.1**  
**Napoleon's March on Russia**



NOTE: The magnitude of the catastrophe is depicted in this map, made in Paris in 1869. The light-brown band shows to scale the reduction (from west to east) in Napoleon's army from the beginning of the invasion to the arrival in Moscow. The black band beneath shows the further reduction during the retreat (from east to west). The difference between the bands' widths at the far left represents the number of Napoleon's soldiers who perished in his "perfect maneuver."

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invasion would fail. This seems to have occurred well into his occupation of Moscow, when there was no longer any basis for expecting Russia's main forces to engage in a climactic battle. As told by Theodore Ayrault Dodge, the first and preeminent historian of the invasion, occupying Moscow was Napoleon's "most fatal error." Even then, the emperor remained perplexed that a fellow sovereign would abandon his capital in order to avoid battle. Said Dodge:

Had [Napoleon] as of old reasoned correctly from the facts . . . he would have recognized in the destruction of their sacred city proof positive that the Russians would never treat with the invader, and that he must retire at once . . . before winter set in. But he continued to hug his delusion that Russia must treat. One of the most valuable qualities in any department of life is the ability to recognize the moment when it is wise to retire; but the Emperor could not give up his plan—could not acknowledge failure. He had never faced failure and could not believe it now.<sup>22</sup>

Instead of ordering a timely retreat to save his army, Napoleon appealed to Alexander to accept terms that were, even then, unfavorable to Russia. That this appeal was answered with silence should have been a clear indication that the invasion had failed. Running out of supplies, Napoleon rationalized retreat and defeat by announcing that

his new aim was “to place the emperor the nearest to France, and give the empire confidence that the emperor is in the midst of friendly people during his winter cantonments.”<sup>23</sup> He described the disastrous retreat as a “perfect maneuver . . . to sustain the honor of arms at the height of this glorious campaign.” Napoleon’s habit of equating his personal well-being with success was not from a lack of courage but because, in his view, France, empire, and Napoleon were a trinity. This after all was the leader who, soon after being told that his “whole army is dissolved,” famously declared to his followers that “the health of His Majesty has never been better.”

## Flawed Model of Reality

In assessing how this could have happened, Napoleon’s own defective reasoning stands out beyond poor intelligence or poor staffing. His ego, arrogance, and confidence that he could control events impaired his cognition.<sup>24</sup> That Napoleon saw himself as a “man of destiny” was hardly conducive to objectivity. Predestined victory obviates the need for contingency planning. Napoleon was sure that obstacles would be overcome by his unmatched brilliance, his sheer will, the excellence of his commanders, and the superiority and *élan* of his troops.

Napoleon viewed Alexander, with whom he had once been friendly, as a predictable opponent and sure loser. In the event, the czar proved to be tough, resolute, resilient, and clever enough to use Russia’s size and cold. For Napoleon, underestimating his adversary as much as he overestimated himself was a recipe for failure. The Russian army was considered no match for Napoleon’s, from its generals (largely foreign) to its foot soldiers (largely peasants and serfs).<sup>25</sup> After all, French soldiers were patriots fighting for France and Napoleon, whereas Russian troops were thought to have little allegiance to either their despot or his realm. Recall that Napoleon considered the Russian people a “blind and apathetic mass.”<sup>26</sup>

Yet, as others before and after Napoleon discovered, Russian soldiers and masses rally even for undeserving leaders, be they Romanovs or Bolsheviks. What did not register with Napoleon was that Russia’s deprived yet devout masses regarded the czar as “their father on Earth” and his lands as their “Holy Mother Russia.” The very ignorance and superstition that the enlightened French saw as Russian weakness made the czar’s army willing to endure great hardship.<sup>27</sup> Patriotism, stoked by the claim of priests that Napoleon was the Antichrist, grew in the Russian army as patriotism vanished—along with warm water and victuals—in the Grande Armée. Moreover, Alexander’s forces were not called on to fight, only to suffer and survive. To Napoleon’s surprise, Russian forces acquitted themselves well, stood stalwartly behind Alexander, and were committed to the eventual and complete defeat of their country’s invaders. Russian forces continued irregular attacks on what was left of the Grande Armée up to the final moment and final mile of its retreat.

Napoleon was not deprived of information that suggested great risk; he just assumed it away. Again, food and weather were known to be potential problems, but manageable ones because victory would be quick and Napoleon's forces would be out of Russia before autumn. Such wishful planning extended to France's allies: Austrian, Prussian, and Polish forces were expected to provide major contributions. Actually, the Austrians and Prussians contributed marginally and performed timidly; neither of these defeated adversaries shared Napoleon's confidence, much less his enthusiasm, at the prospect of invading Russia: "By nature keen at gauging [others], Napoleon was not now abreast of the real restlessness of [his new allies], and the hatred of some who formally bowed to his will."<sup>28</sup> Prussia's desultory support was especially disappointing, given the skill of its forces and the importance of its geography in staging the invasion. In addition, the Prussian military's renowned ability for meticulous planning and rigorous staff work had no value in Napoleon's top-down and intuitive approach to war. The Poles were simply a major military disappointment, notwithstanding their desire for Russia's defeat, especially as it became clear to them that Napoleon did not intend for Poland to become an independent kingdom.<sup>29</sup>

So bad was Napoleon's decisionmaking that historians have wondered if he was suffering some sort of physiologically impaired cognition. On this there is some question. Physical deterioration, diminished mental acuity, and depleted energy—probably due to advanced venereal infection—may explain in part Napoleon's "often strange and unrealistic behavior during the Russian campaign" and subsequently.<sup>30</sup> One thing is sure: Napoleon's thinking had been set by experiences that did not resemble what he encountered in Russia. By 1812, the passage of time and string of successes made Napoleon's decision model so firm that he did not reconsider it when the need to do so was greatest.

Compounding this problem, Napoleon's record and acknowledged genius had made him increasingly dismissive of alternative opinions and options: "Once an idea . . . lodged itself in his head, the emperor became his own dupe. When he sought to seduce you, he had already seduced himself."<sup>31</sup> Napoleon's awareness of his own genius was a problem insofar as it made him unreceptive to information as well as advice that did not conform to his thinking. It is said by Dodge of Napoleon's decision: "His preparations were enormous, his grasp of the general scheme and the details was extraordinary, but he no longer accurately gauged facts."

Communication with the prospective adversary is one way to gather facts and thus avoid misjudgment. As Franco-Russian frictions over Poland and smuggling increased before the decision to invade, exchanges between emperor and czar were frequent but unfruitful, with Napoleon seeking to "bring the matter to a head" and Alexander listening but silent.<sup>32</sup> In the run-up to and during the invasion, Napoleon wrote to Alexander in very personal, even sympathetic terms, angling for preemptive capitulation. The swagger of Napoleon's letters to the czar—"my brother"—vanished as the gravity of his predicament became clear. Writing to Alexander from Moscow,

Napoleon said: “I have made war against Your Majesty without animosity. A note from you before or after the last battle [Borodino] would have stopped my march, and I would even have been willing to sacrifice to you the advantage of entering Moscow. If Your Majesty still conserves for me some remains of your ancient sentiment, you will take this letter in good part.”<sup>33</sup> Now that he “recognized that the Grand Armée was lapsing into a desperate strait,” and no longer expecting a decisive battle, Napoleon was seeking a negotiation that would permit him to depart with dignity.<sup>34</sup>

Even with Napoleon headquartered in his capital, Alexander knew that Russia would win if he just stuck to his strategy. He did not reply to Napoleon’s final appeal; rather, he issued instructions forbidding any communication with the enemy. That Alexander chose reticence throughout the conflict may help explain why Russian intentions and actions mystified Napoleon. Before the invasion, though, in hopes of deterring Napoleon, Alexander had told the French ambassador to Russia—a confidant of Napoleon—that he would retreat, make Russia’s expanse Napoleon’s real enemy, and never surrender. Napoleon was unimpressed with this report. “Russia is swept along by her fate. Let destiny be accomplished,” he proclaimed to his troops. Once Napoleon had decided to invade, even the czar’s own preview of his strategy and the difficulty it would pose did not shake the decision. That the czar would not defend Russian soil, however bad the odds, simply did not register with the emperor of France. As Napoleon began to understand what kind of war was being waged against him, he regarded it as essentially a “breach of the club rules.”<sup>35</sup>

Amplifying the problem of Napoleon’s flawed reasoning, there is no record that Napoleon, by 1812, sought alternative opinions, brooked criticism, or invited debate, let alone requested contingency planning. While he surrounded himself with high-quality people and layers of staffs, their purpose was to support, not question, him. After all, the emperor was “not merely Napoleon; he was France.”<sup>36</sup> Also, as Napoleon’s power and paranoia grew, cronyism and nepotism crept into his appointments, making candor and deliberation even less likely. His increasingly dictatorial governance of France at the time bespoke growing suspicion of strong and independent figures. According to one of his closest “advisors,” Napoleon was “intolerant of contradiction and independence of judgment.”<sup>37</sup> He suppressed debate, discouraged frankness, and punished dissent, making his most-senior associates “completely subservient.” Aggravating this, the people and organizations around him acknowledged his military and organizational brilliance, expected him to grasp and overcome adversity, and deferred to him: “Awe, admiration, hatred, and above all fear held them gripped. It is safe to wager that more than half of [his subordinates] wished that he were dead.”<sup>38</sup> Their memoirs reveal, or claim, deep misgivings about him and about the invasion; but at the time, they more or less saluted as Napoleon made his intentions known.

Some advisors early on questioned the decision to postpone victory over England in the Iberian Peninsula in favor of invading Russia. Some pointed to the example of Sweden’s Charles XII to spotlight “that Russia could not be brought to terms should

she conduct a retreating campaign.”<sup>39</sup> Others expressed concern about the food problem.<sup>40</sup> But by 1812 the officers and diplomats around Napoleon were mere minions. This is critical in that Napoleon, by then, was unwilling if not unable to question his own cognitive model, which told him that the invasion of Russia would end quickly in unambiguous victory and leave Alexander at his mercy.

## He Could Have Known Better

Was the invasion of Russia the result of an intelligence failure? The answer depends on which meaning of *intelligence* one intends. Napoleon knew enough to have realized that the risks of invasion—the consequences of failure multiplied by the probability of failure—outweighed the expected gains. As Dodge puts it: “By his abnormal triumphs, Napoleon had lost that hard hold on fact which in earlier life distinguished him from all other men.”<sup>41</sup> The information available to Napoleon could have led to a different decision, and would have, had his legendary rationality not been swept away by his equally legendary ego.

Apart from having poor maps of Russia, which was acknowledged but not an invasion stopper, Napoleon and his officers did not lack critical information. During the invasion, Napoleon had little intelligence regarding the whereabouts of Russian forces, which obviously hampered his effort to destroy them. (In contrast, Alexander had exquisite intelligence, as one might think, about the location, movement, and condition of French forces.)<sup>42</sup> Of course, one reason Russian forces were hard to locate is that they had retreated deep into Russia. The possibility of deficient intelligence on Russian forces would not have affected Napoleon’s decision to invade, for they were expected to defend their country at the frontier, not melt into it.

In sum, Napoleon’s analysis was flawed, his judgment was bad, he had no self-awareness, and no one around him had the stature and the nerve to insist that he was committing a blunder. He thought he knew Alexander but totally misread him. Strategically, Russia did not present a danger that justified the huge risk Napoleon took. Napoleon had the contemporaneous knowledge to weigh the pros and cons, the expected benefits and risks. At worst, Russian smuggling could continue to harm France’s economy; Russian intrigue could have impeded French control of Poland; and lack of Russian support could have reduced the chance of defeating England, which would have been hard even with Russia on Napoleon’s side. He had options other than imperiling everything by invading. He might have neutralized the Russian problem through political and economic means—he had an abundance of both, but the use of force was a powerful impulse.

If only Napoleon had thought through what could happen if the Russians retreated, as they had against Charles XII and as Alexander warned they would now. But his mind had been warped by success, power, and perhaps infirmity. Napoleon’s

marshals and associates lacked the courage or wit to question him. His organization was strong on paper, splendid in implementation, but weak when it mattered. Napoleon made two blunders: deciding to invade Russia and surrounding himself with so-called loyal associates that would sooner let disaster happen than challenge him.

So firm was Napoleon's belief in his own infallibility that he later laid the blame on everyone else—his commanders, and even the troops who suffered and died in the hundreds of thousands because of his blunder.<sup>43</sup>

## The American Decision to Go to War with Spain, 1898

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*There will be no jingo nonsense in my administration.*

—President William McKinley, 1896

*Woe to the men or to the nations who try to bar this great democracy's imperial march.*

—Theodore Roosevelt, McKinley's assistant secretary of the Navy, 1896

### Looking for the Right War

The premise of this case is that the United States decided to go to war with Spain, not the other way around. It is nearly certain that the USS *Maine* was not blown up in Havana Harbor by a Spanish naval mine but that it blew up on its own.<sup>1</sup> Regardless, major players in the U.S. government, political elite, and journalism were maneuvering the United States toward hostilities with Spain before the *Maine* went to the bottom. For that matter, powerful Americans—notably, Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, and William Randolph Hearst—were itching for empire and war even prior to choosing Spain as the ideal enemy by virtue of its weakness.

Neither the general interest in going to war nor the specific choice of Spain as opponent was supported by what anyone would recognize as systematic analysis. Rather, these decisions were propelled by passions: nationalist fever, imperial lust, urge to liberate oppressed peoples, political ambition, public polemic, herd behavior, personal enthusiasm for adventure, and glory.<sup>2</sup> While there were situational factors, real and contrived, used to justify war, there were two core reasons. First, champions of war thought that the United States could and must become a world power, having consolidated coast-to-coast control with the Civil War, the settlement of the west, the addition of new states, and the building of the transcontinental railway. They refused to accept that the end of the American frontier should be the end of American expansion. Moreover, their goal of making the United States a sea power both fed and was fed by their determination to make it a world power.<sup>3</sup>

The fastest way to become a world power was to acquire colonies. This was the main policy implication of the Large Policy of U.S. expansionism crafted and marketed by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. While the United States had no economic imperative for colonies, as Great Britain, Japan, and Germany felt that they did, colonies were needed for global status and influence. To add morality, Lodge distinguished American colonialism by explaining that the United States would elevate peoples otherwise exploited by European *imperialism* (a term he detested). With the world mostly carved up by European colonial powers, the way to acquire colonies was to take them by force. In sum, war was needed to open the path to American global greatness. It was a matter of choosing the right one at the right time against the right adversary.

The second component was more debatable: War would invigorate the United States. This view personified and was articulated mainly by Teddy Roosevelt, who had made a name for himself as a domestic reformer and then as assistant secretary of the Navy. Roosevelt thought that the country needed more vim and bulliness—in other words, it needed to be more like him. A strong advocate for social progress and a believer in American exceptionalism, Roosevelt was troubled by what he saw as societal apathy and national drift. He thought a war, preferably one that could be easily won, was the best tonic. What was needed, he wrote, was “a general national buccaneering expedition to drive the Spanish out of Cuba, the English out of Canada.”<sup>24</sup> This notion of war as remedy for national malaise appealed to a small but growing and influential circle of “Americanists,” including the press magnate Hearst.

Given such psycho-strategic ideas, instincts, and impulses, the decision to go to war was made not methodically but by the bluster and machinations of a relatively few like-minded men who felt sure their country needed it. Yet, as this case will show, a disorderly and polarized decisionmaking process does not necessarily produce an irrational or regrettable decision. The United States won the war with Spain handily. For its effort, it gained colonies, prestige, and respect, especially for its prerogatives in the Western Hemisphere—hardly the stuff of a blunder. This is a case of war by gut feel that turned out well.

## Late Nineteenth-Century America and Its Ambitions

At the turn of the century, America’s vast territory and natural resources made it much less reliant on foreign trade than its European contemporaries. This happy circumstance allowed the United States to pursue a policy of splendid isolation that eschewed deep engagement in European affairs and made the pursuit of colonies less pressing than it was for many European powers. As American power burgeoned in the later decades of the nineteenth century, however, it was natural that some American strategists and statesmen would be swept up in the European race to conquer the globe, under way for centuries, but which accelerated greatly in the last two decades of the



century. Even though the United States did not economically need to become a world power, they thought, why should it not fulfill its global potential?

The idea of the United States as a world power was first articulated by Alexander Hamilton, but then discarded by those, starting with George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, who wanted to avoid the entanglements and wars that European powers endured. For most of the nineteenth century, the country and its government were preoccupied creating, expanding, unifying (during and after massive civil war), planting, industrializing, absorbing immigrants, reforming, and building infrastructure on a continental scale. As some leading Americans saw it, by the late 1800s this work was largely done, and it was time for the next step, as Hamilton had foreseen in the late 1700s.

It was at this time that Alfred Thayer Mahan, a naval officer, historian, and strategist, offered his theory that to be great, a nation needed to be a global power, and that meant being a great sea power. Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* was a best seller in the salons of power, not only in Washington but also in Berlin and Tokyo.<sup>5</sup> While not a warmonger himself—Mahan believed that the highest purpose of strength was to keep peace<sup>6</sup>—his ideas were retailed in the corridors of power to argue for empire, colonies, and war.

While enthusiasm for Mahan's theory and for becoming a world power was new, the Monroe Doctrine had been in place since the fifth American President. While the principal offender was Great Britain—with more territory in the hemisphere than the United States—Spain clung to Cuba, which stuck in the American craw almost as much as the Crown's dominion over Canada. While relatively few Americans embraced the idea of seizing another power's colonies, most supported the proposition that an increasingly complete, powerful, and confident United States should have primacy if not exclusivity in the hemisphere. Lodge "stretched the Monroe Doctrine to declare 'America's rightful supremacy in the Western Hemisphere . . . peaceably if we can, forcibly if we must.'"<sup>7</sup>

## The War with Great Britain That Wasn't

The chief villain in the narrative being written by Lodge, Hearst, and Roosevelt was Great Britain. Nearly all of Spain's Latin American colonies won their independence during the nineteenth century, making remaining British holdings the largest exception to the Monroe Doctrine. Relations between the United States and Great Britain were never good; animosity toward the British was as deep as anywhere in the American Northeast establishment. Anglophobia flared up nearly to the point of hostilities during the Civil War, as London contemplated recognition of the Confederacy (which it then declined once it became clear that the Union would prevail). After seizing territory from Mexico, the other grand and persistent American ambition was to conquer

Canada. Undaunted (as usual) by British sea power, Roosevelt wrote Lodge: "Let the fight come if it must; I don't care whether our seacoast cities are bombarded or not; we would take Canada."<sup>8</sup>

Although Americans chafed at British presence in the Western Hemisphere throughout the nineteenth century, challenging the sea power that backed that presence was out of the question, Roosevelt's bravado notwithstanding.<sup>9</sup> As of 1880, Britain outnumbered the United States in ships of the line by nearly ten to one (377 to 39). It would be nearly two decades hence—with Roosevelt as the assistant secretary of the Navy—before the United States would rise to Mahan's challenge to become a genuine sea power. Although Americans saw British sea power as potentially threatening to their shores and ships, the lack of robust economic motivation left the United States without strong motivation to build a grand, costly fleet. In effect, the United States defaulted to British sea power to secure the oceans. Not until the mid-1890s, when Lodge and Roosevelt declared that making the United States a world power was the strategic imperative, did the United States seriously commit to sea power and seriously contemplate war with the British. Great Britain was viewed by subscribers to Lodge's *Large Policy* not only as the chief violator of the Monroe Doctrine but also as the chief obstacle to becoming a world power.

A wave of anti-British sentiment crested in 1895 over a Venezuelan boundary, when war was urged by Roosevelt, Lodge, and Hearst's newspapers: "Country is Aroused, Want to Fight England."<sup>10</sup> "Call to arms, the jingoes were right after all."<sup>11</sup> But the jingoes' agenda got way ahead of the country's investment in sea power: The United States had three battleships, while the British had fifty. As it turned out, the British, with bigger problems elsewhere, opted not to call the Americans' bluff and backed off to defuse the crisis.<sup>12</sup> Still, as the Venezuela crisis made it apparent that the small and untested U.S. fleet would not last long against the Royal Navy—a discrepancy that would take another decade or more to correct—American imperialists shifted their attention to a more tantalizing target: Spain.

This was to be a turning point in Anglo-American relations, from a century of antagonism to one of alliance. Just as the United States chose not to take on the dominant sea power, Britain chose not to treat the rise of U.S. power as a challenge. Turning its attention to more pressing threats, especially the gathering danger of German hegemonic challenge in Europe, Britain more or less accepted the Monroe Doctrine. The British were also realistic enough to see that the United States had the wherewithal to create an unchallengeable sphere of influence in its hemisphere. Moreover, the United States and Great Britain were increasingly interdependent economically, though bilateral trade was more important to the United States than to Great Britain. In 1880, 42 percent of U.S. trade was with Great Britain. By 1895, despite rapid growth in total U.S. trade, its trade with Great Britain was still 38 percent. In the Anglo-American case—though not in others, as we will see—shared interest in maritime security sapped the argument for maritime rivalry. Having diverged for most of American history, U.S.

and British strategic interests were increasingly convergent. From America's point of view and Britain's, Anglo-American rivalry between great power and sea power was over before it really began.

## Targeting Spain

Immediately, the interest of American hawks pivoted to Spain. Little was left of the vast Hispanic empire that had stretched from Florida to the tip of South America to the Western Pacific. By the late 1880s, Spain held only a few islands in the Americas—Cuba the most important. The Philippines was the other significant remaining Spanish possession. Spain's glory and great-power pretense were long gone; its main interest now was to exploit, and its main method was to oppress. In both Cuba and the Philippines, revolts waxed, waned, and waxed again. This offered the United States a moral calling—or cover story—as liberator of colonized peoples to go with its aspiration to be a colonial power. That the goal could be one or the other but not both at the same time became a sharp dilemma during the war.

Spain fit the Large Policy's need well because it was a virtual photographic negative of all that the American advocates of empire and war stood for: decadent, despotic, cynical, and shrinking, compared with vigorous, democratic, pure, and growing. What qualified Spain as an attractive enemy above all was its military weakness. Its forces in Cuba and the Philippines were substantial on paper but badly equipped, led, trained, and motivated—barely able to contain local insurrection even with brutal methods. Its navy was obsolete and rusty. It could count on no indigenous support in the event of conflict—just the opposite. These vulnerabilities counted for a lot with American leaders who wanted war, and made gaining public support easy.

The principal argument used by American hawks was not strategic but humanitarian. Starting in 1896, the Cuban liberation movement gathered strong support. Spanish atrocities and Cuban suffering gave Hearst the opportunity to take the high ground, and to sell more newspapers. He became committed to and peddled “a rescue fantasy that would deliver Cuba from the cruel embrace of decadent Spain.”<sup>13</sup> The moral angle, coupled with the nationalist fever and strategic ambition, made it all the easier for the hawks to encircle the cautious President William McKinley with public opinion and political alliance.

There is controversy over McKinley's attitude and role. In the words of the hawkish Lodge, the president did “not want to be obligated to go to war,” at least not early in his administration. McKinley is described by one historian as “never one to confront a problem he could slip around. . . . As usual, McKinley's intentions were hard to read.”<sup>14</sup> On at least one occasion, McKinley told Roosevelt that he was “not ready” for war, though this did not keep Roosevelt from lobbying him and drowning out voices

of caution from the president's inner circle of political aides. He seized every opportunity, including lengthy one-on-one carriage rides, to "stiffen the presidential spine."<sup>15</sup>

In the super-heated atmosphere of Cuban revolt and American jingoism, the USS *Maine* exploded and sank with three-quarters of her crew in Havana Harbor. Although independent naval experts at the time averred that the explosion was caused by a fire, an official board of inquiry was pressured by Roosevelt into supporting the hawks' claim that the *Maine* was sunk by a Spanish mine.<sup>16</sup> Spain proposed a joint investigation but was rebuffed—again, Roosevelt's doing. Meanwhile, Hearst's newspaper spread word to its vast readership that the *Maine* was definitely sunk by the Spaniards: "War! Sure! Maine destroyed by Spanish. . . . This proved."<sup>17</sup> Public sentiment shifted from supporting war to demanding it of the government: "Remember the Maine"—to which was added: "To hell with Spain."

## The Decision

The events that followed can better be described as a stampede than a decision. McKinley remained hesitant.<sup>18</sup> As a soldier during the American Civil War, he had "seen the dead piled up" at Antietam and elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> But the question he and other skeptics of war had most difficulty with was what to do with Cuba after its liberation: It was not capable of independence, yet making it a colony would mean that America was no better than Spain, while also running the risk of another insurgency. Still, he and House Speaker Thomas Reed—an unabashed opponent of expansionism—could resist the mounting public and political pressures only so long. Though a subcabinet official in McKinley's administration, Roosevelt led the charge.

Cornered, McKinley sent a lengthy and complicated message to Congress to call for authorization to conduct armed intervention; however, to the dismay of the hawks and the Cuba Libre lobby, the president's message did not ask for a declaration of war and left room for negotiation. This, in effect, left the decision to Congress. Eight days of raucous and rancorous debate ensued in both chambers. Roosevelt badgered Lodge into calling for recognition of Cuban independence. The Senate and House then passed a joint resolution, which McKinley reluctantly signed.

Congress next passed the Teller Amendment, renouncing any intention to annex Cuba. Still, the matter of what to *do* with Cuba upon liberation remained uncertain. Though "unsure of its strategic aims," the United States had taken an action that would inevitably lead to a Spanish declaration of war.<sup>20</sup> There had been no systematic preparation for war for the simple reason that McKinley wanted to avoid or delay hostilities. Although no one was sure how bloody and costly the war would be, there was little doubt or debate about the outcome. Roosevelt's confidence had been contagious, and it was generally known that Spain lacked the military capabilities to prevail against the United States.

## The Results

Expectations of victory were quickly rewarded when Commodore George Dewey's Asiatic Squadron entered Manila Bay and destroyed all seven Spanish ships, which Dewey's pessimistic Spanish counterpart had anchored close to shore so that they would be sunk in shallow water. Subsequently, a series of naval and land engagements all ended in Spanish defeats, including the climatic destruction of Spain's Cuban fleet off Santiago. All of its forces having surrendered, Spain agreed to peace in August.

Roosevelt had sought war with Spain with his usual exuberance. He got what he wanted: a victory, invigoration of the American people (at least temporarily), several overseas possessions, and a sustained increase in the size and capabilities of the U.S. Navy—U.S. naval expenditures climbed from 7 percent to 20 percent of the entire U.S. federal budget from 1890 to 1905. The United States also got Cuba and the Philippines, and it promptly bungled relations with the independence movements in both places. In the ensuing Filipino insurgency and U.S. counterinsurgency campaign, some four thousand U.S. troops lost their lives, and the interrogation technique known as waterboarding was introduced. Arguably, the decision to go to war should have taken, but clearly did not, into account that the pacification of the Philippines would be so difficult and costly, though it is hardly likely this prospect would have deterred them. Roosevelt inherited the Philippines conflict when he assumed the presidency after McKinley's assassination three years later. Notwithstanding the Teller Amendment, the United States constantly meddled and repeatedly intervened in Cuban affairs until Fidel Castro's revolution sixty years later.

The anti-expansionist movement gained strength in the years that followed the Spanish-American War, effectively ending U.S. colonialism (with several islands to show for it).

## The Decisionmaking and What to Learn from It

By strict standards, the decision of the United States to go to war with Spain was made emotionally and chaotically, not by disciplined analysis and measured deliberation. The President did not make the decision as much as accept it. If Roosevelt, Lodge, and Hearst were driving the locomotive, McKinley was in the caboose (at least prior to the uproar over the sinking of the *Maine*). Of the factors that can contribute to strategic errors mentioned in Chapter One, a number figure in this case:

- rejection by decisionmakers—Roosevelt, Lodge, Hearst—of information and analysis that did not conform to their preconceptions and intentions (especially, the cause of the explosion on the *Maine*)

- overlooking or refusing to consider options other than war—indeed, negotiations were flatly opposed by those whose goal was not just to gain colonies but to wage war
- ridiculing doubters (including the President) and intimidating opponents
- megalomania, arrogance, hubris, and, in Roosevelt’s case, a zest for fighting
- lack of objectivity thanks to jingoism, Americanism, and predisposition toward war
- demonizing the adversary—speeches and correspondence often referred to Anglo-Saxon superiority and duty
- enthrallment with a particular vision—Lodge’s Large Policy
- confidence in intuition, instinct, gut feel.

Equally important, though, the U.S. decisionmakers did *not* underestimate the adversary’s capabilities or will, or the difficulties, duration, and costs of conflict. Despite the slapdash manner in which the decision was made, there were basic facts and elementary rationality to support it. The risk of failure was small, and they understood that. So, for that matter, did the Spaniards, who would probably have been willing to negotiate away the remnants of their empire in order to avoid a war they would certainly lose; but again, the iAmerican hawks wanted not only colonies but colonies won by war. The U.S. decision to go to war was not a blunder, because the risks were in fact as low as the U.S. decisionmakers thought. In this sense, Roosevelt, Lodge, Hearst, and their allies can be credited with having and using a core of accurate information regarding the consequences of their “rush to war.” Keep in mind that even the hawks realized during the Anglo-American Venezuela crisis that war with Britain would end badly; sober judgment broke the war fever. With Spain, the margin of error was huge.

It is important also to critically examine the cognitive model that guided Roosevelt, Hearst, and the more thoughtful Lodge:

- The United States had reached a point at which it could become a world power.
- Failure to become a world power would be disadvantageous strategically, politically, and economically.
- Becoming a sea power and acquiring colonies were prerequisites for world power.
- War would justify building a great navy and could lead to the acquisition of colonies.
- The United States had long stated that foreign powers were unwelcome in the Western Hemisphere, yet Great Britain and Spain defied this policy.
- Great Britain was too strong to defeat; moreover, it was signaling a willingness to accept American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere so that it could prevent German hegemony in Europe—preferably with American help.
- That left Spain: a vulnerable offender of the Monroe Doctrine and brutal oppressor of colonized peoples (in Cuba and the Philippines).

- American liberation would not be tantamount to aggression. Indeed, based on its own values and experience, America could bring true advancement to indigenous people.
- Thus, both moral force and strategic logic favored war with Spain.
- Because victory was more or less certain, the only potential downside was American casualties and costs, which a predictably short war would constrain.

This case is interesting because it involved a messy strategic decisionmaking process, in which emotion overwhelmed analysis and gloves-off politics preempted reasoned debate, yet did not produce a blunder. At the end of the day, the cognitive model of the decisionmakers was close to objective reality. This suggests that the correspondence of cognitive model with reality is a better explanation, and predictor, of good strategic decisionmaking than how orderly the process is. Although information was ignored, manipulated, rejected, and otherwise misused, if not abused, the core knowledge possessed by the decisionmakers was right in a sort of rough-and-ready way.

The case also reminds us that when approaching the decision end of the information value chain described in Chapter Two, beliefs, impulses, biases, and other subjective factors tend to be pronounced. However, if the decisionmaker's model is basically correct, such failures in process do not necessarily point to blunder. Still, the case does not argue for tolerance of instinctive and shoddy decisionmaking, for the military disparity between the United States and Spain was greater and the prediction of victory safer than in most war-and-peace choices. Clear military superiority made up for a multitude of decisionmaking sins. The margin of error was so large that the chance of mistake was small.

Whether the goals of the architects of the Spanish-American War were worthy is debatable. They were neither saintly nor entirely sincere. The long-term results were at best well short of the unbounded expectations of Roosevelt and the sweeping design of Lodge. At the same time, if one were to date the first appearance of the United States as a world power, it would be 1898.





## Germany's Decision to Conduct Unrestricted U-boat Warfare, 1916

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*We are now faced with a choice: Verdun or a U-boat war.*

—Wilhelm II, quoted in Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly*

*If we release the U-boats it will lead to our ruin.*

—Vice Chancellor Karl Helfferich, quoted in Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly*

*Finis Germaniae [The end of Germany].*

—German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg's assessment of the decision, quoted in Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly*

### Germany's Dilemma

Two and a half years into World War I, under the strong influence of his military chiefs and nationalist lobbies, Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II approved the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare against U.S. and other neutral ships en route to Europe with supplies for Germany's enemies. This decision precipitated the American entry into World War I on the side of Great Britain and France. So divided and horrified by Europe's carnage had the Americans been that it took such a flagrantly unfriendly act to convince President Woodrow Wilson and Congress that neutrality was no longer strategically, politically, or morally sustainable.

The Germans made this decision after much debate and weighing of benefits and risks. It was far from a mindless blunder by some charismatic or psychotic leader. But it did involve a gross miscalculation of both benefits and risks, the former of which were to prove illusory and the latter real. While perhaps not as irrational as some of this study's other cases, German deliberations leading to the U-boat decision were distorted

by political polarization, with the prevailing side willfully sacrificing objectivity for the sake of advocacy. By aligning the United States with Britain and France, the German decision gave those two countries renewed determination to fight until victorious and to exclude the kind of negotiated settlement that might have ended the war without German defeat. As we will see, German decisionmakers could have known that this gamble to win the war would more likely result in losing it. They underestimated both British resolve and American competence.

It was obvious by 1916 that Germany could not, as things were going, defeat Great Britain and then overpower France on the Western Front. The ability of the British to keep fighting depended on transatlantic supplies from the United States, which Germany was unable to constrict after halting submarine attacks on neutral shipping when Wilson reacted angrily to the 1915 sinking of the RMS *Lusitania*.<sup>1</sup> By the same token, the prospects of the British and French defeating Germany on land were also dim. Trench warfare was taking a massive human toll on both sides, with nothing but a few kilometers this way or that to show for it. This was not the war German military leaders and militarists had expected or known, given the string of decisive victories scored by their Prussian forebears.

Back at sea, the Battle of Jutland in 1916 was a tactical draw but strategic victory for Britain in that the Royal Navy prevented the German High Seas Fleet from breaking out of the North Sea into the open Atlantic. After that, Germany's navy was largely idle, while Britain's continued enforcing a Continental blockade that sapped Germany's ability to achieve victory on land. If Germany could not upset this military equilibrium, it faced a choice between a prolonged, debilitating stalemate and a negotiated peace. While German statesmen were receptive to what Wilson coined *peace without victory* (as explained Chapter Six), German generals and admirals adamantly opposed a negotiation that would rob them of a glorious triumph, hard-won territorial gains, and a place in the pantheon of Prussian military heroes.

## Kaiser in a Corner

Even after Wilhelm II sidelined the ultra-hawk Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, German generals Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg, aided by the powerful General Staff, petitioned the kaiser to end restrictions on U-boat warfare and start sinking American and other neutral ships. Otherwise, they argued, Germany would "risk being cheated of what [they] hope[d] to gain from the war."<sup>2</sup> The military leaders' position was supported by parties of the Right and Center in the Reichstag, much of the press, and the most vocal segments of public opinion. In Germany's jingoist wartime atmosphere, and with Britain's blockade causing severe deprivation, only the dovish Social Democrats, a few industrialists, and pragmatic civilian leaders opposed targeting U.S. ships. Among the last group, Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg warned

that resumption of U-boat attacks on U.S. vessels would “inevitably [cause] America to join our enemies,” leading to Germany’s ultimate defeat.<sup>3</sup> The German ambassador to the United States, Count Johann Heinrich von Bernstorff, “whose non-Prussian birth . . . spared him many of the delusions of his peers,” warned that unshackling the U-boats would cause Germany to lose the war.<sup>4</sup>

In the end, the proponents of relaxing restrictions on U-boat operations did not challenge the argument that the measure would bring America into the war; rather, they claimed it did not matter. Specifically, the German military chiefs argued that Great Britain could not long endure heavy fighting without supplies from the United States and other neutrals. Then, either its army would fold or London would sue for peace to end suffering at home, with France sure to follow. Germany would thus achieve victory in the war as a whole; retain its territorial conquests, for example, Belgium and Alsace-Lorraine (taken in 1871); demand the cession of colonies; dominate Europe politically and economically; and be a world power second to none. The chancellor and opponents of unrestricted U-boat warfare argued that such a lunge for victory would instead bring defeat; they favored ending the war with an acceptable negotiated peace.

Ludendorff and company thus conceded that the United States would probably enter the war if Germany ended restrictions on U-boat warfare. However, they insisted that Great Britain would submit well before the United States could introduce enough troops to alter the military balance on the Western Front. Their forecast was that the British could not last until their next harvest, whereas the Americans would not arrive in force on the Continent until 1919—a precision that implied great faith in their script. As it turned out, both estimates on which the decision was based proved spectacularly optimistic, and the result was the opposite of what the German brass promised. That analysis confirmed the preconception and furthered the interests of those who produced it is central to understanding and drawing lessons from this case.

## The Military Prevails—Germany Loses

In January 1917, the kaiser agreed with the military’s recommendation to resume unrestricted U-boat warfare. Whether he approved, conceded, or simply rubber-stamped the military’s position, the decision was not his to make in any meaningful sense.<sup>5</sup> As military leaders gained support, determination, and confidence, civilian leaders retreated. At the climactic meeting with the kaiser, the German naval chief of staff, Henning von Holtzendorff, presented a two-hundred-page study—with statistics down to the level of the caloric content of an English breakfast—and “swore that his U-boats could sink 600,000 tons a month.”<sup>6</sup> Appealing to his desire for glory, the kaiser was told by his military chiefs that there was no other way “to guarantee our future as a world power.”<sup>7</sup> As for the U.S. Army, Hindenburg assured the kaiser that even if it was not tardy it would be “taken care of” and that “no American will set foot on the Continent.”<sup>8</sup>

Outnumbered, out-staffed, and without facts or figures, Bethmann-Hollweg again “warned that American belligerence would mean Germany’s defeat”—an argument the proponents dismissed by explaining that the war would be over before the Americans entered in force.<sup>9</sup> He gave in: “Of course, if success beckons, we must follow.”<sup>10</sup>

German military logic, *per se*, was not flawed. Renewed U-boat attacks on neutral shipping offered the best if not only chance to win the war, as opposed to negotiating a compromise peace. But the analysis was wrong, owing to unrealistic assumptions that Britain would crumble before American troops could save the day—assumptions that the kaiser’s military chiefs presented to him as high-confidence analytic findings. This amounted to a gaping discrepancy between the decisionmakers’ strategic model and objective reality. That these miscalculations and misjudgments were made by institutions, not a unitary decisionmaker, suggests an important lesson: Institutions are not always safeguards against blunders; they can contribute to them.

In response to the decision, the United States immediately broke off diplomatic relations with Germany and eight weeks later declared war. As advertised by German admirals, U-boats started sinking transatlantic shipping at an unprecedented rate: 25 percent of all British-bound shipping was sunk in March. By April the German admiralty’s prediction of tonnage sunk was being exceeded.<sup>11</sup>

However, the adoption of transatlantic convoying and deployment of U.S. Navy escorts slowed and then reversed the U-boat threat. German submarine captains were forced to choose between going after a dwindling number of nonconvoyed vessels and trying to penetrate escort screens around the convoys in which most ships were bunched. On those routes where convoying was introduced, shipping losses declined sharply, as shown in Table 5.1.

Meanwhile, although the Americans entered the war grossly unprepared for large-scale fighting in Europe, they mobilized their forces and ramped up their industrial base much faster than the German military had forecast. While they conceded that the United States would declare war on Germany, Ludendorff and company failed to anticipate the galvanizing effect their action had on American determination and resourcefulness. Six months after the declaration of war, the first U.S. division entered the trenches.<sup>12</sup> Although it was not until well into 1918 that the U.S. military presence was sizeable enough to turn the tide of battle, the positive effects on British resolve began when they first arrived. The method used by General John J. Pershing to expedite the U.S. combat contribution was to train units as they assembled in France and send them piecemeal into battle as soon as they were ready. This way of introducing U.S. forces was expeditious but necessitated organizational flexibility—something that violated German military doctrine and surprised German planning. There is no indication that German generals anticipated this U.S. approach any better than German admirals anticipated escorted convoying.

By the time U.S. forces began to pour into the trenches, shipping losses to German U-boats were down to the level prior to the resumption of unrestricted warfare. Trans-

**Table 5.1**  
**Allied and Neutral Tonnage Sunk by Submarines in World War I**

Month	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918
January	-	47,981	81,259	368,521	306,658
February	-	59,921	117,547	540,006	318,957
March	-	80,775	167,097	593,841	342,597
April	-	55,725	191,667	881,027	278,719
May	-	120,058	129,175	596,629	295,520
June	-	131,428	108,851	687,507	255,587
July	-	109,640	118,215	557,988	260,967
August	-	185,866	162,744	511,730	283,815
September	98,378	151,884	230,460	351,748	187,881
October	87,917	88,534	353,660	458,558	118,559
November	19,413	153,043	311,508	289,212	17,682
December	44,197	123,141	355,139	399,212	-

SOURCE: C. Ernest Fayle, *Seaborne Trade*: Vol. 3, London: J. Murray, 1924, Table I[a].

atlantic supplies to Britain reached new highs, just the opposite of what the Germans scripted. Two million U.S. troops were in France by the time of the 1918 armistice, a year before Ludendorff claimed that the first of them would arrive. Among the glaring failures of German analysis was its consistent underestimating of the capability and strategy of the green U.S. military.<sup>13</sup>

The kaiser dismissed Bethmann-Hollweg a few months after the war on American shipping was resumed (but before the U-boat campaign stalled). His successor (Georg Michaelis) was timid, inept, and politically no match for military machinations and bluster. Wilhelm II became a figurehead. For the remainder of the war, Germany was governed by an unofficial military dictatorship, mainly led by the officer most responsible for the misguided U-boat decision, Ludendorff. The added weight of American forces, combined with Britain's reinvigorated war effort, was more than Germany's military could withstand. As shelves were restocked in England, the suffering of Germany's population grew. In a last-ditch attempt to avoid defeat by negotiating peace, Germany discontinued unrestricted U-boat warfare in October 1918.

## Why Were the Risks Minimized?

For Germany's military leaders, not losing the war was not good enough: Germany had to win, and it had the military superiority to do so. This was a matter of Prussian hubris and determination to make greater Germany the dominant power in Europe and a world power equal to if not higher than Britain. The military leadership was not wrong to equate victory with knocking the British out of the war, which required stopping transatlantic shipping. The fact that Germany's land-war fortunes against Britain and France had suffered during 1915–1916, while U-boat attacks on neutral shipping were suspended, underscored the importance, as the German military saw it, of changing this policy.<sup>14</sup> This became the blinding idea that animated German military argument and skewed German military analysis. The German military was unified: The army needed help in the form of strangling Britain, and the navy, frustrated by being sidelined after Jutland, was eager to oblige by using its best weapon.<sup>15</sup> The Germans were right to recognize the potential of the submarine, but wrong to overlook how it could be countered.

Again, the crux of the German military's theory of victory was that Britain, deprived of supplies, would be forced to seek peace before the United States entered the conflict. Yet there was little evidence of flagging British will or increasing interest in peace negotiations even before the German U-boat decision. Moreover, the Germans failed to appreciate that U.S. entry, owing to their own action, would revive British determination. Not foreseeing the adoption of an escorted convoy system and underestimating that the United States would make its military weight felt were fatal analytic mistakes. However, the advocates of the U-boat strategy had done their homework. An obvious inference to draw is that, for all their data, Germany's military leaders were so sure of their instincts, so enthralled with German military superiority, and so captivated by the idea of victory that they misled themselves. After that, misleading, or else just steamrolling, the kaiser was easy.

## The Worst of All Options

Did Germany have an alternative to the U-boat gamble? Barbara Tuchman argues that a smarter, better path for Germany would have been to respond favorably to Wilson's proposal for a negotiated peace. Although stalemated on the Western Front, the end of fighting in the East put Germany in a stronger overall military position than Britain and France. This would have given it leverage in negotiations and a chance for a better settlement than was possible once the United States entered the war. At a minimum, to have shown a willingness to negotiate at the time might have kept the United States from adding its strength to the Allied side.<sup>16</sup>

Even if the Germans chose not to pick up Wilson's peace initiative, they would have been better off not renewing attacks on neutral vessels. One can speculate that Wilson, as averse to entering the war as he was (see Chapter Six), would have kept the United States on the sideline:

Without America, the Allies could not have held out for victory, and as victory was probably beyond Germany's power too, both sides would have slogged to an exhausted but more or less equal peace. For the world, the consequences of that unused alternative would have changed history: no victory, no reparations, no war guilt, no Hitler, possibly no Second World War.<sup>17</sup>

Though better options existed, German military chiefs pressed for a course of action that produced defeat, as they could have known and as German statesmen explained.

Wilhelm II was an easy target, having been deceived two decades earlier by Tirpitz that Germany could and must defeat Great Britain and, under his decisive leadership, become a world power.<sup>18</sup> By the time of the U-boat decision of early 1917, Wilhelm II was indecisive, removed from the management of Germany's war effort, and under the military's sway.<sup>19</sup> This is the ironic case of the weakness of a nominally authoritarian leader opening the way for a decision by a powerful institution. Military officers, maneuvering in the open and in the shadows, held political strong cards: the backing of patriotic organizations and the public in a jingoistic mood and suffering from British blockade.

The German military leaders who orchestrated the U-boat decision were not wrong to think that the war could be won only if Great Britain was knocked out. If one grants the premise that winning the war was the only acceptable outcome, it might be argued that theirs was a gamble worth taking. But they were severely mistaken to believe—or else profoundly dishonest to assert—that the war not only could but *would* be won by unrestricted U-boat warfare. Given the risks of failure, political leaders were right to argue that a balanced negotiated peace was preferable, as it was possible. By late 1916, British and French military prospects were at least as bad as Germany's; and, as we will see, Wilson was eager to mediate an end to the fighting.

Can the U-boat blunder be blamed on defective knowledge due to inadequate or bad information? Not really. Had they sought it, the German military probably could have received better intelligence and objective analysis about what the United States might do to combat the U-boats, how long Great Britain could hold out, and how long it would take the United States to bring force to bear on the Western Front. The alternative explanation—that the German generals were entirely objective but simply got it wrong—is hard to square with the fact that their findings uniformly fit and confirmed their theory of success. The normal human aversion to risk was trumped by the abnormal confidence and commitment to victory of Germany's military leaders. They did not ask what would happen, or what they could do, if their assumptions and calcula-

tions proved overly optimistic. This is especially unpardonable because German brass knew better than anyone did that the analysis was cooked.

Another way of accounting for the German blunder was that the two options in play—maintain or end restrictions on U-boat warfare—were not assessed side by side in any balanced or thorough way. As already noted, the military was united behind the U-boat scheme, and civilian officials by and large were opposed. Accounts of the climactic meeting with the kaiser indicate that he was not presented with analysis to compare the two options. Rather, he was presented with an insistent military position on one side and wilting skepticism from an exhausted chancellor on the other.<sup>20</sup> Partisan and bureaucratic warfare, with military outmaneuvering and overpowering civilian leaders, precluded rational strategic decisionmaking. Had such a process been followed, had options, risks, and benefits been fairly analyzed and debated, civilian leaders might not have been overmatched by military adamancy. As the next case suggests, Wilson might not have brought the United States into the conflict in the absence of blatant German acts of war. In such circumstances, although Britain and France might have fought on for some time, Germany could have negotiated a reasonably favorable peace. Instead, it was forced to oppose more or less alone the combined strength of Britain, France, and the United States, and to accept a devastating and poisonous peace.

More interesting than the relationship between the institution and the individual involved in the U-boat decision—the German military and the kaiser—is the character and discipline of the institution. Generals and admirals told each other what they wanted to hear, and staffs were expected to “tell truth to power.” As time passed, fighting at the front stalemated, and public-patriotic impatience intensified, a unified and irresistible institutional position emerged. As it did, instead of trying to measure risks, the military sought to minimize them.



## Woodrow Wilson's Decision to Enter World War I, 1917

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*If Germany wants peace she can get it, . . . if she will but . . . let me have a chance.*

—Woodrow Wilson to Edward House, quoted in Justus D. Doenecke, *Nothing Less Than War*

*If Wilson wants war, let him make it, and then let him have it.*

—Kaiser Wilhelm II, quoted in Justus D. Doenecke, *Nothing Less Than War*

*The Americans are just bluffing. They have no intention of declaring war against us.*

—General Erich Ludendorff to a fellow officer, quoted in Justus D. Doenecke, *Nothing Less Than War*

### Ending American Neutrality

Again, not all decisions to wage war are blunders. The case of U.S. entry into World War I reveals why such decisions may be right.

With great reluctance, President Woodrow Wilson decided in early 1917 that the United States must enter World War I on the side of Great Britain and France to fight Germany. Had he not done so, chances are that the war would have ground on, for mounting casualties had made both sides more bellicose, not less. While it is impossible to say when and how the war would have ended had the United States remained neutral, it can be said that by early 1917 neither the forces nor the populations of either side were ready to yield. Military prospects for the French and British were especially bleak. Although Germans were suffering terribly at the front and at home, the withdrawal of Russia following the fall of the czar enabled them to divert forces and resources to the Western Front. With the entry of the United States, however, the end of the war as well as its outcome came into sight. As discussed in Chapter Five, it took until mid-1918 before U.S. military power began to make a difference, and even then,

British and French forces took the brunt of Germany's final and unsuccessful offensive. But the presence of two million American troops obviously entered the German judgment that the war was lost. The fighting ended on November 11.

Thus it can be said that U.S. entry brought about the victory of Great Britain and France, which was Wilson's intention. In this sense, the decision was a good one for the United States, democracy, Europe, and the world. However, when he decided to take the United States into World War I, Wilson thought that he would give the United States the political leverage with which to fashion a permanent peace—one based on principles that would bear his name, contradicting the Machiavellianism of hereditary regimes that turned Europe into a slaughterhouse in 1914. Instead, Allied victory led to retribution against Germany and a peace that would fail totally in twenty years. The United States turned a deaf ear to Wilson's call for international leadership. American isolation aggravated Europe's interwar instability. In this sense, the results of Wilson's decision to enter World War I fell far short of his vision. Notwithstanding Wilson's idealism and eventual disappointment, however, the U.S. decision to enter the war can be regarded as strategically sound and successful.

From the outset of World War I, the United States maintained neutrality between the Central Powers—notably Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire—and the Entente Powers of Great Britain, France, and Russia. Wilson's stance reflected America's general aversion to join in the savagery the leaders of Europe had brought upon the people of Europe. He was no pacifist. In fact, while president he intervened militarily more often than any of his predecessors.<sup>1</sup> He believed and explained to fellow Americans that Europe had fallen victim to the obsession with power of its rulers and the machinations of their henchmen. To him, "British navalism" was as deserving of censure as "German militarism."<sup>2</sup> U.S. neutrality was also the product of split sympathies between pro-British elites and the corporate interests of the Northeast "establishment" and German Americans concentrated in the Midwest. In reality, the debate was not about which side to join but about whether to join the Entente or instead remain neutral. Given his own misgivings, judiciousness, and political caution, Wilson was not going to go to war with Germany without a national consensus, which he had no intention of attempting to build. There being no such consensus, American neutrality prevailed by default—to the consternation of the pro-Allies lobby.

Wilson not an isolationist—far from it. Appalled by the carnage caused by European rivalries, arms races, and jingoism, this professor of international law and politics (before becoming president of Princeton, governor of New Jersey, and President of the United States) advocated energetic postwar American leadership. His vision was a liberal international order of common security, collective enforcement, democracy, self-determination, and free trade, all designed into a universal league of nations. Founded on American ideals, stature, and evenhandedness, such an order would replace Europe's unbridled nationalism and ethos of power and war, thus creating a lasting peace. Until

1917, Wilson thought that the best way for the United States to assume the mantle of leadership postwar was by neutrality. He then decided that the only way was to enter the war.

Wilson's neutrality was not passive, for he tried to mediate several times. As fighting stalemated in 1916,<sup>3</sup> his closest advisor, "Colonel" Edward House, tried to negotiate a peace agreement that would satisfy Great Britain and France by restoring territory lost to Germany in the west while enticing Germany to accept this by offering gains in the east at the expense of Russia and present-day Turkey. Taking liberties with the President's vague guidance, House intimated to London that the United States would side with the Allies if they accepted and Germany refused his proposal. Still, the British did not bite. Despite horrendous losses—or because of them—the warring sides of World War I became increasingly determined to fight to the finish, or at least until one or the other could dictate terms as a result of a military breakthrough. As fighting persisted, it became more apparent on both sides of the Atlantic that America's choice between neutrality and war could decide the outcome. (As the preceding case suggests, German military leaders rejected this view, believing that unrestricted U-boat warfare could force the British out of the war before the Americans could enter and help them win it.)

Meanwhile, the U.S. economy benefited from expanded trade, especially to satisfy the needs of Great Britain and France for food, arms, and other war-sustaining stuffs. This trade was necessarily financed by extending more and more credit to the British and French, which they would eventually be unable to service. At the same time, the United States complied with the Royal Navy's blockade of Germany and its allies, creating a *de facto* U.S. tilt. As it was becoming clearer that U.S. entry could decide the war, the political basis for neutrality in the United States was undone by German actions.

As Germany's economic suffering grew, so did its resolve to intercept shipping to Britain from the United States and other neutrals. Germans justified U-boat attacks on belligerent and occasionally neutral vessels, with or without warning, as a fair and logical response to the British blockade. Of course, the Royal Navy was not sinking U.S. vessels. American vexation over U-boat warfare had previously come to a head with the 1915 sinking of the RMS *Lusitania*, a British liner—carrying contraband, as it turned out—which went to the bottom with 128 Americans. What followed was intense U.S. anger and a lengthy tennis match of diplomatic protests and rebuttals between Washington and Berlin, culminating in a German decision to restrict U-boat attacks to belligerent vessels and the application of "cruiser rules," which dictated the removal, rescue, and release of crew and passengers. After this, pressure for U.S. entry into the war receded, to Wilson's relief.

Even so, from the *Lusitania* crisis on, Germany's submarine warfare, large-scale use of poison gas, and reports of atrocities in occupied territory increased the determination and decibels of those favoring U.S. intervention in support of the Entente.

In addition, advocates of U.S. military power and preparedness, such as the former president Teddy Roosevelt and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, maligned doves like William Jennings Bryan, Wilson's secretary of state. Wilson himself was criticized not only by pro-British and pro-German partisans but also by Roosevelt and William Randolph Hearst's press, which accused him of feckless reliance on legalistic protests and of squandering American credibility in response to U-boat attacks. "We have not yet begun to write!" quipped one editorial.<sup>4</sup>

It was action by Germany that broke the political stalemate in America and eventually the military stalemate in Europe. By late 1916, General Erich Ludendorff and other increasingly powerful military leaders, over the objections of Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, persuaded Kaiser Wilhelm II to approve resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. They argued that U-boat operations could starve Great Britain into submission, or at least military collapse, well before the United States could bring forces to Europe. As expected by the Germans, the United States government reacted strongly—at first not by declaring war on the Central Powers but by moving toward "armed neutrality," whereby U.S. merchant ships and passenger liners would be armed and authorized to defend themselves. The Germans regarded such armed vessels as legitimate U-boat targets, on the somewhat twisted rationale that armed neutral vessels could threaten the submarines that stalked them. Following the German decision of January 1917, a number of U.S. and other neutral ships were sunk, some without warning or effort to off-load passengers and crew.

### **Wilson Hesitates, Maneuvers, Then Decides**

Even as the U-boats struck, Wilson was not ready to go to war. Just re-elected by a slim margin and still hoping to avoid the fighting, he made a lofty if not naive appeal to end Europe's spiraling slaughter and to replace the alliance system that caused it with a universal collective security organization: "There must be not a balance of power but a community of power, not organized rivalries but an organized common peace."<sup>5</sup> In calling for "peace without victory"—a phrase that would come back to haunt him politically—Wilson observed that the warring parties all needed peace. He even suggested, somewhat inaccurately, that if each warring government would only listen to their people, it would find that they wanted peace.<sup>6</sup> Wilson had a way of presuming that all people, except self-serving rulers, would embrace his ideas and principles if given the chance to consider them.

When Wilson called on Great Britain, France, and Germany to set out their terms of peace, none would. In Germany, anti-Americanism and military domination of politics prevailed; in Britain and France, it was suspected that the United States would enter the war on their side if Wilson's peace initiative failed.<sup>7</sup> While his last-ditch peace appeal was undoubtedly sincere, Wilson also felt that it would vindicate

a subsequent decision for war. With the failure of yet another American mediation offer and an increase in U-boat attacks on U.S. vessels and belligerent vessels with Americans on board, pressure mounted on Wilson to declare war on Germany. Still he hesitated.

In the midst of renewed American outrage over U-boats, the British intercepted, deciphered, and shared with Washington a telegram from Arthur Zimmerman, the German foreign minister, directing the German ambassador in Mexico City to sound out the Mexican government on the possibility of allying with Germany in war against the United States. Mexico would be rewarded by recovering former territories in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. With that, American equivocation gave way to the view that Germany now was in the hands of ruthless Prussian militarists and their agents—a perception not far off the mark. The political consensus that had not existed, and that Wilson had declined to build, had formed and would leave Wilson little leeway.<sup>8</sup>

Political currents that favored joining the Allies were reinforced by economic considerations, which for Wilson ranked alongside his political values.<sup>9</sup> Only by helping Great Britain and France win could Wall Street protect the mounting credit it had provided the Allies, who were effectively broke. Leading American financiers warned Wilson that British and French default would send a shock wave through overexposed U.S. banks. By coincidence, this came to a head at the same time Germany escalated submarine warfare.

Finally, the overthrow of Czar Nicholas II in early 1917 by what first appeared to be liberal forces made it comfortable philosophically and politically for Wilson to enter the war on the side of the democracies against the despotic Central Powers. Russian feudalism, oppression, elite opulence, and international intrigue under the Romanovs had epitomized the European regimes and practices that repulsed Wilson. If the Russian Revolution made U.S. entry easier, the Bolsheviks' subsequent withdrawal from the war, in October 1917, made U.S. entry essential, for the British and French might not have been able to withstand the full force of the German army.

Facing a tidal wave of support for entering the war because of the German U-boat policy and the "Zimmermann telegram," Wilson asked his cabinet for advice and found unanimity for declaring war. This was followed by resolutions in both chambers of Congress favoring war, opposed only by a few quasi-pacifists and a shrinking isolationist crowd. Even then, the hesitant Wilson was inclined only to seek congressional acknowledgment that a state of war existed, owing to German actions, rather than a declaration of war. In the end, the vote for a declaration of war was overwhelming: 82–6 in the Senate and 373–50 in the House.

For all his reluctance, the decision was essentially Wilson's, in that he still had the authority to choose otherwise. There are several ways to interpret this exceedingly complex man's motivations. Entering the war was the best if not only way to pursue Wilson's goals of democracy, self-determination, and collective security; and there was no way that Europeans, left to themselves, would embrace such an agenda in

the absence of U.S. leadership, which, Wilson now understood, required the United States to enter the war. Wilson was also convinced that peoples everywhere, including Europe, yearned for peace and for American leadership, even if rulers who sent millions into combat were not. Because the nations at war needed and wanted peace, he thought, U.S. entry could bring about a negotiated settlement before long.<sup>10</sup> (Ironically, in expecting the war to end quickly, Wilson suffered a similar illusion to that of his European counterparts when they began it in 1914.)

The proximate cause of U.S. entry was German violation of American maritime freedom and international law, which Wilson took most seriously. Though Wilson had tried since the *Lusitania* crisis to split legal hairs so that German U-boat policy would not force his hand, Berlin's decision of January 1917 and the attacks that followed constituted a clear *casus belli*. Indeed, the expectation that unrestricted attacks would precipitate U.S. entry was one thing on which German military and political leaders agreed.

What made Wilson's decision easier and widely supported was the growing sense in the United States that Europe's two warring sides were not morally equivalent. Until 1917, many Americans shared Wilson's pox-on-both-houses righteousness. However, as evidence accumulated of German atrocities, mistreatment of prisoners, and military rule, American antipathy toward Germany intensified and spread. It appeared, after all, that one side—the democratic one (with Russia's departure)—was more worthy of support than the other. More important, Americans, starting with their President, came to regard it as very important that the war be won by the “right” side. German victory would end all hope for a better international system, the spread of democracy, self-determination, and lasting peace.

Wilson did not expect that large-scale U.S. forces would actually be needed to fight on the Western Front; rather, he figured that political, financial, and material support would tip the balance decidedly in favor of the Allies. Moreover, the United States, with a small standing army, modest reserves, and an aging navy, was unprepared for major combat. Wilson did not share the disposition of London and Paris to fight until Germany was militarily defeated. He thought that all warring powers were so exhausted that the mere act of U.S. entry would move them toward a negotiated conclusion. Notwithstanding his expectation that U.S. forces would see little or no combat, Wilson believed that the United States would emerge in a commanding position to shape a peace to end not just this war but all wars.

Whether American consensus formed in support of Wilson's decision or Wilson came to his decision because consensus had formed may never be unraveled. If he can be faulted for his hesitation, he can also be praised for entering war only when the country was prepared for it and more or less unified. In any case, World War I ended as a consequence of American intervention, but not before a million Yanks fought and a third of them killed, wounded, or captured. Although Russia's withdrawal did enable Germany to ramp up its effort on the Western Front, it was not enough to avoid defeat.

The armistice of November 11, 1918, led to the Paris Peace Conference, at which the huge U.S. delegation was led by Wilson.<sup>11</sup> The stage was set for American internationalism, a just and stable Wilsonian order, and a durable peace. "It was the destiny of the United States," he declared, "to carry liberty and justice" to the world's peoples, and to "convert them to the principles of America."<sup>12</sup> But the peace that followed bore little resemblance to the equitable terms, democratic comity, and global application of self-determination that Wilson believed were needed to avert another conflagration. As he feared, the punitive terms imposed by the Allies sowed the seeds of German revenge, the Nazi Party, the Third Reich, and World War II. As it turned out, American diplomats and lawyers, under Wilson's nose, helped design the draconian peace and establish the legal basis for reparations, leaving it to a British political economist, John Maynard Keynes, to warn of dire consequences.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the immediate goal of defeating Germany was achieved, but Wilson's larger goals for a peaceful world order to follow were not.

## Realism and Idealism

Wilson's decision was based on model of reality that was sound as far as the war was concerned but unrealistic as far as postwar conditions were concerned. He was right to read Berlin as increasingly militarized, hostile toward the United States, and willing to go to practically any lengths, including surprise attacks on neutral ships, to win. This was a significant change for someone who faulted all the combatants for their headstrong rigidity and headlong rush to disaster. Had he clung to his original model, despite evidence that invalidated it, he might have maintained U.S. neutrality until forced by German belligerence and American politics to abandon it. With Russia in upheaval and out of the war, American indecision might even have given Germany enough time to defeat Britain and France.

Wilson correctly reasoned that the cycle of German actions and necessary U.S. responses, starting in January 1917, made entering the war inevitable if not desirable. He knew that arming U.S. merchant vessels was necessitated by German U-boat attacks, but also that such U.S. action would lead not to German concessions but instead to escalation. Wilson was also right to think that U.S. entry on the side of the Allies would lead to the end of the war, though he thought it would come sooner and with less U.S. fighting and dying than it did.<sup>14</sup>

Broadly speaking, Wilson's expectation was nearly the opposite of the German leaders who ordered unrestricted U-boat warfare. As explained in Chapter Five, they thought that the U-boats would force Great Britain into submission before the United States could enter the war. In contrast, Wilson figured that U.S. help would enable the British to hold on until an American army, or the very prospect of one, brought Germany to the negotiating table. The fact that the U.S. Navy instituted an escorted-

convoy system to protect transatlantic shipping assured that Wilson was right and the Germans were wrong.

At the same time, Wilson's model of how the war would end was not that of London or Paris, or for that matter Berlin. Again, he expected that the exhausted parties would be ready to negotiate as soon as the war's probable outcome was clarified by U.S. entry. As it turned out, France and Great Britain were emboldened to fight until victory. The German government, now in the grip of Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg, was not about to capitulate, especially because they did not think that the United States could bring force to bear for another two years.

Wilson's cognitive model included a view of his fellow Americans. It was his belief that they were ready to go to war and, beyond that, to shed isolationism and accept the mantle of international leadership. As the refusal of the Senate to approve U.S. membership in Wilson's League of Nations would show, he was mistaken about this. If there was a flaw in Wilson's model of reality, it was his propensity to project onto whole populations—European and American—his personal view of right and wrong, war and peace, law and order, and the way to a better future. This wishful belief turned to profound disillusionment when his plan "to end all wars" failed on both sides of the Atlantic. Equally distressing was that the promise of U.S. leadership, which influenced his decision to go to war, fell flat.<sup>15</sup>

Yet none of these miscalculations—overestimating U.S. influence, hoping for a rapid end to the fighting and a negotiated settlement, expecting a peaceful international order to follow—determined Wilson's decision to go to war. That decision was based on rational and valid judgments that German force had to be met with force and that it mattered a lot to the United States and to the future that Great Britain and France not be defeated.

As a decisionmaker, Wilson believed in his intellectual and moral superiority. He was more than a visionary. While his principles and concepts were idealistic, his tactical plans and actions were shrewd. Wilson was mostly indifferent to the advice of his friends and the criticism of his detractors. He regarded his chief lieutenants, except for House, as weak and unreliable: he ousted Bryan as secretary of state for his pacifism and distrusted the wisdom and loyalty of Bryan's Anglophile deputy and successor, Robert Lansing. As Wilson worked to keep American options open, Lansing lobbied and schemed for a decision to go to war. Even Wilson's closest confidant, House, was not taken as seriously by Wilson as he, House, claimed to be. Wilson trusted his own prodigious mind above all, kept his own cautious counsel, and was hesitant to the end.

Wilson delayed entering the war until he saw no alternative, not because the people and institutions around him favored delay but despite the fact that they did not. Perhaps the best way to describe Wilson's decisionmaking is that it was torturously deliberative. He, more than his advisors and critics, painstakingly weighed expected gains against risks, and waited until he himself could not refute the case for war. Even as that case became irrefutable in late 1916 and early 1917, Wilson's refusal to prepare



for war suggests a mentality of denial if not self-deception—a product, no doubt, of his visceral revulsion to the thought of joining Europe's self-inflicted bloodbath. At the very least, hedging against war by partially mobilizing U.S. forces would have been prudent. Wilson may have made the right, hard decision in the end, but his method was far from coldly objective.

Because he took so long that there was no room left for further delay or deliberation, maybe Wilson can be criticized for being indecisive. At the same time, he had time on his side. Apart from the terrible killing going on in Europe, Wilson felt no urgency to decide; so he took the time to think, to process fresh information, and to size up the political context of a choice for war.<sup>16</sup> Wilson could be criticized as indecisive precisely because events largely made the decision for him. But as other cases in this study show, so-called decisive leadership can lead to blunders when not receptive to inconvenient facts or tempered by objective analysis.

The information available to Wilson was sketchy; the United States had weak and disjointed intelligence capabilities then. But he possessed the basic knowledge needed for a sound decision. True, he may have been unaware of how unprepared the U.S. military was for war in Europe; however, this would not have affected his decision because he thought that large-scale U.S. fighting would not be necessary to convince Germany to seek peace. He may have underestimated German will; but it was German actions—U-boat attacks and reported atrocities—that impelled his decision. Communications between U.S. and German leaders were extensive but mainly consisted of stilted diplomatic notes staking out legal positions with oblique warnings. Had there been more candid and informative exchanges, however, the result would likely have been the same.

Wilson came to know, though he long found it hard to accept, that it would take U.S. entry to end the war. But he could also have known, for ample information was available, that entering the war would not empower the United States to design the peace and lead the international institutions that followed. Similarly, he could have (and may have) known that his countrymen did not share his eagerness for international engagement, much less leadership. Any such misjudgments were the result of Wilson's excessive confidence in his ideas, his ideals, and his ability to persuade others to embrace them.

## **Reluctant but Right**

Notwithstanding his postwar illusions, Wilson's decision to go to war was rational. Arguably, he knew enough to have made the decision earlier, but by no more than a matter of months. Conversely, he was not wrong to defer the decision as long as the Germans conformed to restrictive rules for submarine warfare. By delaying, he had

a stronger case that disarmed most of his critics, hawks and doves, and unified the country.

History's verdict is that Wilson made a decision that was not only reasoned but right. That the Allies, the American people, and the rest of the world did not conform to his larger vision of what should follow war may have been a product of unfounded idealism. But the history that followed proved him more right than wrong.

In sum, the case of Woodrow Wilson's decision to enter World War I illustrates that the choice of war is not necessarily a misjudgment, of course. It also suggests that having strong intuition and deep beliefs, as Wilson did, does not prevent rational choice. Important for this study's purposes, fresh information about objective reality, especially German actions and what they revealed about German intentions, brought Wilson's decisionmaking model closer to objective reality—in effect, forcing realism on his idealism. The case shows that having the open-mindedness, objectivity, and flexibility to alter one's strategic model may be critical in making good choices and avoiding bad ones.

## Hitler's Decision to Invade the USSR, 1941

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*We terminate the endless German drive to the south and west of Europe, and direct our gaze towards the lands in the East. . . . If we talk about new soil and territory in Europe today, we can think primarily only of Russia and its vassal border states.*

—Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*

*One of the first rules of war is: don't march on Moscow.*

—Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, quoted in Barton Whaley, *Codeword Barbarossa*

### Hitler's Momentous Mistake

Two faulty decisions made in Berlin and Tokyo changed the course of World War II and may have saved the world from fascist domination.<sup>1</sup> In 1941, over a six-month period, one Axis power attacked the Soviet Union and another attacked the United States.<sup>2</sup> Each decision, made quite separately, resulted in a surprise attack on a powerful nation with strategic depth. In both cases the effect of the surprise attack was overestimated and the reconstitution capabilities of the larger nation were underestimated. Both decisions were made with short-term victory in mind and without a full appreciation of the consequences of a protracted war. Once the Soviet Union and the United States both entered the war, it was only a matter of time before Adolf Hitler and Hideki Tojo fell. Both attacks were optional, although decisionmakers in both Berlin and Tokyo treated them as inevitable if not imperative. This chapter and the next try to explain why these blunders occurred and what we can learn from them.

## Reversing Defeat and Gazing to the East

The Treaty of Versailles ending World War I reduced Germany's territory in the east, imposed severe economic reparations, included a guilt clause blaming Germany for the war, and limited German rearmament. Hyperinflation in 1922–1923 wiped out the savings of most German families. The Gustav Stresemann government decided to work with France to manage this economic crisis, which meant paying war reparations and in effect admitting responsibility for the war. Many Germans felt that they had not lost the war militarily and that their punishment was disproportionate. Hitler tapped into this sentiment and attempted his 1923 Beer Hall Putsch, which landed him in jail with considerable notoriety and nationalist support. While in jail he produced *Mein Kampf*, which laid out the extreme visions that he sought to implement in the 1930s.

The Weimar Republic was a failure. In the early 1930s, the Great Depression hit Germany particularly hard, with 40 percent unemployment. Street fighting flared between leftist and rightist groups. Hitler rose to power through the ballot box by creating a nationalistic vision to restore Germany's greatness, including the goal of Lebensraum (living space) in the east for an expanding German *Volk* (people). A massive rearmament began. In 1934 Hitler purged his own party by murdering political enemies and in 1936 remilitarized the Rhineland without a French response.

Hitler's primary focus, as he made plain in *Mein Kampf*, was land in the east. Westward conquest was a secondary focus, made a priority when France and Britain honored their commitments to Poland. In the west, Hitler saw fellow Aryans who might be co-opted. In the east, he saw a loathsome Bolshevik regime, Slavs whom he considered *Untermenschen*, and leadership by a so-called Jewish elite. For Hitler, this was a combination that required action.

Hitler took steps early in his tenure to direct his gaze to the east. He broke a long-standing armaments-cooperation agreement with Russia in 1933. Three years later he joined the Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan.<sup>3</sup> Hitler and Stalin fought by proxy during the 1936 Spanish Civil War. Stalin resisted Hitler's efforts to gain control over Czechoslovakia and sought alliances to protect Russia against Hitler's unabashed vision.

By 1939, Hitler and his Schutzstaffel (SS) began an effort to convert his vision into a brutal plan, called Generalplan Ost, which called for the racial reorganization of Eastern Europe, including Russia.<sup>4</sup> It prescribed ethnic cleansing and genocide of Slavs in order to make room for Germany's population, which would grow, as German women were encouraged to have large families. Hitler's motivation combined aspiration for Germany with fear and contempt for Slavs, Jews, and Communists. As Stephen Fritz concludes, this plan "anticipated and was directly linked to the so-called Final Solution."<sup>5</sup> But the time was not yet ripe for an attack on Russia. First, Hitler would take advantage of a shared interest with Stalin in coveted Polish territory, which had been controlled by their predecessors for more than a century but was relinquished as a result of World War I. In August of 1939, Hitler and Stalin set aside their ideologi-

cal and nationalist differences to find common purpose. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact contained a five-year mutual nonaggression pact and a secret protocol dividing the territory between them, notably Poland.<sup>6</sup> Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, and the Soviet Union invaded Poland weeks later.

The new proximity between Germany and the Soviet Union further exacerbated existing tensions. In November 1939, Stalin invaded Finland and met unexpectedly fierce resistance, creating the impression of Soviet military weakness. In April 1940, Soviet military bases were created in the three Baltic states, and Stalin occupied Bessarabia and Bukovina in June. Stalin was reinforcing his strategic position against Germany, and Hitler knew it.

Meanwhile, Hitler was forced to deal with his Western Front. France and Britain declared war in response to Hitler's invasion of Poland. Hitler reacted in 1940 by invading Norway, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and finally France. Blitzkrieg skirted the Maginot Line, and France capitulated on June 22. Most of the British army escaped through Dunkirk.

The Battle of Britain lasted from July 10 to October 31, 1940. Given British naval superiority, German admirals told Hitler that they needed absolute air superiority before they could launch an amphibious invasion. British and German aircraft were numerically fairly even, but Britain had several advantages, including radar and operating over its home territory. As of September, the Luftwaffe's focus turned from air control to bombing British cities. The Royal Air Force survived, and Hitler lost the Battle of Britain.

Hitler asked his staff if the attacks on Britain and plans for invasion should be called off, believing that Britain would eventually accept an armistice.<sup>7</sup> Having failed in his effort to conquer Britain, Hitler turned back to his primary target in the east. He told his staff that the British were continuing to fight because they hoped Russia would be drawn in on their side. Ergo, if Russia were defeated, Britain would capitulate. Now he said: "The road to London ran through Moscow."<sup>8</sup>

## The Decision for Operation Barbarossa

Historians have debated whether Operation Barbarossa was a pragmatic decision of an opportunist or "the fruition of a long espoused 'programme' for eastern expansion."<sup>9</sup> Most appear to have accepted that Hitler's ideologically driven desire for Lebensraum drove his foreign policy.<sup>10</sup> David Stahel concludes that the operation represented "a culmination of his life-long struggle against alleged Jewish Bolshevik interests," while allowing for "more immediate strategic and economic objectives vital to the pressing needs of the day."<sup>11</sup> Gabriel Gorodetsky determines: "Perhaps the only explanation lies with those who highlight the symbiosis in Hitler's war policy between calculation and dogma, strategy and ideology, foreign policy and radical policy."<sup>12</sup> In sum, there were

both long-standing root causes and more proximate ones that pointed to seeking war in the east.

Some speculated at the time that Hitler might settle for massive Soviet concessions, as Germany did in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918), or that he might opt to occupy the Baltic states and then attack Leningrad from the sea. There is little evidence for that case. In fact, just before the invasion, Hitler cut off diplomatic ties with the USSR out of fear that Stalin would make significant concessions and thus negate the case for a massive invasion.<sup>13</sup>

At the Berghof conference on August 22, 1939, Hitler stressed his plan to attack the Soviets. He concluded: “There is no time to lose. War must come in my life-time. My pact [Molotov-Ribbentrop] was meant only to stall for time, and gentlemen, to Russia will happen just what I have practiced with Poland—we will crush the Soviet Union.”<sup>14</sup> At this conference, military leaders initiated planning for what became Operation Barbarossa; it thus was a watershed event in the planning for the operation.<sup>15</sup> By November 1939, Hitler told his staff that he would move against the Soviet Union at the first opportunity after conquering Western Europe. In the spring of 1940, Hitler moved further secret planning in this direction and told one of his generals that after the fall of France that he would be free for the showdown with Bolshevism.<sup>16</sup> In July, as the Battle of Britain got under way, Hitler instructed General Franz Halder to begin detailed planning for an invasion of the USSR.<sup>17</sup> Hitler suggested to General Wilhelm Keitel that the invasion might even begin in the autumn of 1940, but Keitel convinced the führer that logistics would not be ready by then.<sup>18</sup> Hitler presented the plan to his chiefs of staff at Berchtesgaden on July 31, 1940.<sup>19</sup>

Hitler’s plans for Operation Barbarossa developed on a track parallel to his negotiations with Vyacheslav Molotov. From November 12 to 13, 1940, Hitler and Molotov met in Berlin in an effort by Hitler to redirect Russian ambitions southward and eastward. The key agenda item was Russia joining the Tripartite Pact. When Molotov pressed Russian claims in the Baltic states, an “ill-tempered discussion” ensued. Hitler reaffirmed then that no viable accommodation could be reached with the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> On November 25, Stalin sent Hitler a revised proposal for Russian accession to the Tripartite Pact, which Hitler never answered.

At about the same time, Germany and Russia were in a contest for control of the Balkans, vying for influence in Bulgaria and Romania. The main factor was Russia’s refusal to accept German predominance in Romania and Russia’s claim to joint control over the mouth of the Danube River. Hitler terminated the “irreconcilable” negotiations the following day.<sup>21</sup>

Hitler then decided that the invasion would be launched in the spring of 1941, and he ordered an elaborate deception campaign designed to increase the prospects of surprise.<sup>22</sup> He came to see planning the invasion of Great Britain as a deception for the invasion of the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup> In October, Germany had already begun developing road and rail links to the east to facilitate the invasion.<sup>24</sup> The first draft of Directive 21,

code-named “Fritz,” was ready on December 12. Hitler revised the plan and renamed it Operation Barbarossa in honor of Fredrick I. He then ordered a “reluctant but compliant” General Staff to plan on invading on May 15, 1941.<sup>25</sup>

Then fate intervened. In March, the Yugoslav government was overthrown by a coup d'état. Without waiting for details on the new government, Hitler decided to take military action. By then, Hitler's ally Mussolini had failed to occupy Greece, as agreed. So in April, Hitler ordered invasions of both Yugoslavia and Greece, which delayed Barbarossa for another five weeks.

According to his friend Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler later said: “If the Italians had not attacked Greece and needed our help the war would have taken a different course. We could have anticipated the Russian cold by weeks and conquered Leningrad and Moscow.”<sup>26</sup> In any case, the Balkan diversion did not affect Hitler's decision to invade the Soviet Union.

On June 6 the final timetable for Operation Barbarossa was set, with June 21 as the last date to cancel. German forces, along with troops from Italy, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, and Croatia, crossed the frontier at 3:00 a.m. on June 22, one year to the day after the fall of France—129 years after Napoleon's failed invasion of Russia.

## From Victory to Defeat

Hitler's plan to fool Stalin worked remarkably well, permitting near-total surprise. It consisted of four different deceptions: The real campaign was the invasion of Britain; troops were being sent to the east for defensive purposes; the buildup was targeted at the Balkans; and war with the Soviet Union would be preceded by an ultimatum. Though Barton Whaley lists eighty-four different warnings that should have alerted Moscow,<sup>27</sup> Stalin refused to believe or act on any of them, in part because he did not want to take any action that might provoke Hitler.<sup>28</sup>

The order of battle in the zone of combat included about three million troops on each side. Russia outnumbered Germany in both tanks and aircraft by three to one, the Battle of Britain having depleted the Luftwaffe. But surprise and blitzkrieg soon gave Germany a decisive victory in the opening round of fighting. German forces attacked in three army groups under Wilhelm von Leeb toward Leningrad, under Gerd von Rundstedt toward Kiev, and under Fedor von Bock toward Moscow. German forces advanced four hundred miles in four weeks in the center, capturing 300,000 Soviet prisoners and destroying 2,500 tanks and 250 aircraft. By mid-July German forces were two hundred miles from Moscow. The Germans' advance was so fast that it compromised their supply lines and communications.<sup>29</sup> Then heavy rains and flooding bogged down German tanks and trucks. Army Group Center had to pause.

In August, Hitler and his advisors debated which way the campaign should turn. This further slowed the German advance. Hitler then ordered panzer divisions from

Army Group Center to divert southward to support operations being conducted by von Rundstedt in the Caucasus. Of course, this weakened the central thrust. The best course of action for the panzer divisions was a subject of disagreement between Hitler and General Franz Halder before the invasion began, with Halder arguing that all of the forces should focus on Moscow and Hitler advocating the ill-fated multipronged approach. That Halder did not pursue his argument with Hitler during planning in December 1940 reflected the “disjointed method of communication within the High Command.”<sup>30</sup>

Benefiting from these delays, Russia conducted a scorched-earth policy that denied German troops indigenous supplies. Russian railroads had a different gauge and Russia destroyed the trains they could not withdraw, impeding the German advance. Stalin eventually shipped entire munitions plants to the Urals and Siberia.

By November temperatures dropped sharply, followed by one of Russia’s worst winters in decades. Von Bock fought a major battle at Vyazma, capturing six hundred thousand Russian troops but exhausting his own. German forces reached the outskirts of Moscow, but they were not prepared for winter. They were ill clad compared with Russian troops. Because German engines lacked antifreeze, mobility literally screeched to a halt. By November, Germany had suffered 730,000 casualties. On December 6, 1941, General Georgy Zhukov launched a counteroffensive. The next day Japan struck Pearl Harbor, and soon Germany and the United States were also at war.

Hitler now faced the prospect of major war on two fronts. The Battle of Stalingrad, fought from August 1942 to February 1943, was a decisive Russian victory, with a combined two million casualties. Friedrich Paulus’s Sixth Army was surrounded and, after suicidal attempts to break out, surrendered on February 2, 1943.<sup>31</sup> Many historians consider this to be the major turning point of the war in the European theater. The German retreat began.

## Understanding Hitler and His Environment

Ultimate responsibility for the decision to invade Russia belonged to one man, Adolf Hitler, who controlled all elements of German power. Hitler often made decisions by taking long walks to find the answer deep within himself. He generally did not share his decisionmaking with others. He would make the decision, create the vision, and then often micromanage implementation. So to understand the decision we need to understand Hitler’s complicated and devious mind. Research suggests that Hitler’s personality was affected by:<sup>32</sup>

- An unhappy childhood with four siblings who died young, a pompous and drunken father who beat him, and a mother who protected him but died young
- Failure as a painter



- Wartime experiences as a pliant corporal in the trenches of the Western Front
- Early postwar access to virulent nationalism and anti-Semitism in Vienna and Bavaria
- Exposure to Russian émigrés who despised Bolshevism
- Desire for order, compounded by the near anarchy of the Weimar Republic
- Success as a beer-hall rabble-rouser
- Sexual perversion, asexual behavior, and heavy drinking
- Infatuation with Napoleon.

These conditions may have predisposed Hitler to the blunder of 1941:

- Creation of grand visions based on revenge and hatred
- Thinking in black and white
- Belief in invincibility
- Superhuman self-assurance
- Messianic complex
- Paranoia
- Rage, binge drinking, and suicidal tendencies
- Complete disregard for human suffering.

In sum, Hitler shared Napoleon's abnormal self-confidence, but with much darker and dangerous demons. His intent was not simply to impose his will on Russia but to punish and destroy it. Yet a warped personality alone is not enough to explain Hitler's misguided decision to invade. It also took a willingness of most of Germany's General Staff to follow. The German military did so not only because its leaders were under Hitler's heel but also because they were ill informed about the Soviet military and economy. They held a belief in Russian inferiority, formed during World War I; had special contempt for Soviet officers; underestimated Soviet industrial capacity; were overconfident after their defeat of France; and consequently believed that Russia could be defeated in a few months.<sup>33</sup> Many held what Stahel called a "delusional attitude" that the Soviet Union would simply collapse.<sup>34</sup> By and large, their defective model of reality dovetailed with Hitler's more sinister one.

German society at the time was constituted for loyalty, consensus, and consent. Hitler had constructed a personality cult as an infallible leader and had absolute power. Those closest to the führer were the most dependent, obsequious, and afraid of this menacing figure. Staffs and advisors competed with each other for his favor.<sup>35</sup> Some established senior officers were willing to challenge Hitler on operational matters. The only way a more junior dissenter might have had an impact would be to assassinate Hitler. From 1934 to 1941, there were more than twenty attempts on Hitler's life.<sup>36</sup>

There were pockets of polite dissent among Hitler's more trusted advisors with regard to Operation Barbarossa. In fact, the historian Alan Clark reports that "every

senior official in the German Army had, at some time or other, warned Hitler about the danger of attacking Russia while still engaged in the West.<sup>37</sup> Hitler knew who they were and he found ways to neutralize or bypass their dissent.<sup>38</sup> Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop wanted to preserve his dream of Russo-German friendship.<sup>39</sup> So Hitler kept him in the dark about Barbarossa until a month before the invasion date.<sup>40</sup> As soon as Ribbentrop learned of the decision, he agonized over whether to oppose Hitler but thought better of it. The navy also indicated early concerns about transfers of units to the east; but when the naval commander in chief, Admiral Erich Raeder, showed skepticism about operations against Russia, Hitler simply lied to him about his intentions.<sup>41</sup> Others warned Hitler about logistical difficulties inherent in a march to Moscow. Hitler dismissed all these warnings, not because they were vague or insubordinate but because they implied doubt in his judgment and vision. As Richard Hooker writes, Hitler “viewed the counsel of his military chiefs with ill-concealed contempt.”<sup>42</sup>

## A Flawed Theory of Success

Germany’s expectation of success in Operation Barbarossa was based on three interconnected assumptions: the power of blitzkrieg, Soviet weakness, and confidence that surprise would lead to quick victory and avoid the Russian winter. Each turned out to be wrong.

German military prowess in general and blitzkrieg operations in particular made Hitler feel invincible. Hitler and his officer corps felt an overwhelming hubris after blitzkrieg proved wildly successful in Poland and France.<sup>43</sup> German generals had warned Hitler before Barbarossa that occupying western Russia would be more of a drain than a relief for the German economy. One major-general warned that food would only last for twenty days.<sup>44</sup> But Hitler believed that once Germany had successfully invaded Russia by blitzkrieg, he could make up for any German logistics and industrial shortfalls by using the labor and resources of western Russia to support his military and economic efforts. That was not to be the case. Inadequate German logistics and failure to foresee industrial shortage were high among the German mistakes.<sup>45</sup>

Hitler’s assumptions about the power of blitzkrieg disregarded the lesson of Britain, where a natural barrier prevented German conquest. In the case of Russia, nature’s barrier was winter rather than water. While blitzkrieg proved successful against Russia at the outset, eventually winter doomed it.

As for the expectation of support from the Russian population, Hitler’s own concept of Lebensraum alienated occupied peoples and fanned determined partisan warfare behind the lines. Hitler was unable to see that his goal of not only conquering Russia but also subjugating if not exterminating the Slavs meant that he was almost certain to face guerrilla warfare in the areas that his armies had taken.<sup>46</sup> This diverted

many of Hitler's elite SS troops from more offensive operations. Also, Stalin's scorched-earth policy largely denied German forces use of resources in the western USSR.

The second flawed German assumption was that the Russian military and government would collapse if attacked, as they had in 1917. Hitler told his generals: "We have only to kick in the front door and the whole rotten Russian edifice will come tumbling down."<sup>47</sup> Such confidence was reinforced by German awareness of Stalin's 1935–1938 purges of the officer corps, which killed two of five marshals, 154 of 186 division commanders, and 401 of 456 colonels. The German General Staff felt that this would severely weaken Russia's military capabilities, and they wanted to act before Stalin could reverse the damage. Stalin believed that he could repair the damage to his officer corps by 1942; he tried to buy time.<sup>48</sup> The German General Staff also believed that Russia had a limited reconstitution and mobilization capacity and that Russia would get little support from its allies.

Stalin's dictatorship presented a much stronger wartime government than did the czar's in 1917. The prospect of national annihilation created a strong bond domestically and a willingness to tolerate extreme casualties. The Soviets suffered 8.7 million military casualties, with total national casualties numbering some 20 million.<sup>49</sup> The military purges replaced many professional officers with political commissars. While these political commissars were not as militarily competent as their predecessors, they were loyal to Stalin. In the kind of protracted war Stalin was to fight, these characteristics of the new officer corps had their value.

On the economic front, Stalin's mass arrests created a gulag, with prisoner employees becoming a core of the Soviet command economy. Labor was mobilized for wartime production on an epic scale, with mandatory long hours contributing to rapid industrialization. By quickly disassembling munitions plants in Russia's west and reconstructing them east of the Urals, Stalin was able to produce most of the tanks he needed to stop and defeat the blitzkrieg. Also, the Allied lend-lease program provided the Soviet military with twenty-two thousand tanks and half a million tactical vehicles, mostly delivered by convoys to Murmansk.<sup>50</sup>

German underestimation of Soviet strength also involved a major intelligence failure. German intelligence correctly estimated that Stalin had 150 divisions in the western Soviet Union, with another 50 perhaps to be thrown in later. In reality, Stalin was able to bring up another 200 divisions early in the campaign, giving Russia a volume of fighting power that Hitler had not anticipated.<sup>51</sup>

The third flawed assumption was that a surprise attack would deliver swift victory. Such wishful thinking led to wishful planning: There was no need to prepare for the Russian winter or to be deterred by logistical and industrial shortfalls. Historians have taken the German General Staff to task for incompetent planning, sluggish adaptation to Soviet tactics, irresponsible staff work, and shameless overconfidence.<sup>52</sup> Germany did achieve strategic surprise thanks to a deft disinformation campaign and Stalin's refusal to believe that Hitler had the audacity to invade.<sup>53</sup> The element of surprise

had a striking impact on the relative casualty rates and pace of German progress during the first month. But Hitler lost much of that advantage through a combination of bad weather, delays, and his own decision to divert troops from the center to the south.

In fact, some analysts argue that if Hitler had not diverted panzer divisions from the main thrust to Moscow, the Wehrmacht would have seized Moscow before winter and could have forced Stalin to capitulate.<sup>54</sup> Of course, Napoleon took Moscow and still lost.

As explained, the invasions of Yugoslavia and Greece delayed the start of Operation Barbarossa by five weeks. Yet the speed and success of those and other offensives led Hitler to believe that there was still time to complete Barbarossa before winter set in. German forces had fewer than four months to complete their mission to Moscow, leaving no margin for error. An error did take place though, when Hitler decided to halt the German advance and move panzer divisions from the central to the southern front. His generals knew better; they knew that victory was more likely by focusing on Moscow. As the historian Richard Hooker recounts:

But Hitler would not listen. Mesmerized by the huge Soviet forces in the Kiev salient, he issued orders on 21 August to break off the armored advance on Moscow and encircle Kiev. [Heinz] Guderian was to wheel southeast to close the northern pincer around the city and link up with Von Rundstedt's panzers coming up from the south. [Hermann] Hoth was diverted northward to assist Von Leeb. Furious, Halder offered to resign and counseled [Walther] Von Brauchitsch to do the same. But Hitler stood firm, and the advance toward the capital slowed to the pace of the weary infantry as the panzers moved off on their new task.<sup>55</sup>

The August 21 diversion of panzer divisions from the Moscow salient to the south stemmed from the same sense of overconfidence that drove Hitler's initial decision to invade.

Hitler had studied Napoleon's campaign and felt that Germany could learn from Napoleon's operational errors. But he learned the wrong lessons. Instead of sending his forces in one central thrust as Napoleon had done, Hitler divided his forces into three lines of attack, with each experiencing failure. Hitler also believed that Napoleon should have stayed to fight and not engaged in a disastrous retreat. As a result, when the Soviets counterattacked, Hitler ordered his armies to hold the line and fight to the end, resulting in enormous casualties. Hitler dismissed a critical lesson of Napoleon's failure, the impact of weather. Instead, he thought that he could avoid winter by winning a short war—as did Napoleon! Because Hitler failed to heed warnings that his army was not prepared for a winter campaign, his army froze.

## Conclusion

Hitler's reasoning with regard to Operation Barbarossa was flawed because his hubris and determination to accelerate his "showdown with Bolshevism" was so strong that he refused to see the risks he was running. This is true of Hitler's strategic decision to attack the Soviet Union in the first place and also of his operational decisions to delay the attack by five weeks and then to divert panzer divisions away from the central thrust against Moscow. Warnings about the pitfalls of Operation Barbarossa and diplomatic efforts to avoid the conflict were purposefully sidetracked by Hitler. Ultimately, the blunder called Operation Barbarossa occurred because of Hitler's hubris and the autocratic system he built.

To summarize, the invasion was the fulfillment of a two-decade-old vision of a maniacal leader. The risks were there for any student of history to see. Hitler had studied Napoleon's march to Moscow but learned the wrong lessons. Even if his troops had taken Moscow, as Napoleon's did, they would have been vulnerable to the Russian winter. While Napoleon retreated, Hitler refused and suffered even greater casualties. Generally speaking, the knowledge that he possessed or that was at hand was adequate to have avoided this blunder; but past successes blinded him and his General Staff. He knew the supply and logistics problems his military faced, and he knew that the delay in commencing the invasion would compress his opportunity for victory until the cold set in.

The decisionmaking process provided few of the constraints and counterweights that might have prevented Hitler's blunder. He confined his early planning to a small group of military aides. Senior figures who might have opposed him, such as Ribbentrop and Raeder, were kept in the dark as long as possible. Even those who had some influence with him, like Joseph Goebbels, Martin Bormann, and Erwin Rommel, were shut out until April.<sup>56</sup> Operational differences with his General Staff were settled in Hitler's favor. The decisionmaking system consisted of one all-powerful and imbalanced individual, weak and dependent institutional support, and the manipulation of information to validate an idea forged by Hitler in the 1920s. Nothing less than an assassin's bullet could have stopped Operation Barbarossa. Failing that, Hitler's blunder cost him the war, the Third Reich, and his life.



## Japan's Attack on Pearl Harbor, 1941

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*Japan, from its seat on the small island of Honshu, wanted to be arbiter of Asia and the Western Pacific. The wish thrived in poverty and pride, finding company in thoughts which made it seem just. The Japanese people came to believe that the extension of their control over this vast region was both natural and destined.*

—Herbert Feis, *The Road to Pearl Harbor*

*The dock had seats for twenty-eight defendants. . . . They had once been powerful, but stripped of their uniforms and titles[,] . . . they did not look awesome.*

—Richard H. Minear, *Victors' Justice*

Japan's decision to bomb Pearl Harbor was a blunder of the highest order.<sup>1</sup> It ultimately led to the use of atomic weapons against two Japanese cities, the collapse of the existing Japanese state, the end of the Japanese empire, years of foreign occupation, and death sentences for many of its leaders. Tokyo blundered in steps. Perhaps the greatest misstep was the July 2, 1941, decision to invade southern Indochina. That decision locked into place a confrontation between Tokyo and Washington that Tokyo should have foreseen and that would require dramatic Japanese concessions to defuse. Once that confrontation was initiated, many Japanese leaders felt as if they had no choice but to attack because the United States was preparing to "encircle Japan," cut off its oil supplies, and block the ocean trade that was vital to Japan's imperial power. Alternative paths existed but were not fully explored. Japan gambled that a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor would neutralize the American Pacific fleet for enough time to allow Japan to consolidate its victories in Asia. Japan badly miscalculated the impact of the surprise attack on America's will and capability to surge military forces in relatively short order.

## Imperial Japan Colonizes China

Japan felt slighted at the Paris peace negotiations that ended World War I, cheated at the Washington Naval Conference, and resentful of the West. Western powers held colonies throughout Asia and the world, and Japan sought its own sphere of influence. By 1931, Japan had sent military forces into Manchuria after a fabricated incident and created the puppet state of Manchukuo, which it later annexed. The West protested, and Japan left the League of Nations.

Japan's industrialization, like Britain's earlier, created an economy whose production necessarily exceeded both domestic demand and domestic resources, creating the need for expanding markets and sources of raw material. A group of Japanese officers observing events in postwar Germany became obsessed with the importance of gaining economic autarky, including self-sufficiency through conquest.<sup>2</sup> Japan's economic welfare became dependent on ocean trade and on its navy. The Great Depression resulted in increased tariff barriers and reductions in Japanese exports. While the Depression hit Japan less hard than it did the West, Japanese gold stocks began to decline. Japan became totally reliant on imports of energy and at least thirteen key raw materials. Fearing that their industrial progress would be reversed, Japanese leaders conceived of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, dominated by Japan, as a way to deal with this challenge. They turned to overseas conquest.

By 1937, under pressure from the army, Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoye's government ordered the invasion of China. Japanese victories at Nanking, Xuzhou, Hankou, Guangzhou, Wuchang, and Hanyang did not fully suppress Chinese nationalist armies, and bitter fighting persisted. Japanese atrocities at Nanking and elsewhere shocked the world.<sup>3</sup>

By 1939 Japan sought to extend its conquests beyond China. The Japanese military was divided as to whether its next move would be north into Siberia or south into Indochina and the Indies. Both had resources Japan needed. The North Strike Group of the Japanese army supported the former and South Army Strike Group (along with the navy) the latter. Russia (now the Soviet Union) and Japan had been rivals since before the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, and in 1936 Japan signed an anti-Communist pact with Germany. The Soviet Union in turn allied with China, furnishing financial and military aid. The North Strike Group prevailed, and limited border conflict began in May 1939. In August 1939, Japan lost a massive armored engagement on the Mongolian boarder against Soviet General Georgy Zhukov.<sup>4</sup> When Japan and Russia signed a cease-fire in September 1939, the Japanese drive to the north came to an end.

In June 1940, Japan made one of several decisions to turn its military attention to the south. By then it had already secured Hainan Island and other launch points for a military strike into Southeast Asia. Events in Europe facilitated this, as Germany had invaded France and the Netherlands, two countries with Asian colonies, creating new opportunities for Japan. Japan began to work with Germany and Vichy France to gain



greater access to rice, rubber, and tin from Indochina and with Dutch representatives to gain access to oil from the Indies. The Japanese sought to avoid competition for these resources and gain a dominant market position.

In September 1940, Japan pressured Vichy France to agree to a limited Japanese right to station troops in northern Indochina. Japan needed these facilities to block the flow of arms and fuel, which were making their way to the Chinese army from Haiphong through Hanoi to Yunnan.<sup>5</sup> Japan immediately violated the terms of the occupation agreement, and fighting broke out with French troops, quickly resulting in a Japanese victory and limited occupation.<sup>6</sup>

## U.S. Backlash

Despite its professed neutrality, the United States had significant interests in Asia. Aghast by Japanese atrocities, America provided material assistance to the Republic of China. In December 1937, Japan sank the U.S. gunboat *Panay*, increasing bilateral tension. By mid-1941, volunteer American pilots flying U.S. aircraft formed the Flying Tigers and saw combat over China.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, naval competition between the United States and Japan intensified. In 1934, Japan renounced its obligations under the Washington Naval Treaty to limit the size of its navy. By 1940, the Japanese fleet had grown to 375 ships, with an emphasis on aircraft carriers. While the United States neglected most of its armed forces in the 1930s, the Navy was an exception. In 1933 the U.S. National Industrial Recovery Act authorized the construction of cruisers and other combatants. By 1940, the United States had a fleet of 478 naval combatants, including fifteen battleships and six aircraft carriers. In addition, in the 1930s, the United States forward deployed much of its Pacific fleet from California to Hawaii to dissuade Japan from further expansion. Japanese officials interpreted the growth and shift of U.S. sea power as a threat to its own sea control, trade, national well-being, and strategy.<sup>8</sup>

In response to Japanese expansionism, the United States also imposed economic sanctions. U.S. Ambassador to Japan Joseph Grew and Admiral Harold Stark initially cautioned against excessive sanctions,<sup>9</sup> while Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Defense Secretary Henry Stimson, and State Department Assistant Secretary Dean Acheson pressed for tighter ones. In 1939, the United States had already terminated its Treaty of Commerce and Navigation with Japan.<sup>10</sup> By September 1940, Grew changed his mind in light of Japanese aggression in northern Indochina and sent what historians call his "green light" cable.<sup>11</sup>

That same month the United States halted its exports of scrap iron, steel, and aviation fuel to Japan on the grounds that it was needed at home. The embargo also extended to arms, ammunition, critical raw materials, aircraft parts, and machine

tools.<sup>12</sup> In January of 1941, the denial of war material was extended to copper, brass, bronze, zinc, nickel, and potash, causing a major impact on Japanese industry.

In September 1940, Japan had signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy pledging to “assist one another with all political, economic, and military means.” While Japan hoped that this would deter the United States,<sup>13</sup> in fact it compounded the affect of Japan’s occupation of northern Indochina and was taken in Washington as a move to counter American opposition to Japanese expansionism. Then, in April 1941, Japan signed a neutrality pact with the Soviet Union. Two months later Germany invaded the Soviet Union. The Japanese cabinet was caught by surprise and debated which way to turn. Despite German pressure, Japan maintained its neutrality with Russia and continued its move to the south. Japan thus began to shape its relationships with the major powers for a coming confrontation with the United States.

Also in April 1941, what we would now call a track II effort took place with two Catholic priests, a Japanese banker, and a Japanese colonel associated with the war ministry. They were nicknamed the “John Doe Associates” and produced what they hoped would be a potential deal to stop the downward spiral in bilateral relations. Under their proposal, Japan would resort to peaceful means in Southeast Asia and support Germany only if the United States attacked Germany first. The United States would restore normal relations with Japan and assist Japan in obtaining raw materials from Southeast Asia, and China would agree to merge governments with the Japanese-supported government in China. While their intentions were good, a thorough review of the episode by the historian R. J. C. Butow concludes that in fact they created confusion by misleading both sides with regard to the origins of various peace proposals. The result was to increase distrust between the two nations.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, the episode did demonstrate that there were creative solutions that might have been explored.

## **Fateful Decision**

In a fateful decision in July 1941 that set the final stage for Pearl Harbor, an Imperial Conference decided to occupy southern Indochina, declare the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, and call up a million reserves.<sup>15</sup> The move was considered by the Japanese army as a prerequisite to any subsequent move southward.<sup>16</sup> And yet the historian Herbert Feis concludes that “no combination of policies could have been more certain to bring Japan to ultimate defeat.”<sup>17</sup> Under this decision, Japan would not attack the Soviet Union despite pressure to do so from Germany; Japan would not abrogate the Tripartite Pact with Germany; and Japan would secure control over all of Indochina militarily.

From Washington, the Japanese ambassador to the United States, Kichisaburo Nomura, warned the foreign minister, Yosuke Matsuoka, that this decision would result in a major Japanese-American rupture. The United States had already embar-

goed iron, aviation fuel, and munitions a year earlier, and Japanese leaders should have had every reason to believe that the United States would expand these sanctions in response to a Japanese occupation of southern Indochina. Japan still had time to reverse its fateful July decision in response to firm messages from Washington. The home minister, Kiichiro Hiranuma, warned that war with the United States should be avoided at all cost,<sup>18</sup> but the Imperial Conference rejected the warnings.<sup>19</sup>

The minister of war, Hideki Tojo, felt that if Japan attained self-sufficient operations in the south, it could wear down China and withstand a long war with the United States and Britain.<sup>20</sup> There was no serious examination in Tokyo of the possibility of imposition of a total embargo by the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands.<sup>21</sup> They were taken by surprise.<sup>22</sup> Given the American reaction in 1940 to Japan's first incursion into Indochina, this lack of anticipation constitutes a massive error. The navy, which had traditionally served as a break on Japanese General Staff decision-making, forcefully supported the decision and created the consensus needed for the invasion.<sup>23</sup>

Franklin D. Roosevelt personally met with Nomura in a final attempt to stop Japan's incursion into southern Indochina. He suggested that if Indochina could be neutralized without a full Japanese occupation, an oil embargo might be avoided. At that critical moment, however, Vichy France conceded to the Japanese occupation of airfields and ports in southern Indochina. With the door to the rest of Indochina now opened by France, Roosevelt's warnings not to walk into that open door were disregarded.<sup>24</sup>

In response, the United States first froze all Japanese financial assets in the United States. But an oil embargo was postponed. In a flimsy attempt at compromise, Japan proposed to Roosevelt a deal under which Japanese occupation of Indochina could continue until the war with China was won; the United States would pressure the Chinese Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek to negotiate; and the United States would guarantee Japan's access to Dutch oil from the Indies. That unconstructive deal was rejected by Roosevelt.<sup>25</sup>

In August 1941, Acheson interpreted Roosevelt's earlier decision strictly and took steps to impose what amounted to a de facto oil embargo on Japan by canceling Japan's ability to pay for the oil.<sup>26</sup> Roosevelt did not object. Japan still depended on the United States for 80 percent of its oil; it had about two years in reserve. Meanwhile the United States began encouraging oil companies in the Dutch Indies not to cooperate with Japan. The cumulative impact of sanctions severely stressed the Japanese economy. Despite the clear warning, the Japanese government professed surprise and shock that the Americans would react this harshly.<sup>27</sup>

Throughout 1941, efforts to control the downward spiral were pursued in Washington with some forty or more meetings between Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Nomura. In Tokyo, Grew kept in close touch with Konoye. The United States had broken the diplomatic "Purple" code and knew Nomura's instructions in advance. This

intelligence made Nomura appear deceptive, and thus made Hull even more suspicious of Tokyo's motives. Washington's official position hardened: By midyear the United States was insisting that Japan leave both China and Indochina and give up all exclusive privileges.<sup>28</sup>

Revisionist historians have questioned Roosevelt's motives during the second half of 1941, arguing that he boxed Tokyo in by giving them no choice but to attack because he sought war with Japan as a back door means of declaring war on Germany.<sup>29</sup> The United States did take a tough line against Japanese aggression in China and Indochina, but Japanese behavior warranted that response. Japan was unwilling to make the kind of concessions that would have met Washington halfway and that might have relieved the economic sanctions the country's behavior triggered.

## Moves Toward War

Jeffrey Record's 2009 study of Japan's decision to attack Pearl Harbor argues that it must be seen in the light of Japan's available alternatives as of fall 1941, "which were either national economic suffocation or surrender of Tokyo's empire on the Asian mainland."<sup>30</sup> That is indeed how Tokyo saw its decision in late 1941. But how did Tokyo find itself in that bind, and could it have been avoided? The historian Eri Hotta notes that Japanese decisionmakers "tended to ignore that such extreme choices grew directly out of their own recent decisions and actions."<sup>31</sup>

In this sense the Japanese blunder was not just the final decision to attack Pearl Harbor; the blunder was also to get trapped in a situation that offered no attractive alternatives. The logic of Japan's decisions to sign the Tripartite Pact, turn south and occupy southern Indochina, and force massive concessions from the Dutch East Indies would lead either to a confrontation with the United States or to a conciliatory strategy by Japan. Japan could have made milder choices earlier on, found nonmilitary means of securing resources to the south, and avoided crippling sanctions. But the Japanese did not look to their own record for an explanation of their predicament. Their decisionmaking was based on conformity, acquiescence, obedience, and intuition.<sup>32</sup> The Japanese leadership did not want to yield to U.S. pressure. Tokyo increasingly had a military decisionmaking culture, and the solutions to that group all appeared to be military. They thought that the solution to an American oil embargo was seizing the oil fields of the Dutch East Indies. The United States again stood in the way.

The decision for war was incremental. In January of 1941, the Japanese military began preliminary planning for war with the United States, including an attack on Pearl Harbor. After the occupation of southern Indochina and the imposition of the U.S. oil embargo, the Japanese navy shifted ground from its earlier opposition to war. The navy chief of staff, Osami Nagano, began arguing that if war with the United States was inevitable, it should start soon, while oil supplies lasted.<sup>33</sup>

Real operational planning started in July 1941 for combined attack on the Indies and the Philippines, and for an attack on Pearl Harbor to neutralize the American Navy—the only force that might stop such an attack to the south. An attack on the Philippines, a U.S. protectorate with sizeable U.S. forces deployed there, would in any event mean war with the United States. However, these were only contingency plans. As war became more certain, the Japanese military conducted major exercises with aircraft simulating an attack on Pearl Harbor.

On September 6, war against the United States, Britain, and France was formally proposed in the Imperial Council. Konoye secured support from the navy and the emperor for one last chance to seek peaceful solutions with Roosevelt. The army insisted on a tight deadline for Konoye's effort and on receiving in exchange Konoye's support for war should the deadline not be met. Konoye had no choice but to agree.<sup>34</sup> Then the Imperial Council handed Konoye a negotiating position that the United States could not possibly accept. Roosevelt initially accepted Konoye's invitation for a summit, but the meeting never materialized because Washington, Hull in particular, was convinced that the Japanese policies were fixed. They were right. Konoye had no authority to change course and thus no room to negotiate.

When Tojo declared that the deadline had passed, Konoye resigned. The emperor rejected suggestions that Prince Naruhiko Higashikuni, a moderate who had some control over the army, be made prime minister on the grounds that the royal family should stay out of politics. Instead, Tojo became prime minister.

On November 2, the emperor gave his general consent to war. Three days later he approved the war plans, including the attack on Pearl Harbor, which would have to take place before January, when weather conditions might make the Japanese fleet's transit difficult. Negotiations continued, and on November 20 Nomura handed Hull the so-called plan B, which Hull deemed clearly unacceptable.<sup>35</sup> Final approval for the attack came on December 1. While the Japanese aircraft carriers sailed, negotiations continued in Washington; the fleet was told not to strike if those negotiations succeeded. But negotiations made no progress, and the fleet struck before war could be declared.

## Decisionmaking in Tokyo

Japan was not a dictatorship like Hitler's Germany. Decisionmaking was based on factions and efforts to reach consensus. But a decade of warfare had a massive impact on the decisionmaking culture in Tokyo. By 1940, most of Japan's leaders and ambassadors were military. The military itself had structures independent of civilian control and reported directly to the emperor. Military leaders fell into factions: The navy was generally less belligerent than its army counterparts. Both groups were needed for a policy consensus, so the navy had an effective veto. The Japanese army fighting in

China was particularly belligerent and saw operations against Indochina as a way to relieve military pressure on them. Most military leaders had little exposure to American culture and attitudes, and those who did still underestimated American resilience. Younger military officers tended to be more hawkish and were often unrestrained by senior officers who should have known better.<sup>36</sup> They carried an aggressive Bushido spirit and suffered from what Barbara Tuchman called “cultural ignorance.”<sup>37</sup> And they frequently made decisions without fully exploring their possible consequences.<sup>38</sup>

Underlying the decisionmaking structure and mentality of Japanese decision-makers was the shadow of assassination and coup. In 1936 a group of young right-wing officers attempted a coup and killed two former prime ministers. Thereafter the military gained much more influence over government. During his peacemaking efforts, an assassination attempt failed against Konoye.

The dominant military leader in Tokyo was Tojo, a career army officer who had served in Switzerland and briefly visited the United States early in his profession.<sup>39</sup> His nickname was “razor brain” for his analytical skills and his ability to make quick decisions. But he was said to be without breadth or feeling.<sup>40</sup> Hull said that Tojo was a typical Japanese officer with a “small-bore, straight-laced, one-track mind.” He exhibited an appalling lack of knowledge about events in Europe.<sup>41</sup> Tojo accused Konoye of having a weak character because Konoye foresaw difficulties resulting from Japanese policies. Once Tojo replaced Konoye, war was a near certainty.

Konoye, a prince, led what might be thought of as the peace faction in Tokyo. He was trained as a lawyer and studied Western philosophy. He sent his son to study in the United States.<sup>42</sup> But he also published an essay earlier in his career titled “Reject the Anglo-American Centered Peace.”<sup>43</sup> He had some liberal tendencies and supported “universal male” suffrage. But he relied heavily on the military for political support, and while he would seek compromise, he would not override the military. Throughout the crisis building toward Pearl Harbor, he sought diplomatic solutions to avoid conflict, but his negotiating hand never held adequate compromises.<sup>44</sup>

Tuchman concludes that most civilian leaders akin to Konoye wanted to keep America quiescent while they moved forward with Japan’s Asian designs. They thought that this could be managed by bluster, outlandish demands, and intimidation.<sup>45</sup> They failed to realize that this would be counterproductive and stiffen U.S. policies.<sup>46</sup> Japanese officials did not learn the lesson of the embargoes but rather took them as “a challenge.”<sup>47</sup> To a great extent, Japanese pride and the threat of economic destruction dictated Japanese policies. The Japanese believed that they were racially and spiritually superior to the effete Americans.<sup>48</sup>

Matsuoka was a career diplomat who received his law degree from the University of Oregon and at one point converted to Christianity. Yet he was enthralled with Hitler, advocated joining the Tripartite Pact as a way to balance the United States,<sup>49</sup> and sought to declare war on the Soviet Union after Hitler invaded.<sup>50</sup> Matsuoka initially opposed the July 2, 1941, decision to invade southern Indochina because he

felt that it would undermine Tokyo's ability to declare war on Russia, but he finally joined the consensus decision.<sup>51</sup> Matsuoka also distrusted Nomura, which cast doubt on Nomura's ongoing conversations with Hull. Matsuoka similarly purged the Foreign Ministry of pro-Anglo-American diplomats.<sup>52</sup> According to Feis, "Matsuoka and the men he served showed themselves most clearly as they were: displaced villains out of a 19th century American melodrama who advanced upon their obstinate objective of their affection with white words and black hearts."<sup>53</sup>

Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto played a critical and somewhat enigmatic role in the final decision to attack Pearl Harbor. He had perhaps the deciding vote. He had studied at Harvard and served as a naval attaché in Washington. So he knew the United States as well as any senior Japanese officer. His prestige and personality had the potential to sway the final decision on Pearl Harbor either way. The historian Gordon Prange concludes that had Yamamoto put his prestige behind Japan's moderate faction, diplomacy might have had a better chance. Similarly, Eri Hotta determines that "the great irony in Japan's decision to go to war is that its leaders could not have ever conceived of taking such a grand gamble had it not been for Admiral Yamamoto, who was fundamentally against the war." Strategically he argued against the war but operationally he planned for and encouraged the operation.<sup>54</sup> If there were to be war, he wanted to be in charge of it.<sup>55</sup> Once Yamamoto sided with the army in favor of war, the Konoye faction was incapable of stopping the momentum.

Yamamoto was the chief architect of Operation Hawaii and was responsible for convincing the Japanese Naval General Staff to adopt it.<sup>56</sup> He ultimately commanded the carriers that made the attack. Yamamoto's thinking was complex. He calculated that a Japanese attack to the south against Dutch and British possessions would require most of Tokyo's naval and air assets and would thereby leave Japan itself vulnerable to direct attack by the U.S. Navy. Thus, he wrote, "the only way is to have a powerful air force strike deeply at the enemy's heart at the very beginning of the war and thus to deal a blow, material and moral, from which it will not be able to recover for some time."<sup>57</sup>

Yamamoto's assessment of the impact of an attack on Pearl Harbor was also ambivalent. On the one hand, he told Konoye he had "utterly no confidence" in the outcome of war with the United States if it lasted two years or more. On the other hand, he also predicted that a surprise knockout blow could sink U.S. confidence so it could not be recovered.<sup>58</sup> Like many in the Japanese leadership, he bet that America would have limited staying power and that Japan could hold on long enough so that America would tire of the struggle and "agree to some sort of arrangement."<sup>59</sup> Despite his familiarity with American culture, he too miscalculated America's stamina.

The final decision within the navy to pursue Operation Hawaii was made by Admiral Osami Nagano, chief of the Naval General Staff. Like other naval officers, he had a fatalistic attitude, described as being like a "man in a canoe speeding down

rapids leading to Niagara Falls.” He approved Yamamoto’s plans “to settle a bitter contest in the Navy.”<sup>60</sup>

Emperor Hirohito sat on the pinnacle of this decisionmaking structure, but his power was limited.<sup>61</sup> He relied on the military to maintain the throne and him on it. He was personally very concerned about the impact of war with the United States and criticized some officers for being too optimistic about the outcome of a conflict. Tojo wrote in his diary that “whatever the Emperor said it should be so.”<sup>62</sup> But Hirohito did not exercise his authority adequately in accordance with his stated concerns about the affect of war with the United States.

In a series of conferences in October, economic ministers and other officials finally began to weigh in with economic arguments against war, and even Tojo seemed to have second thoughts. A suggestion was made to delay the attack on Pearl Harbor until 1942. But it was too late. Senior military officers opposed further delay on operational grounds. A decision was made on November 2 to continue negotiating with the United States and prepare for war at the same time.<sup>63</sup> This appeared to be a less belligerent alternative than immediate war, but it had the same effect. An emissary, Saburo Kurusu, was sent to Washington in a final effort to negotiate peace, but his efforts fell short as Tokyo’s deadline approached.

In the months before the emperor’s November 2 decision, Tokyo had put itself in a very difficult position, but it in fact had three different alternatives:<sup>64</sup>

- The first was the diplomatic path. Bluster had failed. To be successful on this path, Tokyo would have to reverse course and end its occupation of Indochina, hoping that the United States would loosen its economic embargoes in exchange. The failed John Doe Associates initiative is an example of a compromise that might have worked given more trust. But compromise was inconsistent with Japan’s military culture. And by then, diplomatic channels were clogged with distrust.
- Second, Tokyo could proceed with an attack on Dutch and British possessions but spare Pearl Harbor and the Philippines on the bet that U.S. neutrality would limit an American response. Historians look back at this as perhaps Tokyo’s most feasible option given its unwillingness to make concessions on Indochina. But the option was not given serious consideration. It remains unclear how the United States would have responded.
- Third, Tokyo could follow the advice of Yamamoto to strike deeply at the enemy’s heart and hope that the United States would tire of war in time for Tokyo to consolidate its victories.

Konoye and the navy had resisted the army’s more aggressive policies in the past. But Konoye’s and then Kurusu’s diplomacy had failed in large measure because of Japan’s inflexible positions. Yamamoto’s logic convinced the navy to support a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. The restraints were gone, and the third alternative was chosen.



## Pyrrhic Victory

On December 7, 1941, Yamamoto, commander of the carrier task force north of Hawaii, ordered the attack. Two waves of Japanese aircraft, 353 in total, damaged all eight battleships in Pearl Harbor. Four were sunk, two of which were raised eventually. Six of the eight returned to service later in the war. American aircraft were clustered together to prevent sabotage, creating an inviting target; 188 aircraft were destroyed. Significantly, the three U.S. aircraft carriers were at sea on routine maneuvers and escaped attack. Japanese intelligence was unaware of these maneuvers. No U.S. submarines were destroyed. A third wave of attack was not ordered by Yamamoto due to fuel shortage; consequently, facilities such as dry docks, ammunition dumps, power stations, and fuel storage facilities were not destroyed. Had the third wave been ordered to strike, the damage might have been more permanent. Despite the tragic losses, Pearl Harbor and most of its fleet were able to recover fairly quickly.<sup>65</sup>

The attack took place before Japan could formally declare war, creating the “day of infamy.” America instantly took a war footing. Six months later, at Midway, Japan sought to finish off the American carriers. Instead, aided by code breaking and some luck, planes from three U.S. carriers sank four of the six Japanese carriers that had struck Pearl Harbor. Midway is seen by military historians as one of the most decisive battles in naval warfare—for America it was what Japan hoped Pearl Harbor would be.

Japan lost 2.3 million people in the war. Many major cities were firebombed. Okinawa was invaded. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were leveled by atomic bombs. After the war, some five thousand Japanese were tried as war criminals throughout Asia; nine hundred were executed. Tojo failed at a suicide attempt and was executed after a trial in Tokyo. Konoye took his own life after hearing that he would be tried as a war criminal. The emperor and his throne were spared to facilitate the occupation.

## Japan's Flawed Model of Success

The decisionmaking process that led Tokyo to attack Pearl Harbor had layers of flaws. At the top of the list was the culture that emerged in Tokyo after years of warfare in China. The information they had was filtered through a prism of militarism, extreme nationalism, arrogance, the urge to conform, a pull toward groupthink, and do-or-die spirit. This affected the ability of Japanese leaders to analyze objectively. Japanese leadership had in the 1930s created a strong consensus on the need to create a new order in Asia and Japan's dominant role in it. There was some disagreement on how to define and achieve this. But the decisions about how to shape and implement that vision were increasingly being made by military officers with little understanding of or patience for nonmilitary options.

To this military-dominated culture, sanctions were not reasons to change policies; sanctions were hurdles to overcome. Diplomatic concessions were viewed as weak and a sign of flawed character. Alternative analysis was not prominent and not accepted by the top military leadership. It would have been hard for new knowledge to penetrate or analysis to change the outlook of the military and the plans that flowed from it. Consensus was too strong, and the price of major dissent was too high.

The second flaw was Tokyo's strategic concept itself. Japan felt that it had both a requirement and a right to become the colonial power in China and Indochina. Again, its economy needed guaranteed access to raw materials and export markets. China seemed weak. Europeans had benefited from colonialism in Asia, so why shouldn't an Asian power? The Japanese even thought that they would be seen by the people of Asia as liberating them from European yokes. If they met resistance, they would trample it. International public opinion did not matter.

Nearly every part of this strategic concept proved to be wrong. Japan could have explored alternative means to secure needed raw materials and export markets—for example, in exchange for ending its military occupations in Asia, it could have had preferential trade agreements. The Chinese saw the Japanese as invaders, not liberators. The resulting atrocities set American opinion strongly against Japan and produced a hardening of U.S. policy, including sanctions.

The third flaw was to misread American strength and policies. Japan saw the United States as having weak will and capability. The U.S. military had been allowed to deteriorate over a twenty-year period; isolationism and neutrality reflected America's interwar mood. Japanese leaders appreciated that the American economy was much stronger than theirs and that over time America's military could dominate theirs. But they took a short-term view, believing that a quick victory could solidify their control in Southeast Asia, while it would take a year or more for the United States to recover fully and reconstitute its power.

Further, the Japanese saw the United States as trying to encircle them economically and militarily, without recognizing that Japan brought this upon itself and could reverse it. The United States took actions in response to Japanese aggression—for example, by providing volunteers and military aid to China; by seeking to strengthen its position in the Philippines; by working with Australia, New Zealand, the British in Singapore, and the Dutch in the East Indies; and by increasing economic sanctions. This so-called encirclement was reactive and partial. But the Japanese saw it as eventually cutting off their economic lifeline.

Another Japanese flaw relating to U.S. policies was that Tokyo saw the United States as likely to go to war anyway if Japan attacked the Dutch East Indies to secure the oil fields. Japan was correct that the only thing standing in their way of its conquest of Southeast Asia was the U.S. Navy. But the U.S. Navy was probably not yet ready for such a mission, and much of it was in the Atlantic. Despite Britain's plight, the United States had not declared war in Europe. Even if the United States declared war

on Germany, it might have wished to avoid a Pacific war. Roosevelt felt that an active campaign in the Pacific against Japan would be a “dangerous diversion of forces and material” from the main theater in Europe.<sup>66</sup> Tuchman assessed that the United States was still committed to neutrality at the time of the attack and probably would not have declared war in response to a Japanese attack on the Dutch Indies. She considers this a major Japanese miscalculation.<sup>67</sup>

Throughout the crucial years of 1940–1941, Japan had ample and continuous high-level access to American decisionmakers and thus knew that U.S. positions were toughening. Despite warnings from Nomura, which they tended to ignore or discount, the leadership in Tokyo seemed surprised by the American decision to implement an oil embargo after the Japanese occupation of southern Indochina. The Japanese may have misread contending views in the U.S. administration for lack of U.S. resolve.

By mid-1941, Japan thought that it was in a predicament with no good exit and under severe time pressure due to economic sanctions, a limited supply of oil, and the beginning of a U.S. military buildup. So Japan did the one thing that would assure war with the United States. Japan misjudged the unifying effect on the American people that a surprise attack had.

A fourth flaw was that Japan felt that it had strategically prepared for a confrontation with the United States by covering its flanks. It had signed an alliance with Germany and Italy and a neutrality agreement with Russia. The remaining major European powers were either under German occupation or at war with Germany. Japan assumed that its war in China would be over soon. Much of this was true but did not spare Japan in the end. After Japan joined the Tripartite Pact, the United States began to see Japan as a potential enemy. Washington pressured Tokyo to leave the pact, but Tokyo refused, further straining relations. The Japanese were disappointed to get no credit in Washington for not attacking the Soviet Union when Hitler did. As it turned out, while Japan came under heavy German pressure to attack the Soviet Union, it received practically no support from Germany.

Finally, Japan's theory of military victory, which underpinned its decision to attack Pearl Harbor, was flawed. America's principal capability to affect events in Asia lay in its Navy, so Japan's logic went. A surprise attack and a debilitating blow could remove that capability for perhaps a year or more, allowing Japan time to consolidate its victory. The successful November 1940 British carrier attack on Italian battleships harbored at Taranto served as the model for the Japanese plan. Japan's own successful surprise attack on the Russians four decades earlier at Port Arthur was also an important element in its thinking.<sup>68</sup> And Hitler's surprise attack on Stalin in Operation Barbarossa seemed to be working at the time.

Japan was right about the importance of the U.S. Navy to America's military capabilities in Asia. But the benefit from surprise can be short-lived. Hitler's surprise attack on the Soviet Union grounded to a halt just as Tokyo launched its attack on Hawaii. In the case of Taranto, one British carrier and a handful of biplanes damaged

two battleships and a cruiser, but the Italians then retreated to the north with their navy. In the American case, the U.S. Navy moved forward to Midway six months later. And given American code breaking, it was the United States that had surprise on its side for most of the war. The attack on Pearl Harbor was only partially successful. The Japanese gamble failed.

## Conclusion

The Japanese leaders were, in Tuchman's words, "prisoners of their outsized ambitions."<sup>69</sup> After 1936, Japanese decisionmaking was increasingly influenced by the military, which took a narrow-minded view of Japan's options and approached problems merely as challenges. Few in the military had much experience with their American adversary. Japan's army was in general more aggressive than the navy. By 1941, most in the navy had concluded that a long war with the United States would be disastrous but that a short war might be successful. Time pressure, including limited oil supplies, swung the navy in favor of military action. Its assessment that war might be short was flawed.

A group of civilians around Prime Minister Konoye did analyze the situation differently from the military and sought a peaceful exit from the growing conflict, but by the time this process had started, positions had hardened on both sides. By September 1941, the emperor was probably the only figure who might have challenged this solidifying Japanese consensus and thus changed the course of history, but by mid-1941 he was under the heavy influence of the military.

The fundamental flaw in the Japanese model of reality that led to Pearl Harbor was underestimation of America—its willingness to take a tough diplomatic stand, its ability to recover from attack and respond, and its willpower. While Japanese military leaders had access to solid evidence that contradicted this assessment, their arrogance blinded them from it.

## U.S.-Soviet Showdown over the Egyptian Third Army, 1973

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*I will say it to you straight that if you find it impossible to act jointly with us, we should be faced with the necessity . . . of taking appropriate steps unilaterally.*

—Leonid Brezhnev to Richard Nixon, quoted in William Burr, *The October War and U.S. Policy*

*[Your] suggestion of unilateral action is a matter of the gravest concern involving incalculable consequences.*

—Nixon's reply to Brezhnev, quoted in William Burr, *The October War and U.S. Policy*

### The Makings of U.S.-Soviet Confrontation

Although both the United States and the Soviet Union each made blunders during the Cold War—the Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, and Afghanistan come to mind—they managed to avoid them when in toe-to-toe confrontation. This was due mainly to the sobering effect of the possibility of nuclear war, which was where a U.S.-Soviet conflict might have led. Both sides assumed that hostilities anywhere could ignite hostilities between NATO and the Warsaw Pact in Europe, where tactical nuclear weapons might be used and followed by escalation to intercontinental nuclear war. The Cuban Missile Crisis is a case in which both Washington and Moscow were guided by their common interest in avoiding disaster. A misstep by either the White House or the Kremlin could have had worse results than all of this study's other cases combined—a reminder of why avoiding blunders between nuclear powers is crucial.

One near miss—less studied, but dangerous—is the October 1973 U.S.-Soviet showdown over the possibility of Soviet intervention to rescue the Egyptian Third Army from destruction by Israeli forces. One can credit the Kremlin with avoiding a blunder by backing away from the brink. But for our purposes, it is more interesting to understand why the U.S. decision to call the Soviet bluff was not itself a mistake,

at least not an imprudent gamble, but instead defused the crisis. Both sides gauged the stakes and risks rationally and in the end chose wisely. The United States—in the midst of a leadership crisis over the Watergate scandal—managed to prevent war without sacrificing its interests in either the Middle East or U.S.-Soviet relations. This took informed and skilled American decisionmaking.<sup>1</sup> Although this case is more about crisis management than of a single decision to go to war or not, we included it for whatever light it can shed on how to avoid conflict by misjudgment between two nuclear powers (as the United States and USSR were and as China and the United States are).

With Egyptian-Israeli peace negotiations dead in the water, the Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, reached the decision in 1973 that military force was necessary to induce U.S. political intervention and thus to facilitate Arab-Israeli negotiations.<sup>2</sup> His immediate aim was to recover Egyptian territory—the Sinai Peninsula—seized by Israel in the 1967 war. Although the Syrian president, Hafez al-Assad, did not share Sadat's enthusiasm for negotiations with Israel, he agreed to join Egypt in war in order to retake the Golan Heights, also lost in 1967. Israel was caught flat-footed. Egyptian and Syrian forces attacked and surged into the Sinai and Golan in October of 1973, making significant, immediate gains on both fronts.

Israel and the United States were both surprised, though the United States had brought certain indications of Arab preparations to Israel's attention.<sup>3</sup> According to the U.S. senior intelligence official Ray Cline, "We were brainwashed by the Israelis, who had brainwashed themselves" into thinking that an Arab attack was unlikely.<sup>4</sup> That the Israelis were shocked and suffered early setbacks had a hardening effect on their attitudes and war aims. Tel Aviv was determined not only to restore the territorial status quo ante—1967 lines—but also to *destroy* Arab forces in order to establish once and for all the prohibitive price of attacking Israel.

In the view of the CIA at the time, "in the Israeli mind, this war is the 'Day of Judgment War[,] . . . a no-holds-barred affair, and the Israelis are determined to punish the Arabs. Given this mental state, the Israelis probably are willing to pay the high cost . . . to demonstrate the consequences of attacking Israel."<sup>5</sup> Chief of Staff David Elezar said that Israel's objective was to "break their bones."<sup>6</sup> This vengeful Israeli mind-set would contribute to the U.S.-Soviet crisis that ensued: The Soviets could not stand by and allow the forces of a key Middle East ally to be annihilated; and the United States could not allow the Soviets to intervene. Reconciling these opposing Soviet and American imperatives was key to how the crisis unfolded and how world war was averted.

As it turned out, the United States did not want to see a fight to the finish either, though for reasons that contradicted Soviet interests. An early and critical insight of the main U.S. decisionmaker, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, was that the Yom Kippur War afforded the United States a rare chance to elbow the Soviet Union out of its role as protector and benefactor of the Arabs, especially Egypt.<sup>7</sup> To do so, the United States would need to convince the Arabs that only Washington had enough influence with Israel to help them. Kissinger wanted the Arabs to come out of the war

understanding that the path to recovering lost territory by force was blocked by Israeli military superiority, but that the path to doing so by negotiations was open and went through Washington. Accordingly, the United States would need to avoid total Arab humiliation by getting Israel to accept less than total victory. More than that, it had to get Israel to agree to discuss concessions in the very territories seized by the Arab surprise attack: Sinai and Golan Heights. To this end, the United States would provide Israelis with essential supplies and other aid to ensure that they would win while also increasing U.S. leverage over them.

### The Fate of the Third Army

After halting and reversing Egyptian and Syrian gains, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) retook the Sinai and surrounded the Egyptian Third Army on the eastern bank of the Suez Canal. Israeli options at that point included destroying the Third Army, taking Cairo, and bringing down the Sadat government—in effect, total victory.<sup>8</sup> As assessed by the CIA, the Israelis “smelled blood.”<sup>9</sup> Total Arab defeat would have been devastating to Soviet credibility and interests. Yet it would also have derailed Kissinger’s strategy of ending the war with improved U.S.-Arab relations; U.S.-led negotiations on the contested territory were already under way. Neither Moscow nor Washington wanted the IDF to destroy the Third Army, as Tel Aviv was inclined to do.

Paradoxical though it was, the coincidence of superpower interests in preventing the destruction of Arab forces led the United States and the USSR to pressure their respective clients to accept a temporary cease-fire in place, approved by the UN Security Council. In Tel Aviv, however, Kissinger hinted to the Israelis that he would not object if they sought to improve their advantage soon after the cease-fire went into effect.<sup>10</sup> From the perspective of U.S. strategy, it was advantageous for Israeli forces to have Egyptian forces defenseless but not destroyed. When Israeli forces violated the cease-fire, the Soviets were furious and, with some justification, accused the United States of giving a green light.<sup>11</sup> They expressed particular alarm about the dire predicament of the Egyptian Third Army and demanded that the United States prevent Israel from wiping it out.

Over the rarely used U.S.-Soviet MOLINK (Moscow Link) hotline, the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev proposed to President Richard Nixon sending U.S. forces to join Soviet forces in relieving the Third Army.<sup>12</sup> This would have meant interposing U.S. and Soviet forces between Israeli and Egyptian ones, opening up supply routes to get food through, and by implication enforcing Israeli cease-fire compliance. Brezhnev stated bluntly that the USSR would be forced to intervene unilaterally if the United States declined to join it.<sup>13</sup>

At the receiving end in Washington, Nixon was badly—as it turned out, mortally—wounded politically by the Watergate scandal. This left Kissinger not only in

charge of crisis management but as the ultimate U.S. decisionmaker. While Nixon's prestige at home and abroad was collapsing, Kissinger's was soaring. As both secretary of state and assistant to the president for national security affairs, Kissinger could set U.S. strategy and direct U.S. actions without reference to other National Security Council (NSC) cabinet officers. In sending recommendations from the State Department to the White House, he was in effect sending them to himself. Soviet communications to and from Washington were with Kissinger, often by name or else in effect. Ironically, at a moment when U.S. decisionmaking and crisis management might have been impaired by the bleeding out of presidential power, it actually led to an unusually high degree of centralized control and decisiveness. In this case, such centralization proved important. Had the decisionmaker been more impulsive, more ideological, or less unwilling to listen than Kissinger was, such centralization could have been disastrous (as it was in some of this study's other cases).

Again, Kissinger's goals were to end the war having enabled Israel to win, to enhance U.S. relations at the expense of Soviet relations with the Arabs, and to set the table for negotiations. His expectation of the negotiations to come was that they would deal only with territorial and other practical issues, and not touch such sensitive matters as Jerusalem and Israel's right to exist. The trick was to get the Israelis, despite their outrage, to negotiate over the return of territory they had just shed blood to recover. Kissinger got intelligence analysis indicating that the Israelis were throwing everything into the fight; while they were determined to destroy Arab military capabilities, they could not sustain such intense combat for long. He knew—and knew that the Israelis also knew—that as both sides suffered huge equipment losses, the force ratios, especially for tanks and combat aircraft, were shifting in favor of the Arabs even as the Israeli counteroffensive succeeded.<sup>14</sup> This knowledge allowed him to foresee the end of the fighting and to position the United States to take full credit for it.

To achieve his objectives, Kissinger needed to use U.S.-Soviet détente to check Soviet moves, while also seeking to undermine Soviet influence with the Arabs. "Everyone knows in the Middle East that if they want peace they have to come through us," he said. Yet because he wanted to preserve détente, Kissinger felt that the United States "can't humiliate the Soviets too much."<sup>15</sup> At the zenith of the crisis, his decision model required him to confront rather than mollify Moscow.

Reacting to the Brezhnev warning of possible Soviet unilateral intervention, yet having no interest in joint intervention, Kissinger decided to "go to the mat."<sup>16</sup> The U.S. response to the Soviets—sent under Nixon's name, though on Kissinger's authority—rejected the proposal for joint intervention and stated that Soviet unilateral action would have "incalculable consequences." At the same moment, the readiness of U.S. forces, including nuclear forces, was elevated at Kissinger's request (in his White House capacity) to DEFCON (Defense Condition) III.<sup>17</sup> The U.S. message was clear: If Soviet forces are dispatched to the Sinai, they will be blocked by U.S. forces. This confronted the Soviets with a more fateful decision of whether to risk armed conflict with the



United States in order to save Egyptian forces from destruction by Israeli ones. Not only that, but by placing U.S. nuclear forces to the highest level of peacetime readiness, the United States anticipated any doubts the Soviets might have about U.S. willingness to escalate, or at least to run a risk of escalation.

## Anatomy of Decision

Just as there were two parts to the Soviet proposal—join us or else we will act alone—the U.S. rebuff required two decisions: first, whether or not to intervene jointly to rescue the Third Army from destruction, second, if the first decision was rejected, whether to accept Soviet unilateral intervention or instead warn that the United States would thwart it. The first decision centered on whether it served U.S. interests to take a big step in applying Soviet-American détente to impose peace in the Middle East over the objection of Israel. While doing so would presumably end hostilities and bolster détente, it would do great damage to U.S.-Israeli relations and also contradict Kissinger's strategy of showing all parties, including Egypt, that the United States was singularly capable and indispensable in producing lasting peace. Of course, if the United States believed the threat of unilateral Soviet intervention and thought that it could not prevent it short of going to war, it might have made sense to opt for the less bad option of bilateral intervention.

So the first U.S. decision depended on the second—in fact, the two were taken simultaneously. The decision to prevent Soviet unilateral intervention was part gamble and part resolve. For the Soviet Union to have relieved the Third Army by force would have torpedoed Kissinger's strategy and sunk U.S. standing and influence with Arabs and Israelis alike. Moreover, if Soviet forces engaged in combat with Israeli forces, the United States would have faced pressure to intervene and risk U.S.-Soviet hostilities anyway. Thus, warning the Soviets against intervention did not increase and might well have reduced the likelihood of U.S.-Soviet hostilities. Moreover, the possibility of Soviet bluffing made the U.S. warning a risk worth taking. The threat of unilateral intervention was intended to make the proposal of Soviet-U.S. joint action more attractive; surely the Soviets were not eager to get directly involved in an Arab-Israeli war. At the same time, although Kissinger thought that the Soviets were bluffing, he was not. Had the Soviets sent forces despite the U.S. warning, the United States would in all likelihood have opposed them, on the principle that one should not threaten to do what one is not prepared to do.

The Soviets replied sternly but in effect withdrew both the proposal for joint intervention and the threat of unilateral intervention. This was a prudent decision, given that the Soviet military had no experience with or preparation for this sort of rapid and opposed expeditionary operation, whereas the U.S. military had. It seems that the Soviet threat to act alone was a bluff—a risky one in light of the distinct possibility that

the United States would call it. One can infer that the Soviets made the threat in hopes of getting the Americans to intervene cooperatively. What they got instead was a sharp American counterthreat containing a not-so-veiled message that the United States was prepared to go to the nuclear precipice. The crisis having been escalated by the United States from a regional to a global one, Moscow decided to defuse it. Kissinger described Brezhnev's reply as "conciliatory."<sup>18</sup> The Soviets' wily ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, said the United States had overreacted to the Soviet proposal for cooperative intervention by putting its forces on alert.<sup>19</sup>

## Success

Meanwhile, the United States intensified pressure on Israel to permit supplies to pass to the Third Army and to abide by the cease-fire. Thus, while backing down in the face of U.S. rejection, the Soviets got what they wanted by having the Americans twist Israel's arm and stop the fighting. So the Egyptian Third Army was spared, thanks mainly to U.S. leverage with Israel, though somewhat because of Soviet leverage with the United States. The cease-fire held. With its enhanced influence with Arabs and Israelis alike, the United States was able to negotiate military disengagement from the Sinai and Golan Heights and durable peace agreements involving Israeli territorial concession in return for international security guarantees. In the end, the United States delivered important gains for both warring sides. The Egyptians and Syrians got back the Sinai and most of the Golan Heights, respectively, which were of no historical or symbolic interest to Israel, and the Israelis got enhanced protection against attack from either direction. Also, the United States laid the groundwork for an economic- and military-assistance relationship with Egypt that ended for good the Egyptians' dependence on the Soviets.

Egypt was to become a close friend of the United States, cementing the U.S. position as the only actor able to work with both sides in the Arab-Israeli dispute. After the Yom Kippur War, the United States had friendly and influential relations with all the important Middle East countries except for Syria and Iraq. From then on, Soviet influence in the region was diminished and never restored—reduced to alliances with unreliable and otherwise isolated regimes. Yet *détente* was preserved for the time being. American handling of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War and Soviet-U.S. crisis had produced a major geopolitical shift in favor of the United States without endangering East-West stability or peace.

Instead of a blunder, the United States had produced positive results. The caution that ultimately prevailed in Moscow can be credited to the moderating effect of the danger of nuclear war. Of course, the United States exploited that very danger to its benefit. However, the decisions it took during the crisis worked not only to its advantage but also for greater stability in the Middle East.

This interpretation the 1973 crisis is not the only one. At least one credible revisionist history—*We All Lost the Cold War*, by Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein—argues that the U.S. threat to escalate was unnecessary and actually heightened the risk of war. In the authors' view, because the Soviets had no intention of unilateral military intervention, the U.S. decision to put its forces on worldwide alert was, and was viewed by the Soviets as, provocative. Hence, if credit is due for avoiding a blunder, it belongs to Moscow.

This view is not supported either by the words of Soviet communications or by perceptions of American officials at the time. Brezhnev's warning of "the necessity of taking appropriate steps unilaterally"—words that were preceded by "I will say it to you straight"—is clearly ominous and probably meant to be so.<sup>20</sup> In fact, it would have been imprudent not to interpret this as a warning, given the context. In any case, Kissinger and his colleagues *did* read it as a warning, while recognizing that it could be a bluff: either way, a strong U.S. response made sense. It is possible the Soviets would have refrained from intervening unilaterally even if the United States had not placed forces on higher alert. The facts remain that the U.S. alert was followed by Russian conciliation, and the crisis was then resolved on terms very favorable to the United States. With the benefit of hindsight, scholars may contend that the U.S. decision was unnecessary. But war was avoided, and U.S. interests were advanced—the opposite, more or less, of so many blunders that have led to war.<sup>21</sup>

## Getting It Right

Having and using a sound model of reality (as explained in Chapter One) is a good place to start if unsound strategic decisionmaking is to be avoided. Kissinger and his associates had an accurate view of the interests and likely behavior of all parties.<sup>22</sup> At first, the Israelis wanted a fight to the finish; but the Americans sensed that in the end the Israelis wanted enhanced security against the sort of two-front surprise attack they had just experienced. In the end, they were pragmatic. The Arabs wanted their land back and believed that they could seize it by surprise attack even if they could not destroy Israel and its forces. Moreover, they—the Egyptians especially—were not so beholden to the Soviet Union that they were unwilling to switch sides if it served their interests, which it did. The Americans correctly pegged the pragmatism of both sides.

The Soviets were thought to view the Middle East strategically but opportunistically. The Middle East was not of such fundamental importance as, say, Europe; and Soviet influence with the Arabs was not as important as its relationship with the United States. The United States had greater regional interests, starting with its commitment to Israel—deeper than any commitment the Soviets felt toward the Arab states—and the West's need for Middle East oil. In the American decisionmaking model, with the

stakes in the region higher for the United States than for the USSR, a checkmate at the global-strategic level would work to the U.S. advantage.

In addition to getting right the motivations and options of the parties, U.S. decisionmakers had a clear and realistic theory of success. While Kissinger obviously had exceptional intuitive powers, the path he took was based on clear-headed analysis and objective appreciation of the assets, liabilities, and limitations with which the United States could work. The idea that the United States could end the war, increase its influence with all parties, and then use that influence to build peace, though ambitious, was achievable. The decisions taken to operationalize that theory of success were based on as strong a body of knowledge as intelligence and other information available at the time permitted.

Although U.S. intelligence, like Israeli intelligence, failed to warn of the Arab attack, it then improved significantly in both the information and the analysis provided to policymakers.<sup>23</sup> Apart from this, a striking feature of this case is the role of direct, blunt, and timely high-level communications with all parties—the Politburo, the Israeli cabinet, and Sadat. This was essential in effective crisis management, but it also proved invaluable in the information it afforded Kissinger and his aides. The United States was operating with knowledge that was superior to that of any other actor and was critical for replenishing the model of reality on which the Americans relied. As a consequence, the theory of success could be validated and refined. From the declassified records, one is struck that diplomatic niceties, legalistic posturing, and rhetorical flourishes were all absent from the U.S. communications, which in turn seemed to have encouraged the Soviets, Israelis, and Egyptians to be no less frank and businesslike.

Thus, abundant information, owing largely to communications, contributed to exceptional knowledge, which in turn yielded objective analysis and considerations of alternatives and what-ifs, leading to wise decisions. Importantly, the U.S. decisions were not excessively cautious. Avoiding strategic mistakes by avoiding all risk is unrealistic, especially for great powers with extensive interests and heated rivalries. In this case, risks were understood, mitigated to the extent possible, and then taken to advance national interests.

U.S. success in the Egyptian Third Army crisis can also be attributed to the efficiency of the decisionmaking system. This may be considered odd in that the U.S. political process at no less than the highest level of constitutional authority was in upheaval. The effective absence of the chief of state and commander-in-chief did not disable U.S. decisionmaking; rather, it simplified it. Nixon was infatuated with the idea of U.S.-Soviet condominium, and during the Yom Kippur War, he thought that the two superpowers should impose a settlement on their respective clients.<sup>24</sup> That this would have meant strong-arming the Israelis was not, in Nixon's view, a disadvantage of a superpower-imposed peace, as he was known for his impatience with Israel. Had

he been more engaged, U.S. policy might have been more confused, and the U.S. response to the Soviet proposal less clear.<sup>25</sup>

Wearing his two hats, Kissinger was able to set strategy, direct implementation, control access and information to Nixon, and authorize extraordinary measures that exceeded the writ of secretary of state alone. He showed little interest in peer involvement or opinion.<sup>26</sup> In particular, Kissinger and Defense Secretary James Schlesinger were usually at loggerheads. Seeking congressional support was impractical because the crisis was moving so fast. Media contacts, messaging, and leaks were totally under Kissinger's control. Most important, when he made commitments and threats to the other parties of the crisis, they knew to take them with utmost seriousness. This was as close to concentrated power and single-point decisionmaking as the U.S. political system permits. It was an artifact of an unusual moment, has not been replicated since, and is not the model most Americans would favor.

At another level, though, the U.S. decisionmaking system was commendable. Though at the apex of his "game" in skill, self-confidence, and control, Kissinger involved and relied on a sizable circle of advisors and staff.<sup>27</sup> These included people who had been with him for years as well as State Department foreign-service officers he had barely had a chance to assess. While there is no record of dissent among Kissinger's advisors, his decisionmaking method was not to smother independent views. Kissinger and his aides sought objective analysis from the intelligence community. Other historical cases suggest that powerful and unchallengeable decisionmakers, such as Napoleon and Hitler, may make blunders because they trust their instincts too much and listen to others too little. In this case, the decisionmaker was a renowned analyst in his own right, receptive to diverse and unbiased advice, and eager for fresh information whether or not it matched preconceptions.

We can only speculate about how Kissinger and his advisors would have responded to information that did not conform to their inclinations about the situation and how to handle it. What if, for instance, Egypt had rejected American involvement, turning instead to the Soviets for support and possibly intervention? This would have contradicted an important aspect of Kissinger's model and corresponding diplomacy: that all parties recognized the United States as the indispensable actor. In that case, he *might*—there is obviously no way of knowing—have encouraged the Israelis to step up their military pressure, while also warning the Soviets against intervention (as he did anyway). While this scenario would have involved greater risks, it suggests, hypothetically, that the underlying model was flexible enough to permit options. Moreover, as we will see, U.S. decisionmakers in this crisis did not write an exact script with the expectation that all parties would follow it; rather, they had a general sense of U.S. interests and influence, but otherwise considerable flexibility in the face of fluid conditions.

The findings from this case are important because a blunder could have been committed but was not. Far from it—strategic decisionmaking succeeded under extremely complex, fluid, and dangerous conditions. Risks were taken, but they were carefully

weighed and justified by consideration of likely outcomes if those risks were avoided. Information was sketchy and sometimes late; however, though this meant that knowledge was incomplete, the individuals and institutions involved in the decisionmaking created and were served well by a model of reality that accurately and dynamically represented the unfolding crisis. Urgency limited the time for debate; and the decisionmaker's preference for curbing involvement to a circle of aides limited the scope of debate. Still, options and contingencies were explored, and the key decisions were taken with careful regard for their implications.

Although there was clearly a dominant individual at the center of the decision-making system, that individual was not impelled by a sense of destiny, like Napoleon; not blinded by hatred and other demons, like Hitler; and not driven by imperial and religious compulsions, like Japanese military leaders during World War II. None of the factors that explain blunders committed by even more powerful decisionmakers were at work when the United States decided to threaten war over the fate of the Egyptian Third Army.

As explained earlier, this case did not involve a decision, *per se*, to go to war or not. Rather, the U.S. decisionmaker took a calculated risk that escalation would prevent a war (after Soviet decisionmakers had issued a warning that could have caused one). The rationale for including this case in the report is that it reflects on how two states with the ability to visit nuclear devastation on each other could blunder into war and how, in this case, that was avoided. As we will see, it is also instructive in the role of communications between parties.

## China's Punitive War Against Vietnam, 1979

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*We believed, we really believed, that if we applied the full force of the PLA [People's Liberation Army] that the Vietnamese would be shattered in a matter of two hours, that we would be in Hanoi or Haiphong within a day or two.*

—Chinese veteran of the 1979 Sino-Vietnam War, quoted in Edward C. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*

### Mitigated Blunder

Scholars and experts have long held contrasting views on the success of China in the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979. While Western analysts tend to regard the war as a Chinese military failure, the official Chinese interpretation is that it was a strategic and diplomatic success.<sup>1</sup> Recent Western scholarship is beginning to view the war in a more positive light by assessing not only the military operations but also the geopolitical consequences.<sup>2</sup>

China's Vietnam War was a mitigated strategic blunder. The Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping made the decision to attack Vietnam under complex domestic and international circumstances. Though Deng was angry at Vietnam, underestimated Vietnam's military strength, and overestimated the Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) capabilities, he did not completely discount the potential for failure. He had planned for the best-case scenario of quick victory, but he also considered the possibility of a less-than-successful military campaign. Most important, Deng correctly assessed that a limited war could bring China neither great victory nor greater loss. When operations on the battlefield were less than desirable, Deng kept his original plan of a short war and did not let China become bogged down in Vietnam. Despite Beijing's dismal military performance in early 1979, Deng was able to use the war to consolidate his domestic control. The war also undermined Vietnamese illusions of strong Soviet support and made Vietnam question whether cooperating with Moscow to encircle China was in its best interests. Over the long term, the war caused Vietnam to overextend itself militar-

ily and economically. China's attack on Vietnam further bolstered Beijing's image in Southeast Asia by standing up against an aggressive Vietnam that was threatening its Southeast Asian neighbors.

## The Road to War

Relations between Vietnam and China began deteriorating sharply after the fall of Saigon. Previously, in the 1960s and early 1970s, the two countries enjoyed close relations, and China provided Vietnam with economic and indirect military support. By 1974, Beijing was wary of Hanoi's aggressiveness and used military force to expel Vietnam from one of the Paracel Islands that it had occupied but was claimed by Beijing. After unifying the country, Vietnamese Communists targeted ethnic Chinese, first taking their wealth for redistribution and finally expelling them in significant numbers from northeast Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> Internationally around this time, China was worried that Vietnam was moving too close to the Soviet Union and that a unified Vietnam would pose a security threat to China. In a September 1975 meeting between Chinese leaders and Le Duan, secretary-general of the Communist Party of Vietnam, China agreed to continue to provide Vietnam economic aid (US\$200 million for 1976) but refused to provide the increased aid level that Vietnam requested. Rebuffed by China, Le Duan denounced China's "systematic hostile policy" and tried his luck in Moscow, where he received a five-year guarantee for funding worth US\$3 billion. In return for Soviet support, Hanoi embraced "certain aspects of Soviet foreign policy" that China viewed as the "principal tools of Soviet expansionism."<sup>4</sup> By 1976, frictions along the China-Vietnam border increased and China experienced domestic unrest after the deaths of Chinese leaders Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. Chinese official sources claim that border clash incidents spiraled from 752 cases in 1977 to 1,100 in 1978.<sup>5</sup>

In the mid-1970s, China saw itself surrounded by hostile countries. To the north, the Sino-Soviet split had worsened since the border disputes of the late 1960s. Deng viewed the Soviet Union as the main enemy that rallied other countries against China. In February 1978, China did not renew the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance, the end of a thirty-year treaty. Beijing also rejected all advances from Moscow to negotiate a nonaggression pact and worried that a renewed treaty would reduce China's influence in Asia.

To its west and south, Beijing viewed Moscow as backing countries against China. India was receiving arms and aid from the Soviet Union. Vietnam shared the Soviet Union's interest in reducing China's influence in Southeast Asia. Hanoi allowed Moscow to use its naval ports and build missile bases that could house Soviet missiles aimed at China.<sup>6</sup> The Soviet Union reciprocated by asking Vietnam to join the Soviet-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and sending more arms and up to



four thousand advisors to Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> On November 2, 1978, the two countries signed the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.

The immediate precursor to the Sino-Vietnamese War was Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia on December 25, 1978.<sup>8</sup> Vietnam regarded its neighbor Democratic Kampuchea as troublesome and under the influence of China. Cambodia was a barrier to Vietnam's dreams of dominating Indochina. From 1975 to 1977, Vietnam and Cambodia had several land and maritime military clashes. In 1978, Hanoi obtained Soviet support for its attack. Moscow saw the invasion as useful for containing Chinese influence. If successful, it could limit China's influence in Southeast Asia, undermine the status and power of Deng, and illustrate that China was a "paper dragon" that was weak and not to be feared. Even if the attack was not successful, it may be able to drive a wedge between China and the United States by showcasing China's brutality if China were to defend its ally.<sup>9</sup>

This string of events set the stage for China to invade Vietnam on February 17, 1979, three days after the anniversary of the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty. The official reason China proclaimed for the attack was Vietnamese occupation of the Spratly Islands and Hanoi's mistreatment of ethnic Chinese; Beijing, however, had a number of other strategic goals.

## The Decision to Punish Vietnam

The Chinese decision to launch a punitive war on Vietnam occurred within a complex geopolitical game, and China was jockeying for power at home. There was not a sole reason for China to invade Vietnam. Instead, Beijing sought multiple goals from launching a limited war and not all of them depended on a successful military operation.

### Strategic Beliefs, Motivations, and Goals

Domestically, Deng was still consolidating his power in late 1978. He had a more pragmatic vision for China than a number of other elites. The political turmoil in the 1950s and the subsequent Cultural Revolution had created serious rifts among the Chinese leadership, including among the PLA. Deng had long deemed the military to be incompetent and lazy and wanted to develop a professional army that was not involved in politics. The last enlarged Chinese Central Military Commission meeting in 1978 that involving all key PLA leaders had devolved into bitter accusations with little agreement or progress. Deng was worried not only about the quality of the PLA but also about loyalty of its leaders and the potential that PLA generals would split China into military fiefdoms.<sup>10</sup> A war was a way to battle test the PLA and could provide Deng with more control over the PLA by allowing him to control China's use of force and appoint military personnel.<sup>11</sup>

Internationally, Chinese elites, particularly Deng, were convinced of hostile Soviet and Vietnamese ambitions. In conversations with the United States, the Chinese leadership explained that they saw Soviet support for Vietnamese power expansion in Indochina as a critical step in Moscow's global strategic campaign. The Soviet Union already concentrated troops along the northern Chinese border and in Eastern Europe and was seeking bases in Indonesia, the Middle East, and Africa. If Moscow could consolidate its power, it could block off key sea lines of communication and crucial energy sources.<sup>12</sup>

Deng firmly believed that China needed a safe and stable international environment to engage in domestic modernization. Beijing could not allow itself to be encircled by threats.<sup>13</sup> He further saw that South Korea and Japan had benefited economically and militarily by supporting U.S. military operations abroad. He hoped that a closer alignment with the United States—by attacking a Soviet client state—would also win China technological assistance.<sup>14</sup>

While Deng was a confident and pragmatic strategist, frustration, anger, and prejudices against Vietnam undoubtedly influenced his and other Chinese leaders' desires to teach Vietnam a lesson. Chinese leaders saw Vietnam as an ungrateful neighbor. Between June 1965 and August 1973, Chinese records indicate that Beijing sent 320,000 so-called volunteers to Vietnam to serve as advisors and help Vietnam maintain its supply lines and continue its wartime activities. China suffered thousands—if not tens of thousands—of casualties assisting Vietnam.<sup>15</sup> Beijing further estimated that its economic aid to Hanoi from 1950 to 1978 “exceeded \$20 billion.”<sup>16</sup> Deng reportedly even complained to then-Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew that China had shipped over US\$10 billion worth of goods to Vietnam while the Americans were still there. This was more than what Beijing had provided Pyongyang during the Korean War.<sup>17</sup>

Personally, Deng felt betrayed by the Vietnamese. Unlike earlier Chinese leaders such as Zhou Enlai, Deng did not develop any deep individual, emotional ties to particular Vietnamese leaders.<sup>18</sup> He did, however, work alongside fellow Vietnamese Communist revolutionaries for five decades, starting as a worker-student in the anticolonial struggle in France. Deng was also involved in increasing Chinese aid to Vietnam during the 1960s.<sup>19</sup>

In dealing with Vietnam, Deng and other Chinese leaders drew a historical analogy with the Sino-Indian War of 1962.<sup>20</sup> They were familiar with the success China had in quickly punishing an unruly neighbor, India.<sup>21</sup> This history may have been particularly powerful in shaping Deng's response. Since the Chinese Civil War, Deng had served in the army as well as senior party and government posts. In the 1950s and 1960s, he participated in battles of quick decision in Central Asia and watched the PLA conduct a quick, decisive campaign in India: In 1962, China drove one hundred kilometers into Indian territory within just a few days.<sup>22</sup>

Though Deng was aware of the problems plaguing the PLA, he is likely to have thought that a successful quick, decisive attack on Vietnam remained within the capabilities of the PLA.<sup>23</sup> Should the attack be less successful than desired, it would provide reason to push through the military reforms that he had long advocated.

### Internal Debate and Decision

China's decision to attack Vietnam involved a patient wait-and-see process with international probes and internal debates and meetings. The decision was not the result of rash choice by a single leader forcing his opinion on others. Rather, Deng and Chinese leaders carefully weighed the options and created the necessary conditions before taking action.

To seek international support—or at least minimize criticism—for an attack, Deng launched a diplomatic campaign against Vietnam and the Soviet Union. In 1978 and 1979, he journeyed to the United States, Japan, and Southeast Asia to “change China's image abroad from revolutionary challenger to fellow victim of Soviet and Vietnamese geopolitical designs.”<sup>24</sup> Whereas previous Chinese leaders tended to emphasize Chinese strength and waited for others to travel to Beijing, Deng stressed China's poverty, backwardness, and willingness to learn from the West and other countries. In Southeast Asia, Deng labeled Vietnam the “Cuba of the East” and emphasized China's unity with regional countries.<sup>25</sup> In August 1978, China signed a peace agreement with Japan, and in December China normalized relations with the United States.

From mid-November to mid-December 1978, Beijing held an enlarged Politburo meeting to discuss a number of issues, including the Indochina situation, which involved smaller-scale fighting between Vietnam and Cambodia and persistent tensions along the Sino-Vietnamese border. A number of options were presented, including dispatching troops to aid Cambodia, helping Cambodia guard its coast, and launching a punitive war against Vietnam.<sup>26</sup> Chinese leaders wanted to punish Vietnam but did not want to send troops to Cambodia. They feared that any involvement in Cambodia would be expensive and long.<sup>27</sup>

While Deng supported an attack on Vietnam, he had to win over other senior Chinese leaders. Many Chinese civilian and military elites voiced doubts over attacking Vietnam:

Some were concerned that just as China was beginning its modernization drive, it would be unwise to divert China's scarce resources, which were sorely needed for building modern industries. Some worried that Chinese troops were not properly prepared. Others opposed in principle an attack on a fraternal Communist country. Some worried that an attack would heighten long-term Vietnamese hostility to China. Other officials feared that the Soviet Union and its massive military forces might be drawn into the conflict.<sup>28</sup>

During the Third Plenum of the Central Committee, December 18–22, 1978, Deng was still consolidating his power. When Vietnam launched an all-out invasion of Cambodia on December 25, Deng's position was strengthened. Beijing issued a stern warning to Vietnam but still left open the possibility of negotiations with its Southeast Asian neighbor.<sup>29</sup>

It was not until an expanded Chinese Politburo leadership meeting on December 31, 1978, that Deng formally proposed launching a war to punish Vietnam.<sup>30</sup> Before and during the meeting, Deng had comprehensively assessed the situation for his colleagues and brought on board senior Chinese leaders, such as Chen Yun, to support his position. Deng reasoned that a *self-defensive counterattack* on Vietnam would at most elicit a small- or medium-scale Soviet attack that would not be serious, and China could be prepared for it. Chen supported Deng by arguing that a short war with Vietnam was possible since Soviet divisions along the Chinese border were undermanned. Moscow would need to divert troops from Europe to seriously attack China, a movement that would require more than a month.<sup>31</sup> Deng thought that intervention in Vietnam would not generate unfavorable international opinion and would not hinder China's domestic drive toward modernization. He "argued that China might achieve about 70 percent of its war objectives. The 30 percent failure would serve as a stimulus for military improvement."<sup>32</sup>

The Chinese leadership agreed to keep the war to a short attack in order to limit its costs and allay the concerns of those opposing it. China's initial war plans never envisioned a full-scale invasion of Vietnam or a prolonged occupation of Vietnamese territory that would directly threaten Hanoi or Hanoi's control over the country. Instead, Chinese war plans mainly involved thinking of ways to punish Vietnam at a low cost while obtaining maximum geopolitical gains.<sup>33</sup> The Chinese leadership thus focused on achieving military success in Vietnamese territory close to the Chinese border. Deng appointed two generals: Xu Shiyou to command the eastern front from Guangxi and Yang Dezhi to command the western front from Yunnan. Deng also sent two aides to help coordinate military operations in the two regions.<sup>34</sup>

Beijing intensified military preparations in mid-December 1978.<sup>35</sup> Internal memos and circulars were sent between then and the start of the Chinese invasion that indicated the problems the PLA had encountered in its war preparations. Leaders in Beijing responded with direction on how to overcome the difficulties, including combining understaffed army divisions.<sup>36</sup> In early January, Deng sent three senior PLA leaders to inspect whether the military would be ready for war. The original plan was for "all units [to] reach their designated positions by 10 January 1979 and complete combat preparations at once."<sup>37</sup> Zhang Zhen, one of the three sent and the director of the PLA General Logistics Department, was appalled by the efforts. He recommended to Deng and other senior leaders to postpone the war for another month—until mid-February. As Beijing reassessed the situation, news from the battlefield encouraged it to abandon a component of a war plan to attack Dien Bien Phu from Yunnan via Laos.

Instead of having four key war fronts, the forces originally planned for the northwest front were moved to support the Guangxi front.<sup>38</sup>

The final step to war was taken after Deng returned to China from traveling to the United States and Japan in late January and early February 1979. Deng timed the attack immediately after his trip, when he felt that he had sufficient international support. Southeast Asian countries were afraid the Vietnamese-Cambodian War might spread to Thailand and had condemned Vietnam's aggression. The United States also did not express any strong opposition to a possible Chinese attack. Planning the attack after normalization of U.S.-China relations strengthened the impression that Washington was tacitly supporting the attack.<sup>39</sup>

Deng personally determined and oversaw the political, diplomatic, and military operations of the war. To contain the costs of the war, limit escalation, and diminish the likelihood of Soviet intervention, Deng stipulated that the war would not be longer than the 1962 war with India (thirty-three days) and that it would be a ground war involving no aircraft. To hedge against Soviet involvement, China pulled back three hundred thousand Chinese civilians from its border with the Soviet Union and continued to position China's best troops along the Soviet border—China deployed only second-lined troops to the Vietnamese front. To provide maximum troop exposure to combat as well as to combine the strengths of various armies, the war involved Chinese troops from ten of the country's eleven military regions.<sup>40</sup>

## Assessing the War

The war achieved some, but not all, of the goals Deng had in mind. The war was a fiasco on the ground and even Deng recognized that the military operation “had not gone so well.”<sup>41</sup> Yet because war was limited in goal, scope, and duration, the Chinese leader was able prevent operational problems from completely undermining the broader political and diplomatic advantages of attacking Vietnam.

### Disappointing Military Performance

Operationally, the China-Vietnam war was unlike the cleaner and more successful 1962 Sino-Indian conflict or other well-executed Chinese military campaigns. The China-Vietnam war began on February 17, 1979. Instead of penetrating deep into enemy territory within a few days of fighting like in 1962, it took the PLA three weeks of bitter fighting to capture three of six Vietnamese provincial capitals—Cao Bang, Lang Son, and Lao Cai—that bordered China.<sup>42</sup> During the war, China deployed a large force of more than 400,000 troops against “about 50,000 regular Vietnamese troops and a few militiamen.”<sup>43</sup> This PLA force size was comparable to the Chinese force involved in the Korean War. Yet the Chinese force had moved farther in twenty-four hours against a larger, better-equipped defending force during the Korean War

than the PLA did in two weeks against fewer Vietnamese.<sup>44</sup> A combination of outdated and ineffective military tactics, a flawed personnel system, and poor logistics plagued the PLA during the Sino-Vietnamese War. The slow advances and small gains the PLA obtained came at the cost of significant casualties.<sup>45</sup>

Though the Soviet Union did not open a second front to support Vietnam, Hanoi used guerrilla tactics to prevent Beijing from achieving a quick victory.<sup>46</sup> Chinese leaders had inaccurately assessed that an attack could force Vietnam to divert forces from Cambodia. Hanoi diverted some troops but was able to conscript many more from the war locales. This allowed Vietnam to sustain, at least in the short term, military operations in Cambodia, Laos, and along the Chinese border. To overcome the Chinese advantage in manpower, Hanoi turned to Moscow for arms and advisors.<sup>47</sup>

As he saw China's massive losses on the ground, Deng ordered the PLA to withdraw despite not achieving as much military success as desired. His decision directly contradicted the designs of Xu, one of the commanding generals at the front. Xu had wanted to launch an even greater offensive on Vietnam, believing that China should continue and directly attack Hanoi. While Xu tried to stall and convince Beijing to continue the war, Deng was adamant about preventing China from being bogged down in Vietnam, leading to more Chinese losses and costs.<sup>48</sup> China announced its intention to withdraw and began withdrawing on March 5, 1979. It completed its withdrawal on March 16 and announced then that it had taught Vietnam a lesson. This was soon followed by a Chinese announcement on April 3, 1979, that Beijing would terminate the 1950 Sino-Soviet treaty.

While the Sino-Indian War brought China peace for more than half a century on one of its most important borders, the China-Vietnam conflict did not immediately alleviate instability along the two countries' shared border. China was also not able to force Vietnam to abandon Cambodia in 1979. Throughout the 1980s, China and Vietnam engaged in border skirmishes and conflicts.

### **Larger Geopolitical Gains from the War**

Geopolitically, the war and its aftermath gradually undermined Vietnam's ambitions and ability to dominate Indochina. China's attack on Vietnam enhanced Beijing's prestige in Southeast Asia since Vietnam's attack on Cambodia threatened Thailand and had led to the formation of a strong Association of Southeast Asian Nations coalition opposed to Vietnam.<sup>49</sup> The war clearly signaled Chinese opposition to Vietnam becoming a regional hegemon and its willingness to fight to prevent that from happening. On the one hand, the war lent credibility to later Chinese warnings of unacceptable aggressive Vietnamese behavior. This included, for example, a June 1980 Chinese warning to Vietnam not to conduct military operations deeper into Thailand and a Chinese attack on Vietnam in 1984 to force it back from seizing a critical pass from Cambodia into Thailand.<sup>50</sup>

On the other hand, the war exacerbated Vietnam's economic difficulties as Hanoi overextended itself and prepared for a two-front war: Vietnam held on to Cambodia and also defended itself against China along its northern border. Even after China announced its withdrawal on March 5, 1979, Vietnam feared further Chinese attacks from the north and called for national mobilization and construction of a defensive position around its capital. At a time when Vietnam's economy was "in a worse state than at any time since 1975," the war and subsequent defensive measures imposed enormous economic and social costs on Vietnam, preventing the country from devoting significant resources to modernizing its economy.<sup>51</sup>

The war demonstrated to Vietnam the limits of the 1978 Soviet-Vietnamese treaty and helped China minimize the threat of a two-front war.<sup>52</sup> While the Soviet Union engaged in a series of deterrence signals—which included alerting its troops in the Far East, intensifying surveillance, conducting live fire exercises, sea- and air-lifting supplies to Vietnam, and increasing its naval presence in the South China Sea—it did not open a second front.<sup>53</sup>

The war helped, but it was not necessary for improved U.S.-China relations, and China did not receive as much technological assistance as Deng would have liked. According to Henry Kissinger, the war "ushered in the closest collaboration between China and the United States for the period of the Cold War" and there was "an extraordinary degree of joint action."<sup>54</sup> The Jimmy Carter administration saw a need to upgrade China's technological and military capacity and was willing to provide China with more equipment than was available to the Soviet Union. Washington agreed to sell China military equipment, which included surveillance equipment and vehicles, but not arms. The United States also decided to not interfere with allied decisions to sell arms to China.<sup>55</sup>

In the long run, however, Deng waged a successful diplomatic campaign after the war to isolate Vietnam economically and politically, making Vietnam dependent on the Soviet Union. As the Soviet Union became tied down in Afghanistan after 1979, and weakened and changed course under Mikhail Gorbachev, Hanoi could no longer sustain its previous aggressiveness. In 1989, Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia. In 1991, Vietnam made peace with China on Chinese terms.<sup>56</sup>

### **Consolidating Domestic Control Through Military Reforms**

Domestically, the war with Vietnam allowed Deng to push for military reform and consolidate his political power. The war revealed the PLA's weaknesses and undermined the arguments that the military did not need to undergo significant changes. It allowed Deng to replace and rotate senior military leaders who either challenged his vision for China or were incapable of leading an army. While senior members of the PLA had backed Deng against the more radical Gang of Four in the mid-1970s, many were uneasy with Deng's plan to modernize China. An enlarged Central Military Commission meeting at the end of December 1978 further showed that senior

PLA officials could hardly agree on foreign policy, but instead engaged in acrimonious disputes and accusations. One Chinese elite insider, Zhang Sheng, who was son of the senior PLA general Zhang Aiping and on the General Staff at the time, argued that internal fighting among senior PLA leaders would have continued in China if not for the war with Vietnam.<sup>57</sup>

Deng thus used the Vietnam debacle to promote younger and junior officers loyal to him and forced out elders who had power and could threaten him or his agenda. By the end of 1980, Deng had transferred or replaced seven of China's senior regional military commanders, along with a number of political commissars. The PLA's budget was also cut by 13 percent in 1980 and declined in the subsequent years. To buy support for his reform agenda, Deng shifted money and power from the PLA to provincial officials.<sup>58</sup>

The continuing border skirmishes between China and Vietnam throughout the 1980s also provided China opportunities to train its troops. While the costs in the local areas near the Vietnamese border were high, Deng ordered the PLA to keep large numbers of troops along the border to continuously reinforce "the lessons" of the war. China rotated infantry armies to the Vietnam border to fight against war-proven Vietnamese ground troops.<sup>59</sup>

## **Deng as Decisionmaker**

Overall, the war was an operational failure, but because it was limited in goal, scope, and duration, Deng was able to use the failure to his advantage. He used the war to consolidate domestic control over the military and the country by implementing military reform. The attack also provided larger and longer-term geopolitical benefits: It demonstrated China's strength and will to resist the Soviet Union and Vietnam; it destroyed the illusion of a strong Soviet-Vietnamese alliance and mitigated the threat of encirclement; and it eventually economically and militarily overstretched the Vietnamese, preventing Vietnam from dominating Indochina.

Several key aspects of Deng's decisionmaking are worthy of note:

- First, Deng was a rational, thorough, and sharp thinker who made decisions of war and peace not only on the foreign policy implications of war but also on the domestic implications. Deng, in both his foreign policy and domestic policy, often emphasized getting the big picture or big idea right. He was confident in his capabilities, but he was also open to alternative ideas and updating his views.
- Second, though Deng had to convince his colleagues of the benefits of an attack, he did not disregard information or silence alternative views. He had more confidence than warranted of the PLA, but he was not oblivious to the military's weaknesses and did see the war as a way to battle test the military. Deng's plan



for a limited war with Vietnam was designed to alleviate concerns about attacking Vietnam and questions regarding the PLA's military capabilities to do so successfully.

- Third and most important, Deng was correct in assessing that a limited war would bring Beijing neither great loss nor great victory. The war was executed after months of careful geopolitical calculation and preparation to keep the Soviets out and to prevent China from being bogged down in a long conflict.
- Fourth, Deng's prejudices against Vietnam and inaccurate assessment of military capabilities may have prevented him from fully mapping out potential Vietnamese military responses. While these errors were significant—and a major factor contributing to strategic blunders in other cases examined in this monograph—it was not devastating for Deng because he was able to rationally assess new information as he waged the war, including information from the battlefield that China was not performing well militarily and had experienced massive losses.
- Finally, Deng did not let setbacks lead to mission creep and did not expand the conflict from limited war to protracted conflict or occupation. Even when his general on the ground, Xu, wanted to continue the battle to capture Hanoi and bring China more military success, Deng was not tempted. For him, the losses the PLA suffered did not mean that China should continue fighting to attempt to obtain greater military success. He thus pressured his general to end the war.

In sum, Deng's decisionmaking model to launch the Sino-Vietnamese War was largely correct, but it was flawed with regard to Vietnamese and Chinese military capabilities. Deng made his decision to launch an attack by carefully and rationally considering various options, consulting with his colleagues, and updating his views as new information arrived. He neither silenced alternative views nor surrounded himself with advisors who merely echoed his thoughts. He laid significant international and domestic groundwork to obtain support before launching an attack and correctly assessed that the larger geopolitical environment would not be unfavorable to a limited war. Nevertheless, Deng's prejudices about Vietnam may have contributed to his underestimation of the Vietnamese ability to adapt to an enemy attack (by mobilizing soldiers locally instead of diverting them from the Cambodia war) and overestimation of the PLA's war-fighting capabilities. Yet he was correct in his big-picture assessment that a limited attack on Vietnam could not have extraordinary consequences, either negative or positive. By maintaining his position and waging a limited war, Deng mitigated the blunder that arose due to his underestimation of the Vietnamese.



## The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 1979

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*We cannot afford to lose Afghanistan.*

—Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, 1979, quoted in Svetlana Savranskaya and Malcolm Byrne, *Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan a Case of Mission Creep, According to New Book and Original Soviet Documents*

*If we load up our leaders in Moscow with this kind of analysis, their heads will burst.*

—Orlov-Morozov, Soviet Deputy Station Chief, Kabul, 1978, quoted in Svetlana Savranskaya and Malcolm Byrne, *Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan a Case of Mission Creep, According to New Book and Original Soviet Documents*

### The Beginning of the End

When historians explain the end of the Cold War, the triumph of the West, the demise of communism, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, they often start with the Soviets' 1979 decision to invade Afghanistan. Of course, the problems that undid the USSR—economic dysfunction, political illegitimacy, institutional atrophy—ran deeper than a foreign intervention that backfired. The Soviet Union could have collapsed even if the intervention had succeeded or never been attempted. But the ten years of occupation and war that followed the invasion took an enormous toll, adding to the economic exhaustion and strain of empire from which the Soviet Union was beginning to buckle.

Failure in Afghanistan led to the abandonment of the Brezhnev Doctrine, which mandated Soviet intervention to save communism from counterrevolution in neighboring states.<sup>1</sup> It also set the stage for Mikhail Gorbachev's futile attempt to reform Soviet politics and economics, the liberation of Eastern Europe, the abandonment of communism, and the dissolution of the USSR. Apart from having these world-changing effects, the invasion did not achieve its immediate aims of stabilizing and keeping Afghanistan under Moscow's wing. Rather, it ended in Taliban rule, the rise

of al Qaeda, Islamist extremism within Russia proper, and lasting harm to Russian standing in South Asia.

## Monumental Mistake

The magnitude of the Soviet blunder in invading Afghanistan can be measured not only in the damage it caused but also in how poor Soviet decisionmaking was. As we will see, the Kremlin failed to understand the dynamic conditions of Afghanistan, failed to see that Afghanistan could not be stabilized by external force, failed to anticipate that invasion would spawn even fiercer opposition, failed to encourage objective reporting and analysis, failed to heed warnings of operational pitfalls, and failed to examine what could lay in store for Afghanistan and for the USSR if intervention plans went awry. Fundamentally, in mistaking Afghanistan for a prize of East-West competition, the Soviets erred by launching an intervention that foundered because of Afghanistan's harsh local realities. The result was far greater harm to the Soviet Union than the harm Soviet leaders feared when they ordered the intervention.

Even by strictly Cold War calculations, which guided Soviet decisionmaking, the intervention was totally counterproductive. By invading Afghanistan, the Soviets set in motion a round of East-West competition for which they were unprepared. To illustrate: U.S. defense spending was \$155 billion in 1979, having risen slowly since the end of the Vietnam War. But it grew to \$210 billion by 1981 and reached \$400 billion the year Soviet forces were withdrawn. As a consequence, the conventional military balance that had favored the Warsaw Pact in the 1970s tilted decidedly in NATO's favor during the 1980s. The U.S. military buildup and growing technological lead coincided with Soviet hemorrhaging of resources in Afghanistan.

As the Cold War approached the climactic 1980s, the Kremlin's increasing interest in Afghanistan was mainly geostrategic and defensive: to prevent the United States from obtaining an advantageous location from which to observe and threaten the Soviet Union. The Soviets had little enthusiasm for fomenting socialist revolution in Afghanistan, much less for conquering the country. While they vaguely understood the difficulties of controlling Afghanistan, their main motivation was to deny the United States access to it. This anxiety about Afghanistan and its implications for East-West competition came at a time of growing pressure on Soviet positions in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia, owing to U.S.-European, U.S.-Arab, and U.S.-Chinese cooperation, respectively. All in all, Soviet leaders were not feeling the imperial bullishness that Washington imputed to them in the late 1970s.

In a paradox understood only in hindsight, the Soviets were concerned about a U.S. geostrategic offensive directed toward the USSR's underbelly at the same time the Americans were concerned about a Soviet geostrategic offensive directed toward the Persian Gulf and its fuel reserves. American fears that Afghanistan was a manifestation

of resurgent Soviet expansionism led to U.S. support for Afghan mujahidin freedom fighters, which not only contributed to Soviet defeat but also invigorated Islamist-extremist fighters who have been battling the United States since 2001. Reminiscent of the Anglo-Russian Great Game of the mid-1800s, the Soviets saw Afghanistan mainly as an arena for superpower rivalry, or a new front in East-West confrontation. This was a self-fulfilling error: Before the Soviet intervention, the Americans were much less interested in Afghanistan than the Soviets thought, and much less interested as they, the Americans, would become because of the intervention.

The Soviets' concern about Afghanistan's Cold War importance was aggravated by signs that this unpredictable country—a nation-state in name only—was descending into political anarchy, which in turn could accelerate the spread of Islamist extremism there and beyond, including to Soviet Central Asia. The Soviet Union's doddering leaders, who had cut their teeth in the relatively simple, binary world of East versus West, communism versus capitalism, found Afghanistan bewildering. Like great powers before and since, the Soviets would intervene in Afghanistan with deficient knowledge of the place, its people, and its perils. Among the Afghan realities that led to Soviet misjudgments were the difficulty of growing communism on the barren soil of a traditional, agrarian, tribal society; ingrained Afghan resistance, especially in the Pashtun regions, to central authority of any ilk; hostility to foreign interference; mountainous terrain inhabited by mountain people with an inclination and knack for fighting; and the porousness of international borders (e.g., with Pakistan).

After recovering from the shock of a 1978 leftist coup against the ruthless but largely reliable Mohammed Daoud Khan regime, the Soviets tried to create a unified, sturdy, and dependable communist state. However, this was to be frustrated by a combination of infighting among Afghan revolutionary leaders—business as usual for Afghan politics—lack of Afghan aptitude for practical administration, rejection of officialdom (as opposed to tribal authority), historical feuds, and rising Islamist extremism. The Soviets' objective of orderly political transformation and steady economic development toward a serviceable socialist state was a pipe dream. Reporting to this effect from midlevel Soviet officials and officers in Afghanistan was either ignored or suppressed by intermediate command chains eager to please the Kremlin.<sup>2</sup>

The toppling and killing of the revolutionary government's leader, Nur Muhammad Taraki, by an even more mercurial and untrustworthy associate, Hafizullah Amin, increased Soviet leaders' apprehension about Afghan chaos or betrayal in favor of the Americans. The nominally pro-Soviet communist Amin government proved to be neither reliably pro-Soviet nor recognizably communist nor much of a government. It could not cope with growing violent opposition on the part of Islamists, the bourgeoisie, and provincial tribes. So erratic and unhelpful was Amin that the Soviets suspected him, wrongly, of ties to the CIA. The Afghan regime, leftist though it was, was not part of the solution but part of the problem.

Meanwhile, U.S.-Soviet relations were already taking a turn for the worse while the Soviets were struggling over how to deal with Afghanistan. The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) II Treaty was under political fire in the United States, and Senate ratification was in doubt. Responding to a buildup of Soviet nuclear-armed SS-20 missiles targeted on Western Europe, NATO was edging toward a decision to deploy U.S. intermediate-range nuclear-armed missiles (Ground Launched Cruise Missiles and Pershing IIs) in Europe—a decision that would come two weeks before Soviet forces crossed into Afghanistan. The fall of the shah of Iran, in early 1979, heightened the American fear of a Soviet thrust, or at least creep, toward the Persian Gulf. In response, the United States was ramping up force deployments and military-access rights around the Indian Ocean, including a major operating base in Diego Garcia. The Pentagon was unveiling ambitious plans for modernizing U.S. and allied conventional forces in Europe and for building a rapid deployment force for contingencies in southwestern Asia. And if the hardening of attitudes in the Jimmy Carter administration was not enough, the ominous possibility of a hawkish Ronald Reagan presidency looked real in Moscow.

Although Americans explained these moves and developments as a response to the lengthening shadow cast by Soviet military power over the “arc of instability” (stretching from the Middle East to South Asia), the Soviets saw them as menacing, at worst, and, at least, a retreat from *détente* in the U.S. policy toward the USSR. All this made the Soviets more convinced of U.S. meddling in Afghanistan and more alarmed about the danger of it slipping from their orbit to that of their adversary. The toughening of U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union also had the effect of reducing Moscow’s assessment of the downside risk to U.S.-Soviet relations in the event it invaded Afghanistan. Although the invasion of Afghanistan dealt a further and hard blow to *détente*, the prior malaise of *détente* weakened the case against invasion. Indeed, since the Soviets already suspected U.S. skullduggery in Afghanistan, concern that the United States would object to Soviet military intervention there carried little weight.

Knowing that the Afghan regime could not stabilize the country by itself, the Soviets increased their support, including military aid, training, and mentoring, in the months before the invasion. They also came to the conclusion that Amin was making matters worse and had to go, lest he drag the country into utter bedlam or into the arms of the United States. Although Amin professed loyalty both to Moscow and to communist principles, he was at best a loose cannon, at worst an American agent, and in any case not competent to govern, much less stabilize, develop, and transform Afghanistan.

### **Mission Creep, Soviet Style**

As conditions in Afghanistan deteriorated toward the end of 1979, it is more useful to speak of three Soviet decisions than one. The first was to expand the size and mission

of the Soviet military training-and-advisory presence in Afghanistan in order to bolster the Taraki-Amin regime's efforts to counter a widening and multiheaded insurgency. When that proved inadequate, the Soviets decided in December to insert substantial ground forces in order to secure Afghan military bases and Afghan cities, thus enabling Afghan force to fight insurgents. Simultaneously, they disposed of Amin, in favor of a regime that was far more compliant than competent. These moves constituted what is usually considered the Soviet decision to "invade." When that too proved inadequate, in a matter of weeks, the Soviets elected to escalate by committing more forces and engaging them directly in fighting insurgents. In a way, this decision to commence large-scale combat operations was the most fateful.

A recent study by some former Soviet intelligence and military officers who were involved in the Afghan saga describes this series of decisions, more or less accurately, as "mission creep."<sup>3</sup> After the initial decision to intervene, deliberation and debate became less robust. As with the United States in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, and on a lower scale in Somalia in the 1990s, each decision reset reality in a way that prejudiced subsequent choices in favor of deeper involvement. Just as war can alter and raise the stakes of the parties, intervention can beget deeper intervention in order to protect the existing investment and uphold the credibility of the intervening power. This becomes a rolling blunder, whereby stakes, and mistakes, accumulate.

As each decision was made, the scope for questioning underlying assumptions and strategy was reduced, despite evidence that indicated a need for questioning. Soviet leaders could not reverse themselves without admitting that their chosen course was wrong—something they lacked the courage, confidence, and creativity to do. Upon discovering in early 1980 that Afghan government forces could not control the country while Soviet forces guarded bases and cities, the Kremlin had three options: (1) stand pat, (2) withdraw, or (3) escalate. Because the situation was unstable, standing pat would have led to further deterioration despite the presence of Soviet forces in the country—a stark demonstration of impotence. Instead of asking whether the immediate postintervention instability indicated that intervention would not work, as the Soviet military had argued, Soviet leaders took the position that the intervention was too timid to succeed. On the other hand, to have withdrawn at that point would have meant abandoning the goals that justified intervention in the first place, thus hastening the descent of Afghanistan into chaos, religious extremism, or American exploitation. Moreover, because the Soviets had all along seen the Afghan problem in terms of East-West competition, withdrawal would have been a major geostrategic setback.

That left escalation as the only option that was consistent with the strategic thinking behind the original decision to send Soviet forces into Afghanistan, flawed though that thinking was. Thereafter, with Soviet forces directly engaged in fighting and suffering losses, it became even harder to abandon the goals that led to initial intervention. Of course, use of Soviet troops in combat was precisely what Soviet military leaders feared. Chief of Staff Nikolai Ogarkov knew enough about insurgency to understand

that it was a contest for the political allegiance of the population, rather than regular warfare. He also knew that the capabilities required for counterinsurgency were a far cry from those the Soviet armed forces had honed for war in Europe. To its credit, the Soviet military gradually modified its operations to respond more effectively to the needs of the people and thus to the demands of counterinsurgency—but this was too little and too late to help. As casualties and costs mounted, so did Moscow's resolve—until soaring costs and flagging prospects led a new generation of Soviet leaders to conclude that the USSR was doing itself more harm than good in Afghanistan.

Like the average insurgency, this one lasted a decade (not counting its resumption for at least another decade after the U.S. post–September 11 invasion). Like many large-scale counterinsurgency campaigns waged by foreign troops—Malaya, Algeria, and Indochina (France) and Indochina (U.S.)—this one failed.<sup>4</sup> Again, the end results were worse than mere failure to achieve the decision's goals. Islamist extremism was not defeated but enflamed, resulting in Taliban control of Afghanistan. The United States realized a geostrategic gain—though that gain slipped away when the Americans lost interest in Afghanistan after the Cold War ended, and the Taliban then turned against them. The Soviets suffered lasting international criticism (much as the United States did because of Vietnam). Permanent harm was done to the U.S.-Soviet *détente*. Back home, a decade of occupation, fighting, and killing deepened public dissatisfaction, dissent, and dissidence.

### **What Were They Thinking?**

A blunder of such scale demands explanation of *how* the Soviets could have been so wrong in expecting that a brief intervention with no direct combat would have brought Afghanistan under control. Put differently, why did they so grossly underestimate the risks? The Kremlin considered it imperative that Afghanistan not be lost, to either the Americans or the Islamists. The Kremlin was right to worry about Islamists, but not the Americans, who actually wanted little to do with Afghanistan until it was invaded.<sup>5</sup> Given the advent of a communist government, the Soviets thought that Afghanistan eventually could be developed into a viable state and reliable client, thus neutralizing both the American and Islamist threats. In fact, there was never any realistic hope for communism in Afghanistan. Just as Afghan diversity obstructed unity, Afghan culture obstructed communism. To underscore the futility of injecting Marxism-Leninism into Afghanistan, one Soviet analyst quoted an Afghan cleric: "In this country one . . . cannot do only three things: challenge the faith, honor, and personal property of Afghans."<sup>6</sup> Communism challenged all three.

The Soviets were also wrong to think that whoever controls Afghan cities controls Afghanistan. It was in the rural and rugged regions of eastern and southern Afghanistan that resistance was strongest, combat most difficult, and counterinsurgency most



problematic. Yet without control of these regions, the position of the Soviets and their clients in Kabul was precarious. In light of this and the weakness of Afghan state forces, Soviet troops had to leave their garrisons and fight insurgents throughout the country. At first, the Soviets thought that Afghan state forces could be improved and win without Soviet forces having to fight. At worst, the Soviets thought that the need for their forces to engage in combat would be brief. Despite Soviet efforts, however, Afghan forces proved resistant to reform and improvement—a lack of progress that implied that a critical assumption in the decision to intervene was not valid.

Thus, the Soviet “theory of success”—control population centers, enable loyal Afghan forces to defeat insurgents, win quickly, foster communist development—collapsed when confronted with Afghan realities. Yet the stakes had been raised by the invasion. Since Soviet leaders could not bring themselves to shed their original geostrategic fears or undo their original decision, Soviet forces would be in for a long and bloody occupation. But even as operational facts demolished their strategic assumptions, Soviet civilian leaders did not expect defeat. As far as they were concerned, Soviet armed forces were up to whatever challenge they faced. In fact, and as their top commanders warned, what was demanded of Soviet forces in the mountains of Afghanistan was nothing like what they were organized, trained, and equipped to do on the plains of Central Europe.

International criticism was expected to be sharp but short-lived, as the intervention itself was expected to be. It was sharp, to be sure, but it lasted the entire decade Soviet troops were in Afghanistan. As foreseen, the United States reacted most harshly. The invasion ended the Carter administration’s already wavering commitment to détente, vindicated and emboldened anti-Soviet elements inside and outside the Executive Branch, and kindled public support for increased defense spending. While the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan did not determine the outcome of the 1980 American election, it compounded voters’ dissatisfaction with Carter’s firmness and decisiveness, thus boosting Reagan’s chances.<sup>7</sup>

Even deeper than the failure to anticipate the obstacles to success was the Soviets’ misreading of the factors and forces at work in Afghanistan. They considered Afghanistan to be a Cold War prize and battleground—a rook or bishop on the East-West chessboard. In fact, what was happening within Afghanistan was not the result of and would not be determined by East-West competition. That different Afghan parties exploited American, Soviet, Arab, and other external interests for their own ends hardly made them reliable agents of any of those interests. By framing Afghanistan as a Cold War conflict, the Soviet leaders underestimated Afghanistan and their adversaries and overestimated their own ability to control Afghanistan and their clients.

We find nothing in the historical record to suggest that Soviet decisionmakers anticipated the danger that the invasion of Afghanistan would hasten the end of the Soviet Union and communism. (This stands in sharp contrast to the case, in Chapter Twelve, of the Soviet decision in 1981 not to invade Poland, when Kremlin deci-

sionmakers expressed fears that the Soviet Union itself could suffer grave harm if an invasion of Poland backfired.) It took the regime's successors, Gorbachev and Eduard Shevardnadze, to realize that the system was failing, that perestroika, glasnost, and cooperation with the West were critical, and that ending the political and economic bleeding required ending the physical bleeding in Afghanistan. As it turned out, the Soviet Union's final leaders had a much firmer grasp of the realities of the world and of the Soviet empire than their putatively tough-minded predecessors did. Moreover, the new leaders found it much easier to recognize error, admit failure, and cut losses than did the leaders whose blunder it was.

So flawed was the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan that it begs the question of the collective and individual states of mind of those who made it. Soviet leaders at the time were worn out. Leonid Brezhnev, though still in charge, was less and less capable of lucid thought, or even staying awake. At key meetings, internal and external, he stumbled through his talking points, which he may or may not have understood.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, his top associates vied for his favor, stroked his ego, and needed his blessing. Urging toughness, abroad and at home, was the best way to do this. Brezhnev offered no resistance to the idea that intervention was needed to impose Soviet will on Afghans, crush religious extremism, and thwart American designs.

The real decisionmakers were Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov, and KGB Director Yuri Andropov. Gromyko relied on simplistic and threadbare geostrategic intuition. In essence: we must not lose Afghanistan to the Americans, yet we must not ruin our relations with the Americans or spoil our international image. Ustinov's general reflex was to use force, having spent an entire career with his finger on the trigger. Gromyko and Andropov deferred to him on matters of military feasibility, which had the effect of muffling Marshal Ogarkov's warnings. Andropov was the most mentally acute—given to international and domestic scheming, ambitious, though also fading. Importantly, his strong policy views compromised his objectivity as head of and spokesman for the Soviet intelligence apparatus.<sup>9</sup> Although analysts with experience in Afghanistan tried to convey its complexities, uncertainties, and hazards, Soviet intelligence was not independent of policy, in violation of the first commandment of good intelligence. Again, furnishing analysis that reflected negatively on the beliefs and choices of decisionmakers was not the way to advance one's career or protect one's future pension.

As noted, some analysts and representatives in the field—diplomats, military advisors, KGB agents—tried to explain, at least obliquely, that Afghanistan was unmanageable, that the Soviets' ability to control it was marginal, and that armed intervention would greatly amplify Afghan hostility. These functionaries and operatives understood the perils of intervention, but most just deferred to direction from the top. Some gave up trying to provide objective analysis, were ignored, were marginalized, or pulled their punches. By the later 1970s, bureaucratic cynicism regarding the Soviet state, its leaders, and its international conduct was pervasive. Lower-level sentiment

about intervention in Afghanistan, though better informed than higher-level decisions, was distinctly fatalistic.

Unlike, say, the decisions of Napoleon and Hitler to invade Russia, pros and cons of the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan were debated. (To be more precise, the cons of invading were weighed against the cons of allowing Afghanistan to collapse or fall into the Americans' lap.) As noted, Okarkov tried to get his civilian masters to see that invasion was a bad idea, was not the only option, and would not go as hoped and planned. He was allowed to express his reservations on the eve of the key decision to send forces in, but was overruled and reminded who was in charge. Soviet civilian (party) control of the military was strong—a hallmark of communist regimes. Yet this had the effect of limiting the weight and effectiveness of expert military advice about Soviet forces, enemy forces, and operational risks. Again, the strategic model trumped the operational reality. The Soviet decisionmakers were not without misgivings; Gromyko articulated risks, though not with the intensity or clarity that the risks themselves warranted. But Ustinov was gung ho, Andropov was (mis)calculating, and Brezhnev's visceral instinct was to impose Soviet will and foil American strategy.

## Failure to Imagine What Would Happen

In any case, there was a failure to think through the consequences of a long, bloody, costly war. As in so many decisions to initiate war, those who started this one assumed that it would not last long and would be neither bloody nor costly.<sup>10</sup> Despite misgivings by the Soviet military brass and occasionally by one or another of the decisionmakers, Soviet calculations of the pros and cons of invasion excluded the effects of failure.<sup>11</sup> Although worst-case thinking about Afghanistan led to the decision to invade, thinking about the effects of invasion was predicated on best-case planning.<sup>12</sup> One would think that if the decisionmakers opted to invade despite their own prior misgivings, they would have prepared to avoid or mitigate the risks of which they knew—for example, getting drawn in and getting stuck.

It is not accurate to attribute the mistake of invading Afghanistan to intelligence failure. On the whole, the Soviet decisionmakers had ample information to alert them to the operational and political risks of invading Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> Plenty of noise, data, and even reliable information were available from the field; but little of it translated into knowledge and sound judgment in Moscow. Again, comprehending Afghanistan requires the patience and ability to analyze the welter of tribal, feudal, personal, geographic, and topographic factors that determine Afghan politics and security. While Soviet agents and observers on the ground largely got this, they and their awareness were decoupled from the incurious and puzzled minds that decided to intervene. This is an example in which information does not translate into knowledge that is in turn related to the choices at hand. In this particular case, a manifestation of Soviet institu-

tional fatigue and cynicism led actors from bottom to top to act in a way that protected or advanced their personal interests. In addition, the secrecy of high-level deliberations and impediments to interministerial institutional cooperation were problems in both planning and execution.

In sum, the principal failings of Soviet strategic decisionmaking concerning Afghanistan centered on the cognitive shortcomings of a handful of top leaders:

- Failure to translate available information from officers and agents in the field into sound knowledge about the true nature, causes, and implications of Afghanistan's problems.
- Failure to appreciate the poor prospects for stabilizing Afghanistan by invasion, for reforming Afghan forces, and for building a viable communist Afghan state.
- Gross misunderstanding of the opponent's character and way of fighting, underestimating its will and capabilities, and indifference to likely operational difficulties—all of which had been brought to the Soviets' attention.
- Lack of consideration of the worst-case consequences of a long, drawn-out, costly, and unsuccessful intervention.

It cannot be said that Soviet leaders were deprived of critical information and unmindful that Afghanistan was complex and held risks. At bottom, they placed much greater weight on the risk to Soviet interests of a chaotic Afghanistan falling under American or Islamist control than on the risk that intervention would fail and do grave harm to the Soviet Union itself.

Did Soviet decisionmakers have alternatives to the course of action they chose? The best alternative was not to intervene militarily at all, for the very act of intervention both enlarged the problem by fanning the insurgency and raised the stakes by putting Soviet credibility on the line. Moscow was right to view the costs and risks of nonintervention as being quite high: the failure of a fledgling communist regime, an unstable neighbor, Islamist extremism. However, by intervening, they got all that anyway, *plus* huge costs and damage to the USSR itself. The Soviets' deeply ingrained faith in force and intimidation led them into a war that their own military chiefs told them they could not win.

Defective Soviet strategic decisionmaking concerning Afghanistan was at least partly a manifestation of much that was defective in the Soviet state: aged, faltering leaders relying too heavily on experience, intuition, and, in particular, intimidation; lack of trust and open information flow, vertically and horizontally; cynicism, fatalism, and careerism; overestimation of U.S. capabilities and aggressiveness; inability to view reality problems except through the lens of ideology and East-West rivalry; and failure to sense that the ground was moving beneath their feet. Because leaders were oblivious that the Soviet state and Soviet communism were beginning to fail, they saw no risk that Afghanistan would hasten the process. It did, and they should have known.

## The Soviet Decision Not to Invade Poland, 1981

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*If Polish forces are unable to cope with . . . Solidarity, [Wojciech] Jaruzelski hopes to receive assistance from other countries, up to and including the introduction of armed forces.*

—Report to Moscow from a Soviet emissary in Poland, quoted in Mark Kramer, “Soviet Deliberations During the Polish Crisis, 1980–1981”

*We do not intend to introduce troops into Poland. . . . Even if Poland falls under the control of Solidarity, so be it. . . . We must be concerned above all with our own country.*

—KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov, quoted in Mark Kramer, “Soviet Deliberations During the Polish Crisis, 1980–1981”

### Counterrevolution in Poland

Having imposed Soviet control and communist rule throughout Eastern Europe after World War II, the Kremlin was intolerant of dissent and disorder until near the end of the Cold War. Wayward societies and regimes were crushed by Soviet-led forces, most spectacularly in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Thereafter, Moscow’s Brezhnev Doctrine explicitly mandated military intervention by the Soviet Union and like-minded Warsaw Pact regimes if need be to protect communism from those who would oppose it. The Soviets were not wrong to believe that sustaining communism in most of Eastern Europe required the threat or use of force, as was evidenced by their rapid loss of control when the Brezhnev Doctrine was suspended by Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s. His predecessors were arguably less naive than he was about the potential for rejection of Marxist government. Gorbachev was the first—as it turned out, also the last—Soviet leader to regard reform as an alternative to counter-revolution. His predecessors knew that reform spelled trouble, as it had in 1956 and 1968.

So firmly were pre-Gorbachev Soviets leaders determined to preserve their bloc and so credible was their threat of force that East European leaders were effectively deterred from allowing, much less instigating, reform. As the case of Romania suggests, Moscow could excuse indiscipline in foreign policy as long as counterrevolution by reactionary elements was suppressed internally. Of course, this did not prevent pressures from building up and dissidents from trying to organize. When Soviet-style centrally planned economies started to falter, as they inevitably did, the potential for domestic dissent in Eastern Europe grew. When it erupted in Poland, as of 1980, the Soviets' presumptive response was to insist that the regime either crack down or stand by for military intervention. This time, however, Moscow chose not to invade. As we will see in the pages to come, this was a wise decision at the time. Taking the long view, it also weakened the Soviet yoke on Eastern Europe.

Poland's Solidarity Movement, formed in August 1980 out of a collection of independent trade unions, reflected rising worker dissatisfaction with climbing food prices and stagnating wages—the Polish economy shrank by 2 percent in 1979—and with a lack of basic freedoms under the communist political system. Workers, intellectuals, and an increasingly dissident church presented a wider and more complex challenge than Poland's illegitimate and inept regime could handle without force. Alarm quickly spread among Soviet bloc regimes that Solidarity's gathering momentum could lead to a noncommunist takeover in Poland. This would produce a gaping strategic hole in the Warsaw Pact and infest other East European states, which were also struggling economically.

The Soviet Union was more immune from this danger than East Germany, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Whatever political legitimacy Marxism-Leninism still had in its Russian birthplace, it had virtually none where it had been imposed by the Soviet Union thirty years earlier. The hard-line East German leader Erich Honecker was especially fearful that the loss of Poland would leave East Germany geographically isolated and ripe for counterrevolution. Far from having to coerce their Warsaw Pact junior partners into getting tough with Poland, Soviet leaders discovered that they were the ones under pressure to end Poland's instability.

At the time, the Soviet economy was beginning to strain under the weight of its war in Afghanistan—begun a year before Solidarity appeared—and Western sanctions in response to that war. In parallel, the arms race with the United States, by then free from Vietnam, meant that an expanding share of Soviet state revenues were consumed by the bloated Soviet defense sector. The Soviet propaganda campaign to dissuade Western Europeans from implementing NATO's 1979 decision to deploy intermediate-range nuclear weapons systems was not succeeding; indeed, NATO solidarity was stronger than it had been since before Vietnam.

More fundamentally still, the inability to form capital and meet new investment requirements revealed a fatal flaw in communist economic theory and reality. Because of growing economic inefficiencies and blockages, the Soviet Union needed *détente*

with the West more than ever. Yet anti-Soviet sentiment was gaining ground in the United States and, though less stridently, Western Europe, owing to the Soviets' growing military capabilities and international heavy-handedness. Paradoxically, the very military power and empire that frightened the West were becoming unbearable burdens on the Soviets. As American hard-liners warned that the USSR was becoming stronger and bolder, Soviet leaders were becoming pessimistic and hesitant.

Given the squeeze on Soviet resources, dissidence and, just as bad, reform in Eastern Europe could not have come at a worse time for Moscow. The Kremlin and other East European regimes felt that Polish leaders had brought the Solidarity problem on themselves by deviating from strict communist principles—a euphemism for softness—and were now too timid to crack down. The Soviets pressured the Polish party leader Stanislaw Kania and the premier (and defense minister) Wojciech Jaruzelski to impose martial law and break up Solidarity. This was to no avail: Kania, in particular, felt that conciliating Solidarity would be less traumatic than attempting to extinguish it. Frustrated by the inaction of Polish leaders, the Soviets devised plans by late 1980 to deploy a modest force of Soviet and other Warsaw Pact armed forces into Poland and, if that failed, to undertake a massive intervention.<sup>1</sup> It is not clear how firm these plans were; indeed, Soviet participants later claimed that no decision was taken to intervene.<sup>2</sup>

### **From a Reluctant Yes to a Maybe to an Adamant No**

At first, the prevailing view among Soviet policymakers was to permit under no circumstances communism's collapse and a noncommunist regime's emergence in Poland. The Brezhnev Doctrine had become an article of faith. Yet Soviet leaders were mindful that an invasion could meet fierce Polish resistance (from reformers and patriots alike), the end of East-West détente, tougher sanctions, and worse economic woes. Thus, while the Soviets were reluctantly preparing to intervene, their preference from beginning to end was for the Polish regime to break Solidarity without necessitating invasion.

As of late 1980, the Soviets created a rather twisted connection between action by the Polish regime and intervention by forces of the Warsaw Pact:

- The strong preference was for the Polish regime to stop—better yet, destroy—Solidarity via martial law.
- If the regime would not or could not do so, Warsaw Pact forces would intervene.
- For political and operational reasons, however, such an intervention would need to be in support of martial law by the regime and its forces.

Such ambiguity about the preconditions of invasion left Polish leaders—and perhaps Soviet leaders themselves—unsure about whether martial law was an alternative or a

prerequisite. Whether out of confusion, indecision, or a conscious effort to buy time to manage the crisis, the regime assured the Soviets that it would act even as they stalled.

Meanwhile, the Soviets' dilemma grew sharper as the United States warned of grave consequences if Poland was invaded. Because the Soviets' best hope lay in a crackdown that the Polish regime did not want to undertake, the Soviets were forced to threaten an intervention they did not want to undertake. Threats took the form of preparations to use a regular Warsaw Pact military exercise, scheduled for April 1981, as cover for an intervention, assuming that the Polish leaders would agree to ask for such help, which they would not.

In the meantime, interpreting intelligence on pact military activities to mean that an invasion of Poland was imminent, the U.S. administration of Jimmy Carter launched a pro-Solidarity international publicity campaign and warned the Kremlin that détente would be done and sanctions increased if outside force was used against the Poles.<sup>3</sup> This tough line was echoed more or less by U.S. allies, who were lobbied by Washington. Of course, this line would be reinforced by the incoming Reagan administration. The effect of intensifying pressure on Moscow was to increase Moscow's pressure on Warsaw to impose martial law, on the assumption that the USSR would not be punished by the West as long as it did not intervene.

Still, Kania balked at cracking down and instead tried to defuse domestic tension by mollifying Solidarity. This not only failed but also fueled the ire and impatience of the Soviets and their hard-line associates in Berlin and Prague. Sensing the growing danger of outside force, the Poles advised the Soviets that invading forces would likely encounter large-scale violence.<sup>4</sup> This compounded the Soviets' dilemma regarding intervention: Even as it dawned on them that Kania did not intend to impose martial law, they came to realize that intervention could be successful, and heavy fighting avoided, *only* if in support of martial law. As a consequence, Soviet preparations for intervention were curtailed early in 1981. When Kania made major concessions to Solidarity in March 1981 in order to avert a general strike, all Brezhnev would do was rant about Polish "surrender" in the Politburo.<sup>5</sup> The Warsaw Pact military exercise in April turned out to be no more than an exercise.<sup>6</sup>

Having discarded the threat of invasion, the Kremlin thereafter was reduced to the policy that "all the necessary measures must be taken to ensure that our Polish friends act on their own."<sup>7</sup> Soviet leaders had made two fundamental judgments, both correct: (1) The costs of invasion outweighed those of allowing Solidarity to prevail, and (2) the threat of invasion was not going to induce the current Polish leadership to impose martial law. This left no alternative but to change Polish leadership. In October 1981, Moscow engineered the replacement of Kania by Jaruzelski, making the tough ex-soldier Poland's premier, defense minister, and now party leader. Sure enough, Jaruzelski immediately showed a willingness to crack down on Solidarity.

As Soviet leaders' confidence grew that Jaruzelski would impose martial law, they abandoned altogether the idea of Warsaw Pact intervention. Indeed, by the end of



1981, Moscow's position had further matured—from a conditional yes to a maybe to an adamant no. Again, the Soviets' first instinct a year earlier was to brandish the threat of intervention in order to coerce the Poles into imposing martial law. Then, as the potential difficulties and costs began to register with them, the Soviets decided that intervention was worth the risks only if the Polish regime was ready and able to take full operational advantage of it by imposing martial law.<sup>8</sup> But as of the end of 1981, the Soviets had decided, quite emphatically, against invasion regardless of whether or not the Poles imposed martial law.<sup>9</sup> The same group of Soviet leaders—Andropov, Ustinov, and Gromyko, with Brezhnev accepting the consensus—who had decided at the end of 1979 to invade Afghanistan to save a quasi-communist regime had now decided not to invade Poland even with European communism at stake.<sup>10</sup> While Poland was far more important than Afghanistan to the Soviet Union, the Soviets' change of heart about military intervention in the space of two years was profound.

### Conversion on the Road to Warsaw

Until late 1981, Soviet decisionmaking regarding intervention in Poland was contingent on Polish decisionmaking. Then, the Soviets absolutely decided against intervention, even if invited. The position was reached at a crucial October 29 Politburo meeting, after which Andropov, the KGB chief, reported the “consensus that no Soviet troops would be sent to Poland.”<sup>11</sup>

A matter of controversy to this day is whether Jaruzelski opposed, sought, or even demanded intervention. With an eye on politics and posterity, he wanted a respectable excuse for a crackdown. For that he cited the Soviet demand for martial law and the threat to invade if martial law was not imposed or was imposed but failed. Jaruzelski later claimed that he imposed martial law in order to prevent the greater evil of invasion.<sup>12</sup> Critics insist—and subsequent evidence supports—that he told the Soviets he would impose martial law *only* if he received an assurance of intervention if martial law alone did not succeed.

The Soviets installed Jaruzelski because they thought that he would solve the Solidarity problem without intervention. Records indicate that Jaruzelski and his associates, to the Kremlin's astonishment, sought an assurance that military intervention would occur if martial law failed.<sup>13</sup> An internal document of the Polish Ministry of the Interior specified that “assistance by Warsaw Pact forces is not ruled out” if the proclamation of martial law were to provoke a general strike, attacks on public buildings, or severe clashes with the security forces.<sup>14</sup> Thus, by the end of 1981, not only East European hard-liners but apparently Jaruzelski himself wanted a Soviet commitment to invade if need be to crush Solidarity.

While Moscow was relieved that Jaruzelski was planning a crackdown, it refused to provide the assurance he sought. At a December 10, 1981, Politburo meeting, Soviet

leaders expressed outrage that Jaruzelski persisted in making martial law contingent on a Soviet pledge to intervene if a Polish crackdown failed. Andropov again summed up the Kremlin's stance:

Jaruzelski has made the implementation of martial law contingent on our willingness to offer . . . military assistance. Although we support the notion of internationalist assistance and are alarmed by the situation in Poland, the matter must entirely and unequivocally be handled by the Polish comrades themselves. We do not intend to introduce troops into Poland. That is the proper position, and we must adhere to it until the end.<sup>15</sup>

So adamant was the Soviets' eventual refusal to intervene that they held to it despite the fact that Jaruzelski made martial law conditional on a promise of intervention if his actions proved inadequate. The implication of this was that Moscow was unwilling to intervene even if it meant that Solidarity would survive and perhaps succeed.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, there were several reasons for the Soviets' conversion:

- It appeared that many Poles, possibly including some army units, would fight invading forces. Polish officials had warned the Soviets that “it is even possible that if other Warsaw Pact troops move into Poland, certain units [of the Polish army] might rebel.”
- The West was sure to react harshly to intervention with damaging sanctions at a time when communist economies in general and the Soviet Union in particular were sputtering.<sup>17</sup>
- Two years on, the war in Afghanistan was going worse than expected and already straining the Soviet economy, military, and international reputation.<sup>18</sup>

There is no evidence that the Soviets expected a heightened danger of war with NATO. Even when the more stridently anticommunist Reagan succeeded Carter, the Soviets had no more reason to fear a Western military response in 1981 than they did in 1980. For all the renewed talk of rollback, Washington remained as unwilling as ever to use force in support of East European liberation movements.

Andropov stated frankly and clearly why the Kremlin's priorities had changed since 1956 (when he was the Soviet ambassador to Hungary):

I don't know how things will turn out in Poland, but even if Poland falls under the control of Solidarity, that's the way it will be. And if the capitalist countries pounce on the Soviet Union—and you know they have already reached agreement on a variety of economic and political sanctions—that will be very burdensome for us. We must be concerned above all with our own country.<sup>19</sup>

Mikhail Suslov, second secretary and chief ideologue of the Communist Party, supported him by adding that the Soviet Union's investment in détente made it "impossible for [the Soviet Union] to change [its] position. World public opinion will not allow [it] to do so." So much for the Soviet boldness and aggressiveness that was alarming American critics of détente.

Though Soviet decisionmakers did not put it in such terms, the Brezhnev Doctrine was finished as of 1981. The Kremlin's final decision not to invade appears to have been a calculation specific to circumstances, context, and options concerning Poland, as opposed to a considered and basic change in its predilection to use force to shore up communism in the bloc. By late 1981, the situation in Poland had changed enough to permit Soviet leaders to discard the military option, about which they had misgivings all along. With Kania gone and Jaruzelski in charge, Soviet officials had reason to think that the Poles could solve the problem by themselves after all. The possibility cannot be excluded that the Soviet Union would have eventually invaded if Jaruzelski had not imposed martial law after all or if martial law had failed to stem the threat to communism.<sup>20</sup> At the time, however, the Soviet decision was firm. As Andropov said, the Soviet Union could not afford to endanger itself for the sake of rescuing communism in Poland. In essence, worn-out leaders of a worn-out superpower were losing the option to impose their will on those who rejected their ideology and domination.

## The Days and Years to Follow

Martial law in Poland was declared by Jaruzelski on December 13, 1981, and kept in force until mid-1983. For the short term, it worked. The arrest of Solidarity's leaders had the immediate effects of curtailing the activity and audacity of the opposition to communism. As the Soviets had hoped all along, strong Polish action made foreign intervention unnecessary.

Of course, the underlying causes of Polish opposition persisted. The economy remained sick, despite an injection of Soviet aid. The Catholic Church continued its shift from quiet encouragement of reform to outright opposition to communism. Anticommunist movements elsewhere may have been emboldened by the fact that the threat of invasion appeared to be gone. As the appeal of Polish liberalization increased throughout the Soviet bloc, the decision not to invade came back to haunt those who made it. Solidarity reemerged in Poland in the late 1980s, and in 1989 it was the first opposition party to participate in free elections in any Soviet bloc nation.

Does the denouement of 1989 make the Soviet decision of 1981 a bad one or a good one? It is difficult to say what course history would have taken had the Soviets invaded. Most likely, many Poles would have fought fiercely, resulting in a large-scale conflict in the keystone country of the Warsaw Pact. Soviet communism's

legitimacy and the Soviet Union's international image would have been further damaged. The Soviet economy might have buckled under the strain of two conflicts—Afghanistan and Poland—and the impact of tougher Western sanctions. U.S.-Soviet relations would have deteriorated further, though détente was over by 1981 anyway because of Afghanistan and the election of Reagan.

Even if the Soviets had invaded and crushed resistance in Poland, opposition there would likely have rebounded in some form before long. One can only speculate about the impact throughout Eastern Europe of a Soviet invasion of Poland—thus, the continuation of the Brezhnev Doctrine. Fearing invasion, communist regimes might have been more aggressive in extinguishing any flicker of opposition and rejecting even marginal reform. On the other hand, dissidents might have been more determined to organize and resist. Overall, while a Soviet invasion of Poland might have delayed the collapse of European communism, it might also have made that collapse far more violent than it proved to be.

## Were the Soviets Thinking Straight?

By the time Solidarity appeared on the scene, Soviet leaders had an essentially realistic view of their environment, the strengths and weaknesses of their country and its system of government, the failure of that system to establish roots in satellite countries, and the growing costs of maintaining an empire and competing with the West. Even as some Americans argued that the Soviet power was expanding and represented a present danger, Soviet leaders saw themselves on the geostrategic defensive in all regions. NATO was improving its conventional and nuclear military capabilities; Soviet positions in East Asia were being challenged by China (which had just invaded Vietnam); and U.S. forces and bases were being strengthened across the Indian Ocean. Of most immediate concern, what was expected to be a short and simple intervention in Afghanistan—also defensive, as Moscow saw it—was actually Soviet forces being bogged down in a conflict they did not fathom and, as their own generals had warned, could not win. On the inside, communist economy and ideological energy were nearing exhaustion, and the Soviets knew it.

Given their larger strategic, economic, and ideological challenges, the Soviets were right to regard unrest in Poland as extremely dangerous. The threat from Solidarity, with its roots in worker dissent, was as great as those faced when force was used against Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. But the Soviets were also right to think that invading Poland would be extremely risky and costly at a time when the Soviet Union was already struggling to maintain its empire, compete with the West, and recharge its economy. The Soviets' belief that the Poles would fight invaders was almost certainly correct.

Given the dueling dangers of Solidarity and of invasion, Soviet leaders decided in the end to look after the well-being of the USSR itself, which was argument against invasion. This attitude presupposed that the Soviet Union itself was less vulnerable to internal opposition than were its satellites. This was also true. Opposition to communism was spottier and slower to develop in the Soviet core (Russia and Ukraine) than in any of the European satellites or Soviet republics. The eventual collapse of Soviet communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union were more the results of choices made by Soviet and Russian leaders—Gorbachev, Eduard Shevardnadze, and Boris Yeltsin—than of contagion from the likes of Solidarity and other East European opposition movements. (Again, communism elsewhere carried the additional liability of having been imposed by a foreign power and was therefore jettisoned for patriotic as well as ideological reasons.) In any case, at least toward Poland, the Soviets concluded that the costs to the Soviet Union of enforcing the Brezhnev Doctrine outweighed the risks to the Soviet Union of suspending it. At the time, they were right.

The Soviets' reading of conditions and actors in Poland was also more or less on the mark. They were right to think that Polish leaders had the means to crush or at least slow Solidarity, obviating the need for invasion. They were right to bet that Jaruzelski would impose martial law even if they refused to pledge intervention if martial law failed. More fundamentally, they were right to understand—though they did not put it this way—that the use of force to perpetuate communism outside the Soviet Union was not viable, given communism's failure to achieve either sustainable political legitimacy or sustainable economic strength. As the Soviet leaders of 1981 saw it, opposition to communism would have to be met by tough national regimes taking tough measures. This view changed under Gorbachev—and his so-called Frank Sinatra doctrine—whereby communist states would have to “do it their way.”

Even though more cynical than Gorbachev, the Soviet leaders preceding him misunderstood the meaning of dissidence. Solidarity and groups similar to it were regarded by Soviet leaders as reactionaries, counterrevolutionaries, and class enemies rather than as representative of wider and growing rejection of Soviet domination and communism. The Soviets were wrong to think—if indeed they really thought—that martial law would put an end to anticommunism in Poland and prevent its spread. More likely, as Gorbachev stated, they simply knew they had no better option than to count on a Polish crackdown.

Generations of Soviet leaders used force by habit, and in this respect those of 1981 were no different from the Lenins, the Stalins, and the Khrushchevs. Even as Soviet ideological fervor and economic strength declined, military power remained fundamental not only to strategy but also to existence. Confidence in the Red Army was as strong as ever, notwithstanding its struggles in Afghanistan (about which Soviet military leaders had warned). Although the Soviets held the traditional Russian sense of superiority over “lesser Slavs,” they did not underestimate the serious violence an invasion of Poland could produce. While the Soviet military remained under tight

state and party control in this crisis, and to the end, it is noteworthy that the top uniformed officers of the Red Army echoed their civilian bosses' aversion to intervention. It appears that the Soviet military was aware of its liabilities by 1981, and of the need to conserve its strength to contend with steadily improving NATO capabilities.

On the whole, Soviet decisionmakers took a sound and sober view of both Polish and Soviet realities in 1981. Interestingly, these jaundiced leaders of a rigid system proved to be flexible. Soviet decisionmakers were not impelled to continue their reliance on force by ideological dogma, real political strategy, or hostility toward those who would defy them. Had such simplifications trumped rational thinking, they probably would have intervened, whether to uphold the revolution, to prevent a tear in the Warsaw Pact, or to teach the unruly Poles a lesson.

The decision was not imposed by a single autocratic ruler. Brezhnev was by then something of a figurehead. Indeed, he is reported to have agreed early on with Honecker that intervention should be undertaken if need be, only to find that position increasingly opposed by his chief lieutenants.<sup>21</sup> Differences existed even among Andropov, Gromyko, and Ustinov, with the last the more hawkish. Andropov, who would become the Soviet leader in less than a year, seems to have been the most influential player, as well as the one most anxious about the reaction of the West. How much debate took place is unclear; but there was considerable deliberation, which was surprisingly open and collegial.

Given the dilemma they faced, Soviet decisionmakers might have been unable to decide at all. But they were decisive, clear, and resolute in their refusal to intervene or promise intervention. That their decision went against both received doctrine and initial reflex suggests that these men appreciated that this situation was unfamiliar and new, and that the standard approach would not work, at least not at an acceptable cost. Their conclusion was that while Soviet communism was in trouble elsewhere, the Soviet Union itself must and could be saved. In essence, maintaining expansive Marxism and empire was secondary to maintaining power. As it turned out, the difficult trade-off made by these Soviet decisionmakers only bought a few years.

## Lessons for Strategic Decisionmaking

The Soviet decisionmakers had access to and made good use of a great deal of intelligence and other information about the crisis at hand. Their analysis of the benefits, costs, and risks of feasible options was objective, sober, and largely correct. Intervention would have had far worse immediate consequences for the USSR and most likely would not have delayed the Soviet collapse that was to come by the end of the decade. Although they could have applied their established model of how to interpret and react to trouble in East European communist states, they instead effected a major shift in policy, not only based on their assessment of the immediate problem but also on a

deeper if less explicit realization that their world was changing and that Soviet communism was in trouble.

Having said that the Soviet leaders had adequate information, displayed sound knowledge, and exercised rational judgment, one can speculate whether they would have decided against intervention had they known that Solidarity was a precursor of an earthquake that would destroy European communism and then the Soviet Union. Of course, no one in East or West knew then that Soviet communism's end days had arrived. Moreover, it is hard to see how a Soviet invasion of Poland in 1981 would have extended communism's life. Even if an intervention had succeeded—and it is not clear that it would have—widespread Eastern European demands for liberation from both failed communism and the Soviet yoke were bound to erupt. Thus, even with hindsight, the decision not to invade seems correct.

That this blunder was avoided fewer than two years after the blunder of Afghanistan was committed suggests that even hidebound leaders of a stagnant system can learn and adapt. They accepted and were guided by fresh information that contradicted their experience, predisposition, beliefs, and policy. Undemocratic and unenlightened though they might have been, the Soviet leaders discarded an established model in favor of one much closer to objective—if unpleasant—reality. In this sense, the Soviet decision not to invade Poland is a useful and encouraging lesson: The ability and willingness of decisionmakers to *learn*—to absorb and act on information that is at odds with their predisposition, even their beliefs—can prevent the commission of a blunder.





## Argentina's Invasion of the Falklands (Malvinas), 1982

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*We must find an element that brings cohesion to society and the country. That element is Malvinas.*

—Admiral Jorge Isaac Anaya, chief of the Argentine navy, quoted in Juan B. Yoffre, 1982

*The invasion of the Malvinas, or the occupation of the Malvinas, was caused by a long-time British attitude.*

—Argentine Foreign Minister Nicanor Costa Méndez, quoted in Nora Femenia, “Emotional Actor: Foreign Policy Decision-Making in the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas War”

### As Bad as a Blunder Can Be

The 1982 invasion of the Falkland Islands by Argentine troops and the subsequent humiliating removal of those troops by British forces not only brought down the rulers who ordered the invasion but also profoundly harmed Argentine pride and confidence. As it turned out, Argentine forces had no chance against British forces backed by American intelligence and logistics. The results of the decision to invade were not just regrettable for those who made it; they were catastrophic. As strategic blunders go, history offers few if any that surpass it—so bad that it took a rare brew of witless leaders, willful advisors, and gross disregard for reality to produce it.

Argentine diplomats had tried in vain for two decades to negotiate with their British counterparts the transfer of sovereignty over the Malvinas (their name for the Falklands) from the UK to Argentina. British dominion over the islands was seen as—and more or less was—a colonial relic. For Argentines, elites and general population alike, their nation could not be whole, geographically or psychologically, until the islands were theirs. This was a deeply emotional matter and a top foreign-policy

priority for them. While this had been so for generations, it was brought to a head by a coincidence of Argentine, British, and world politics.

Although previous British governments had occasionally taken forthcoming positions about the eventual (albeit always long-term) transfer of sovereignty, Margaret Thatcher's government showed no flexibility on this, the Argentines' paramount interest and constant demand.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, London's negotiating position had never been less promising than it was under Thatcher. That Britain's Iron Lady was inflexible toward *all* her opponents, foreign or domestic, did not ease the pain to Argentines of seeing their national prize snatched away yet again. One of the great ironies of the Falklands episode was the Argentines' failure to extrapolate forceful British reaction to invasion from obdurate British negotiating.

### Argentine Fury and Folly

By the 1980s, the United Kingdom was, arguably, a has-been global power, whereas Argentina was trying to be a regional power. The two had long enjoyed close and mostly friendly bilateral relations. The Argentines' war of independence in the early nineteenth century succeeded in part because British attacks had weakened Spain's control over this key colony during the Napoleonic Wars. Although having earlier designs to wrest Argentina from Spanish control, London recognized the new country in 1823. Cultural, educational, and political ties were historically strong; indeed, the United Kingdom had always been something of a mentor to Argentina. Even with its decline, the postempire United Kingdom remained the yardstick by which Argentines tended to measure their country's stature and aspiration.

This mind-set amplified Argentina's growing frustration with British intransigence and resentment over British dismissiveness toward Argentina's most cherished international goal: sovereignty over the Falklands. Negotiations starting in the 1960s made control of the islands an even more immediate, passionate, and unifying goal than ever among virtually all Argentines, despite otherwise deep political fault lines in the country. With the British adamant that the future of the island could only be decided by its inhabitants—all of British stock—the absence of face cards in Argentina's negotiating hand became obvious. Meanwhile, strict British control of immigration precluded the creation of an ethnic-Argentine majority. By 1982, the goal of transfer of sovereignty looked impossible to achieve through diplomacy.

At the time—following decades of mostly ineffective, Peronist, corrupt, and authoritative government—Argentina was under the military dictatorship of the brutal but inept army general Leopoldo Galtieri (its leader), the bellicose navy admiral Jorge Isaac Anaya, and the circumspect air force brigadier Basilio Lami Dozo. Because of its own misrule and Argentina's economic troubles, this group was losing whatever political legitimacy a military junta can presume to have. Although the likelihood of popu-

lar revolution was slight, the junta depended on the backing or at least acquiescence of Argentine elites. Of more immediate concern, other senior Argentine officers were watching and waiting for this threesome to stumble.

Meanwhile, the new U.S. administration of Ronald Reagan had made the reversal of perceived Soviet gains in Latin America a top foreign-policy priority. Despite the Argentine junta's ugliness, it was seen in Washington as a reliable and influential friend in the hemispheric confrontation with communism that was building. Of course, with Europe also a contested and critical region—at a moment when Europeans were torn over NATO's decision to deploy intermediate-range nuclear-armed missiles—the United Kingdom was important to American interests. Thus, the geostrategic stage was set in Buenos Aires for a war that took London and Washington by complete surprise, as well as for an outcome that took its Argentine authors by equally great surprise.

Notwithstanding Thatcher's categorical rejection of the possibility of transferring sovereignty to Argentina, British diplomats—ever the tactical pragmatists—did not break off negotiations on the future of the islands. Indeed, just before the invasion, the two sides completed a round with a communiqué affirming the intention to hold further talks based on an “open agenda with the aim of settlement by the end of 1982.”<sup>2</sup> This hint of flexibility, approved by Britain's relatively dovish Foreign Secretary Francis Pym, was viewed by Argentina's sharply hawkish Foreign Minister Nicanor Costa Méndez as a meaningless and patronizing sop, given the real attitude of the real British policymaker, Thatcher. On March 3, the Argentine government stated its “total dissatisfaction with the outcome of the . . . talks and implied that it would not feel bound to pursue its national interests by peaceful means.”<sup>3</sup> Egged on by Anaya, and assured by Costa Méndez that the UK would do nothing more than rant, the junta had already decided to occupy the islands.

The invasion of April 2 consisted of a mainly unopposed amphibious landing by fewer than one thousand lightly armed Argentine troops, who proceeded to engage and capture the few Royal Marines on the islands. Argentine orders were to minimize violence and avoid casualties (one Argentine and no Brits, in the end). As tame as the invasion was, it shocked the world, including the queen's intelligence services, government, and armed forces. The first instinct of Washington, which was just as surprised, was to claim that it had no dog in this proverbial fight—a position it would rethink in light of Argentina's violation of international law and British messaging that the “special relationship” was at stake.<sup>4</sup> But the invasion was greeted in Buenos Aires by huge celebrations among the same people who had until that moment held the junta in contempt. Operationally and politically, as Argentina's leaders saw it, so far so good.

This was not a decision actually to start a war, for none was expected. Rather, it was a decision to use Argentina's only trump card—military force, along with a twelve-thousand-mile geographic advantage—in order to alter the status quo and put muscle behind its negotiating position. Argentina's leaders considered it an occupa-

tion—a nonaggressive recovery—not an invasion. They even claimed that the British were starting a war by sending a force to attack Argentine forces, whose actions had been peaceful.<sup>5</sup> The expectation of Argentina’s diplomats was that physical possession would lead to international acquiescence, then acceptance, and eventually to British recognition of Argentine sovereignty. The details, including British consent, were to be worked out across a green-felt table.

Because the possibility of a forceful British response, thus of war, was more or less totally discounted by Argentina, invasion troops were effectively given no capability to defend themselves, let alone to defend the islands. Neither the air force, which subsequently acquitted itself well, nor the navy, which did not, was prepared to oppose a British response. Even as Argentine army troops were delivered to the islands, the readiness of Argentine naval and air forces was not elevated. There is no evidence that the Argentines did an analysis of British military capabilities (with or without U.S. material support) and how Argentine forces would perform against them.

The foreign minister’s belief that the British would not fight if the islands were seized aligned with the junta’s need to reverse its political plunge by taking an action that would capture the imagination and hearts of all Argentines. If there was discussion of the danger of triggering and then losing a war, we could find no record of it. The decision was based on analysis only of the pros, without reference to cons.

## **In a Trap of Their Own Making**

The British and American reactions that followed jolted the junta and its advisors. Thatcher made it clear that the United Kingdom would retake the Falklands militarily if Argentine troops had not left by the time British forces arrived. While more understated than the postinvasion jubilation in Argentina, the show of strong popular and political support for Thatcher—and for war—was quickly apparent. As for the Americans, Secretary of State Alexander Haig launched a mediation effort to try to avert war, albeit with the clear purpose of getting Argentina to remove its troops before UK forces removed or destroyed them. Predictably, the Argentines asked the United States to restrain the British while the U.S. mediation was under way; but Haig and his team (of which one author was a member) told the junta that British forces would not delay, would not be asked by the United States to delay, and would receive U.S. support if Argentine troops were still on the islands by the time the British got there. Now the Argentines were confronted by the cons that their decision had ignored. While trying not to offend Argentine pride, and possibly make matters worse, Haig’s team intimated to the Argentines that British forces would prevail.

As a large British joint task force moved by sea to retake the islands, with indispensable U.S. intelligence and logistics support, the junta made a second fateful decision—not one of commission but of omission. Instead of accepting an American peace

proposal that would provide Argentina a fig leaf and glimmer of hope of eventual sovereignty—a proposal the British would have been under intense pressure to accept—the junta elected to stand pat and wait for hostilities with a country possessing vastly superior forces.<sup>6</sup> If the decision to invade had been based on the assumption of triumph, the decision to decline the U.S. peace proposal was taken in the face of the certainty of defeat. Now pleading with the U.S. negotiators to stop the southward movement of the British task force, the Argentines conveyed at last that they understood what was in store.<sup>7</sup> Galtieri blamed Costa Méndez for misreading the British, as if this would excuse the junta's violation of international law and international peace, or for that matter save Galtieri.

However, having created a whirlwind of public excitement and support over the invasion, Argentina's leaders were trapped in it: "Immediately after mobilizing national identity by recovering the islands, it was impossible for the junta to withdraw the troops from the Islands without jeopardizing . . . their political support"—indeed, without jeopardizing their political survival.<sup>8</sup> There was particular concern about rumors of a coup by other generals.<sup>9</sup> The junta's calculation was that as politically disastrous as Argentine troops being forced off the Falklands would be, it would be worse for the junta—though of course not for the troops—to order their withdrawal. That Argentina's leaders would rather allow their forces to be defeated, captured, wounded, and killed than to admit their own blunder suggests that they were not only foolish but also depraved.

The results of the decision to invade were diametrically opposite to what the junta had intended, had been led to expect, and had promised. A war ensued that Argentina had not meant and therefore was not prepared to fight. The United States, as it warned, removed itself from mediation and provided the UK with invaluable intelligence and logistics support. As the British force bore down, most of Argentina's navy remained welded to the pier—the main Argentine capital ship that was sent to sea, the light cruiser *General Belgrano*, was sunk. British naval forces took some losses from Argentina's French-equipped and competent air force. Argentine occupation troops were left unreinforced, largely defenseless, short of supplies and shelter, and in misery awaiting their fate. To their relief, they were overwhelmed, rounded up, fed, and subsequently repatriated by British troops.

The international community, on the whole, condemned the Argentine invasion as a violation of the norm that disputes must be settled peacefully and by agreement among the parties. Some Latin American countries displayed desultory backing of Argentina, but only to the point of urging that negotiations be continued and hostilities avoided. That Argentina was ruled by a right-wing military dictatorship reinforced hesitation in the Third World to show support. The world took notice of the incompetence of the Argentine junta in ordering the invasion, in failing to grasp a possible peace deal, in leaving their troops hungry and vulnerable, and in being soundly beaten in a war they started. Argentina was disgraced; the military junta was toppled;

and military juntas as a prevalent Third World form of government were discredited. Thatcher was rewarded politically at home and abroad; she entered the era's pantheon of great leaders; her domestic policies got a needed shot of adrenaline; and her influence with the United States soared. Argentina sank from an important friend in the U.S. anti-Soviet strategy to a virtual leper, until the junta was removed.

On the dispute itself, what little progress prior negotiations had made was dashed. Transfer of sovereignty had become an even more remote possibility for Argentina. Having placed the Falklands under the spotlight of international attention, Argentine conduct toward the islands would henceforth be carefully watched, with zero tolerance for coercion or confrontation.

Domestically, the junta's members went from heroes to goats, were tossed out, and eventually stood trial (for internal atrocities, not the Falklands debacle). Since then, Argentine politics have evolved into democracy, more or less. The patriotic high that Argentines enjoyed momentarily upon the invasion, as well as the depths of shame upon the defeat, was replaced by the more normal, sober, healthy ups and downs of a pluralistic society with a proper place in the world.

## Unhinged from Reality

Against this backdrop, it is worth considering what the cognitive model was of those who took the decision to invade the Falklands, and how that model was shaped. What the junta members thought was largely a product of their experience (or lack thereof): preoccupation with power, especially their (waning) domestic political power; lack of exposure to and crude understanding of international politics; contempt for the public and its opinion; and, ironically for a military junta, inexperience in military operations and disregard for troops. They were easily persuaded by more-sophisticated Argentine diplomats that the UK would not fight.<sup>10</sup> Having been persuaded, the junta members had neither the personal competence nor any institutional options to question that view. Rather, their leading hawk, Anaya, seized the diplomats' assessment because it fit his predisposition to use force to bolster the regime's position at home and the country's position internationally. Because Costa Méndez told the military leaders what they wanted to hear—that occupation would go unopposed and lead to triumph at home and abroad—it cannot be said that they were outright deceived by him. Their eagerness to find a way out of their domestic predicament made the military dictators susceptible to the flawed analysis Costa Méndez gave them.<sup>11</sup>

But what of Costa Méndez and his minions, who should have known better? These were cosmopolitan diplomats with years of face-to-face exposure to their British counterparts. They had nothing to gain yet much to lose by leading the junta and the country into military and political disaster. Did they deceive themselves? Was their objectivity skewed by frustration and anger? Again, they did not infer from London's

intransigence over the Falklands, as they might have, that London would go to war to preserve sovereignty over them. The Falklands were thought to be of little importance to the British: They had no economic value and only a handful of inhabitants. One British public opinion poll had ranked the Falklands forty-seventh in a list of UK strategic interests. Though the British diplomats had been given little room to negotiate, they were nonchalant, relaxed, patronizing, and without any sense of urgency. This attitude both antagonized the Argentines and reinforced their assessment that the Falklands did not matter enough to Great Britain to go to war. On top of this, the Argentines could see that Her Majesty's Government was mired in political, economic, and pan-European problems.

Conversely, if British representatives had begun to detect that Buenos Aires was about to abandon negotiations and invade the islands, they never warned their Argentine interlocutors that the consequences could be war. (For that matter, British negotiators never warned the cabinet that the Argentines might turn to military force.) This raises another factor that might have contributed to blundering into war: State-to-state communications between London and Buenos Aires were irregular, formalistic (i.e., diplomatic notes), and abstruse. They revealed next to nothing about what the other party was really thinking, let alone might do. The lack of clear and direct communications left both Argentina and the UK in the dark and also without an essential tool for crisis management. The way the Argentines found out about the strength of British views and intent to go to war was by being told by Haig. By the same token—though it may well have made no difference—10 Downing Street never heard directly from the Casa Rosada that Argentina's patience would expire if negotiations remained fruitless.

Again, the Argentines did more than underestimate Thatcher; they also failed to anticipate the galvanizing impact the invasion would have on the British government, media, and people. The expectation of Argentine diplomats was that military occupation would cause the British to earnestly negotiate a transfer of sovereignty—a colossal analytic failure that made the junta's decision an easy one. One scholar, assessing the role of emotions in strategic decisionmaking, highlights the irony of the Argentines making a decision that was intended to appeal to patriotism while utterly failing to take account of the effect of their decision on British patriotism.<sup>12</sup> If the invasion offered them relief from their domestic troubles, might not a forcible British response offer a political boost for Thatcher?

After all, Brits were in their own national doldrums. From Suez on—1956–1982—Britain had seen its influence in the world, in Europe, and with the United States decline.<sup>13</sup> Far from being too preoccupied to go to war, a good war was precisely what the British needed.<sup>14</sup> In a country otherwise polarized by partisan and ideological differences, a whopping 89 percent of British citizens supported Thatcher's decision to retake the islands and applauded her for the results. Just as Argentines took time out from their domestic difficulties to celebrate the invasion, Brits took time out from

theirs to undo it. The Argentines' belief that invasion offered relief from their own woes yet would not be resisted because of Britain's woes was a fatal flaw in reasoning.

If the Argentines underestimated the UK's willpower, they did not estimate the UK's capabilities one way or another. Implicit in the Argentine state of mind was that the British would not and probably could not send sufficient forces from the top to the bottom of the globe. Therefore, the lack of preparedness of Argentine forces—especially aggravated by the neglected state of ground and naval forces (thanks largely to the junta itself)—was not germane. In any case, “fear of Britain's military might was not enough to deter brinkmanship decision-making when considerations about lack of international prestige, loss of face and narcissist hurt provoked the rage of the military *junta* members.”<sup>15</sup> In contrast, the British had a good analysis of Argentine military weakness and vulnerabilities, which they then fine-tuned with American help.

An equally consequential, not to say inexcusable, Argentine oversight was to misread the United States. In their confidence that the United States valued Argentina in its strategy of countering the USSR in Latin America, the Argentines ignored that the United States valued even more the UK in its strategy of countering the USSR in Europe. Thus, Cold War considerations did figure into U.S. policy on the conflict, but opposite of the way the Argentines expected. If there was Argentine analysis of whether their forces could withstand British forces supported by U.S. intelligence and logistics, it has never been found. Historians would be hard-pressed to find other cases in which a state starts a war with a stronger state without considering the enemy's ability to fight, without operational planning, and without preparation.

The Argentines also expected abundant Third World or at least Latin American support against a former—and an especially unpopular—colonial power. While there was perfunctory support among Latin American governments and publics, the general international view was that Argentine force must leave the islands, preferably before being thrown off.

The regime was right to expect that the Argentinian people would celebrate, suspend their divisions, and applaud the regime. However, this response made it impossible for the junta to negotiate its way out of the predicament in which it had placed the country and themselves. Of course, they did not consider this potential trap because they were convinced that there would be no war. As it turned out, celebratory demonstrations turned ominous when it appeared that the regime might negotiate its victory away, and then downright hostile when British forces retook the islands.

## Rational but Wrong

Putting this all together, it is easier to accuse the junta of being obtuse than of being irrational. Given the (defective) knowledge it had, it seemed that invading the Falklands would produce a domestic-political bonanza, increase respect for Argentina abroad,



fulfill national aspirations, bolster national self-esteem, and make historic champions of the junta members—without having to fight a war or do serious harm to relations with the United States. However “wrong” the decision to invade was, it was not pathologically irrational, impulsive, or emotional.

The junta's rejection of the Haig peace proposal was arguably also rational, if also devastating—to Argentina above all. To have removed Argentine forces without a transfer of sovereignty in order to avoid war was political suicide for the junta. While aware that military defeat and removal of Argentine troops by superior British forces might also lead to national humiliation and regime change, the junta chose to take a chance. Another explanation is that faced with two options that both pointed to the same outcome, at least for them, the junta simply froze.<sup>16</sup> Having made one awful decision, the junta was then unable to make any decision at all.

Argentina's leaders did not make the decisions to invade and then to reject peace in isolation. They sought input from the people who had been grappling with the dispute and with the British for many years: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They did not ignore or reject the analysis of their professional advisors; rather, they paid dearly for accepting that advice. If anything, those who advised the junta were more emotional, and less objective, than the rulers. The foreign-ministry professionals, from the foreign minister down, were infuriated with British stonewalling. Indeed, they showed strong animus toward the British themselves. While Argentine military leaders did not demonize the British—indeed, they admired their British counterparts—Argentine negotiators did. Costa Méndez had access to good information but failed to convert it into sound knowledge, for him or for his superiors. It required no special intelligence—in either sense—to know how London, as well as Washington, would react. The failure was one of analysis. Although the junta had little firsthand experience dealing with the British, the foreign minister and his associates had a lot of it. Only a lapse of reasoning could have allowed the diplomats to think and advise the junta that there was little or no chance of war. After all, Thatcher was building a reputation for her toughness and readiness to brawl.

There appears to have been no analysis of adverse contingencies and no attempt to hear diverse opinions. The junta relied on a single source of information and advice. One wonders whether blunder, war, and the junta's demise would have been avoided if Galtieri and company had asked some trusted but independent advisors, or asked themselves, two simple and obvious questions: What if the British fight? What if the Americans support them? Had they done so, the consequences might have appeared so severe that the normal human inclination to avert risk would have led to a rethinking of the decision to invade.

When strategic blunders are made, the cause may range from inadequate information to shoddy analysis, to poor judgment, to a betrayal of leadership trust, to the failure of government institutions to correct or contain such shortcomings. In this case, we have a group of military dictators answering to no one and indifferent to interna-

tional law, insulated from world affairs, and inexperienced in war, and depending on a group of diplomats' outrage over the stonewalling of their negotiating counterparts, in the setting of a nation in need of a lift. Facts available to them—Thatcher's pugnacity, the special quality of the Anglo-American relationship, and the mediocrity of Argentina's armed force—would have indicated that an invasion of British sovereign territory, disputed or not, was likely to end badly. But good information is not enough: It must be analyzed and related to the issue at hand; weighed and used in an objective assessment of goals, risks, and options; formed into a cognitive model that represents fairly the complex conditions surrounding a decision; and then used by those who are accountable for making war-and-peace decisions. Throughout this process, decision-makers must have the self-consciousness and strength to question not only the information and analysis they receive but also their own biases, intuitions, and impulses. The Argentine leaders who started the Falklands War failed in every respect.

## The U.S. Invasion of Iraq, 2003

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*States like [Iraq, Iran, and North Korea] and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil. . . . By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. . . . I will not wait on events while dangers gather.*

—President George W. Bush, State of the Union, January 29, 2002

*For us, war is always the proof of failure and the worst of solutions, so everything must be done to avoid it.*

—President Jacques Chirac to a joint session of the French and German parliaments, January 2003

### Dividends of Misjudgment

President George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq on March 20, 2003, was not a blunder on the scale of those of Napoleon, Hitler, and Tojo.<sup>1</sup> There was a case to be made on several grounds for operations against Saddam Hussein. The initial phase of combat was highly successful, and some still argue that the American investment was worth the cost of toppling the Saddam regime. Bush was reelected in November of 2004 as much because of as despite his invasion of Iraq. His subsequent 2007 decision to launch the “surge” did limit some of the damage.

The main premise for the war was that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and that these were at risk of falling into the hands of terrorists. In the end, however, there were no such weapons, and Saddam's links to al Qaeda were unproven.<sup>2</sup> This robbed the invasion of legitimacy. The insurgency that ensued after initial combat operation robbed the invasion of success. Today, the United States has less influence in Baghdad than Iran does. Iraq is a Shia-dominated state with an alienated Sunni minority, rampant violence, and virtually no control over the Kurdish north. At least 134,000 Iraqis died as a direct result of the American invasion, and the violence there continues.

As this is written, violent Salafists from Syria and elsewhere have swept through the Sunni areas of Iraq, routing the Iraqi army, seizing important cities, and declaring an Islamist caliphate. There were no U.S. military forces available in Iraq to support the Iraqi army. The Kurds have taken the oil-rich contested city of Kirkuk and hinted at the possibility of separating from the Iraqi state. The United States has been compelled to send military advisors back to Iraq, and it may no longer have enough influence with any of the parties or in Baghdad to preserve a unified state.

Meanwhile, the Afghan conflict was neglected for half a decade.<sup>3</sup> Allied trust in America was eroded, and attitudes about the United States in the Muslim world were poisoned. Some 4,486 American service personnel were killed and more than thirty thousand wounded. The total financial cost by some estimates could approach \$2 trillion.<sup>4</sup> Largely because of Iraq, the U.S. public has become very skittish about overseas U.S. combat deployments, especially involving ground forces.<sup>5</sup>

Major errors included misinterpretation and misuse of intelligence on Iraq's WMD capability, unwillingness to give WMD inspectors time to conclude their work, peremptory diplomacy that damaged the Atlantic Alliance, and failure to properly anticipate what would happen in postconflict Iraq.

## **A Vision of Regime Change and Doctrine of Preemptive War**

During the 1990s, the United States would have preferred regime change in Baghdad, but it settled for containment. The 1991 Gulf War ended after one hundred hours of combat with Saddam still in power. Afterward, President George H. W. Bush signed a covert-action "finding" authorizing the CIA to topple the Saddam regime. During the Bill Clinton administration, no-fly zones in the north and south of Iraq kept Saddam's aircraft grounded in an effort to protect the Kurds and Shias. In February 1998, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright confirmed that U.S. strategy toward Saddam was containment, arguing that removing Saddam would be too costly and that fomenting a coup would create false expectations.<sup>6</sup> In October 1998, however, Clinton signed the Iraq Liberation Act, providing funds for the Iraqi opposition. Later in 1998, Clinton authorized a four-day bombing campaign designed to strike Iraqi WMD sites.<sup>7</sup> But the Clinton administration never contemplated an invasion of Iraq.

When the George W. Bush administration entered office, its initial focus was on China and military transformation. "Nation building" was anathema. CIA threat briefings concentrated on al Qaeda, not Iraq,<sup>8</sup> though efforts to have the new administration deal with al Qaeda failed. Well before the September 11 attacks, officials at the Pentagon, led by Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, quietly began to consider military options against Saddam. Deputy National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley developed a policy of phased pressure on Iraq, which included ratcheting up many of the mea-

asures used by the Clinton administration, such as sanctions, weapons inspectors, and aid to the opposition.<sup>9</sup>

That all changed on September 11, 2001.<sup>10</sup> Initially, Bush, Wolfowitz, and others thought that Iraq might be behind the attacks.<sup>11</sup> So did a large majority of the American people, a belief reinforced by the speculation of administration officials. It became clear that this was not the case, as Bush finally revealed,<sup>12</sup> but for many this connection stuck. The first order of business was to destroy al Qaeda in Afghanistan, but the case against Iraq moved rapidly to the front burner. Bush indicated that as soon as the Taliban were driven from Afghanistan, he would turn his attention to Saddam.<sup>13</sup>

The case for invasion resembled a layer cake. At the base was the acute sense of imminent national danger caused by the September 11 attacks. A rogue regime with WMDs and ties to terrorists aroused fear of a much more devastating attack on the U.S. homeland. Saddam had shown himself for the ruthless villain he was. He had used chemical weapons against his own people and against Iranian troops in the 1980s. He had invaded Kuwait and started a bloody war against Iran. He perpetually threatened Israel. He refused to implement at least ten UN Security Council resolutions aimed at ending his WMD programs and had expelled weapons inspectors in 1998.

In the aftermath of September 11, the CIA began to highlight Saddam's WMD capabilities. The director of central intelligence, George Tenet, revealed eight ways that Saddam might develop a nuclear capability and called the WMD case against Saddam a "slam dunk."<sup>14</sup> The CIA had missed several indications that might have given specific warning about the September 11 attack and was not about to be caught off guard again.<sup>15</sup> Because the Bush administration had not acted on more-general intelligence warnings of the al Qaeda threat to the U.S. homeland, it would take any future warning much more seriously.

This sense of immediate and extreme danger was amplified in the wake of the September 11 attacks by two other events that cemented the link between WMDs and terrorism. Soon after September 11, anthrax spores were mailed to the U.S. Congress and others, killing five people. Intelligence reports indicated, wrongly it turned out, that Saddam had weaponized anthrax, although he was not suspected of initiating these particular attacks. Also, the CIA received reports that Osama bin Laden was seeking "dirty" (i.e., radiological) bomb capability, possibly from Pakistan.<sup>16</sup> Public concern grew, U.S. hardware stores began to run out of duct tape, and pharmacies ran short of ciprofloxacin.

In considering war on Iraq, the sibling of danger was opportunity.<sup>17</sup> Some of the neoconservatives around Wolfowitz had held midlevel jobs in the administration of George H. W. Bush. They had seen efforts at regime change work when the United States invaded Panama to topple Manuel Noriega in 1989, when Eastern Europeans cast communism aside that same year, when the Soviet Union itself collapsed in 1991, and when the Bulldozer Revolution toppled the Serbian strongman Slobodan Milos-

evic in the wake of the Kosovo War. Emboldened by these successes, this group now saw the opportunity to press for forcible regime change in Iraq.

Meanwhile, there was growing recognition that U.S. military power was in a class of its own. The United States had developed new military technologies and tactics that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld championed as defense transformation. These included data networking, accurate and voluminous intelligence, instantaneous command and control, and precision strike. Developed in the 1980s and 1990s, they had been on display during Desert Storm and more recently in Afghanistan, where this “military transformation” technology toppled the Taliban regime effortlessly and created a sense of total American military dominance. By contrast, the Iraqi military had suffered contractions of 35 percent in its army and 60 percent in its air force since before Desert Storm.<sup>18</sup> Iraq stood no chance in a force-on-force war.

The thinking went that if the United States could change the regime in Baghdad, it might create a new model of democracy in the Middle East. After all, democracy was on the rise globally in what the political scientist Samuel Huntington called the Third Wave. Just as it was flourishing throughout Eastern Europe and Latin America, it could take hold in Iraq and serve as a model for the Arab world. Democracy in the Middle East would be a geostrategic game changer, foster stability in that strife-ridden region, and provide America’s ally Israel with a much more secure environment.<sup>19</sup> In addition, a new regime in Iraq would allow the United States to remove its troops from Saudi Arabia, where they fueled extremism, and to have another friendly source of oil.<sup>20</sup> Converting Iraq from an adversary to a friend could also strengthen the U.S. hand—and even provide military bases—against Iran.<sup>21</sup>

A third and related line of thinking that led to war was a prevailing sense of unfinished business with Saddam—namely, his removal—that needed closure. The United States had been waging a low-grade undeclared war against Saddam since Desert Storm ended as part of its containment strategy. As part of Operations Northern Watch and Southern Watch, the U.S. Air Force flew daily missions over 60 percent of Iraqi territory and was often fired upon, though never hit.<sup>22</sup> Other anti-Saddam options seemed to be failing. France and Russia were not cooperating with international sanctions and funds were being diverted by Saddam from the Oil-for-Food Programme to buy arms. In January 2002 the CIA presented Vice President Dick Cheney with an assessment that Saddam had created a nearly perfect security apparatus that made the prospects of a successful coup nearly impossible.<sup>23</sup>

This unfinished business concerned Bush directly. Saddam had earlier tried to have assassins attack his father while on a Middle East trip. The fact that Saddam “tried to kill [his] dad” evidently weighed on his decisionmaking.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, after September 11, forcing a regime change in Baghdad made good political sense for the Republicans. The attack on Afghanistan had bipartisan and international support. But the administration needed to be seen as doing more in its declared global war on terror. By going after Saddam they would be well positioned to “wrap

themselves in the flag” and compensate for missing the September 11 attacks.<sup>25</sup> The 2000 Republican platform had already set the stage by calling for a comprehensive plan to remove Saddam, though without specifically referring to an invasion.<sup>26</sup> After September 11, the use of force against Saddam would be difficult for Democrats to protest.

From this logic developed a new national security doctrine of preemptive war. Bush made the case for this during a June 2002 speech at West Point, arguing that the United States could not rely on Cold War concepts such as deterrence and containment to deal with terrorists who are willing to commit suicide for their cause. Neither could it afford to wait for a rogue regime to transfer WMDs to others or gain a decisive capability to harm the United States. It had a responsibility to preempt if necessary.<sup>27</sup> During his UN General Assembly speech in September 2002, Bush tied the doctrine of preemption to Iraq, noting “with every step the Iraqi regime takes towards gaining and deploying the most terrible weapons, our own options to confront that regime will narrow.”<sup>28</sup> This concept was formalized in the September 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, which said: “We cannot let our enemies strike first. . . . The overlap between states that sponsor terror and those that pursue WMD compels us to action.”<sup>29</sup> The new strategy had general application, but in the context of 2002 it provided the specific strategic justification for an invasion of Iraq.

This concept, born of danger and opportunity, was deeply flawed. The case for Saddam having WMDs turned out to be wrong, and Saddam never had close ties to Sunni terrorists. The preemption doctrine lacked international legitimacy and undermined international trust in the United States. And yet this flawed concept drove the Bush administration to an early and uncoordinated decision for war, brushing aside the need for analysis, distorting intelligence, marginalizing senior officers who raised doubts, and neglecting postconflict stabilization requirements.

## Hawks, Doves, Diplomats, and the Decider

It is not clear exactly when Bush decided to invade Iraq. Even before the inauguration, Cheney asked outgoing Secretary of Defense William Cohen to provide Bush with a briefing focused on Iraq. Wolfowitz was pushing for military seizure of Iraq’s oil fields, which Secretary of State Colin Powell is reported to have called “lunacy.”<sup>30</sup>

Rumsfeld raised the possibility of an invasion on September 11, 2001, as a potential “opportunity.”<sup>31</sup> On September 17, Bush told his advisors: “I believe Iraq was involved.”<sup>32</sup> Some in the administration felt that al Qaeda would be unable to organize an attack like September 11 without a state sponsor. With little intelligence to support this assertion, the administration continued to repeat that claim.<sup>33</sup> A week after the attack, Wolfowitz began sending memos to Rumsfeld making the case for an attack on Iraq.<sup>34</sup> Cheney soon began talking about Iraq as a threat to peace.<sup>35</sup> Bush told the

British prime minister, Tony Blair, in mid-September that Iraq was not the immediate problem.<sup>36</sup> But that changed after the fall of Kabul.<sup>37</sup> On November 21, 2001, Bush asked that the war plan for Iraq be secretly updated, which shocked the military.<sup>38</sup> By the end of December 2001, Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander Tommy Franks was at the Bush ranch in Crawford, Texas, briefing the President and his national security team on the war plan.<sup>39</sup>

This early planning did not necessarily reflect a final decision: Some saw it as part of a two-track effort to rid Saddam of his WMDs by using diplomacy and military threats to give diplomacy teeth. But within the next six months, the cement began to dry. In March of 2002, Bush informally told a group of senators: “We’re taking him [Saddam] out.”<sup>40</sup> That same month, Cheney told Senate Republicans that “the question was no longer if the U.S. would attack Iraq, the only question was when.”<sup>41</sup> By late July 2002, the British chief of intelligence returned from Washington concluding that military action against Saddam now seemed inevitable.<sup>42</sup> National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice “brushed back” State Department concerns about invasion, saying that “the president had made up his mind.”<sup>43</sup>

The three camps in the administration regarding Iraq might be called the hawks, the doves, and the diplomats.<sup>44</sup> The hawks were led intellectually by Wolfowitz. Bureaucratically they formed the leading position within the Bush administration in 2002, with Cheney dominating the White House and Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz controlling Defense.

Wolfowitz thought it was a mistake in 1991 to have allowed Saddam to attack Iraq’s Shia population after Desert Storm and had favored a demilitarized zone enforced by the United States. Powell opposed him. In the late 1990s, both Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld, out of office, continued to call for Saddam’s overthrow.<sup>45</sup> Wolfowitz’s model in 2002 was the Holocaust, believing that a tyrant who attacks his own people will eventually export that terror.<sup>46</sup> Cheney had been a pragmatic internationalist while serving in the George H. W. Bush administration; but according to Brent Scowcroft, he had changed.<sup>47</sup> Some speculate that it was his bypass operation, others that it was the psychological impact of being in the White House during the September 11 attacks. Cheney had daily contact with Bush and was his closest advisor on national security matters. Cheney was described during this period as having a “disquieting obsession” and acting as a powerful “steamrolling force.”<sup>48</sup> Rumsfeld also strongly supported military intervention, but his principal role was to think about details of the coming conflict and continually refine the war plan to conform it to his notion of military transformation.<sup>49</sup>

The hawks in government were supported by a combination of neoconservative colleagues and people with connections to the Middle East. Prime among them was a slick American-educated mathematician Iraqi expatriate named Ahmed Chalabi, who was head of the Iraqi National Congress and hoped to return as Saddam’s successor.



Wolfowitz gave Chalabi access and Chalabi provided intelligence that turned out to be of highly questionable veracity.<sup>50</sup>

The doves were anything but 1960s tie-dyed peaceniks. They were generally influential pragmatic leaders who were not in the administration. They included the chairman of Bush's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, Brent Scowcroft; the former CENTCOM commander Anthony Zinni, and the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Ike Skelton. Scowcroft "went public" in August 2002 in telling *Face the Nation* that war with Iraq would be an unnecessary and bad choice that would seriously harm international cooperation against terrorism.<sup>51</sup> Zinni's alternative model was Vietnam. He had been badly wounded there and wanted to make sure the cause was just before sending young Americans into harm's way. While at CENTCOM, he had seen no intelligence that Saddam had WMDs. He wanted evidence. He also felt that those pushing for war had no idea that the war might last ten years.<sup>52</sup> Skelton sent Bush multiple questions about the cost and duration of the occupation, noting that he should not "take the first step without considering the last." Skelton was told that the administration did not need his vote.<sup>53</sup>

Within the military, several senior officers, including Lieutenant General Gregory Newbold and General Eric Shinseki, demonstrated concern about the force structure needed for the operation. But in the fall of 2002, the Joint Chiefs cut off any further debate about the wisdom of an invasion.<sup>54</sup> Most in the military were compliant with Rumsfeld's directions.

The diplomats tended to see the same problems that the doves saw, but many were serving in the State Department or wanted to preserve their standing with the administration. Once it became clear that Bush was on a track to war, they sought to find a diplomatic exit or, failing that, to garner international support and create legitimacy for an invasion. This group included Powell and former secretaries Henry Kissinger, James Baker, and Lawrence Eagleburger.<sup>55</sup>

On August 5, 2002, Powell advised the President that the United States should only attack Iraq if it had a UN Security Resolution authorizing such action. Powell hoped that a UN resolution might force Saddam to back down from his intransigence on WMD inspections—which it in fact did. Powell also told Bush that the United States would "own" Iraq after an invasion and that it would dominate all other foreign-policy initiatives. Bush did not back down from his decision to proceed toward war, but he did agree to give a UN resolution a try. The diplomats may have delayed the invasion by half a year by seeking UN authorization, but once a modest UN resolution was achieved, they lost the ability to prevent war.

Foreign leaders also lined up as hawks and doves. The most important hawk was Blair, who was weary of letting a gap open with American policy.<sup>56</sup> Spain's prime minister, José María Aznar, lined up with Blair, while the French president, Jacques Chirac, and the German chancellor, Gerhard Schroeder, eventually opposed invasion. Getting the international consensus Powell wanted would not be easy.

Bush considered himself to be “the decider.” After September 11, he seemed “reborn as a crusading internationalist who had embraced Woodrow Wilson’s vision of a democratic world and who was willing to use America’s military might to make it happen.”<sup>57</sup> Bush’s decisionmaking style was based on his gut instincts.<sup>58</sup> His snap judgment that somehow Saddam was behind September 11, or might be behind the next attack on America, remained with him. Bush felt that September 11 was the “Pearl Harbor of the 21st Century,”<sup>59</sup> and that his new and transcending purpose as president was to prevent another, possibly worse, one.<sup>60</sup> That early decision solidified during the first half of 2002. Bush was quick to reach decisions, and once reached, he saw change as a sign of weakness.<sup>61</sup> After he reached an early decision on war, he was prepared to try a UN resolution, but not change his fundamental course. He would not let Saddam’s new willingness in 2003 to open up to WMD inspectors stop him from invading.<sup>62</sup>

Rice was Bush’s closest confidant. Her primary interest was protecting the President and translating his wishes into policy. But she did not develop the decisionmaking process needed to analyze and debate the wisdom and implications of going to war. According to Powell, there was no moment when all views and recommendations were aired.<sup>63</sup> Nor was there much White House interest in complicated analysis: “They already knew the answers, it was received wisdom.”<sup>64</sup> There was “no meeting with pros and cons debated. . . . If there was a debate inside the Bush Administration, it was one-sided and muted.”<sup>65</sup> The urgent sense of danger, the instinct to be bold, and the vision of transforming the Middle East trumped debate and analysis.

## Shaping Intelligence and Selling a War

Shortly after the September 11 attacks, Tenet presented Bush with a list of countries malevolent enough to help al Qaeda get a dirty bomb: Iraq was on the top of that list. That notion had a profound impact on Bush.<sup>66</sup> Bush said: “I made my decision [for war] based upon enough intelligence to tell me that [our] country was threatened with Saddam Hussein in power.”<sup>67</sup>

The case for Saddam’s complicity in September 11, or at least for his strong ties with terrorist organizations, was weak.<sup>68</sup> The case for his possession of WMDs appeared stronger and drove decisionmaking. After all, he had used chemical weapons against the Iranians and the Kurds in the 1980s. But the intelligence was wrong. Iraq had gotten rid of its WMDs. Some say this was the worst U.S. intelligence failure since the founding of the modern intelligence community.<sup>69</sup>

The intelligence that Bush and others received was based on outdated and incorrect evidence, material from untrustworthy human sources, and worst-case analysis.<sup>70</sup> The United States had no reliable intelligence assets in Iraq.<sup>71</sup> International WMD inspectors had been kicked out of Iraq since 1998; so in that sense Saddam brought

this about himself. The Pentagon was receiving intelligence from Chalabi, the Iraqi opposition politician, who had an ulterior motive, and from sources such as the aptly named “Curveball.” The Pentagon set up a one-off intelligence unit, called the Counter Terrorism Evaluation Group, which began producing “alarming interpretations of the murky intelligence about Saddam Hussein, WMD, and terrorism.”<sup>72</sup> They were in essence cherry-picking the intelligence in order to draw links between al Qaeda and Iraq and thereby justify intervention.<sup>73</sup> In July of 2002, British intelligence concluded that “the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.”<sup>74</sup> A State Department intelligence analyst concluded similarly that the administration was looking for evidence to support conclusions it had already drawn.<sup>75</sup> The decisionmakers and their staffs did not listen to WMD experts like Charles Duelfer, who argued that there was no significant remaining stockpile.<sup>76</sup> In fact, they sought to have two intelligence officers removed whose analysis did not comport to their view of events.<sup>77</sup>

CIA analysts were tasked to prepare a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE).<sup>78</sup> They had just been embarrassed by missing the September 11 attacks. Now they were faced with the Pentagon’s autonomous intelligence unit, to which the Vice President was listening. Before the intelligence community rendered its official verdict, Cheney was saying in August of 2002 that Saddam was pursuing a nuclear weapons program.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Rice told CNN: “We don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.”<sup>80</sup> At the same time a series of leaks to *The New York Times* put this faulty intelligence on the front pages.<sup>81</sup> So while there was no effort by the intelligence community to falsify evidence,<sup>82</sup> all of the mistakes tilted in the same direction.<sup>83</sup>

The NIE was delivered in October 2002 and was considered by many as a warrant for going to war. It concluded, with caveats, that the Iraqis possessed chemical and biological weapons along with delivery systems and sought to reconstitute their nuclear program.<sup>84</sup> The body of the NIE contained several qualifiers that were dropped in the executive summary. The fact that the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research disagreed with the conclusions was not highlighted.<sup>85</sup> As the draft NIE went up the intelligence chain of command, the conclusions were treated increasingly definitively.<sup>86</sup> Only the summary of the NIE was partially declassified, and it omitted most of the reservations and nonconforming evidence.<sup>87</sup> The fact that the NIE concluded that there was no operational tie between Saddam and al Qaeda did not offset this alarming assessment.<sup>88</sup> A year later, a Senate Select Committee on Intelligence report found that the NIE was wrong, that it overstated the case, that statements in it were not supported, and that intelligence was mischaracterized.<sup>89</sup>

Apart from being influenced by policymakers’ desires, there were several other reasons that the NIE was flawed. Evidence on mobile biological labs, aluminum tubing for uranium enrichment, uranium ore purchases from Niger, and unmanned-aerial-vehicle delivery systems for WMDs all proved to be false. It was produced in a hurry. Human intelligence was scarce and unreliable. While many pieces of evidence were questionable, the magnitude of the questionable evidence had the effect of making the

NIE more convincing and ominous. The basic case that Saddam had WMDs seemed more plausible to analysts than the alternative case that he had destroyed them. And analysts knew that Saddam had a history of deception, so evidence against Saddam's possession of WMDs was often seen as deception.<sup>90</sup>

The flawed NIE and associated press leaks had a profound impact on votes in Congress and at the United Nations. At first the administration sought to avoid congressional votes, arguing that they had adequate authority under the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act. Then, under pressure from Powell, they shifted ground and pressed for an immediate vote. Senators and congressmen and women did raise substantial questions about the nature of the threat against the United States and the need for rapid congressional action. Senator Robert Byrd and Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi in particular questioned the urgency of the vote. Senators Richard Lugar, Paul Sarbanes, Chuck Hagel, John Kerry, and Arlen Specter each asked a series of serious questions about the nature of the charges against Saddam. Senators John McCain and Joe Biden and House Majority Leader Dick Armey all questioned the thoroughness of intelligence briefings they received.<sup>91</sup> However, less than 10 percent of the Senate attended the floor debate at any one time, causing Byrd to say that the chamber was "dreadfully silent."<sup>92</sup>

The Republican-controlled House voted first, and then Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle announced that he would support the resolution on the grounds that it was time for Americans to speak with one voice on the issue.<sup>93</sup> In October, a congressional resolution authorizing the President to use the armed forces of the United States to defend against the threat posed by Iraq passed with 296 yea votes in the House and 77 yea votes in the Senate.<sup>94</sup> All but one Republican senator voted for the resolution. Many Democrats recalled that a majority of their party voted against Desert Storm, to their regret, and they did not want to make that mistake again. Six Democrats who ultimately ran for President in 2004 and 2008 voted for the resolution.<sup>95</sup>

At the United Nations, the United States negotiated with France and others for eight weeks and on November 8 passed UN Security Council Resolution 1441 by a vote of fifteen to zero. The resolution, backed by American intelligence, declared Iraq to be in "material breach of cease fire terms" and gave Saddam a "final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations." But the resolution did not authorize "all necessary means"—that is to say, force—to be used. U.S. Ambassador John Negroponte agreed that another resolution would be necessary to authorize the United States to invade Iraq.

Iraq agreed to the resolution and opened its doors to inspection teams led by Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei, who declared Iraq devoid of WMDs and released forty-three volumes of documentation to try to prove it.<sup>96</sup> German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer argued that inspections were "moving in the right direction and . . . they should have all the time which is needed."<sup>97</sup> Meanwhile, Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith reportedly told his administration colleagues that inspections were a hazard to the administration's strategy and that they "cannot accept surren-

der.”<sup>98</sup> The inspectors were unable to find any WMDs. But Blix reported to the UN on January 27 that Baghdad had not been forthcoming enough in its declarations.<sup>99</sup> Later, in 2004, the U.S. Iraqi Survey Group concluded that Iraq had unilaterally destroyed its WMDs in 1991.<sup>100</sup>

Inspections were moving too slowly for the Bush team. The American military, which had already begun to deploy forces to the region, was in position to invade, and there was a narrowing window to attack before the weather became blisteringly hot. In February 2003 Powell went to the UN with an intelligence brief based in large part on the flawed NIE. He concluded that the Iraqis were “concealing their efforts to produce more weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>101</sup> Powell had made an extra effort to personally verify details of his speech with Tenet, and Powell’s own intelligence team pointed out several problems with the speech. But many errors nevertheless remained in the text. Opposition to war was meanwhile mounting in Europe. Blair insisted on a second UN Security Council resolution to bring his country along, but the French feared that a resolution would just be a rubber stamp on a dubious U.S. case for war. In March, when the French threatened to veto a second resolution, Bush dropped the effort and gave Saddam a forty-eight-hour ultimatum to leave Iraq. With apparently reliable intelligence that Saddam had been spotted on March 19, the attack began by targeting him personally.

## Successful Combat and Failed Preparation for Later

In November 2001, at Rumsfeld’s direction, Franks began a series of revisions of Operation Plan (OPLAN) 1003, the war plan for the Persian Gulf. Franks’s emerging concept embraced Rumsfeld’s theory of military transformation, which focused on joint operations, information, speed, and maneuver. By March 2002 Franks’s command was translating his concept into a plan. Given Rumsfeld’s continual challenges to reduce the force structure and maximize the simultaneity of the attack, the new Hybrid 1003V plan emerged in the fall of 2002. Turkey decided it could not serve as a launch point for an attack from the north, so the plan was modified again for a multipronged attack from Kuwait. The plan focused on winning the war. There was no annex in the plan for postconflict operations. That would be left up to a newly created Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA).<sup>102</sup> The two-day ORHA rehearsal (“rock drill”) at the National Defense University just before the invasion demonstrated that postconflict planning was quite primitive.<sup>103</sup>

By March 19 the United States and its coalition partners had assembled 290,000 military personnel in the region; 116,000 were involved in the march to Baghdad.<sup>104</sup> The march to Baghdad was “not only successful but peremptorily short.”<sup>105</sup> There were massive defections in the Iraqi military as entire units deserted. There was some tough fighting and sandstorms on the march up, but according to the historian John Keegan,

there was “no real war.”<sup>106</sup> Welcoming crowds of liberated Iraqis never formed. The Iraqi military and their Baathist leaders melted into the countryside, many taking their weapons with them. On April 9, the U.S. Army occupied the banks of the Tigris River and the U.S. Marine Corps entered Baghdad. Saddam’s statue was toppled, marking the symbolic end of the combat phase of operations.<sup>107</sup>

What were anticipated to be relatively quick and easy postconflict operations went badly. The ORHA team selected to administer postconflict Iraq was soon replaced by the more robust Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). The CPA made several controversial decisions, which complicated Iraq’s reconstruction. It fired Baathists from the top layers of management in government departments; it formally dissolved the Iraqi army (which was in massive disarray anyway); and it shut down state-run enterprises to make way for private companies.

Although mistakes were made during implementation, many of the difficulties experienced by the United States in stabilizing, transforming, and leaving Iraq can be traced to errors of commission and omission in the original decision to go to war. For the most part, these difficulties should have been anticipated based on what was known at the time, if not as probable than at least as possible. The postinvasion model in the minds of those who decided to invade was that Iraqis freed from Saddam’s despotic rule would work through a peaceful political process to create a unified, democratic, and productive state that would serve as a model for others in the Arab world. The implication was that the demand for American occupation—troops, money, administration, and mediation—would be modest and brief.

If this view was naive, it also was expedient in gaining support for the decision to invade in the first place. To some extent, the proponents of invasion discouraged pre-invasion consideration of postinvasion risks lest it raise doubts or cause delay. In any case, they had unjustifiable confidence in an unrealistic script—namely, that once Iraqi forces were defeated, Baghdad was taken, and Saddam was removed, fighting would subside, a democratic state would emerge, and increased oil production would produce ample revenues to rebuild and transform the country’s infrastructure and industry. In any case, inadequate preparation and provision were made for the travail that would follow “mission accomplished.”

First, having ruled Iraq since colonial times, large segments of the Sunni minority resorted to armed resistance and then a full-blown insurgency. The U.S. government insisted that the persistent violence was merely the death throes of “former regime elements” and so would quickly run its course. As the insurgency grew, it opened the door to both foreign and Iraqi religiously motivated terrorists (called “al Qaeda in Iraq”), who attacked the new state and the Shia population, especially soft targets such as mosques and pilgrimages. This then precipitated a Shia backlash in the form of death squads—some from within the Interior Ministry—who targeted not just Sunni terrorists and insurgents but Sunnis in general. Meanwhile, Shia militias, buoyed by their new political clout and abetted by Iran, attacked the American occupiers.

The U.S. military was unprepared to deal with Sunni uprising, Shia violence, or Sunni-Shia warfare—let alone all three. Eventually, the United States had to increase its troop presence and remunerate Sunni sheikhs to root out insurgents and terrorists. The failure, or refusal, to consider before the fact that invasion would trigger such turmoil helps explain why the United States left roughly half the forces in Iraq that independent experts and Army officers said would be needed. Those who dismissed such postinvasion dangers and needs were the very advocates of invasion.

Besides having too few troops in the country, the U.S. government had programmed insufficient resources. The CPA was understaffed for the postinvasion upheaval it had to try to manage—after all, no such upheaval was anticipated, or its possibility was denied, when the decision to invade was made. Inadequate funds were earmarked to train and employ the hundreds of thousands of former Iraqi soldiers, security forces, militias, and resistance fighters who would have to be “disarmed, demobilized, and reintegrated.” As a consequence, there persisted to be large reservoirs of men ready to continue fighting for one side or another, for lack of alternative opportunities. Compounding the problem of inadequate programmed resources, Iraqi oil revenues did not increase as hoped, mainly because production operations and transport were insecure.

On top of these difficulties, a shortage of competent Iraqis for government, industry, and security forces arose because of the way the eradication of the Baath Party was managed. Chalabi and other Shiite partisans took control of de-Baathification and stripped important ministries, companies, and security services of capable and needed Sunni professionals from top to bottom. Predictably—though not predicted—disgruntled ex-Baathists joined the Sunni insurgency. All these problems of poor preparation contributed to and were aggravated by increasingly heavy-handed majoritarian Shiite rule and enhanced Iranian influence.

Postinvasion problems cost the United States dearly in lives, dollars, and goodwill in the Arab and Muslim worlds and beyond. There were plenty of warnings about what faced the United States in postinvasion Iraq. Both the intelligence community and the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff produced assessments of postinvasion Iraq that were largely ignored by administration decisionmakers.<sup>108</sup> And the military understood the requirements of postinvasion Iraq. The administration simply did not listen to the professional military, Foreign Service, or intelligence community. While several of these problems resulted from mistakes in implementation, many can be traced to the decision to invade. Had the potential for these problems been confronted objectively, preparations could have been made, plans formulated, and resources allocated and adequately provided. However, the architects of war were either too confident to imagine them or, less innocently, afraid that a discussion of risks would undermine political, public, and media support for the invasion. Whether the decisionmakers would have decided to invade if these contingencies and consequences had been flagged is moot. As noted, the President in particular was not the type to revisit a decision once made.

At a minimum, if such risks had been identified, they might have been mitigated and the terrible costs to the United States and Iraq might have been reduced.

## Why It Went Wrong

The strategic environment immediately after September 11, 2001, was filled with a sense of urgency and imminent danger. Bush felt a heavy burden of responsibility for protecting the nation. Even after it was known that Saddam was not complicit in the attacks on America, there was concern that he might provide WMDs to terrorists, who would eagerly use them on America. In this environment different factors conspired to lead Bush to a decision to pursue an optional war that most Americans believe in retrospect did much more harm than good to their interests.

The first factor was an effort by a group of neoconservatives in and out of government to seek opportunity in danger. They saw an opportunity to rid the Middle East of a dangerous dictator and create a new democratic model for the region. They shaped an attractive vision of what might be that turned out to be far from the mark.

The second was an effort by the Policy Counter Terrorism Evaluation Group in the Pentagon to cherry-pick selective intelligence from questionable sources and the subsequent failure of the actual intelligence community to prevent some of that questionable intelligence from making its way into the NIE and the public domain. That selected and dubious intelligence reinforced concerns about the danger posed to the United States by Saddam. Reservations carefully placed in the NIE by the intelligence community were buried in the body of the report.

The third was a sense of prowess and hubris from a string of successes by a transformed high-tech military that created the belief that expeditionary warfare is decisive, quick, easy, and low-cost.

The fourth was a dysfunctional and opaque decisionmaking process that rejected much analysis available in and out of government and that never formally brought the cabinet officers together to discuss the pros and cons of waging war.

The fifth was impatience on the part of the Bush team to wait for the results of the arms inspectors who were making progress in Iraq, results that could have obviated the need for war. That impatience led to lost support from key American allies, such as France and Germany.

The final flaw in the decision chain was the failure to prepare for a postconflict occupation and stabilization program; that failing initially resulted in anarchy and then civil war.

Throughout, those who preconceived the war used information selectively, marginalized dissent, and evaded analysis that could threaten their preconception. They had a compelling model, but it did not reflect reality.



## Making Sense of Making Mistakes

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Understanding why and how strategic blunders are made is obviously crucial to finding ways to avoid them. This chapter offers some conclusions about the causes of blunders and how the supply and use of information may guide leaders and institutions to make or avoid them. The chapter starts with an assessment of the factors that affected decisionmaking in the historical cases, highlighting the most important. It summarizes how the fidelity of cognitive models relative to objective reality explains the occurrence—perhaps even the severity—of blunders. In light of the cases, the propensity to take risks, the confidence in control and scripting, and the failure to think through adverse contingencies are reexamined. The chapter concludes with general observations about families of blunders.

In trying to distill findings from the cases, it is important to deal with the benefit of hindsight. The fog that may have shrouded key information has lifted. Reality is easier to discern in retrospect than in the event. The quiet of the analyst's study may allow more perspective than the boiler room of decisionmaking under stress. The intentions of an adversary are known now but largely surmised in the event. Thus, to say that blunderers “could have known better” is to set a very high standard. For this reason, we have tried in each case to understand what the decisionmaker knew or could have known—in the sense that information to support a wiser decision was available if sought. While we admit to the (unavoidable) *benefit* of hindsight, we have made an effort to avoid the *bias* of hindsight, whereby past choices are judged based on what is known now but not then. This is critical if we are to understand whether blunders are caused by failures in the supply or in the use of information.

### Assessing the Cases

The cases presented in the preceding chapters include eight strategic mistakes and four mistakes avoided over two hundred years. The states involved range from democratic (the United States) to totalitarian (Nazi Germany). Decisionmakers range from brilliant (Napoleon, Deng, Kissinger) to deliberate (Wilson, the Soviet Politburo), to malleable (Wilhelm II), to obtuse (the Argentine junta), to earnest (George W. Bush),

to psychopathic (Hitler). The institutions involved range from obedient (Napoleon's ministers and commanders) to domineering (Imperial Germany's military leaders), to helpful (Kissinger's advisors), to accommodating (Bush's top intelligence officials). Professional military officers committed half of the eight blunders examined (if one includes Napoleon). In the three of the four blunders committed by civilians, military leaders expressed misgivings, though sometimes obliquely. Four of the states involved possessed nuclear weapons (the USSR, China, the United States, and the UK), though in only one did both antagonists possess them (the 1973 U.S.-Soviet crisis); otherwise, the risk of nuclear war played no role. The consequences of these blunders include the end of states, the dissolution of empires, the demise of the decisionmakers themselves, and immense human and economic losses. In sum, insofar as these cases are representative, strategic mistakes are made by all sorts of states, leaders, personality types, and institutions.

Implicit, by design, in all the cases is the simple three-part strategic decisionmaking system described in the introductory chapter: individuals, institutions, and information flow. In the eight cases in which blunders occurred, the models of reality that guided decisionmaking were defective. In the four cases of sound strategic decisions—including two to go to war (the Spanish-American War and World War I) and one to threaten war (the 1973 U.S.-Soviet crisis)—the models of reality were largely correct.

The factors listed on the left in Table 15.1 were found to have some bearing on the strategic decisions covered in the cases. Cells are colored according to their importance in a given case. Those at the top mainly concern the supply of information; those below concern the use of information:

- The pale yellow signifies factors that are *evident* but not of much significance.
- The yellow signifies *significant* factors but not decisive factors.
- The orange indicates *very important* factors.
- The red identifies the *most important* single factor.

**Table 15.1**  
**Case Assessment Matrix**

Factors Contributing to Blunders	Blunders								Nonblunders			
	Napoleon's Invasion of Russia, 1812	German Use of Unrestricted U-boat Warfare, 1916	Hitler's Invasion of the USSR, 1941	Japan's Attack on Pearl Harbor, 1941	China's War Against Vietnam, 1979	Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 1979	Argentine Occupation of the Falklands, 1982	U.S. Invasion of Iraq, 2003	U.S. Decision to Go to War with Spain, 1898	Wilson's Entry into WWI, 1917	U.S.-Soviet Crisis During the Yom Kippur War, 1973	Soviet Non-intervention in Poland, 1981
Data unavailable												
Failure to collect data												
Failure to produce information												
Failure to share or relate information												
Inadequate communication with other parties												
Information ignored, filtered, misconstrued, or manipulated												
Misreading or ignoring history												

Table 15.1—Continued

Factors Contributing to Blunders	Blunders								Nonblunders			
	Napoleon's Invasion of Russia, 1812	German Use of Unrestricted U-boat Warfare, 1916	Hitler's Invasion of the USSR, 1941	Japan's Attack on Pearl Harbor, 1941	China's War Against Vietnam, 1979	Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 1979	Argentine Occupation of the Falklands, 1982	U.S. Invasion of Iraq, 2003	U.S. Decision to Go to War with Spain, 1898	Wilson's Entry into WWI, 1917	U.S.-Soviet Crisis During the Yom Kippur War, 1973	Soviet Non-intervention in Poland, 1981
Excessive reliance on intuition and experience												
Emotional or ideological bias												
Mental disorder (e.g., paranoia, megalomania)												
Demonizing or dehumanizing the enemy												
Unwarranted confidence from arrogance, egotism, hubris												

Table 15.1—Continued

Factors Contributing to Blunders	Blunders								Nonblunders			
	Napoleon's Invasion of Russia, 1812	German Use of Unrestricted U-boat Warfare, 1916	Hitler's Invasion of the USSR, 1941	Japan's Attack on Pearl Harbor, 1941	China's War Against Vietnam, 1979	Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 1979	Argentine Occupation of the Falklands, 1982	U.S. Invasion of Iraq, 2003	U.S. Decision to Go to War with Spain, 1898	Wilson's Entry into WWI, 1917	U.S.-Soviet Crisis During the Yom Kippur War, 1973	Soviet Non-intervention in Poland, 1981
Excessive confidence in surprise												
Rigid or wrong strategic concept or vision												
Strategic imperative—no choice												
Failure to consider options												
Failure to consider contingencies												
Under-estimation of enemy												

Table 15.1—Continued

Factors Contributing to Blunders	Blunders								Nonblunders			
	Napoleon's Invasion of Russia, 1812	German Use of Unrestricted U-boat Warfare, 1916	Hitler's Invasion of the USSR, 1941	Japan's Attack on Pearl Harbor, 1941	China's War Against Vietnam, 1979	Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 1979	Argentine Occupation of the Falklands, 1982	U.S. Invasion of Iraq, 2003	U.S. Decision to Go to War with Spain, 1898	Wilson's Entry into WWI, 1917	U.S.-Soviet Crisis During the Yom Kippur War, 1973	Soviet Non-intervention in Poland, 1981
Under-estimation of operational difficulty or duration	Yellow		Orange	Yellow	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Yellow				
Over-estimation of operational difficulty or duration	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow		Orange	Yellow		Yellow				
Groupthink		Yellow		Yellow		Yellow	Yellow		Yellow			
Dissent and debate stifled	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow		Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow			
Insulated decision-makers	Yellow		Yellow			Yellow			Yellow			
Excessive secrecy and compartmentalization			Yellow			Yellow						
Hardening of views over time	Yellow	Yellow		Yellow			Yellow	Yellow	Yellow			

Factors that are significant in at least three cases or most important in at least one case are:

- Information is ignored, filtered, misconstrued, or manipulated to fit predispositions.
- Excessive reliance is placed on intuition and experience.
- Arrogance, egotism, or hubris causes unwarranted confidence.
- A rigid but wrong strategic concept or vision prevails.
- Contingencies are not considered.
- Enemy will or capabilities are underestimated.
- Operational difficulty or duration is underestimated.
- Dissent and debate are stifled.

Note that these most common and prominent factors involve the *use* of information, which supports our general argument. The remainder of the study will concentrate on these eight key factors (while not discarding the others).

There are cause-and-effect relationships among these factors. In particular, decisionmakers who have unwarranted faith in their intuition, indulge in hubris or arrogance, or are seized with a powerful but faulty strategic concept are consequently more likely to misuse information, to underestimate their enemies and ignore the difficulties they face, to think through what could go wrong, and to suppress disagreement.

At the heart of each blunder we find a flawed cognitive model: a mistaken and misleading cognitive representation of how the world works, of circumstances at hand, of variables that determine the future, of choices available, and of expected results. In some cases, the model was made explicit by the decisionmakers themselves: Napoleon spoke often and confidently of his ability—even destiny—to impose his will on those who dared oppose him. In other cases, we infer the models on which leaders and institutions relied. In all cases, factors responsible for blunders can be found by comparing the decisionmakers' models with objective reality, as Table 15.2 summarizes.

One can see that the greater the discrepancy between the decisionmaker's subjective model and objective reality, the greater the blunder; to wit: Napoleon's invasion of Russia, Hitler's invasion of the USSR, Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, the Soviets' invasion of Afghanistan, Argentina's seizure of the Falklands. As a rule, decisionmakers with flawed models neglected or refused to make use of available intelligence, analysis, and advice that would have corrected the flaws. Decisionmakers with especially high confidence in their distorted models of reality exhibited the strongest tendency to resist information that would remove those distortions.

In contrast, decisionmakers in cases of nonblunders formed and relied on more-accurate models of reality, ranging from intuitive but basically sound (the Spanish-American War) to deliberative (Woodrow Wilson's decision to enter World War I and

**Table 15.2**  
**Case Studies and Models of Reality**

Case	Decisionmakers' Model of Reality	Objective Reality
Napoleon's invasion of Russia (1812)	The key to imposing political will and controlling Europe is military superiority and brilliance at war. Russia must be defeated before England can, and it can be by invading and forcing a climactic battle. Hunger and cold will be avoided by quick victory. Destiny and genius will prevail.	Knowing that Napoleon's invading army cannot be defeated head-to-head, Russia's best strategy is to retreat and pull Napoleon's army deeper and deeper into Russia. Hunger and cold will defeat the invader.
German resumption of U-boat attacks on neutrals (1917)	U-boat attacks on U.S. vessels will bring the United States into war. However, drastic reduction in transatlantic supplies will force Britain to sue for peace well before U.S. troops can reach the Western Front.	Escorted convoys can defeat U-boat warfare, permitting adequate supplies to reach Britain. British perseverance can be bolstered by a U.S. declaration of war. A determined U.S. effort can get forces to Europe within the year.
Hitler's invasion of the USSR (1941)	Destroying the USSR is necessary to defeat communism and provide living space for Germans in the east. Invasion will succeed in short order because of Wehrmacht invincibility and the weakness of Soviet troops and loyalty, as well as the abominable Soviet state. Napoleon's blunder can be avoided.	Invasion is highly risky (for the same reasons Napoleon failed). Soviet forces, war-fighting skills, patriotism, and leadership should not be underestimated. Delays will risk fighting in winter. A lengthy campaign will end in defeat and a crushing blow to the Third Reich.
Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor (1941)	Japan should and can control East Asia by virtue of the superiority of its people, its imperial state, and its military ethic. It must have resources to thrive. The main obstacle, the United States, can be knocked back by a surprise attack on its fleet long enough to permit Japanese conquest of Southeast Asia, after which an advantageous peace can be negotiated.	A surprise attack on U.S. territory and forces will galvanize American unity and resolve. U.S. forces can rebound quickly; U.S. industrial and military power can overwhelm Japan's in a prolonged conflict, after which Japan will face retribution and devastation.
China's invasion of Vietnam (1979)	Vietnam needs to be "taught a lesson" for defying Chinese interests by a quick and limited but decisive invasion. As a result, the Soviet Union, Vietnam's ally, will be discredited. In the face of invasion, Vietnam will have to deplete its forces in Cambodia.	Vietnam outlasted and defeated two superior powers, France and the United States, conquered the south, united the country, and proved the extraordinary toughness of their forces and people. Vietnamese troops are seasoned, skilled, resilient, and well led. If not quickly successful, the invasion will have to be terminated.



Table 15.2—Continued

Case	Decisionmakers' Model of Reality	Objective Reality
Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979)	Chaos in Afghanistan poses strategic dangers to the USSR, including the collapse of a fragile communist regime, the rise of Islamist extremists, and the opportunity for the United States to gain a foothold at the soft Soviet underbelly. Soviet forces are superior to any opposition they might face, and may not have to engage in direct combat. Control of cities and bases will suffice.	Soviet intervention will be a catalyst for a fierce and spreading insurgency. Afghan proxy forces are no match for their opponents, forcing Soviet troops into direct and sustained combat. Control of cities and bases will not lead to control of Afghanistan. Soviet forces get bogged down. International opprobrium lasts and leads to sanctions on an already weak economy.
Argentine seizure of the Falklands (1982)	The junta's sagging domestic fortunes can be reversed by military occupation of the islands and a surge of Argentine nationalism. Britain will not fight to retain sovereignty. Because of U.S. interest in cultivating anticommunist Latin American allies, it will restrain the UK and otherwise keep to the sidelines. The Third World will cheer.	British people and politics will unify behind Prime Minister Thatcher's decision to retake the Falklands by force. Britain can mount an impressive long-range joint expedition and achieve complete superiority over Argentina's untested forces. If it fails to get Argentina to remove its forces before British forces arrive, the United States will side with and enable the UK.
U.S. invasion of Iraq (2003)	Intelligence that Iraq has WMDs creates the risk that Saddam will provide weapons to terrorists. September 11 creates an opportunity to remove Saddam by force and create a model for Arab democracy. Conquest will be fast and easy. Increased Iraqi oil production will pay for reconstruction. Iraqis will welcome liberation.	Evidence that Iraq has WMDs is unproven; U.S. intelligence officials have told political leaders what they want to hear. The transition from Sunni-based dictatorship to Shia-majority democracy could be tumultuous, lengthy, and violent. The United States could get caught in the middle with casualties and at such great cost that Iraqi oil revenues will not cover.

the Soviet decision not to invade Poland) to sophisticated and sound (Henry Kissinger's in the Egyptian Third Army crisis). In those cases:

- Dogma, principle, ideology, and other beliefs did not act as blinders. Wilson's strong aversion to involvement in Europe's bloody blunder did not prevent him from seeing that the outcome mattered a great deal and that only by entering the conflict could the United States affect it. The Soviets saw that the doctrine of saving communism elsewhere could lead their own country into great harm. Even in the case of the Spanish-American War, urges for empire and war were channeled toward the choice of a vulnerable adversary.
- Enemy will, enemy capabilities, and operational difficulties were reasonably well estimated. Wilson was convinced that Germany could not win if the United States entered on the side of Britain and France, and he was right. Teddy Roosevelt

and friends saw the Spaniards as weak enough to assure a quick and resounding U.S. victory, and they were right. Kissinger understood the magnitude of Soviet power, but he calculated that it would not be used if the United States threatened to block intervention.

- Contingencies were considered. Soviet bosses decided that the possibility of armed Polish resistance, on top of severe Western sanctions, argued against invasion even if it meant that Solidarity would take power in Poland. When making this judgment, they had no assurance that the Polish regime would crack down on its own.<sup>1</sup> As it turned out, Soviet restraint was vindicated, as the harm from invasion was avoided, and Polish communists still clung to power for another decade.
- In the nonblunder cases, if decisionmakers did not begin with sound models of reality, they were not too trapped in their preconceptions to adapt their models based on fresh information and further thought, as Roosevelt, Wilson, and the Soviet Politburo did. Moreover, as our assessments indicate, even when decisionmakers were influenced by hubris (Roosevelt), ego (Wilson and Kissinger), or ideology (the Soviet Politburo), these factors did not blind them from the available information needed to arrive at good judgments.

### **What Have We Learned About the Supply and Use of Information?**

Although we did not exhaustively examine the quantity and quality of information available to decisionmakers in these cases, they seem to bear out Yaacov Vertzberger's conjecture that failure does not stem from a dearth of information, but rather from incorrect judgment and evaluation of available information.<sup>2</sup> Intelligence is never complete or error free, even when supplemented by news and other open sources of information. Napoleon lacked good maps of Russia and was not sure where the bulk of Russian forces were. Even if he had had such information, however, it would not have altered his decision; if anything, it could have made him even more confident. Napoleon's capital mistake was to ignore the strong possibility that the Russian czar would not accommodate his desire for a conclusive battle, which the czar knew as well as Napoleon that Russia would lose. Napoleon had more than enough information to have focused on this contingency, including an explicit warning from the czar via the French ambassador.

Similarly, Hitler's intelligence on Soviet capabilities was deficient. Had it been perfect, however, it probably would not have affected Hitler's decision to invade, which was based on his disgust of Bolshevism, dehumanizing of the Russian masses, and conviction that the Soviet state was too rotten to resist the Wehrmacht. Better German intelligence might have led to greater military success than was the case. But it almost

certainly would not have enabled Hitler to succeed, destroy the Soviet Union, and win World War II.

It is argued that the Japanese probably would not have attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, had they known that the U.S. aircraft carriers were at sea. But they would have when the carriers returned to port. As it turned out, several of the U.S. carriers that were spared destruction helped to defeat Japanese carriers at Midway six months later. However, the U.S. reaction to the attack on Pearl Harbor would hardly have been less fierce if the carriers had been sunk, and soon the United States was producing aircraft carriers at the rate of fifteen per year. The outcome of World War II in the Pacific would have been fundamentally no different if Japanese intelligence had been right about the missing U.S. carriers. In these cases, even if defects and deficiencies in intelligence had been avoided, the strategic decision and their results would probably have been the same.

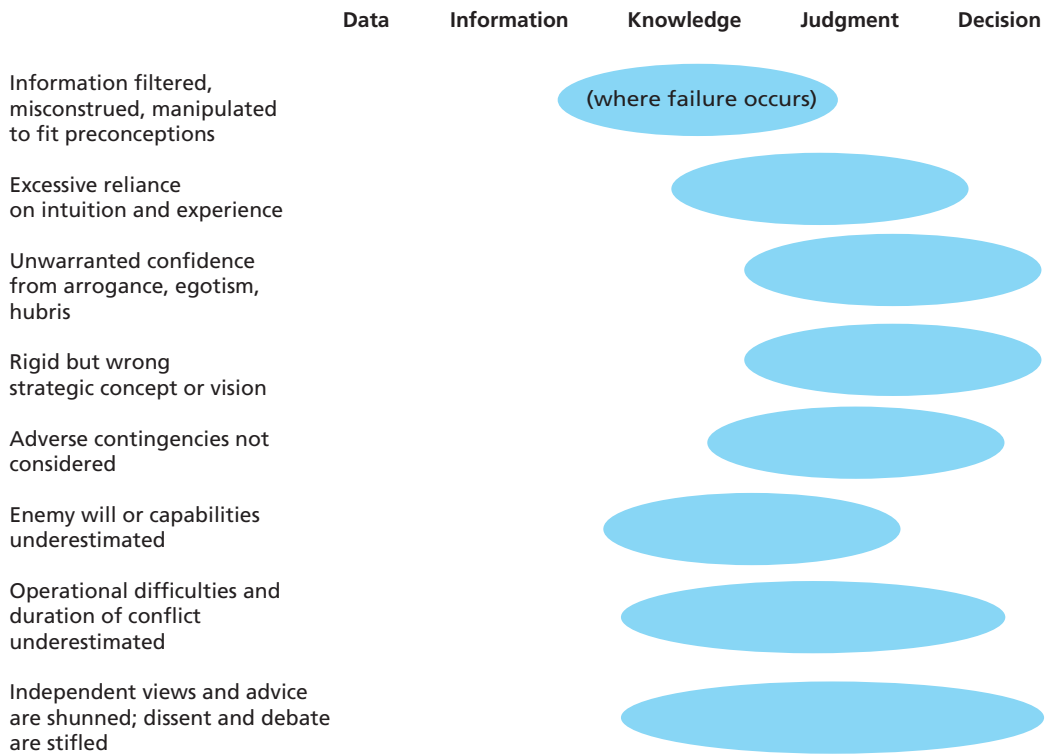
This is not to suggest that the supply of information is unimportant. Insufficient or bad information *can* lead to or aggravate flawed decisions, and several cases revealed that information errors or gaps reinforced bad decisions or complicated the implementation of those decisions. That said, we find that ample information existed to have supported wiser decisions, with better outcomes, in all eight cases of strategic blunders.

For another perspective, we can relate the eight main reasons for blunders to the information value chain from Chapter Two (as shown here in Figure 15.1), which helps us to see where failures occur.

Reinforcing our argument (and Vertzberger's) that blunders are mainly caused by how information is used by decisionmakers is that they continued to occur throughout the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first despite exponential growth in the availability of information in general and state intelligence in particular (as detailed in Chapter Two). Once decisionmakers relied on spies and informers to uncover secrets, but they now have access to vast open sources, buzzing social networks, and massive leaks. Our cases suggest that decisionmakers *before* these technological advances had enough information to have chosen more wisely.

Furthermore, the expansion of available intelligence and other information since the mid-twentieth century evidently does not seem to have reduced the propensity to blunder. Take two important cases in point: the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. By 1979, the USSR possessed the world's largest intelligence apparatus and had a plethora of technical collection methods (not to mention traditional ones, which it was not hesitant to use). As the Kremlin became increasingly alarmed by the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, it had access to copious information about every significant aspect of government misrule, extremists' beliefs and methods, urban and remote terrain, and postures of outside states (e.g., Pakistan and the United States). Similarly—only far more so because of technological advances in data and intelligence collection—the U.S. government was teeming with information about Iraq as it considered whether to invade. While there were gaps

**Figure 15.1**  
**Cognitive Problems and the Information Value Chain**



RAND RR768-15.1

in intelligence, decisionmakers mainly made a bad choice because they were not receptive to information that contradicted the option indicated by their erroneous model of reality.

Supplying information is increasingly a function of technology, whereas *using* information is mainly what people do. Preventing strategic mistakes will therefore be a lot harder than merely developing and deploying better technical capabilities to sense, gather, screen, sort, crunch, and disseminate information. Yet, as one observer put it, there is a “bias to invest in systems to provide more and better information rather than to support better decision-making with that information, [perhaps] because the former is relatively easy and the latter is relatively hard.”<sup>3</sup>

The tendencies to make poor use of or to misuse information, as shown in our historical cases, are consistent with our species’ common trait of welcoming news that bolsters rather than threatens beliefs. In both the Falklands and Iraq invasions, bits of evidence that contradicted the predisposition to invade were given less attention than bits that were friendly to the predisposition. Likewise, underestimating enemy will, enemy capabilities, and operational difficulties correlate with heavy reliance on intu-

ition, unwarranted confidence from hubris, arrogance and egotism, and attachment to a flawed strategic concept. Just as humans form models of reality to confront complexity, they may flee from complexity to the safe haven of established beliefs. As they do, information is treated subjectively, not objectively.

The problem of favoring information that conformed to decisionmakers' predispositions was especially pronounced in Napoleon's invasion of Russia, Germany's decision to conduct unrestricted submarine warfare, Hitler's invasion of the USSR, Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, China's invasion of Vietnam, and George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq. In these cases, evidence that pointed to failure was trumped by that which strengthened confidence—indeed, led to unwarranted optimism and a devaluation of costs and risks. In contrast, the sensitivity of Soviet leaders in 1981 to indications that Poles would fight if invaded led to the suspension of a central plank of Soviet policy. Even then, it took a year for the Kremlin to shake the habit of using force against threats to communism.

This returns us to the matter of models. If such cognitive constructs are meant to represent reality, one might think that accurate fresh information about reality would cause them to be rethought and, as warranted, amended or replaced. Yet a common feature of the blunders we studied is that this does not occur. More often than not, flawed models of reality were unreceptive to fresh information that threatened them, as with a diseased organism resisting a cure. Instead of improving as time passes, as conditions change, and as new information arrives, models may harden. This has the effect of depriving individuals and institutions of the value of information as the moment of decision nears, when they most need it. In some cases, fresh information was misconstrued to buttress preconceptions when it could have demolished them. The more that Soviet leaders of 1979 learned of Afghanistan's instability, the more convinced they became that military intervention would put an end to it. They might instead have read the same information to suggest that military intervention would aggravate instability and fail.

Argentina's invasion of the Falklands is a prime example of a cognitive model that ignored the obvious. Why would the Argentines think that the redoubtable Thatcher would not choose to respond forcibly to their occupation of the Falklands? Although the UK, a declining power, would have been hard-pressed militarily to removal of Argentine forces without substantial help, an objective assessment in Buenos Aires of how Argentine-American ties stacked up against the Anglo-American "special relationship" would have indicated a strong possibility that the United States would enable the British victory.<sup>4</sup> True, there was room for doubt about whether the UK would react militarily and receive critical U.S. help. However, as far as is known, the Argentines simply ignored this possibility, as evidenced by their utter failure to prepare their forces for combat.

If poor use of information causes blunders, is it conversely true that good use of information prevents them? Our cases, admittedly few, suggest so. Wilson pon-

dered hard and long—his critics claimed too long—over the question of whether to enter World War I. Reluctantly, for his instinct was to remain neutral, he updated his cognitive model with fresh information about reality: Germany was acting atrociously toward conquered populations and belligerently toward the United States; it was important that Germany not win; U.S. entry on the side of Britain and France would prevent German victory; therefore, the United States should fight. Where Wilson's model failed was to expect that U.S. forces would not see heavy fighting and that Europeans and Americans alike would embrace his vision of a new international politics, guided by U.S. ideals, galvanized by U.S. power, and capable of perpetuating peace. But again, had he known that this was false hope, he would have entered the war anyway.

Kissinger made good use of the information available to him and actively sought more, regardless of its compatibility with his cognitive model. By communicating directly, clearly, and continually with all parties, he was able to see a panorama of the entire situation. Despite America's own domestic upheaval, the information available suggested that it was possible to restrain Israel while still ensuring its victory, to enhance U.S. ties with key Arab states while still working for their defeat, and to exploit the U.S.-Soviet détente without destroying it. As fresh information revealed changing conditions, Kissinger's decision model adapted. Formed in the midst of a complex and perilous crisis, it was both realistic and flexible.

Even strongly held models of reality can be replaced when decisionmakers treat information objectively. Again, the Soviets wanted all along for the Polish regime to solve their problem by crushing Solidarity. But after much analysis and soul-searching, they decided to not invade even if the Polish regime could not defeat this threat to communism. The Soviets arrived at a new model, which reflected the harsh reality they faced: The war in Afghanistan was not going well, the Poles might fight, the West would respond with tougher sanctions, and the Soviet state was not strong enough to withstand such a combination of challenges. Even jaundiced leaders, steeped in reliance on raw power, proved capable of using new information, unpleasant though it was.

### **Discounting Risks, Writing Scripts, Counting on Control**

The Kremlin concluded that using force to save communism in a critical country was riskier than letting it fail. In general, our cases suggest that blunders involve injudicious risk taking or, looking at the other side of that coin, unwarranted confidence. Again, this is contrary to the average person's tendency to place greater value on avoiding harm than on achieving gain.<sup>5</sup> Most people prefer to invest hard-earned money in low-return certificates of deposit or blue-chip equities than to gamble it on speculative stocks, though the former may only match inflation and the latter is the way to get

rich. Given the high stakes—armies destroyed, economies crippled, empires lost, leaders banished—one might think that risk aversion would be even more evident in decisionmaking involving war and peace than that involving dollars and cents.

On the contrary, researchers have discovered “a tendency toward overconfidence in domains where there are a lot of unknowns, part of which is often referred to as the ‘hard-easy’ effect.”<sup>6</sup> Also, risk taking may be heightened by the prospect of huge gain—think of state lotteries and get-rich-quick schemes. Such exceptions to ordinary human risk aversion are noteworthy here because strategic decisionmakers may face large uncertainties and also believe that there is no other way to achieve grand results. Likewise, prospect theory holds that when faced with the possibility of significant loss, a decisionmaker may elect to take a large gamble to offset it, even when the odds of coming out ahead are not favorable.<sup>7</sup> While leaders in some of our cases were driven to act by the allure of great gain (Napoleon, Hitler, the Argentine junta), others were motivated by the prospect of significant harm if they did not act (Germany’s generals in 1916–1917, Japan’s in 1941, the Soviets in Afghanistan). The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 was decided on the prospect of both great gain (democratizing the Arab world) and great loss (terrorists with WMDs). In all these cases, the risks were underestimated and the decisions backfired.

Leaders are not invariably more inclined to risk defeat than investors are to risk bankruptcy; otherwise, wars would be much more frequent than they are. Yet in the cases studied here, bets were made that the bettors, with available information, could have known were bad ones. After the fact, making a bad investment may be seen as having taken a bad risk, whereas making a killing is seen as having taken a smart one. In psychology, this is known as *hindsight bias*.<sup>8</sup> Because risk taking is the key to superior investment returns, excessive aversion to risk can be a recipe for passivity and no gain, whether in markets and business or war and peace. Eisenhower did not know that the Normandy invasion would succeed. But had he been seized by fear of failure he would not have launched it.

Far from seized with fear of failure, those who committed the blunders studied here were way too bullish. This is consistent with observation that leaders, like other successful executives, may have well-above-average beliefs in their ability to control situations. This can incline them toward greater risk taking than the rest of us—indeed, toward greater risk taking than conditions and available information justify. This helps explain why, so often, enemies and operational difficulties were often underestimated, contingency plans and preparations were neglected, information that implied risk was discounted, and information that fit experience, bolstered confidence, and reinforced prevailing cognitive models was welcomed. In most of this study’s cases of blunders, we discover unwarranted levels of decisionmakers’ confidence in their ability to plan, script, and control the results of their choices.

There is a vast difference between risk taking that makes objective use of all available information and risk taking that favors information indicating that the risk taker

is right. In some of the blunders examined here, leaders and institutions even *suppressed* information and advice that indicated risks, something even daring entrepreneurs would not do. Time and again, strategic decisionmakers counted on their plans to work and on their intuitions to tell them what to do. Consequently, they failed, often shockingly, to think through what could go wrong and what to do if it did:

- Napoleon dismissed the risk that the Russian czar would choose the best, if not only rational, option he, Alexander, had: to retreat and draw Napoleon into Russia's vastness.
- Germany's military leaders overlooked what should have been an obvious way for the United States to neutralize the U-boat threat: to form convoys.
- Hitler took essentially the same risk that defeated Napoleon's invasion of Russia, with essentially the same result: a grinding and total defeat.
- Japan attacked Pearl Harbor despite the risk that this would rile America and trigger a military-industrial response that it could not match: In six months, the Japanese were defeated at Midway.
- China invaded Vietnam expecting weak opposition, after thirty years of fierce Vietnamese opposition to France and the United States: They withdrew with large losses and nothing gained.
- The Soviets intervened in Afghanistan despite the risk of being ensnarled in an endless insurgency by fighters of known fanaticism and skill: The Soviets retreated a decade later.
- Argentina's junta and its advisors ignored the risk that Thatcher would fight to retake the Falklands: The forces, the junta, and the advisors were soon gone.
- U.S. decisionmakers discounted the failure of UN inspectors to find evidence of WMDs in Iraq; they also gambled that a country crisscrossed by ethnic, sectarian, and economic fault lines would be made peaceful, stable, and productive by the forcible removal of its dictator by foreign troops: The war in Iraq lasted eight years, at great harm to America's standing and economy.

In every case of a blunder, decisionmakers failed to heed the very dangers that derailed their plans and in some cases led to their own downfall. The important message from these blunders is not that they involved risks—what war doesn't? Nor is it that risks were merely underestimated, which is often the case when wars, investments, and other choices do not work out well but are not necessarily indicative of a blunder. Rather, in these cases at least, decisionmakers could and should have known that very *load-bearing assumptions* of their decisions might give way when exposed to reality. The unfortunate results are threefold: Bad decisions are made, precautions are not taken, and no preparations are made to respond when plans go awry. When conviction blocks doubt and hope becomes expectation, consideration of alternatives and contingencies is the casualty.

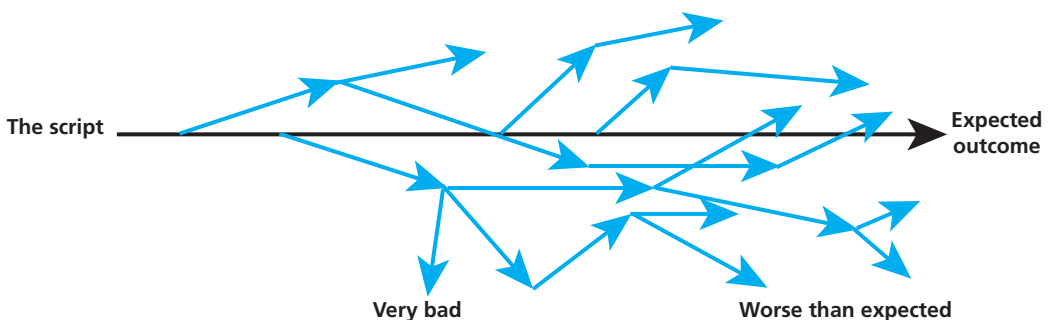


A common error of blunderers is to expect events to conform to their plans, as if they were scripts to which all parties were bound to adhere. This is related to the tendency of successful executives (e.g., national leaders) to overestimate their ability to control. Often—Napoleon in Russia, German leaders in World War I, Soviets in Afghanistan, Argentines in the Falklands—decisionmakers thought that they knew how enemies would behave. As often, they planned against caricatures—respectively, a predictable czar, indecisive Americans, Islamist rabble, an over-the-hill Great Britain. Such scripting implies assurance in one’s ability to control the future—or at least to predict it—which may overlook complexity, flux, and the latitude of other parties. Scripting can even assume control over an enemy that will instead be strongly motivated to defy expectations. Imagine a football coach so sure of his scheme and his team, so dismissive of his opponent, that he knows how the game will go. Napoleon (“man of destiny”) and Hitler (in *Mein Kampf*) trusted not only their personal visions and campaign plans but also their ability—their *will*—to control war in Russia. Each lost control, the wars they started, and eventually their hold on power.

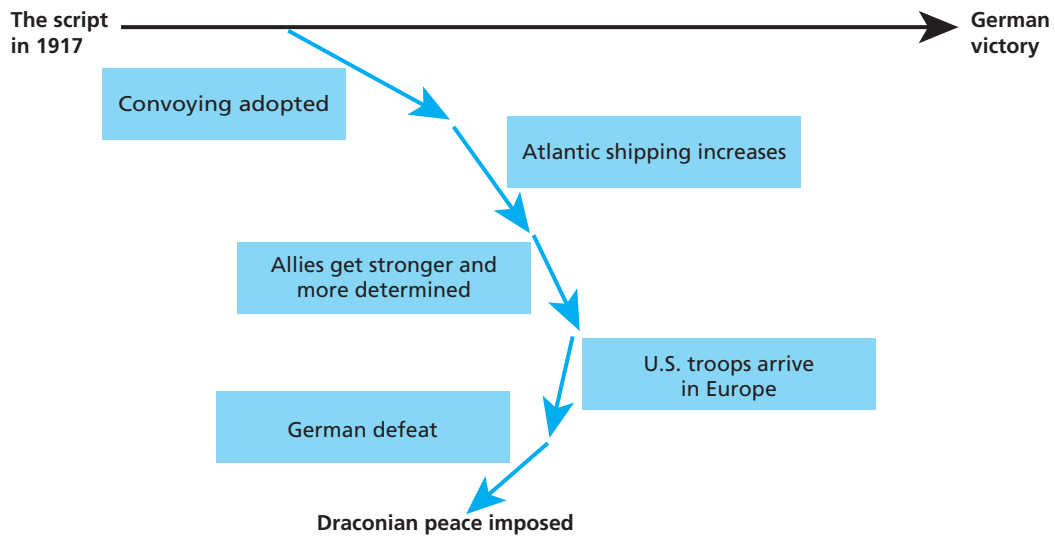
As explained, strategic decision models that lead to blunders tend to be not only flawed but also inflexible. Once events deviate from the script, possible paths and outcomes multiply. It is uncomfortable and difficult for the brain to contemplate what could eventuate and what to do when scripts fail, control is lost, and reality fractures, as the simple diagram in Figure 15.2 shows.

If coping with complex reality requires the brain to form a model in order to make decisions and plans, coping with multiplying possibilities when events deviate from the script can be more daunting still. Take the case of German military leaders who calculated that unrestricted U-boat warfare would force Britain out of the war two years before U.S. forces got to Europe: Within a few months it was clear that supplies to the British were actually expanding, that American forces would arrive sooner than expected, and that Germany had lost control (see Figure 15.3).

**Figure 15.2**  
Scripts, Expectations, and Fracturing Reality



**Figure 15.3**  
**German U-boat Warfare Script (1917)**



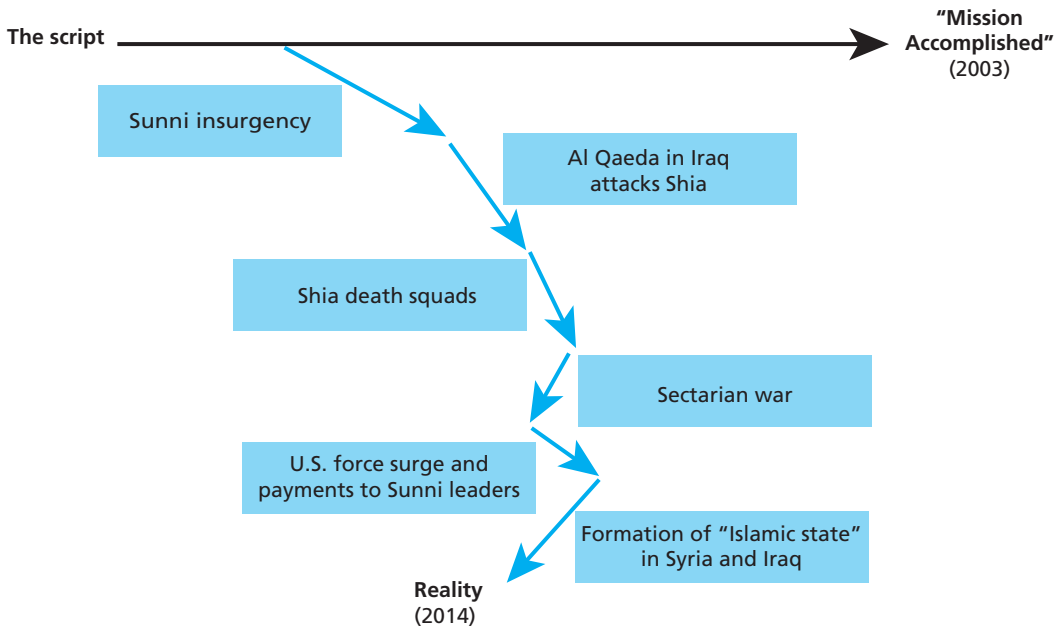
RAND RR768-15.3

U.S. leaders decided to invade Iraq expecting that any resistance by remnants of the Saddam regime would quickly fade, that U.S. forces could soon leave, and that Iraqi oil would flow. The expanding Sunni insurgency that ensued was neither anticipated nor, even as it flared, admitted. That in turn created the opportunity for al Qaeda to enter Iraq (where it had not been), which gave rise to Shiite retaliation and sectarian war, which was gotten under control at the cost of much American blood and money and virtual Shiite majoritarian dictatorship (see Figure 15.4).

The actual path was, if anything, more plausible than the script, which was based on a fragile set of interlocking rosy assumptions about how Iraqis would behave post-Saddam, when U.S. troops could leave, and how quickly petroleum production and revenues would expand.<sup>9</sup> U.S. decisionmakers had essentially all the information they needed to understand the potential for a Sunni uprising; the likely response of al Qaeda to such an uprising; the virtual certainty of Shia reprisals and majoritarian oppression, leading to resurgent Sunni extremism and sectarian war; the impact on the Iraqi economy; and the resultant costs the United States would have to bear. The admission of such risks would have called into question the advisability of invading Iraq, an idea with broad support as long as the risks were dismissed.

Again, confidence that an adversary will comply with one's script and, more generally, that the results of a decision can be controlled are tantamount to assuming away risk. When this leads to a failure to prepare for bad results, the consequences can be that much worse. Think again of Napoleon: Had he at least considered the possibility

**Figure 15.4**  
**U.S. War with Iraq Script (2003)**



RAND RR768-15.4

that the Russian army would not stand and fight, he might still have invaded Russia, but he might have withdrawn upon realizing that the czar would not following his script. Instead, he pressed on, moved deeper, occupied Moscow, and did not retreat until weather, hunger, and Cossacks destroyed most of his army.

Is it correct to infer that decisionmakers who do not commit blunders are innocent of scripting?<sup>10</sup> Not entirely. Teddy Roosevelt and company gave little thought to how plans for war with Spain could go awry. However, they had such a wide margin for error, owing to Spain's marked military inferiority, that their confidence in their script and in their ability to control—by sheer force and will—the course of events was not misguided. Similarly, Wilson and Kissinger, neither one lacking in self-confidence, made their (sound) decisions with the expectation of having the upper hand, which as it turned out they did. The Soviet decision not to invade Poland was more complex in this regard: The Politburo was unsure what would happen if they let events in Poland develop. However, as that case study explains, they decided that even the worst outcome of noninvasion—noncommunist victory in Poland—was not as bad as the expected consequences of invasion for the Soviet Union, and they were probably right. In any case, we have not suggested that strategic decisions that do *not* end in failure are necessarily flawless; however, decisions that do end in failure can often be at least partly explained by the unwarranted confidence in plans and the ability to control.

In sum, decisionmakers' overconfidence in being able to control events, owing to their experience, intuition, ego, grand theory, or vision, can cause them to underestimate enemies and difficulties, discount risks, rely on scripts, and ignore what could go wrong. These same disorders make decisionmakers resistant to information, analysis, and advice that could expose and correct flaws in the cognitive models that skew their judgment. They start wars they cannot control against enemies who do not behave as expected, with adversities for which their armies are unprepared.

## Families of Blunders

To paraphrase Tolstoy, every bad strategic decision is bad *in its own way*. But not every bad decision is in a class of its own. It is useful to think of three families of bad decisionmaking: the *blinding idea*, the *intuitive leader*, and the *only apparent option*. In cases of the blinding idea, decisionmakers are so taken with and driven by some big idea—a sweeping vision, a strategic goal, a guiding principle, a transcendent theory—that they construct an elaborate and inflexible model of reality around it. The problem is that the model is subjective. Such decisionmakers acquire comfort with their model and then refuse to abandon or change it even when faced with information that contradicts it. The big idea thus becomes the blinding idea. Leaders and institutions become invested in the model itself and insulate or defend it from contrary evidence and threatening advice, even if it means marginalizing doubters, silencing dissenters, manipulating intelligence, and biasing analysis.

The German military chiefs who talked the kaiser into approving unrestricted U-boat warfare had convinced themselves that this would knock Great Britain out of the war before U.S. forces could turn the war's tide. The idea was so appealing, and so blinding, because it offered a path to outright German victory. Copious analysis was produced to convince, not to critique. Instead of illuminating risk, that analysis distracted those who ordered it from the possibility that an escorted convoy system could actually increase transatlantic shipping and enable the British to hold their own until American troops arrived and sealed Germany's defeat—the opposite of the idea's intent.

Soviet leaders thought that the growing chaos and threat of Islamist extremism could be stopped by sending Soviet ground forces across the border. This mistaken confidence grew out of ingrained Soviet faith in military power. Indeed, so bewildering were Afghan developments to Soviet leaders that they, in effect, sought refuge in a model that was familiar to them: responding to danger with force. Their belief in force smothered contrary information, analysis, and advice, including the point-blank insistence of the Soviet military chief of staff that his forces lacked the ability to counter the furious insurgency that intervention could and did cause.

The U.S. decision to invade Iraq was based on not one but several blinding ideas: the mistaken belief that Saddam was behind September 11, the fear that he would menace the region with nuclear weapons or provide them to terrorists, the belief that the Arab world was swayed only by power and that the United States needed to display it, and the notion that creating a democratic state in the Arab heartland would ignite a beneficial political transformation. When combined, these ideas were all the harder to refute or oppose. Doubts were drowned out by an “amen chorus” of political, media, and public support. Despite having different motivations, proponents were so determined to make their case that they never analyzed it.

Blunders that did not occur may help illuminate this phenomenon of the blinding idea. Soviet leaders facing counterrevolution in Poland could have defaulted to the view that they had the requirement, the responsibility, and the capabilities to ensure communism’s survival. Had they been blinded by this idea, they might have thoughtlessly applied it. Instead, they took time to deliberate and in the end decided that the costs of intervention were too great for the Soviet Union to bear even if Polish martial law failed. The Kremlin’s confidence in the use of force was shaken by the ongoing war in Afghanistan, which was not following Soviet script.

Likewise, Wilson began with a strong commitment to keep the United States out of World War I, which he saw as a European-made calamity for which Americans should not pay. He looked beyond the war to a new system of international comity, law, and collective security, which he thought Europeans would accept once exhausted by the violence that their old system caused. But Wilson came to understand that his prescription for lasting peace could be fulfilled not by neutrality but by fighting.

The Americans who instigated the Spanish-American War shared a very big idea that led them to that decision: The United States could and must become a world power, which required ridding the Western Hemisphere of European dominion, seizing colonies, and having an invigorating war. But they were not blinded by this idea. They saw that the risks of conflict with Great Britain were far greater than those of conflict with Spain, so they passed on the former and seized the latter. As slipshod as their decisionmaking process was, they made a rational—if not entirely commendable—choice and achieved the results they sought.

Cases involving intuitive leaders have in common exceptional self-confidence on the part of the leader; deference to that leader, out of awe, fear, or ambition; and a tendency to discount facts that threaten the leader, his self-confidence, or deference to him. (We write as if blunderers are men, which history supports!) Our cases spotlight three such leaders: Napoleon had authored extraordinary military success; had created an empire—with him as its emperor—largely by force; and deserved the reputation of a commanding general without peer. With success came growing confidence not only in his own ability but also in his intuition—to the point that he could foresee how wars would be fought and won. That intuition led Napoleon to choose invasion as the method of imposing his will on Russia. Having done so, he wrote a script that

he expected all players, including his adversary, to follow. Napoleon did not consider the probability that the czar would reject a script that inexorably pointed to Russian defeat. The blunder produced by Napoleon's brain was facilitated by the reluctance of his advisors, out of respect or fear, to challenge him.

What the führer lacked in Napoleonic military brilliance he made up for by stifling debate. Hitler's cognition was, as the case explains, not only strongly intuitive but dangerously psychotic. When a commander or advisor mustered the courage to question his thinking, it was usually done so with great circumlocution, and even then often with regret. Because Hitler rewarded merit less than he did obedience, the institutions around and beneath him echoed and amplified his misjudgments. While this pattern occurred repeatedly during World War II, no decision was worse and more consequential than to invade the Soviet Union despite the loud lessons of history and the ignored doubts of Germany's generals.

By 1979 Deng Xiaoping had not attained stature approaching that of Napoleon in 1812 or Hitler in 1941. Six years earlier, a dying Zhou Enlai had persuaded a reluctant Mao Zedong to rehabilitate Deng and make him first vice premier. Deng had to be careful not to criticize Maoism, and even then was targeted by the Gang of Four with Mao's encouragement. That he emerged as China's leader by 1978 was a testament to his exceptional talent. The year he decided to invade Vietnam, 1979, was the first time Deng began to explain why and how China must transform itself and its relations to the world. He lacked the experience, credibility, arrogance, and authority to base a decision to invade Vietnam solely on intuition. He thought it through with some care, recognized the possibility of failure, and took a calculated risk. However, because he harbored a low regard for Vietnamese in general, Deng underestimated the opponent's ability and will to oppose invasion. Because the results were ambiguous—the invasion failed, but some gains (e.g., reform of the PLA) were recouped from it—we do not regard Deng's decision as a major blunder. But clearly his bias affected his objectivity.

By way of contrast, Kissinger could have mainly relied on intuition in making decisions during the exceedingly complex and fluid U.S.-Soviet crisis of 1973, but he did not. Intuition, which is based on experience, can fail in unfamiliar circumstances. The U.S. reflex from prior Arab-Israeli wars was to support complete Israeli victory. This time, however, the opportunity presented itself to improve U.S.-Arab ties at the expense of Soviet-Arab ties, and that could happen only if the United States restrained Israel. The challenge of ensuring Israeli military success short of utter Arab defeat was a new one, requiring the use of all available information, objective reasoning, and open debate, albeit within a small circle of advisors. Indeed, Kissinger heavily relied on advice and did not discourage differences of opinion, even with his own.

Of course, an intuitive leader can make sound decisions, including strategic ones. Under conditions of urgency and scarce information, good intuition can be critical. However, problems occur when intuition is substituted for processing available information and performing analysis that would, if done, contradict that intuition.<sup>11</sup> This

is especially problematic in making war-and-peace decisions, when time is short, pressures on leaders are great, and stakes could not be higher. When it comes to making such decisions, the intuitive leader runs the compound risk that his unwarranted confidence will not be questioned or corrected by those around him. When sure of his own ideas—often the most blinding—as well as his absolute authority, as Napoleon and Hitler were, the intuitive leader can ignore huge risks and commit huge blunders, as Napoleon and Hitler did.

The only-apparent-option cases are those in which individuals and institutions have convinced themselves that the proposition on the table, however risky, is the only way to accomplish their goals. Of course, one does not rule out that the perceived only option is in fact the only option. But we are not prepared to accept the premise that strategic blunders occur because those who commit them have no choice, for this would imply that all other options would have had even worse results. It is hard to imagine a worse outcome for Japan than the one of 1945 that resulted from the decision of 1941, and it is not hard to imagine an alternative course for the Argentine junta that would have immediately led to defeat, humiliation, and removal from office. In these cases, we know now that what might have seemed the only option proved to be the worst option.

But one of our criteria for a strategic blunder is that the decisionmaker *could have known at the time* that the choice could end disastrously. Of interest here, thus, is when decisionmakers convince themselves that a bad option is the only option. If the only option proves to be a dreadful one, there is a good chance that decisionmakers erred in assessing expected results and other options. Once convinced, they become less receptive to information that suggests otherwise and more concerned with implementation planning than with what could go wrong.

Of our cases—perhaps of all cases in history—the Japanese decision to attack Pearl Harbor stands out for the enormity of the risks that well-informed decisionmakers knowingly took. Even the most fanatical, militaristic, and arrogant of Japan's leaders knew that a deadly surprise attack on U.S. soil might unify Americans around a demand for justice, revenge, and total victory. Japanese decisionmakers were also aware that the United States had the industrial, technological, and demographic wherewithal to prevail, and aware that Japan would eventually face the fullness of U.S. power. They just gambled that Japan could attain a dominant military position in Asia before that happened and that Japan could then negotiate from strength. But they also thought that the United States would use its naval power to threaten Japanese conquests and to strangle Japan itself even if they did not initiate a war. By underestimating the U.S. threat in response to an attack and overestimating the U.S. threat in the absence of one, the Japanese came to think that attacking was less risky than not attacking. At the crux of these dual misjudgments was the bias of the Japanese military to use force offensively.

The Argentine military junta was right to think that only something as spectacular as the seizure of the Falklands would spare them the political oblivion their domestic misrule had earned. The absence of other good options made a hugely risky one look least bad. When assured by their diplomats that the British would not attempt to retake the islands by force, the decision was a “no brainer” (in more ways than one). The diplomats were at fault for letting their Anglophobia contaminate their reasoning and their advice to the junta. But the military leaders themselves earned a place in the pantheon of blunders by starting a war without making preparations to fight it. They picked what they considered their least-bad option and gave no thought to how it could turn out to be their worst.

These families of blunders have in common decisionmakers’ reliance on erroneous models of reality, to which they clung regardless of contrary information. Time and again, information that would flag risks, shake overconfidence, and yield sounder decisions is available but not used. So we arrive at this study’s core question: How can information be used better to prevent strategic blunders?



## Possible Remedies

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### Decisionmaker, Heal Thyself

The cases suggest that blunders occur when decisionmakers form and use mental models that poorly reflect real conditions, problems, opportunities, options, and risks. Their models can be more inventions than reflections of objective reality. Rather than enlighten decisionmakers, they trap them. We believe—again, the evidence is not absolute—that available information could have supported better decisions in all the cases we examined. However, that information was discounted or manipulated for the sake of reinforcing, rather than rethinking, assumptions, intuitions, and preconceptions. As necessary, criticism and dissent were muffled. Although the particular causes of blundering are complex and varied, as explained in Chapter Fifteen, we can generalize that *blunders occur because decisionmakers fail to use available information to correct dangerously flawed models of reality*. Blinders cause blunders.

This presents a serious difficulty—one that Barbara Tuchman foreshadowed by blaming “wooden-headedness” for the colossal mistakes leaders and governments make. As it turns out, decisionmakers *are* the problem—not victims of bad information but villains of the bad *use* of information. They can be relatively impervious—and their models impermeable—to information that would support better judgment. But Tuchman, the historian, more or less left it at that. Rather than accept her verdict that humans are just bad at government, we have sought to understand *why* (other than having wooden heads) decisionmakers would cheat themselves of information that could correct their models of reality.<sup>1</sup> Why, in some cases, would they even filter out information that does not conform to their flawed models?

One answer is a familiar one: humans would rather have their beliefs, intuitions, and preconceptions validated than contradicted. The former is reassuring; the latter is unsettling. Conceptually, this makes the problem of blunders hard to treat: The patient is not only creating the problem but also resisting the cure.

How can the very decisionmakers who cause these problems be made to heal themselves? How could Napoleon, he of the immense ego, have been convinced ego blinded him from the (obvious) possibility that Czar Alexander would refuse to play his role in a script that would end in Russia’s defeat? Who among Napoleon’s lieu-

tenants would have dared try, and not get sacked? How could German generals and admirals have been persuaded to concede the fallacy of their belief that the American Army could not enter World War I before Great Britain was starved into submission? What information would have led the Argentine junta to reject the advice from Foreign Minister Nicanor Costa Méndez that the invasion of the Falklands would go unopposed and thus save their hides? How can a President who is, by his own admission, not wired to reverse a decision he has taken be convinced to seek information that could require him to reverse himself? This is the fundamental challenge of finding promising remedies.

Conceptually, correcting bad cognitive models that lead to blunders requires enhancing the value of information, especially at those stages of the value chain (described in Chapter Two) where information is used to expand knowledge, enable objective analysis, and produce rational judgment. We now find, with the benefit of the cases, that the greater challenge is to improve the use of information *even if decision-makers resist*, whether because they are sure they are right, because they do not countenance opposing analysis and advice, or because they are surrounded by people who think as they do or dare not say otherwise.

The cases offer little encouragement that individual decisionmakers will, of their own accord, see their own errors before it is too late. We cannot rely on leaders with great power, successful careers, big ambitions, bold ideas, and other ego-inflating qualities to be very receptive to the proposition that their decisionmaking could stand improvement. Indeed, those with traits that correlate with the propensity to commit blunders—hubris, arrogance, flawed intuition, convinced of their ability to control others and events—would surely be the least likely candidates for “decision training.” Conversely, leaders who are interested in improving their decisionmaking abilities may not be the sort who tend to blunder. So it is best to assume that we are more or less stuck with fallible individuals to make war-and-peace decisions.

If individual decisionmakers cannot be counted on to recognize the flaws in their cognitive models and to use (unwelcome) contrary information to correct those flaws, we need to turn to the second part of our strategic decisionmaking system: institutions. However, the cases of blunders also suggest that the institutions—advisors, ministers, commanders, bureaucracies—that served decisionmakers did not act as safeguards against bad judgment:

- Few of those close to Napoleon dared question his belief that Russia was bound to fight a decisive battle soon after the invasion, and those who did were timid in doing so.
- German military culture and discipline discouraged dissent. The political leaders who did voice opposition to the proposal to resume unrestricted U-boat warfare could produce no analysis to refute the military’s calculation that the British would be starved into submission before U.S. troops arrived in Europe.

- Hitler excluded, intimidated, or banished commanders who expressed doubts about the wisdom of invading the USSR.
- Although important Japanese officials warned that war with the United States could not be won, the military leadership became increasingly adamant and unified that Japan had no choice.
- Presenting Soviet leaders with assessments that intervening in Afghanistan would end badly was not the way for junior officers to gain favor and advance; consequently, reports to that effect were buried by midlevel functionaries.
- Once Bush bought (and began selling) the case for the post–September 11 invasion of Iraq, no high-level official is known to have told him that the intelligence about WMDs was flimsy; moreover, concerns that stabilizing Iraq after the invasion would require a lengthy and costly U.S. occupation were dismissed by those around the President who favored war and claimed that the United States could hand the country over to a handful of expatriates and quickly leave.
- Only in the case of China’s 1979 invasion of Vietnam did the decisionmaker, Deng, heed warnings that swift victory might not be in the cards; he did not abandon but rather scaled back the invasion plan.

Thus, of the main causes of the blunders identified in Chapter Fifteen, one—the stifling of debate, dissent, doubt, and criticism—has special significance in that it allows the others to occur. When a leader is relying on a flawed model of reality, the institutions around that leader ought, in theory, to be able to catch, check, and counter such tendencies. In essence, some degree of institutional independence is critical to preventing blunders by providing a safeguard against other decisionmaking failures. Obviously, this distinction between leaders and those reporting to them raises thorny questions of authority, accountability, independence, loyalty, trust, and tolerance of dissent.

The challenge of fostering institutional independence in order to prevent blunders should not be underestimated. The institutions that a leader is most likely to turn to are usually appointed by, dependent on, subordinate to, and controlled by that leader, which means that they are more inclined to echo and assist than to disagree and frustrate. The cases suggest that the stronger the convictions of leaders, the more they can count on the agreement of the institutions around them. By implication, remedies for flawed strategic decisionmaking need to work regardless of the consent, and beyond the dictates, of decisionmakers, who most likely are convinced they are right—a tall order.

## Ensuring Objectivity and Confronting Complexity

Compounding the problems of stifled dissent and institutional subservience is the lack of objectivity. In most cases of blunders, individuals and institutions involved in decisionmaking were prone to subjective biases: Napoleon's unbounded self-confidence, the arrogance of Imperial Germany's generals and admirals, Hitler's hatred and warped theories, the hubris of Japan's military leaders, Deng's low regard for the Vietnamese, the Soviet Politburo's disdain for Islamist insurgents, the Argentines' Anglophobia, and Washington's unfounded conviction that Saddam would provide WMDs to terrorists. Time and again, subjectivity smothered objectivity, which contributed to underestimating adversaries and operational difficulties, overestimating the ability to control events, failing to examine what could go wrong, and intolerance of dissent, all of which resulted in excessive risk taking.

In the cases of blunders, as far as we could determine, decisionmaking involved a dearth of objective analyses of assumptions, of adversary weaknesses and strengths, of options and their pros and cons, and of contingency plans. Of course, powerful subjective biases are hostile toward objectivity and can render decisionmakers incapable of recognizing their lack of objectivity. Perhaps institutions can inject objectivity when leaders cannot; but that leads us right back to the problem of insufficient institutional dependence, which we have yet to solve. Another angle of attack on the lack of objectivity is to insist on *standards*. As any good researcher, analyst, or scientist will attest, standards can expose subjectivity, provide a measurement for quality, and encourage discipline, structure, consistency, and reliability. Of course, standards demand documentation, transparency, scrutiny, critical review, and other methods of quality assurance that are not generally found in government decisionmaking. In the cases of blunders we examined, analytic indiscipline was rampant. Even in cases of nonblunders, standards of analysis and corresponding rigor were not explicit, though objectivity prevailed by and large. On the whole, strategic decisionmaking does not appear to meet basic standards of analytic rigor. While this does not necessarily lead to bad decisions (as the Spanish-American War case shows), it can.

Looking for remedies for strategic blundering also requires confronting the problems of complexity and uncertainty. As noted at the outset and borne out by the cases, matters of war and peace can be exceedingly complex—extreme versions of the bewildering realities that require humans to form and use cognitive models. In the cases of blunders, the models were deficient or defective in representing complex reality (for all the reasons we have discussed). Moreover, information that could have been used to correct these models was not. It follows that if decisionmakers and their institutions and analysts were better at incorporating information to understand complex reality, the more robust and less susceptible to errors their models should be. Information technology has gone through a revolution since Herbert Simon articulated the use of cognitive models to deal with complex realities and the dangers of them being wrong.

The complexity-information challenge is especially severe and consequential when it comes to analysis of contingencies. Chapter Fifteen explained that decisionmakers' reliance on scripting and confidence in control ignore the myriad possible futures that can follow a decision, especially in matters of war and peace. It depicted the splintering possibilities and vastly different outcomes to which they could lead. The cases reveal that the failure to consider what-ifs can be especially regrettable when an adversary behaves differently from what was assumed: Czar Alexander, the Americans after German U-boat attacks, the Soviets when invaded by Hitler, the Americans after Pearl Harbor, Afghan extremists, Margaret Thatcher, and Iraq's Sunni insurgents.

The problem here is this: If reality is already so complex that it requires reliance on cognitive models, how can the human mind wrap itself around all plausible futures? The answer is: It can't. It needs help. One thought is to look to technology—in particular, technology that can aid in the use of information.

## Prescriptions

To sum up so far, our cases and analysis indicate that blunders occur because decisionmakers fail to use available information to correct dangerously flawed models of reality. Yet we may find decisionmakers who are unlikely to see that they are wrong, institutions that will not tell them so, subjective bias throughout decisionmaking systems, and the sheer complexity of trying to contemplate every contingency. Together, these are serious impediments to the effective use of information, to aligning models with reality, and to making wise strategic decisions. Consider the generic blunder: The leader thinks that war can fulfill a grand vision; no one has the backbone or freedom to insist that the vision is wrong and that war could backfire; plans are drawn up, but assumptions, options, and risks are not articulated; and plausible contingencies involving enemy reactions and operational hazards are ignored in favor of a script that the blunderers think they can control and the enemy will obey.

We are thus drawn to ways of ensuring independent advice, analytic objectivity, and the ability to reason in the face of complexity. We prescribe three main remedies for failures in the use of information that can cause blunders: (1) independent institutional safeguards, (2) standards for analytic objectivity and rigor, and (3) tools for decisionmakers and institutions to confront the complexities and uncertainties that surround strategic choices. While these are specific to U.S. decisionmaking, the principles underlying them could apply anywhere.

### **Prescription 1: Independent Strategic Advisory Body**

The U.S. system for national-security decisionmaking is not without independent voices. Press commentators, opinion shapers, and think tanks are outside of executive control. However, they may be regarded as oppositional or ignored when they

challenge the assumptions, knowledge, rationality, and wisdom of decisionmakers. Congress, along with analytic organizations that support it (e.g., the Congressional Research Service and the Congressional Budget Office), has a responsibility to scrutinize before authorizing and appropriating funds; however, it functions at constitutional arm's length, may not be able to provide timely input, and in any case is as likely to be treated as a problem to be managed than as a source of helpful if contrary advice. Such limitations of existing sources of disinterested thought suggest a need for some sort of independent review within or plugged into the Executive Branch.

U.S. intelligence officials, starting with the director of national intelligence (DNI) and military leaders (notably the Joint Chiefs of Staff) are expected to provide disinterested assessments and advice. While intelligence officials and military officers have a moderate level of independence when it comes to registering professional judgments, they are also subject to the control of leaders who may have strong strategic intuitions and policy impulses. Moreover, the intelligence community has no mandate to question policy, and the military is naturally circumspect in doing so.

These institutions have important roles to play in imparting objectivity when it comes to assessing conditions, enemy capabilities and will, and operational pitfalls. Yet the decision to invade Iraq, though only one case, is enough to raise questions about the will of top intelligence officials and military advisors to maintain their independence when subjected to political pressure. Although we have not studied the matter here, we feel obliged to flag the idea that the DNI be appointed for a fixed and lengthy term, as the director of the FBI is, rather than be a member of each incoming political administration. This would not preclude compromise of the independence of the intelligence function; nor are politically rotated DNIs bound to be politicized. However, it would signal commitment to the principle of independence, shielded from the predilections and pressures of policymakers to have intelligence conform to their wishes.

Likewise, military leaders can help avoid bad war-and-peace decisions by pulling no advisory punches when their assessments of enemies, operational problems, and contingencies are sought—even when they are not sought. War plans should contain multiple scenarios, such as a short war becoming a long one.<sup>2</sup> “Can-do” military attitudes should be tempered by strict objectivity, and no officer should be punished for raising questions that may cast doubt on decisionmakers’ preferences. However, in the U.S. experience, as in most of the cases we studied, intelligence officials and military officers cannot always be relied on to challenge bad strategic decisions and the flawed reasoning on which they are based. Indeed, in some cases—Napoleon, the Germany U-boat decision, Hitler, Pearl Harbor, the Falklands invasion—these institutions were complicit.

It follows that consideration be given to options for sources of independent, critical strategic analysis and advice tied to the Executive Branch. There are examples of presidents seeking diverse and even contrary views. During Ronald Reagan’s administration, a procedure was used to present the president’s national security advi-

sor with independent red-team assessments of specific issues. This was done ad hoc, as requested.<sup>3</sup> President Barack Obama reportedly sought contrarian analysis of the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden. These instances are encouraging in that they are reminders that decisionmakers are not invariably inclined to discourage or ignore contradictory analysis and advice. However, we are left with the observation that bad decisions can be made when such input is not solicited or welcome. These ad hoc examples strengthen the case for institutionalizing independent review.

Chronic failures of institutions to question unsound intuitions and offer information and counsel, welcome or not, to the leaders they serve steer us toward the idea of an independent body to perform such critical blunder-preventing tasks. Such a “decision audit” function cannot be performed objectively and consistently by the same staffs that provide “decision support.”<sup>4</sup>

The duties of an independent analysis and advisory body would include:

- Scrutinizing and assessing prevailing strategic thinking
- Critiquing how intelligence and other information is being used
- Insisting on documentation of analysis that supports decisionmaking
- Spelling out benefits, costs, risks, and options
- Analyzing adversary perceptions, options, and possible responses
- Developing alternative scenarios of the results of options under consideration
- Alerting decisionmakers to pitfalls of blinding loyalty
- Examining intelligence estimates and military plans
- Essentially, offering the decisionmaker a disinterested view of reality.

Such duties might seem at first blush to be in tension with the executive function for which governments, including the U.S. government, are constituted. Yet the need to critique war-and-peace decisions was anticipated by the U.S. government itself decades ago. The National Security Act of 1947 states that one of the “duties” of the NSC is

to assess and appraise the objectives, commitments, *and risks* of the United States in relation to our actual and potential military power, in the interest of national security, for the purpose of making recommendations to the President in connection therewith.”<sup>5</sup>

Applying our three-part decisionmaking model, the *institution* (NSC) is tasked with enabling the *individual* (President) to make sound judgments by using *information* “to assess and appraise.” Given the reference to “risks” in the law, it is fair to infer that this duty is meant in part to help presidents avoid imprudent strategic choices. This study has found that risk taking is common in the commission of blunders. We do not contend that American presidents are abnormally prone to take chances, especially when it comes to war and peace: They range from daring (Teddy Roosevelt) to cautious

(Woodrow Wilson). But we must note once again that leaders who have known executive success may have inordinately high confidence in their ability to control situations, which can incline them to take risks that perhaps they should not.

In essence, the NSC is expected to ensure that decisions concerning “actual and potential military power” are based on a sound reading of reality. Not said but implied is the NSC’s obligation to tell the President when he or she is wrong—the hardest truth to speak. As any veteran of U.S. policymaking knows, NSCs and NSC staffs do not always stand up to presidents with bad ideas.<sup>6</sup> In the Iraq case, for instance, the NSC’s recommendations to the President evidently did not give sufficient attention to risks that Iraq had no WMDs, that a postinvasion Sunni uprising would erupt against the U.S. occupation and Shia rule, and that such insurgencies last a decade on average. The NSC staff, as now instituted, managed, and used, is not independent enough to act as a blunder-prevention fail-safe. It will take a new mechanism with independence to fulfill the intent of the original law.

Two forms of such a mechanism come to mind: one near the center of power, and one at arm’s length from the center of power. The trade-off is simple: organizational close proximity to decisionmakers maximizes access at the expense of actual or perceived independence; organizational distance maximizes actual and perceived independence at the possible expense of access. The former could consist of a council of advisors with an analytic staff. While it could be a standing group, the purpose is not to conduct routine review of foreign and defense policies, but rather to engage on matters of strategic importance, including the use of force or actions that could lead to war. The body could be in the Executive Office of the President, perhaps connected to the NSC, in accordance with its statutory duty to assess risks.

In theory, the body could fall within the oversight of the assistant to the President for national security affairs (national security advisor). In practice, not all who hold this position can be expected to find the right balance between staffing the President and preventing the President from doing something reckless. Loyalty and responsibility to serve the President can interfere with hardheaded objectivity. Therefore, linking an independent policy-advisory body with the NSC, which has its advantages, should be accompanied by a clear statement reinforcing that the national security advisor is responsible for ensuring that strategic decisions take into account all reasonable options, risks, contingencies, and alternative analyses. (As already explained, the alternative of expecting the NSC staff itself to question and, if need be, argue against the executive’s preferred strategy is unrealistic.)

The alternative is to establish an independent analytic and advisory body outside the government. There are examples of think tanks being used by the government in this capacity (in addition to their regular functions).<sup>7</sup> They are expected to be apolitical and objective, to use the best analytic methods and tools available, to adhere to strict quality-control standards, and to publish their unclassified findings. However, their access may be limited, and their analysis and advice does not always register with deci-



sionmakers. Just as the *inside option* would require safeguards to ensure its independence, this *outside option* would require reinforcement to ensure its relevance.

A third, hybrid option, which we favor, is to situate a strategic advisory body within the NSC structure but to provide it with independent analytic support from outside the government. Though its members should be appointed by the President, the advisory body should be nonpartisan.<sup>8</sup> It would be activated ad hoc upon the President's request or at its own initiative. Decisionmakers' analysis, options, intentions, military plans, and intelligence assessments should be made available to it, uncensored and classified as necessary. While the concurrence of this body would not be required before making and carrying out any decision, decisionmakers would be obligated to hear its findings. Full documentation and eventual public disclosure would encourage decisionmakers to take its views seriously.

Even with such a mandate, independence in practice would be harder than in theory. Without suggesting that we can—or for our purposes must—offer an exact blueprint, there could be additional practical steps to maintain objectivity. Members could be unpaid, rotated regularly or as needed, required to disclose possible conflicts of interest, and asked to recuse themselves if for any reason they cannot provide impartial advice. Presidents themselves could reinforce independence by making plain their desire for it. Conversely, any attempt to compromise the deliberations of an advisory body or the analysis it receives would carry substantial political risk. In any case, while leaders with strong beliefs may not *really* welcome contrary views, this does not argue against creating a mechanism capable of providing them.

Observers of policy wars and bureaucratic life may regard as unrealistic the idea of mandating an entity to provide independent analysis and advice on strategic matters. Yet this is where our analysis of why blunders occur logically takes us: Failure to speak truth to power in a timely, reasoned, and uninhibited way is a common factor in bad decisions that lead to war. While such a check on strategic decisions might not sway a hyperconfident, driven leader from acting out of impulse or arrogance, it could give pause to thoughtful ones who are otherwise trapped in flawed cognitive models that their own staffs are unable or unwilling to challenge.

Moreover, there are reasons, including our own experiences, to consider this idea feasible:

- As noted, red teams, devil's advocates, and team Bs are sometimes stood up for the express purpose of giving decisionmakers perspectives they cannot count on their subordinate institutions to provide. Asking a team of people to place themselves in an adversary's shoes and present responses to a plan under consideration is common. Similarly, asking a group of analysts to shoot holes in the thinking of regular organizations has served useful purposes on a number of occasions.<sup>9</sup> The idea suggested here would institutionalize a fairly common practice.

- The President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, mentioned in the Iraq case, is now mandated to question intelligence assessments, which can have policy implications. While it is a major step to constitute such a body with the duty to critique strategy and war-and-peace decisions, there is this antecedent.
- As already noted, U.S. policymakers live with the reality that the military and intelligence establishments are required to provide objective assessments. This is not the same as a mechanism that can question strategic decisions. At the same time, objective military advice and intelligence analysis, while not always welcome, are respected.
- Because the NSC's charter clearly calls for it to assess risks, the requirement to do so need not be relegislated.
- Where a great many Americans are concerned, there is enough lingering doubt about the objectivity of decisionmaking leading to the 2003 decision to invade Iraq that the idea of an independent source of analysis and advice—available to the NSC and the President—would have political resonance.

The legitimacy and effectiveness of an independent advisory and analytic function would depend on procedures and ground rules. These could include:

- It should only deal with matters of strategic import and risk, as suggested by the language (“actual . . . military power”) and spirit of the 1947 National Security Act.
- Its input must be based on rigorous analysis, not just opinion.
- It would be in a standby status when not convened, reducing the danger of kibitzing.
- Because it would be able to task the bureaucracy, with the consent of policymakers, it would not need and should not spawn some parallel bureaucracy.
- Analysis and advice must be timely—that is, early enough to permit orderly reconsideration of assumptions, objectives, options, and contingencies.

An important design issue is whether a group of this sort would be under the umbrella of executive privilege (i.e., not subject to congressional scrutiny). If it were, its work could be more easily ignored. If it were not, it would be an obvious target for congressional inquiry (and political cannon fodder). On balance, and given its connection to the NSC in our variant, the function should be covered by executive privilege.

Even within such constraints, it is unlikely that sitting presidents and their staffs would be enthused about this prescription. Some would feel it was unnecessary because of their own rational and judicious approach to strategic matters; others would find it inconvenient because it could interfere with their decisions and plans. Nonetheless, the idea should not be discarded on the basis of political resistance since the potential for strategic blunders persists.

### **Prescription 2: Standards of Analytic Objectivity and Rigor**

Because blunders can be caused by erroneous cognitive models, shielded from objective information and analysis, the question arises: Is objectivity determined? We suggest some standards to overcome or at least expose biased reasoning and its accomplice, shoddy analysis:

- The question at hand should be well formulated.
- Analysis should be well designed and performed accordingly.
- Assumptions should be explicit and justified.
- Options should be spelled out and weighed evenhandedly.
- Findings and recommendations should be warranted and explained, with caveats.
- Implications, including adverse ones, should be presented.
- Contingencies should be explored, and their risks explained.
- In the case of war plans, a detailed plan for postconflict operations should be included.
- Throughout, analysis should be objective and balanced.<sup>10</sup>

As a practical matter, conforming to such standards of objectivity and analytic rigor is a requirement to document analysis. In the U.S. government, basic documentation of important decisions is normal practice. Every administration uses one or another form of “presidential decision memorandum,” which is a place to start. What if these or associated documents were required to identify what-ifs, as well as assessments of enemies, difficulties, and possible duration? Such documentation, like all serious analysis, should be clear, transparent, and subject to critical review. In addition to fostering objectivity in strategic directions and decision, such documented analysis of contingencies and perils would have two other benefits. First, it would help ensure due diligence in preparing for untoward developments; second, it would create a basis for accountability.

Even prior to deciding on matters of war and peace, administrations have requirements and opportunities to document their assessments of the global landscape, interests and objectives, threats and obstacles, and national-security and military strategies. When these are to be made public, they tend to be written so as to put the best case forward, which flies in the face of the standards of objectivity and rigor just suggested. However, there would be a benefit in establishing a requirement to document the underlying analysis.

Neither standards nor requirements to document stand much chance if decision-makers and the institutions beholden to them have made up their minds, based on cognitive models that may be at odds with reality. Confident and decisive leaders with blinding visions, strong instincts, and an eye on history will want loyalty, support, and implementation plans, not analysis that might find them wrong. The very subjectivity

that can lead decisionmakers to favor information that conforms to their beliefs will abort attempts to use information fully, carefully, and impartially.

This observation does not diminish the importance of standards; rather, it underscores the need for the will to use them. It thus reinforces our first prescription for some sort of independent advisory and analytic mechanism, which would be responsible, by mandate, for applying and upholding standards of objectivity and rigor in its review of how decisionmakers and their subordinate institutions are approaching matters of war and peace. It follows that whatever executive or legislative measures are taken to create a capability for and requirement to use independent advice and analysis should incorporate standards along these lines.

Would standards of analytic objectivity and rigor have prevented or at least mitigated blunders of the past? This is obviously a fanciful question. Some of the great blunderers—Hitler, to take the extreme example—had primal urges that left no place for objectivity (or, for that matter, objective reality). Some—the military leaders of Imperial Germany and Japan—thought that rigor was important in proving their case and in scripting implementation. Moreover, Napoleonic France, the Third Reich, Argentine dictators, and the Soviet Politburo could hardly be more different from twenty-first-century American democracy. At the same time, Napoleon was known for his rationality and meticulousness, especially in campaigns that preceded the invasion of Russia.<sup>11</sup> Even the Soviet decision not to invade Poland was based on rigorous reasoning, which flew in the face of received doctrine and was clearly painful to Yuri Andropov and company.

Still, it is difficult to assess whether standards would have prevented blunders in most of history's cases. Yet it may be illuminating—as a thought experiment—to consider whether the underlying logic of standards would have prevented or at least mitigated two notable U.S. strategic mistakes involving the United States: Vietnam and Iraq.

The honest answer is: maybe. In both those cases, sweeping (blinding?) geostrategic theories, seasoned with ideological bias, were at work: the need to combat communist expansionism worldwide in the first case, and the opportunity to transform the Middle East in the second. In both, these ideas gathered consensus and momentum so that by the time of the Gulf of Tonkin episode and the assertion that Iraq had WMDs, respectively, doubts and doubters were overwhelmed by the claims of presidents, the machinery of government, and even the voice of the media.

It may well have helped prevent the large mistakes that followed if, in these contexts and in some fashion, the U.S. government had applied standards of objectivity and rigor. If coming from an independent source, disinterested analysis might have helped:

- Flaws in grand theories, in assumptions, and in information supporting them could have been revealed. For instance, a case could have been made that Ho Chi

Minh was first and foremost a champion of national independence and unification, and a Marxist secondarily (because only Moscow was willing to support him).

- Explicit, rigorous, and documented analysis of enemy capabilities, operational risks, and alternative paths could have exposed what could, probably would, and of course did go wrong. The prospect of a major Sunni insurgency and sectarian war following the conquest of Iraq would have been hard to dismiss if there had been strong analytic standards.

In the end, such safeguards would more likely work if leaders and institutions saw potential merit in them. This requires a level of self-awareness and rationality that is not too much to ask of government—at least not of representative government. Tuchman’s diagnosis of incorrigibility—of innate wooded-headedness—may be too pessimistic.

### **Prescription 3: Technology-Assisted Analysis**

An entirely different class of prescription concerns the use of information technology to aid in the absorption of information, strengthening of knowledge, and consideration of options, risks, and contingencies. Specifically, it will take technology to explore the complexities of reality and possible futures that drive decisionmakers into the safe harbor of their cognitive models. Computer programs cannot and should not replace human cognition as the final, accountable arbiter of strategic choice. However, they sort, order, and present complexities in ways that could reduce model errors and thus decisions based on those models. They can help decisionmakers use information better.

As Clive Thompson points out in a recent book, human cognition has long been aided and extended by tools: written language, the printing press, telecommunications, the word processor, computers large and small, the Internet, and handheld information devices.<sup>12</sup> Progress in this regard has been accelerating in recent decades and years, as Chapter Two explains. Yet those who have spent much time in the White House Situation Room will attest that the principal cognitive tools available to and used by decisionmakers, even on the gravest matters of peace and war, are pencils and paper.

Thompson explicitly observes what many have long understood: People teaming with computers—each doing what he or she or it does best—are more capable than people without computers or computers without people. His illustration is that competent chess players teamed with computers are now defeating *both* grand masters (without computers) and computers (without chess players).<sup>13</sup> That some masters of this venerable game have been convinced to team with computers suggests that it may be possible to overcome the cultural and psychological resistance that government decisionmakers would mount.

Two strands of work over some years now suggest the power of capable analysts using capable programs (and enhanced processing capacity) in supporting policymaking, decisionmaking, and planning.<sup>14</sup> One is often known as *exploratory modeling*, an

offshoot of computer-based simulations of military operations (e.g., for force planning). The other is *adaptive planning* (and policymaking) associated with especially complex problems (e.g., climate change), for which information is incomplete and predication is difficult. In both cases, decisionmakers can be shown in graphics the possible benefits, costs, and other results of different options, contingencies, and variables that determine outcomes even when their values cannot be known (which is why the future cannot be predicted). As with Thompson's chess-playing people and computers, such analysis depends on teamwork. Indeed, the sheer complexity of the analytic challenges and essential human accountability for making decisions suggest that analysis in support of strategic decisionmaking can only be done adequately with teaming.

Among the more serious factors involved in blunders, based on this study's cases, are overconfidence, underestimation of the adversary and the difficulties and duration of conflict, misplaced faith in scripting and the ability to control events, and failure to think through and prepare for what could go wrong. As explained in Chapter One, of the many paths a conflict could follow, the scripted one may be among the least probable insofar as an enemy with options is not likely to choose one that leads to its defeat. In only one case of a decision leading to war—the Spanish-American case—did the enemy (of the United States) play its scripted role, and that was because it lacked the capabilities to do otherwise. If it is likely that the main plan will not prevail because the enemy will try to foil it, it stands to reason that other paths, including their probabilities and consequences, must be analyzed before a decision is made. This would either lead to better preparations and hedging or to a decision that so many things could go wrong that the better part of valor is not to go to war at all.

Because there are so many branches, branches from those branches, and so on, even a team of the best analysts working “manually” could not explore them adequately if time is a factor, as it often is in crises and periods prior to war-and-peace decisions. By the same token, no responsible leader is going to count on a computer program to make a choice between war and peace. Some form of analyst-technology teaming is needed—a variant of the sort that some think tanks have been doing in other veins of policymaking and military planning.

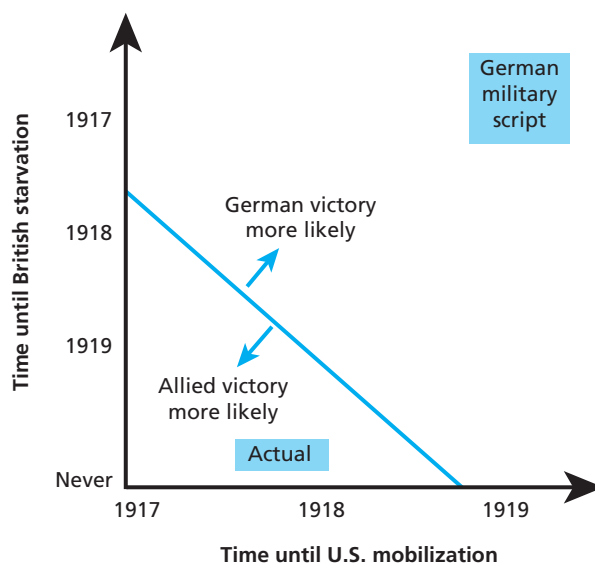
To illustrate, take the case of Germany's decision to resume submarine attacks on U.S. and other neutral shipping headed for Europe. While the General Staff had detailed analysis to back up its position—the civilian who opposed had no such analysis—it basically boiled down to whether Great Britain could be starved into suing for peace before American forces arrived. Erich Ludendorff and others predicted that Britain would be knocked out before the end of 1917, whereas American troops would not enter the trenches until 1919—making the U-boat decision a “slam dunk.” As we know, by the time American troops began arriving in late 1917, transatlantic neutral tonnage was actually increasing; far from being stripped bare, British shelves were being restocked. The German analysis could hardly have been more wrong—not only by underestimating the speed of U.S. mobilization and the toughness of ordinary Brits

but also by overlooking the possibility that the Americans would employ escorted convoys to defeat the U-boat threat. But even if the Germans had not been so dramatically wrong, they might at least have seen that their script was improbable and, therefore, that resuming U-boat attacks was a bad idea. Consider the graph in Figure 16.1.

German victory depended on not one but three specific assumptions: that the United States would deliver forces to Europe slowly, that the U-boats would curtail supplies to Europe, and that the British would capitulate quickly. These assumptions defied the huge uncertainties that surrounded the choice at hand, as well as the range of plausible results. If any of them were wrong, Germany was irrevocably committed to a losing the war with Britain, France, and the United States. Note the gulf separating the German analysis and script (as presented to the kaiser) and what happened.

The German military could have known at the time that what actually happened was more likely than their script. They had ample information available to have doubted their own analysis. The historical record suggests that they misled the kaiser after first misleading themselves, which they seemed to have done out of determination to come up with a path to victory. Their assurance that their plan would work seems to have been more of a wish. They could have recognized that the Americans could mobilize before the British were starved into submission *and* that convoying would defeat the U-boats. It might have occurred to them that a U.S. decision to enter the war would give the British the resolve to hold on until American troops arrived. In that case, Germany might have lost even if convoying had neutralized the U-boat threat. To have admitted such possibilities would have been to accept that Germany's real choice, by 1917, was between negotiated peace and defeat, rather than between victory and

**Figure 16.1**  
**German Military Script**



negotiated peace. At the same time, how would (the malleable) Kaiser Wilhelm II and (the weary) Chancellor Theobald Bethmann-Hollweg have responded if they had been *shown* that bad outcomes were more plausible than good ones when enemy reactions were taken into account?

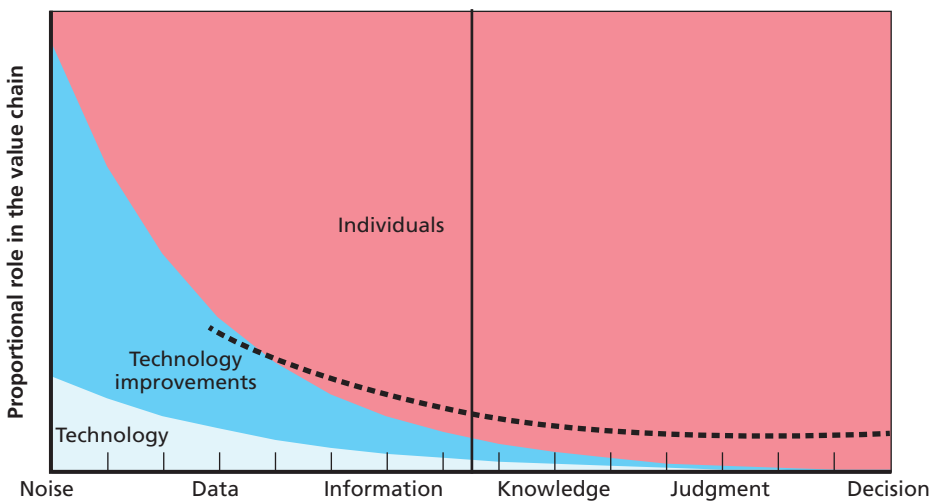
Of course, it does not take a computer to illuminate the possibilities and trade-offs evident in this example. (It could have been sketched with a pen and paper in 1917!) But now that computational tools are readily available to explore many futures, many possible consequence of choice, and many effects of altering assumptions, they ought to be used.

Because the power of computer modeling in capable hands vastly exceeds that of unaided human “what-if” analysis, it is more likely to be able to reveal risks, contingencies, and untoward consequences of the sort that could reveal flawed models of reality for what they are. The institutional innovations described earlier—to provide alternative views, critiques, and challenges—would lend themselves to such analytic methods. For example, an inside strategic advisory board would be able to make use of the advanced analytic capabilities of an outside institution.

Recall Chapter Two’s explication of the disproportionate impact of information and communications technology on the supply of information compared with the use of information. The thought here is to extend the benefits of technology to the right—along the upper end of the information value chain—in a modest but potentially very beneficial way (see Figure 16.2).

The barriers to this are in small part technical and in large part psychological and cultural. Recent work in computer-aided policy analysis and the related field of adap-

**Figure 16.2**  
**Potential Technological Contributions to the Use of Information**





tive planning indicates that decisionmakers can become comfortable and competent with such work and its products.<sup>15</sup> However, it takes skill in translating information into knowledge at the frontier between the supply and the use of information.

## Assessing Remedies

To conclude this consideration of possible remedies for bad strategic decisionmaking, it is worth assessing their potential value in countering the eight major common causes. Table 16.1 indicates with an *X* where a remedy might make a difference.

As this assessment suggests, there are synergies among the remedies. An independent advisory and analytic body is well suited to issue and monitor compliance with standards. Its use of advanced analytic methods can increase its credibility and serve as an exemplar for institutions involved in strategic decisionmaking. Critiques of prevailing thinking coming from a mandated independent source with exacting standards and advanced methods would be hard for a leader to dismiss. Biased models of reality and selective use of information—the assassins of sound decisionmaking—could be caught in the act.

**Table 16.1**  
**Remedies for Common Factors in Blunders**

	Independent Strategic Advisory Body	Standards of Analytic Quality and Objectivity	Technology-Assisted Analysis
Information is ignored, filtered, misconstrued, or manipulated	X		
Excessive reliance is placed on intuition and experience	X	X	
Arrogance, egotism, or hubris causes unwarranted confidence	X	X	
Rigid but wrong strategic concept or vision prevails	X	X	
Contingencies are not considered	X		X
Enemy will or capabilities are underestimated	X	X	
Operational difficulty or duration is underestimated	X	X	X
Dissent and debate are stifled	x	X	



## The Sino-U.S. Case

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*You think we are a bully. We think we are a victim.*

—Anonymous Chinese military expert, quoted in David Ignatius, “What Does China Want?”

Our interest in getting to the bottom of why strategic blunders occur comes mainly from concern that China, the United States, or both could be susceptible to flawed decisionmaking. This chapter examines how the main causes of blunders that the historical cases have illuminated, as well as the analysis that led us to them, could apply to the world’s two strongest powers, especially as they face each other. We appreciate, and will explain, the differences between the Chinese and American decisions that could bear on war and peace and the cases considered thus far. However, both the framework for understanding the role of information in strategic decisionmaking and the lessons regarding the causes of bad decisionmaking can have value. We look at how these might apply to the United States and China, each on its own, as well as how the two decisionmaking systems might interact, which takes us into uncharted analytic waters.

Whether and how the United States and China can settle their differences without war is among the most important questions of the twenty-first century. It is unrealistic to think that this will happen by achieving complete harmony between American and Chinese interests. While prospects are good for cooperation on various global issues—trade, finance, development, nuclear proliferation, and terrorism—Sino-U.S. rivalry will persist if not intensify in East Asia: For it is there that China’s growing power and claims to territory contested by U.S. allies and partners could be most in tension with America’s determination to maintain stability and influence.

Although the United States is not a party to any of the region’s territorial disputes, it has bilateral defense obligations to states that do, notably Japan and the Philippines. The United States also insists that disputes be resolved peacefully. Unlike China, which would prefer to settle these issues bilaterally in order to maximize its leverage, the United States favors multilateral dispute-resolution norms and means. In addition to its treaty obligations and insistence on peaceful settlement, the United States places

enormous importance on its access to and freedoms in international waters.<sup>1</sup> More broadly, most of the region's states want the United States to ensure that the growth of Chinese military power does not cause disequilibrium (though they may also be concerned that Sino-U.S. military rivalry could be destabilizing). All in all, U.S. interests and regional expectations indicate the need to maintain a major security role and presence, including military forces and defense ties with China's neighbors. While the United States seeks a cooperative partnership with China on a number of issues, many in China have come to interpret the military dimensions of U.S. strategy akin to Cold War thinking and indicative of a strategy of containment.

Tension between China's growing power and America's continued presence may at times be punctuated by crises, if not directly between China and the United States, then between China and U.S. treaty allies or other states. Whether crises boil over into war matters vitally to both states, the region, and the world, for a Sino-U.S. war could involve large clashes of conventional forces, attacks on computer networks and satellites, homeland damage (especially for China), devastating economic warfare, and the risk of nuclear escalation.

Because war could be catastrophic, both powers are strongly inhibited from starting one. Objectively, neither side stands to gain as much as it could lose from war, even if does not lose militarily. Thus, war between China and the United States would most likely begin by a misjudgment or miscalculation by one or both—by a misjudgment or miscalculation so consequential that it would qualify as a blunder (as we have defined it). Even as the potential consequences of Sino-U.S. conflict get worse, the possibility of it may be increasing. The reason for this, as we will see, is the rising “strategic distrust” between the two states,<sup>2</sup> even as their interdependence and their cooperation in some spheres are expanding.<sup>3</sup> In sum, the potential for crises in the Western Pacific and the danger of bad decisions during crises are both growing.

Going in, one sees two significant differences between the Sino-U.S. case and the eight blunders we have examined. First, whereas our historical blunders were mainly committed by one side, there is an added if not greater risk in this case of combined and compounding misjudgments. It is true that Russian behavior was harmful to French interests before Napoleon's invasion, that the United States was threatening Japan's lifelines in the run-up to Pearl Harbor, that Britain had stonewalled Argentina in negotiations about the Falklands, and that Saddam Hussein had shown himself to be a scoundrel who used chemical weapons on Iraq's own citizens. But the choice of war was made in Paris, Tokyo, Buenos Aires, and Washington, respectively. In contrast, Sino-U.S. war could result from decisions in both capitals.

In order to deal with this feature, we first analyze why and how decisionmakers in each state could make a strategic misjudgment, and whether they did, because of a flawed cognitive model and failure to use information to correct it. Then, because of the dynamic of interdependent decisionmaking—a decision by one affects a decision by the other and so on—we look at the two states and their respective cognitive

models side by side. Because a war between China and the United States could result from misjudgments of the two sides, analyzing how to prevent it is more complicated than analyzing the risk of premeditated blunder by one side alone.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the frameworks and lessons this study has produced provide a way to do so.

The danger of Sino-U.S. war by misjudgment is related to but different from that of Sino-U.S. war *by accident*. The close proximity of Chinese and U.S. forces, as well as forces of U.S. allies, creates the potential for accidents (e.g., incidents at sea), mistaken sensor readings, unauthorized initiatives by military commanders, and even poor military training or discipline.<sup>5</sup> Avoiding such occurrences is an important topic for Chinese and American representatives to pursue. However, the main concern here is with deliberate strategic decisionmaking by leaders in Beijing or Washington, or both. Of course, the potential for accidental hostilities makes it all the more important to ensure sound decisionmaking in capitals, for that will determine whether accidents involving Chinese and U.S. or allied forces escalate or are contained and defused.

The second and major difference is that decisions and actions of third parties—North Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines and others—could increase the potential for strategic errors, more so than in the historical cases examined earlier. In this respect, a Sino-U.S. conflict could be less like Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union or the Soviets' invasion of Afghanistan than like the chain of decisions whereby an Austro-Serbian crisis led to a Russo-German crisis and then to World War I. The very purpose and legitimacy of U.S. security ties with China's neighbors are a source of sharp disagreement: China sees America's East Asian alliances as throwback to Cold War thinking and, more alarmingly, as indicative of America's new intent to align the region against China; the United States sees them as important states that look to it for security in the face of Chinese muscle flexing.

This chapter employs the analytic constructs used thus far: the three-part decisionmaking system (individuals, institutions, information); models of strategic reality, sound or flawed; and the value chain of information—its supply and use—which may contribute to correcting models that can cause blunders. In place of historical narratives, the chapter examines four scenarios—future crises—in which misjudgments by China or the United States, or both, possibly resulting from third-party actions, could lead to war. We will then see whether risks of strategic mistakes in the Sino-American case can be mitigated by the remedies prescribed in the preceding chapter, as well as what other steps are needed.

## Chinese and American Models of Strategic Reality

Again, comparing decisionmakers' subjective models with objective reality can shed light on whether and why strategic blunders happen: The greater the discrepancy between model and reality, the greater the danger of misjudgment. Recall, for instance,

that the Argentine junta's model was shockingly wrong, whereas Henry Kissinger's in the 1973 Yom Kippur War crisis was uncannily right. Because our twelve cases indicate that the comparison of models with reality is a good explanation for blunders committed and avoided, it may also serve as a good predictor of blunders. By comparing the cognitive models of both Chinese and U.S. decisionmakers with reality, we can gauge the risk of blunders on either side or both sides that could lead to conflict.

The subjective models postulated in this chapter are how we the authors think that the Chinese and Americans see reality. We are not suggesting that there is one agreed-upon U.S. or Chinese model of reality; but we try to present U.S. and Chinese models of reality that largely map onto more mainstream U.S. and Chinese thinking. We are helped in this endeavor by many sources as well as a new book about how China and the United States view their own interests, each other's intentions, and the issues that concern them.<sup>6</sup> *Debating China*, edited by Nina Hachigian, documents ten conversations—really debates—between Chinese and American policy analysts. From this and other work, we can infer the models that inform strategic decisionmaking in Beijing and Washington, which form the backdrop for choices bearing on war and peace. Likewise, the descriptions of Chinese and American objective reality are our best approximations—purged, we think, of any biases we might have about the rights and wrongs of Chinese and American policies.

We cannot exclude that the Chinese, or the Americans, would find themselves in circumstances in which they might correctly judge that the risks and costs of inaction exceed those of conflict. (In this sense, we would not regard *any* decision to go to war as a bad one.) However, such circumstances would not meet the criteria of a mistaken choice of war. Moreover, we believe in general that the consequences of Sino-U.S. conflict could be so damaging to both states—the one starting the conflict no less than the other—that it is hard to see which of the known problems between China and the United States (described below) would be best solved by war.

### **China's Strategic-Decision Model**

Again, in making decisions that might result in war with the United States, the Chinese will surely be inhibited by the prospect of a destructive war that quite possibly ends in defeat and immense damage to China's economy, international standing, and domestic order. This being so, we should carefully look for features of Chinese (and later American) models of reality that could weaken these inhibitions, making expected gains from war seem greater relative to risks and costs than an objective view of reality would indicate.

The Chinese model of strategic reality presented here is a product of history, geography, politics, and psychology:<sup>7</sup>

- The Chinese live with a mixed sense of history: On one hand, they are an ancient, proud civilization with more than five thousand years of history. On the other,

in recent years, they have suffered from colonization, molestation, invasion, and humiliation, which they mean to put behind them. While most Chinese accept Deng Xiaoping's admonition that China needs international peace and quiet in order to grow rich and strong, this does not mean that China should live with past transgressions now that it is richer and stronger. In essence, it is China's time now to regain what it has lost, but the United States stands in its way. While the Chinese seek an East Asian order that recognizes China's regional leadership, the United States is perceived as wanting to preserve its "superiority in military power[,] . . . dominant position in regional security[,] . . . [and] self-proclaimed leadership."<sup>8</sup> Because the Chinese have granted that the United States has interests in East Asia, they interpret American misgivings about China's rise as determination to remain the region's big dog.

- Specifically, there is a sense that China's newfound power affords it the chance to restore its rightful sovereign territory, of which past Chinese weakness and foreign encroachment deprived it. Taken together, China's territorial claims suggest a determination to make the country complete, having been reduced by conquest when it was weak. Although China has been restrained about using force to settle disputes, it will do so if others, including U.S. allies (Japan and the Philippines), attempt to alter the status quo.<sup>9</sup> The United States is perceived as allowing its treaty obligations, willfully or naively, to encourage these third parties to pursue their claims at Chinese expense in the expectation that the United States will stand up to China.<sup>10</sup>
- Nationalism is in the air in China nowadays, not unlike it was in Germany, Japan, and America as they modernized, grew powerful, and looked outward at the end of the nineteenth century. This nationalism is concentrated in the swelling middle class, which, while not strong enough to impel Chinese leaders into rash decisions, is expecting respect for and firmness from China. Popular nationalism is especially pronounced on matters of sovereignty—national completeness—and China's decisionmakers and military commanders themselves may share it.
- Accompanying this nationalist reflex to claim what is fairly theirs, there is a concern among the Chinese that the United States and U.S.-backed neighbors may hinder and perhaps want to deny China the great-power status the Chinese people deserve and have earned.<sup>11</sup> Regardless of their assurances, the Americans are and may continue, as the Chinese worry, to encircle China with old and new U.S. allies and by keeping superior military power in its vicinity. After all, it is common for important Americans to stress the need for *countering* China's growing power—a fine semantic distinction from *containing* China's growing power. The Chinese harbor the thought that the United States may hold a black-and-white vision of the world and view China as America's next strategic and ideological adversary.<sup>12</sup>

- U.S. complaints about China's growing military power are dismissed as hypocritical: "If China's motives for military modernization are to be questioned, then what explains America's motivation to seek absolute military superiority?"<sup>13</sup> The Chinese find U.S. off-shore strike power especially offensive, in more senses than one. They consider their own antiaccess and area-denial (A2AD) capabilities—ballistic missiles, submarines, and advanced Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR)—as both defensive and imperative. Expectations that U.S. forces would attack China in the event of war stir Chinese fears and reinforce China's commitment to develop capabilities it sees as required to counter U.S. military intervention.<sup>14</sup>
- U.S. attempts to build military-to-military relations are viewed by the Chinese as serving "the U.S. purpose of penetrating deeply into the Chinese armed forces for ulterior motives."<sup>15</sup> More generally, the Chinese have taken note of an American predilection to influence the political development of other states "in the Middle East, Central Asia, and other parts of the world"—sometimes with disruptive effects—and so must "become even more vigilant against [U.S.] interference."<sup>16</sup>
- Notwithstanding U.S. capabilities, alliances, and perceived designs to encircle and contain China, on most specific regional disputes where the United States might oppose China, outcomes matter less to the United States than to China. The South China and East China Seas are of vital interest to China, and the territorial disputes in these waters are questions of sovereignty—not so for the United States. Korea's stability affects China more than it does the United States. The fate of Taiwan matters less to the United States than to China. Such an imbalance in stakes could, in Chinese eyes, provide a measure of crisis dominance, even without military superiority.<sup>17</sup> The Chinese remind the United States of this asymmetry of stakes every time they define these matters as core interests.
- This perception of asymmetric Chinese and U.S. interests in Western Pacific disputes means that the Chinese may doubt American *will*, whether to confront or wage war with China, which could nullify the U.S. advantage in military forces and strategic depth. In the event that a Sino-American crisis leads to conflict, the Chinese would like to think it would be brief and confined, as a result not only of Chinese military plans but also of weaker American resolve.
- Chinese hopes of fighting a quick, intense, confined, and brief war—should one occur—have been encouraged by steady improvements in A2AD capabilities. As the Chinese increase the reach and fidelity of their sensors, the range and accuracy of their weapons, and the skills of their military personnel, they may believe that U.S. forces stationed or sent near China are already or soon will be vulnerable.
- Preparations for and expectations of a short and successful war are especially intense in the PLA, upon whose judgments Chinese political leaders rely heavily—maybe too much. Along with this, the Chinese may also have an unrealistic



view of their ability to script and control the course of conflict with the United States, a view reinforced by traditionally rigid and centralized military command and control.

- Because U.S. security relationships, as well as U.S. efforts to form the economic Trans-Pacific Partnership, are viewed as building blocks of regional encirclement, they may not restrain and could instead increase Chinese resolve to assert China's rights, exert its influence, and build its power. Indeed, the United States is suspected of not only wanting to preserve a regional security architecture that it dominates but also aligning it against China.
- For historical reasons, the Chinese are less friendly toward Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam than toward the United States. So U.S. security relations with these states augment Chinese paranoia and perception of being encircled. Moreover, U.S. defense commitments and support are seen as encouraging the intransigence and belligerence of China's neighbors and thus making conflict more likely despite China's reasonableness.
- Overall, the Chinese see themselves as increasingly needing and able to confront U.S. military power near China, where it obstructs Chinese rights, emboldens Chinese adversaries, and menaces the Chinese homeland.

To the extent that this is a fair representation of the Chinese model of reality, it has some serious defects, objectively speaking. For starters, just because the Chinese feel that their sovereign claims are just and legitimate does not mean that others—Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam among them—are less sure of the correctness of their positions. China's logic that its new strength offers an opportunity to reestablish its interests is hardly persuasive to those who fear precisely that, as evidenced by those neighbors' growing tilt toward the United States and their military—particularly naval—improvements. Nor does it give adequate weight to the essential international norm that disputes must be settled peacefully. China's model does not take these perspectives into account.

In addition, the Chinese suspicion that the United States is trying to prevent China's rise is a caricature. By and large, American leaders are searching for a formula whereby the established power and the rising power can pursue cooperation and avoid the historical pitfalls of great-power rivalry—and war—consistent with U.S. interests and obligations, of course. According to *Debating China*, “There is no mainstream support in the United States today for a policy of containing China”; indeed, it “has a stake in China's successful development and faces no impairment of its interest when China has good relations with its neighbors.”<sup>18</sup> The United States has no delusions about its ability to restrict China's importance or power: The United States has acknowledged that China is emerging as the strongest country in East Asia and a global power.

The Chinese are mistaken, as well, that the United States “needs an enemy” and that “when one enemy disappears, it will find another one.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, the United States

has gone through prolonged periods of its history without a prime enemy (even, one might argue, at times when such enemies lurked). Contrary to the Chinese model, the United States mainly wants regional stability, compliance with international law, freedom of the seas, and peaceful settlement of disputes. It opposes China when these interests are endangered by Chinese action. Other than that, this Chinese worry that Americans may want to hold China back is untethered from reality—perhaps the deepest flaw in the Chinese strategic model.

Chinese suspicion of U.S. motives in expanded military-to-military contacts is well off the mark. The main reasons why the U.S. armed services have tried to engage their Chinese counterparts are, first, concern that lack of familiarity can perpetuate strategic distrust and, second, a belief that accidents and miscalculations are less likely to occur if each military understands the other and how it operates. In other words, while military-to-military contacts could allow the United States to have better intelligence on China (what China fears), the shared intelligence and understanding may be beneficial for U.S.-China relations. How ironic that a strand of U.S. policy intended to reduce the risk of blunder is itself the object of Chinese suspicion.

For all the distrust the Chinese have toward the United States, they might at the same time underestimate its will to go to war in this region. After all, the United States did fight three large wars there since 1941. Apart from its treaty obligations, the United States, as the world's preeminent sea power, would fight to preserve its maritime rights. Likewise, it would be a mistake for the Chinese to interpret U.S. decisions to cut defense spending, U.S. public misgivings about intervening abroad (e.g., in Syria), or America's weak response to Russian actions in Ukraine as signifying that the United States would lack nerve in a confrontation with China over U.S. interests or allies.

In addition, should war occur, it may not be the brief one the Chinese want. If China's best hope of avoiding defeat is to avoid prolonged fighting, it follows that the United States will, assuming it has the will, keep fighting until it wins or at least gets the upper hand. That Chinese A2AD capabilities are improving is beyond dispute. However, the "kill chain" on which Chinese A2AD depends is complex, fragile, and now targeted by U.S. forces.<sup>20</sup> Chinese confidence in controlling a Sino-American conflict is unrealistic: There are too many paths it could take—some perhaps more likely than the one on which Chinese planners are counting. Moreover, while the U.S. military has engaged in a number of recent conflicts, China has not fought a war since 1979, where major weaknesses in China's military capabilities were exposed.

The Chinese cognitive model seems to be infused with emotion. The Chinese themselves admit to "the pride and confidence held by China's political elites based on their assessment of China's newly gained power."<sup>21</sup> Although "pride and confidence" are understandable—and largely irremediable—given China's history, these particular feelings obviously can cause mistakes during crises.

In sum, the Chinese may distrust U.S. intentions, underestimate U.S. will and the difficulties and duration of conflict, and overestimate the probability that con-

flict with the United States can be controlled. Recall that such mistakes were among the most common major causes of blunders in the cases we studied. All told, there is enough distance between objective reality and what we surmise to be China's subjective model to suggest some risk of strategic misjudgment.

### **America's Strategic-Decision Model**

As with China, war could do the United States great harm, directly and as a consequence of the shock to the global order and global economy on which it depends. Moreover, mainstream American decisionmakers do not buy simplistic arguments heard in some U.S. circles that China is out to establish hegemony in East Asia by threat and conquest and then to replace the United States as world leader. Increasingly, Washington regards Beijing as an essential, if prickly, partner on a host of global issues, which also weighs in favor of avoiding conflict in the region.

That said, the mainstream views of U.S. policymakers and opinion shapers may cluster around a cognitive model concerning China that is in certain ways askew from reality and could increase risks of misjudgment and conflict:

- Broadly speaking, Americans have an unfavorable and apprehensive view of China. They identify it with communist ideology (perhaps more than the Chinese themselves do). Images of government brutality in Tiananmen Square from 1989 remain vivid, and disapproval of the continuing oppression of dissidents and denial of religious rights is widespread in the United States: "We have an innate distrust of authoritarian, one-party systems."<sup>22</sup> Chinese cyber espionage has exacerbated the American tendency to view China as an enemy.<sup>23</sup>
- U.S. distrust of China is aggravated by the latter's lack of transparency with regard to its military forces. The difficulty the U.S. military has had in trying to engage with the PLA is construed to signify that China is trying to hide its capabilities and intentions. More than that, it suggests that the PLA, at least, regards the United States as China's enemy.
- China's heavy-handedness in pressing its territorial claims is seen to strongly correlate with its growing military might; hence, the stronger China gets, the more aggressive it will be. This leads to the U.S. belief that failure to oppose Chinese assertiveness will signal weakness and invite bolder Chinese actions, if not aggression. Every dispute in the Western Pacific tends to be seen by Americans in geo-strategic terms.
- Chinese strategy is widely regarded in the United States as intended to diminish U.S. power and influence in the Western Pacific, and to replace the United States as the arbiter of regional security and politics. In this respect, while Americans disclaim the idea that rivalry between established and rising power is preordained, they believe that the Chinese are less enlightened. If U.S. military presence is meant to maintain stability and yet China opposes it, Americans deduce

that China must want to revise the East Asian order—to gain influence over Japan, domination of Korea and Southeast Asia, and control of the South and East China Seas.

- While denying any intent to surround China, Americans find it advantageous to strengthen relationships with an arc of countries, stretching from South Korea and Japan in the north to Indonesia and Vietnam in the south, to India in the west. The Americans' model tends to discount that what they view as reasonable and responsible to buck up China's nervous neighbors is interpreted by China as encirclement.
- Likewise, the United States interprets the buildup in Chinese military A2AD capabilities not as defensive but as offensive—intended to drive the United States out of the Western Pacific, deny it access to international commons, weaken its standing in the region, and create an umbrella under which China can threaten its neighbors.
- To Americans, maintaining military superiority—specifically, the ability to project force to and intervene in East Asia—is only prudent. Less clear is whether the U.S. model accounts for the fact that China regards the U.S. commitment to military superiority as meant to preserve American regional hegemony.

In what respects does this U.S. model diverge from objective reality? First off, China's primary goals remain the development, stability, and cohesion of the country, not expansion. The U.S. belief that the Chinese are willing to destabilize East Asia discounts their continued preference for a peaceful environment conducive to trade, investment, and development. Perhaps the most serious flaw in the American model is the tendency to extrapolate from Chinese insistence on fulfilling its rightful territorial interests, mainly concerned with islands off its coast, to expansionism. Again, because the Chinese consider claimed territories to be part of China—taken at times of weakness—they do not regard their recovery as international aggression, as the American model tends to do. Although Chinese claims to Taiwan and much of the East and South China Seas are indeed consequential for regional stability and U.S. interests, they do not imply designs on China's neighbors, let alone on the region as a whole. While the Chinese have admitted an ambition to be the region's leading state, neither their words nor their deeds suggest intentions to achieve this by conquest.

China is not alone in seeking to create advantageous facts in maritime boundary disputes: The United States tends to overlook that its own allies and friends also seek to advance their claims unilaterally, whether Japan in the East China Sea or the Philippines in the South China Sea. The U.S. model does not seem to place much weight on the danger that U.S. allies will be emboldened by U.S. support to advance their claims in the face of Chinese opposition. More generally, Americans steeped in the Monroe Doctrine should appreciate that the U.S. military presence and threat of intervention in "China's region" are bound to not sit well with the Chinese.

Americans may also forget that Chinese A2AD capabilities were at least originally motivated by concern that U.S. strike forces could attack China and render it defenseless in the event of conflict—something Chinese forces cannot do to the United States. Given this, the Chinese are not being duplicitous when they say that “development of [A2AD] weapons is essential for national defense.”<sup>24</sup> Likewise, for Americans to dismiss Chinese concerns about containment and encirclement ignores how the Chinese interpret American steps to strengthen ties with China’s neighbors *on all sides*.

Just as the Chinese are too confident of a short-war script based on their A2AD capabilities, Americans might be too confident of their plans to destroy those capabilities. Both may be so preoccupied with refining their plans that they give short shrift to all that can go wrong in a war involving the world’s two strongest powers, especially if neither thinks it can afford defeat. Faith of U.S. decisionmakers in their ability to control a conflict with China could lead to excessive risk taking.

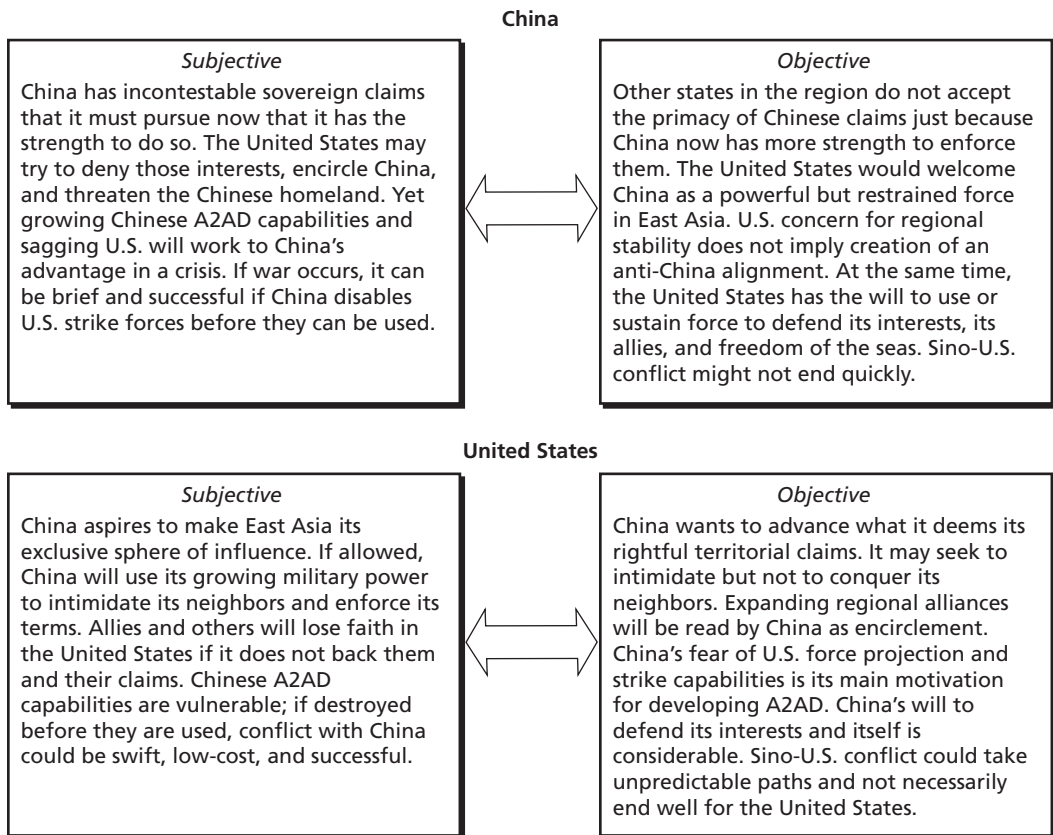
In sum, while Chinese and U.S. models each have some basis in reality, they are both skewed toward distrust of the other side’s motives: the Chinese seeing Americans as intent on blocking China’s ascendance, and Americans seeing the Chinese as intent on seizing vitally important international waters and dominating East Asia. Could this lead to bad decisions and war?

Recall the comparison of prevailing cognitive models to objective reality in each of the eight historical cases of blunders, as summarized in Table 15.2 in Chapter Fifteen. Because the models tend to be the basis for strategic decisions, they help explain why and how bad ones occur. Extending this reasoning, a similar assessment of Chinese and U.S. cognitive models (as we infer them) should have value in gauging the potential for flawed decisionmaking by one country, the other, or both. Also recall that the extent to which a model deviates from objective reality may explain the magnitude of misjudgment, miscalculation, and blunder—think of Napoleon’s stupendous error compared with Deng’s limited one. Likewise, the distance separating reality from the Chinese and U.S. cognitive models could signify how great the potential for blundering is.

With this in mind, Figure 17.1 summarizes as subjective or objective the respective strategic models of China and the United States in comparison to reality.

Again, the case of China and the United States involves how the two cognitive models may interact, more so than in this study’s historical cases. So we must analyze the potential for not only a blunder by either state but also a blunder that results from the interaction of the two models, which adds further complexity to our analysis. To inform this analysis, four problems in East Asia that could increase the risk of Sino-U.S. conflict are explored.

**Figure 17.1**  
**Subjective and Objective Models of Reality**



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## Models and Flash Points

Choices between war and peace are not taken in the abstract, obviously. Therefore, in place of historical narratives, we will look at specific flash points that could require war-and-peace decisions by China and the United States. Given the potential that another state might contribute to Chinese or U.S. miscalculations or instigate conflict, we have chosen four cases in which third-party behavior could be instrumental: collapse of the North Korean state, trouble in the South China Sea, trouble in the East China Sea, and tensions over Taiwan.

### Korea<sup>25</sup>

Korea is one of the most dangerous security challenges facing *both* the United States and China, and is a potential U.S.-Chinese flash point. This is less because North

Korea will invade South Korea, though an attempt cannot be excluded, than because of the possibility of a violent end of the increasingly ineffective, desperate, and reckless nuclear-armed northern state. Once a country with an industrial base and agricultural surplus, North Korea now has neither. Its economy is mainly based on the extraction of minerals; human power has largely replaced mechanization.<sup>26</sup> For all its muscularity, the state is unable to meet the needs of the population. Beneath a thin crust of privilege, it is incompetent and illegitimate. Its collapse might not be imminent but could be cataclysmic when and if it comes.

Unlike failing states that *implode*, North Korea could *explode*. Even if North Korean armed forces fragment, the regime might still order attacks against suspected internal enemies, South Korea, and Japan. Although it could not successfully invade the South, North Korea could launch missile and artillery attacks, possibly with chemical weapons. It might even detonate one or more nuclear weapons to show resolve and try to strike a deal for survival.<sup>27</sup>

Faced with a North Korean cataclysm, the main U.S. goals would be to prevent the use or spread of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons; prevent attacks on South Korea and Japan; limit human suffering; and set conditions for the creation of a unified, friendly, democratic, nonnuclear Korea. U.S. air-strike capabilities are unlikely to be enough to achieve these goals because of North Korean concealment, risks of contamination from WMD materials, and the need to bring order and livable conditions, so the United States might have to insert large-scale ground forces into North Korea as rapidly as possible. The movement of South Korean forces north of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) would not obviate the need for U.S. forces.<sup>28</sup> Depending on South Korean, North Korean, and Chinese capabilities and actions, one hundred thousand or more U.S. forces could be required.

Under conditions described here, Chinese leaders might see four military options:

- Seal the North Korean border to keep out refugees, armed rogue groups, and WMDs.
- Create a buffer zone of, say, fifty miles on the North Korean side of the border in which to bring order, disarm rogue groups, address humanitarian needs, and prevent South Korean and U.S. forces from getting near to China.
- Drive toward Pyongyang, seize critical WMDs and other military and economic assets, and prevent South Korean and U.S. occupation and unification of North Korea.
- Coordinate with the United States and South Korea on zones of responsibility—for example, with Chinese forces handling missions above and South Korean and U.S. forces below an agreed line, such as through Pyongyang.

China, South Korea, and the United States would all have strong incentives to avoid direct hostilities in what would already be a perilous situation in the North. Still,

there is a risk that dual interventions would lead to contact, confusion, tension, incidents, or hostilities, especially if all forces rush (toward Pyongyang) to control as much as they can of the North. Because the Chinese have been coy about their estimation of and planning for Korean contingencies, we do not know what choice they will make. However, it is plausible that they will plan and act on the assumption that the United States and South Korea will try to take control of North Korea. Unless they decide to concede control of most of South Korea, the Chinese may opt for a large-scale and deep military intervention.

In turn, indicators of Chinese preparations for such an intervention would push the United States toward sending significant force far enough into North Korea to back South Korean allies and prevent Chinese control. In sum, although neither the United States nor China would rationally risk war with the other in order to gain control of North Korea in the event of collapse, both might regard it as unacceptable for the other to do so. Each might form a *situational* model of reality that indicated risk of large-scale intervention by the other and, consequently, decide on the sort of large-scale intervention the other feared it would. Moreover, insofar as U.S. and Chinese decisionmakers were relying on *general* models of reality that are infused with distrust, as described earlier, the danger of misjudgment could be that much higher.

The obvious answer to this problem is for U.S. and Chinese planners to coordinate in advance for this contingency. The problem is that China is unwilling to hold such consultations for fear that they would harm relations with and create instability in North Korea, thus causing the very problem they are trying to avoid. This Chinese reluctance could set up a situation in which both parties are faced with the need to make rapid and uncoordinated decisions in the time of North Korean collapse.

### South China Sea

China would like to establish sovereignty over much of the South China Sea, mainly because of the valuable minerals, fossil fuels, and other resources these waters contain. It claims key islands and the right to control what happens on and under the sea within two hundred miles of these islands.<sup>29</sup> It has on occasion referred to these claims as “core interests,” which implies a willingness to use force to ensure them.<sup>30</sup> Here, as in the East China Sea, the Chinese have shown a willingness to threaten force to back up their claims and to prevent other states from backing up theirs. So far, they have succeeded mainly in stiffening the resolve of these states to resist Chinese pressure and in causing them to improve their naval forces.<sup>31</sup>

Being far from the main concentration of Chinese military power, on the eastern coast, the South China Sea would be a very challenging operating theater for the PLA, especially if opposed by the United States. In particular, the U.S. Navy has the capability to exercise both sea control and sea denial in the South China Sea—the former being the ability to operate in these waters in defiance of any adversary, and the latter to deny any adversary that same ability.<sup>32</sup> This U.S. supremacy could erode somewhat



over the coming years as China expands and extends the reach of its A2AD capabilities—sensors, ballistic missile, submarine, and surface-naval forces.<sup>33</sup> If and when China is able to exert temporary or partial sea denial, it will not have the capability for sea control if and when the United States chooses to deny it. Thus, while the Chinese may be increasingly able to harass vessels of other states and resist competing claims in the South China Sea, they will be unable to enforce their claim of sovereign control because at least one other state—the United States—does not accept it.

The United States has several interests in countering Chinese attempts to gain control of the South China Sea. First, these waters are important for trade passage and for their resources; therefore, the United States wants to preserve their international status and its freedom of navigation and access. Enforcement of Chinese claims of sovereignty over a two-hundred-mile exclusive economic zone around the contested islands would be strongly, perhaps forcibly, opposed by the United States. Second, the United States has a security relationship with the Philippines that could be tested and invoked in the event of Chinese threats. Third, here as elsewhere, the United States strongly opposes the settlement of disputes by coercion, force, or other unilateral action. Finally, successful Chinese military intimidation of any South China Sea state, regardless of security ties with the United States, would create a dangerous precedent for Chinese conduct in the region.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, U.S. interests in the South China Sea go far beyond its legal obligations (to the Philippines). If the Chinese were to get into an armed confrontation with another state over activities on or near contested islands, the Chinese might underestimate the will of the United States to respond militarily. Take the case of Vietnam: The Chinese would note that the United States has no security commitment to Vietnam and takes no position with regard to the conflicting territorial claims. Moreover, China might infer that U.S. interest in the South China Sea, though important, does not rise to the level of core—sovereign—interest. Not being a “sea power” in the classical sense, the Chinese might not appreciate how seriously the United States would regard infringement on its freedom of the seas, especially in such important waters.

Although the Chinese would acknowledge that U.S. naval capabilities in the South China Sea are superior to China’s and are currently beyond the reach of China’s sensors, submarines, and land-based missiles, they might believe that a sharp but limited use of force against Vietnam, in this example, would produce no more than a U.S. rebuke.<sup>35</sup> In a matter more important to China than to the United States and with no U.S. obligation to act, U.S. aversion toward conflict with China would prevail—or so Beijing might think.

The actual U.S. decision model in this case could be quite different from that inferred by China. U.S. decisionmakers might conclude that failure to respond would embolden the Chinese, undermine U.S. credibility in the region, weaken the resolve of Southeast Asian states to resist Chinese pressure, and set in motion a chain of incidents leading to virtual Chinese control of the South China Sea. Knowing that it has

military-operational superiority, the United States might decide that this is the right time and the right place to show that China cannot have its way by threatening or using force. The lack of a security obligation to Vietnam might enter into U.S. thinking but not dominate it. U.S. decisionmakers might also believe that the Chinese would not risk armed conflict with the United States, especially with local military inferiority. Indeed, they might think that the Chinese would not have dared use force against Vietnam if they expected the United States to intervene. It follows, according to the U.S. decision model, that threatening and if need be inserting forces into the conflict in support of Vietnam would cause China to back down.

In sum, it is not hard to imagine that China and the United States would each assume it has the upper hand in a South China Sea crisis—China by virtue of having greater will to prevail, and the United States by virtue of having greater capability to prevail. Given the disparity in capabilities, the Chinese would be making a blunder that could lead to military defeat and a risk of wider conflict with the United States. The critical Chinese miscalculation would be to figure that the United States would not use force to support Vietnam, when in fact the United States could have several compelling reasons to use force.

The predicate for such a mistake could be a general Chinese subjective model that underestimates U.S. will to use force and risk war in a place closer to and more precious to China. Conversely, the inclination of the United States to use force in this case could be the result of a deeper U.S. fear that China aims to dominate the Western Pacific. Again, the existence of such Chinese and U.S. general models may predispose the two toward behavior that could lead to crises, mistakes, and war.

### **East China Sea**

A potential confrontation between the United States and China over contending claims in the East China Sea has many of the characteristics of the South China Sea disputes. But this issue involves a third power allied with the United States: Japan. In fact, the difficult and at times toxic relationship between China and Japan—owing largely to their history—exacerbates the territorial dispute and makes the danger of Sino-U.S. conflict, arising out of Sino-Japanese conflict, if anything greater than in the South China Sea.

The focus of the contending claims is the Senkaku Islands (called the Diaoyu Islands by China)—eight small, uninhabited islands located between Taiwan and Okinawa. The Senkakus were claimed by Japan in 1895 at about the time Taiwan was ceded to Japan after China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War, but, importantly, in a separate claim. Japan has claimed the islands as sovereign territory since then, and China did not contest that fact until 1971. In the late 1960s, oil and gas exploration indicated potentially rich fields in the area. In 1971 China renewed what it said was a centuries-old claim. China (and Taiwan) both claim that the islands were historically Chinese and that they should have been returned to China under the Treaty of San

Francisco along with other Chinese possessions seized by Imperial Japan. In 1972 the United States transferred full sovereignty over the Ryukyu Islands (including Okinawa) to Japan, including Japanese administrative authority over the Senkakus. But it did not transfer sovereignty over the Senkakus. The islands are considered by the United States to be “within the range of application” of the 1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between the United States and Japan.<sup>36</sup> There is, however, a high degree of anxiety in Japan about whether the United States would indeed help to defend the islands.

The confrontation came to a head in September 2012, when the nationalistic governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, sought to buy all the islands from a private owner and the Japanese government preempted by purchasing three of them. From the Chinese perspective, this purchase would strengthen Japan’s claim if it went unchallenged. Ironically, the Japanese government claims that it purchased the islands to prevent Ishihara from building on them, and thus to avert rather than cause a crisis. However, the measure has had the opposite effect on Beijing, which interpreted it as an attempt to solidify sovereign control.

Before and since this episode, numerous incidents have taken place at sea between Japanese patrol vessels and Chinese fishermen. Then, in November of 2013, China declared an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) that included airspace over the Senkakus.<sup>37</sup> The United States immediately contested that zone and its reporting criteria. Now there are overlapping Chinese and Japanese exclusive economic zones and ADIZs around the islands, each being contested by patrol boats and fighter aircraft. Japanese fighter aircraft now scramble several dozen times a month to challenge China in the contested ADIZ area.<sup>38</sup> There are no tactical or operational communications between Japan and China to minimize the risks of an incident and of escalation.

Nationalism, fishing rights, vital shipping channels, and the prospect of large oil and gas reserves motivate both sides. The Chinese see the loss of the Senkakus as part of the loss of sovereign Chinese territory after their 1895 defeat by Japan. It relates to their claim to Taiwan and to their concern about Japanese interpretations of World War II history. The Japanese see their claims as separate from the Sino-Japanese War and interpret Chinese behavior as part of Chinese expansionism and opportunism at their expense. Politicians in both countries are limited by strong public reactions to the confrontation.

The situation holds risk and the prospect of blunder for China and the United States. China understands that its naval and air forces are no match for combined U.S. and Japanese forces around the Senkakus. They are aware of the nature of the U.S. commitment and that their ADIZ is not and will not be accepted by the United States. Yet they continue to take provocative steps to strengthen their claim, as well as to undermine Japanese administrative control and to get an admission that the islands are in dispute. Their calculation must be that they can manage particular incidents and avoid escalation. They need to take this risk not only to strengthen their claim but also

to satisfy nationalist pressure. The Chinese blunder might be to think that the risks of confrontation with the United States can be contained, while in fact an incident might grow out of control.

The U.S. error might be to get drawn into conflict with China as a result of Japanese action in the East China Sea—for example, by shooting down Chinese drones in this air space, something Japan has threatened to do and China has said would be an act of war.<sup>39</sup> Freedom of the seas and freedom of airspace are critical to America's global interests and need to be protected, if need be unilaterally. Similarly, supporting a treaty ally when it is attacked without provocation is a profoundly important U.S. responsibility. But these two interests are separate and should not be confused. Were Japan to provoke China into a confrontation and then ask for U.S. military backing, based on the bilateral defense treaty, the United States could find itself drawn into a confrontation with China mainly of Japan's making.

That the United States and Japan have a defense agreement does not mean that their interests are identical in the East China Sea or toward China in general: "The bitter, bloody history of Japan-China relations in the 20th Century . . . [causes] expectations and obstacles for Japan that the United States does not face." Moreover, whereas "Japan feels threatened now by Chinese actions . . . the threat is more distant, in geography and time, and more abstract to the United States."<sup>40</sup> While Japan sees China mainly as a threat, the United States sees China as both a competitor and, on some important matters, a global partner. In the East China Sea, the United States takes no stand on the claims to the disputed islands (although it does recognize that Japan presently administers them). Thus, Japan could be more belligerent than the United States toward Chinese claims and activities in the East China Sea, especially if it felt sure that the United States would back it in the event of hostilities. The Americans' decision model must not only interpret Chinese motives and actions correctly but also take into account that Japan may be less restrained if it believes that American support is unqualified.<sup>41</sup>

As in the two preceding cases, both China and the United States could be more prone to make mistakes in the East China Sea that could enflame crises and raise the danger of war if predisposed by general models of reality based on strategic distrust, unwarranted confidence, and underestimated risks.

### Taiwan

China and the United States agree, in essence, that Taiwan is part of China.<sup>42</sup> Where they disagree is that the Chinese refuse to rule out the use of force to affect unification, whereas the Americans insist that unification may come about only by agreement and peaceful means. The United States has made plain its willingness, if not its commitment, to intervene militarily if Taiwan is threatened by China, provided Taiwan does not unilaterally proclaim independence.

As this is written, relations between Taiwan and mainland China are stable and progressing. Neither an attempt for independence by Taiwan nor a threat of force by China seems likely, for now.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, while the political situation is improving, the military balance is getting worse for Taiwan and the United States. China's increasingly powerful missile, aviation, and naval capabilities are giving it credible options to use force against Taiwan. Moreover, owing to its heavy investment in A2AD capabilities, China now has the capability to impair U.S. efforts to defend Taiwan from Chinese attack. U.S. aircraft carriers, other surface naval vessels, and air bases in the region are substantially vulnerable to Chinese targeting and strike capabilities. On the assumption that the Chinese believe that the Taiwanese understand these shifting military realities, they could decide to take a more rigid and impatient stance in negotiations with Taiwan authorities over cross-strait relations. As a consequence, the gradual progress and calm that have characterized those relations could give way to tension and intimidation. Well short of declaring independence, the Taiwanese might rebuff Chinese attempts to get some sort of acknowledgment of eventual unification under Beijing's control.

In the past, China has taken threatening actions only when deemed necessary to dissipate Taiwanese interest in independence or to signal its resolve to the United States. In the future, as the military balance shifts, China might opt to pressure Taiwan into acceptance of eventual unification. This would present Taipei with a choice between succumbing to Chinese pressure and calling on the United States to intervene. In similar circumstances in 1996, U.S. military superiority forced China to relent. Since then, and motivated strongly by the 1996 episode, the Chinese have fielded capabilities to contest such a U.S. show of force. In the future, the United States could be mistaken to think that the Chinese would back down in the face of possible U.S. intervention, now that the military balance is more favorable to them.

Thus, decisionmakers in Washington could blunder by underestimating Beijing's nerve—both in imposing Chinese will on Taipei and in resisting U.S. intervention. It is difficult to say what turns a crisis over Taiwan might take or how hostilities might go. Even with improved A2AD, China would be at a disadvantage in a prolonged and expanded war, and strikes on China would be probable. Even as American decisionmakers might underestimate China's will, their Chinese counterparts might overestimate China's capabilities. Unless American will folds before or with the onset of conflict, the Chinese could face a more costly war and less satisfactory outcome than their script would suggest.

It seems unlikely that either China or the United States would blunder into war with the other over Taiwan, given that more or less clear red lines exist. Still, one can see how misjudgments by one could cause misjudgments by the other, and so on. U.S. doubts about Chinese will combined with Chinese overconfidence about its military ability to deter or defeat U.S. intervention could create instability if the China-Taiwan cross-strait process took a bad turn. Underlying strategic distrust of each power about

the intent of the other would heighten the risk. A conflict over Taiwan seems improbable for now; but the effects of the steady improvement of China's A2AD could be destabilizing.

### It Could Take Both to Blunder

With these scenarios and Chinese and U.S. cognitive models under our belt, some judgments can be made about the dangers of war being caused by a blunder by one, the other, or both. In none of these four scenarios does it seem likely that Chinese or American decisionmakers would, after weighing their interests, options, pros and cons, and ability to control events, make a considered decision that a war with the other state was their best alternative. Even with tensions rising, and third parties roiling them, the inhibitions on each state, based on expected consequences of war, would be strong. Reinforcing this assessment is the view that neither China nor the United States is operating with a cognitive model that is so unhinged from objective reality that war would be a rational, premeditated choice for it.

Such judgments assume that Chinese and American decisionmakers would each make good use of the information available to them about circumstances at hand, capabilities of the potential adversary, military-operational difficulties, alternatives to hostilities, and so on. Recall from their respective cognitive models that both China and the United States might be somewhat more confident than warranted about prospects for a quick, limited, and successful conflict. However, we do not see in either capital—at least not presently—the sort of Napoleonic egos, Hitler-like demons, unbridled hubris of Imperial German and Japanese officers, Soviet-style ideological doctrines, or grand theories of democratizing the Arab world by military might, much less the burning hatreds of Hitler, that could blind or warp the judgment of either Chinese or U.S. decisionmakers. On neither side does there appear a great danger that decisionmakers would systematically discard or distort information in order to promote the case for war. In sum, it is unlikely that one or the other would blunder more or less on its own, as leaders and institutions in our blunder cases did.

At the same time, we can see in the Chinese and American models of reality a greater degree of *mutual* distrust than is objectively warranted. As one U.S. China-watcher put it: “An antagonistic relationship will ultimately be hard to avoid if new approaches are not adopted to deal with the corrosive issue of *strategic distrust*.”<sup>44</sup> In reality, China is not determined to control East Asia and exclude the United States from it, and the United States is not committed to containing China. Yet each suspects the other of such an aim. There is a potential feedback loop whereby Chinese behavior, born of distrust of the United States, amplifies U.S. distrust and causes U.S. behavior that feeds Chinese distrust and behavior, and so on.

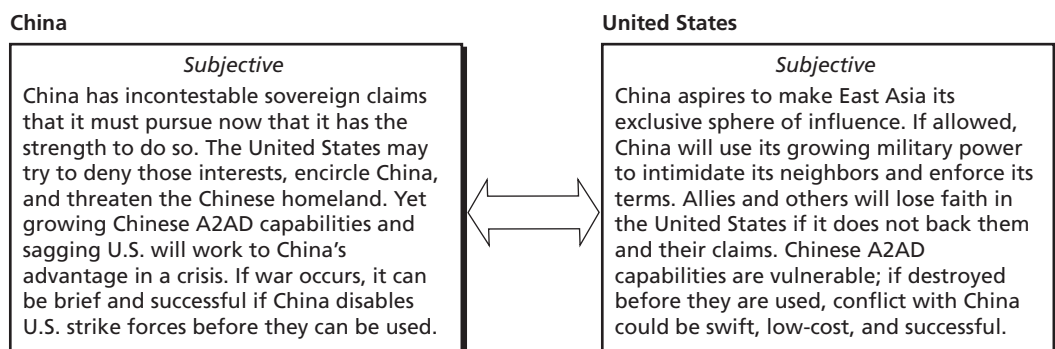
The potential for this dynamic stands out when the subjective models of China and the United States are juxtaposed (as shown in Figure 17.2).

In essence, inflated U.S. fears of Chinese expansionism and inflated Chinese fears of U.S. encirclement increase the probability of crises and the danger of overreaction when crises occur. This perspective is much more worrying than that of each actor deciding on its own. While this does not predict war by the United States or China against the other, it suggests that there is enough risk of mismanaged crises and miscalculated use of force to warrant preventive measures by both. This is not the same as war by accident, though that too cannot be excluded. In sum, the risk of Sino-U.S. blunder is the product of two interacting models, each somewhat off plumb from objective reality and each reinforcing distrust.

The risk implied by the dynamic interaction of the two models could be aggravated by the role of third parties, as detailed in the scenarios. Moreover, both the Chinese and U.S. militaries have developed plans that could reward using their forces to strike before being struck. For some time the PLA has been honing plans to attack first if war appears imminent; and, as noted, the U.S. military is moving toward a strategy that would, to be most effective, require attacking Chinese A2AD capabilities early.<sup>45</sup> Although we do not assert that the United States intends to strike first if war with China appears imminent, the advantages of doing so cannot be ignored. These conditions are a recipe for crisis instability, which means that crises, which one must expect, can cause a sharp spike in the risk of war, which otherwise would be low.

Finally, the expansion of Chinese military power, especially naval forces, in the Western Pacific makes it more likely that the ships, submarines, or planes of one power will have accidental contact with those of the other (or its allies). The divergence in Chinese and American cognitive models of reality makes it more likely that such contact will lead to miscalculation and escalation. Because the two models are infused with substantial mistrust, each leadership may suspect the other of manufacturing,

**Figure 17.2**  
**Interacting Chinese and U.S. Models of Reality**



provoking, or exploiting incidents. At the same time, being cognizant of the danger of incidents at sea sparking conflict, China and the United States have begun cooperating to avoid them.

Having considered four scenarios in which China and the United States could face the possibility of war, we can identify specific decisionmaking factors that could heighten that possibility. These are shown in Table 17.1 in relation to those from the historical cases. Key factors in the Sino-U.S. case are in gray.

Broadly speaking, China and the United States are at greater risk of bad strategic decisions because of poor use of information rather than by a shortage of information. Both states have extensive intelligence-collection capabilities based on advanced sensors, networks, and processing technologies, and so they should have abundant information about the each other.

**Table 17.1**  
**Potential Factors Affecting U.S. and Chinese Strategic Decisionmaking**

	United States	China
Information unavailable (due to lack of transparency)	X	
Information ignored or rejected	X	X
Information misconstrued	X	X
Inadequate communications with other party	X	X
Excessive reliance on intuition and experience	X	X
Misreading or ignoring history	X	X
Emotional bias (e.g., patriotism, human rights)	X	X
Hubris, arrogance, egotism	X	X
Rigid and flawed strategic concept	X	X
Perception of having no choice	X	X
Failure to consider options	X	X
Failure to consider what could go wrong	X	X
Underestimating enemy will	X	X
Underestimating enemy capabilities	X	X
Underestimating difficulty and duration	X	X
Groupthink	X	X
Stifling of debate and dissent		X
Insulated decisionmakers	X	X
Excessive secrecy and compartmentalization		X



Like several of the historical cases—the German U-boat decision, Pearl Harbor, the Falklands, the U.S. invasion of Iraq—institutional failures could compound those of individual leaders. For instance, if strategic distrust is baked into the cognitive models that guide the behavior of the military establishments of both China and the United States, the danger of miscalculation could be heightened. Add to this the pride and confidence that Chinese government institutions undoubtedly share with political elites, and the result could be a bias toward excessive risk taking, even if leaders are otherwise prudent.

Keeping in mind the importance of using fresh information to update or correct cognitive models on which strategic decisions are based, what stands out in the Sino-U.S. case more than the historical ones is the danger of inadequate communication between the parties. The significance of this factor stands to reason given that the main danger of Chinese, U.S., or Chinese-U.S. blunder may be the failure to understand each other with complete objectivity. Given that both Chinese and U.S. cognitive models are biased toward distrust, direct communications—continuous in peacetime and intensified in crisis—are essential to prevent information from being misconstrued to fit those models. Perhaps the most crucial information needed to bring the models of Chinese and U.S. decisionmakers into line with objective reality, thus to avoid blunders, is what they can receive from each other.

The challenge of Sino-U.S. communications is compounded by the nature of the crises in which their forces may be called on to operate. In the North Korea, East China Sea, and South China Sea cases, U.S. and Chinese ground forces (in the first case) and naval forces (in the second and third) could literally collide. This heightens the potential for tactical incidents and mistakes. Lack of strategic understanding and trust between Chinese and American decisionmakers could increase the risk that accidents could escalate. Although reducing the probability of misjudgment by decisionmakers would not exclude mistakes by subordinate commanders, it would reduce the danger of misinterpretation and escalation.

## Remedies

Again, we find that neither Chinese decisionmakers *on their own* nor U.S. decisionmakers on their own have tendencies that indicate a great danger of blundering into war. Moreover, the respective cognitive models are not so far from reality as to outweigh the heavy inhibitions against war. But, of course, these Chinese and U.S. models and the decisionmakers who rely on them do not function on their own—rather, in relation to each other. Herein lies a risk from bilateral decisionmaking that differs from the more or less unitary decisionmaking cases assessed earlier.

Because the United States and China are more likely to find themselves at war as the result of their dual misjudgment than of premeditated attack, the framework

for considering remedies should be their combined decision systems, as shown in Figure 17.3. The individual decisionmaker for China is the Chinese Communist Party general secretary, who is also president, chairman of the Central Military Commission, and chairman of the new National Security Commission; for the United States, it is the president, who is also the commander-in-chief and chairman of the cabinet-level NSC. Key institutions for China are the civilian-led national-security apparatus and the PLA; for the United States, they are the NSC, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the military chain of command.

Given the possibility and consequences of these two systems misunderstanding each other, there is an obvious need for information links between the two systems at every level, as depicted in the figure. As a reminder of the value of such information links, recall the 1973 U.S.-Soviet case, in which war was avoided in large part because of extraordinarily direct, frank, and timely communications between Washington and Moscow, Tel Aviv, and Cairo.

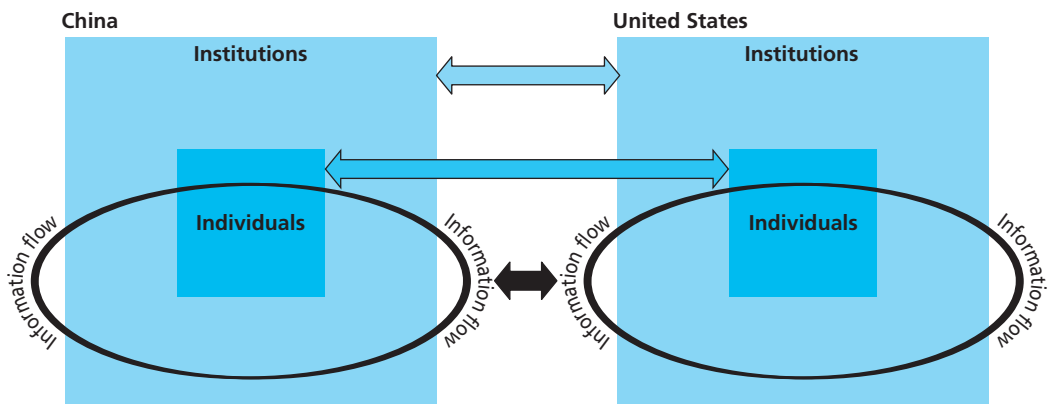
### Individual Decisionmakers

Given the importance of Sino-U.S. relations and of avoiding conflict, the Chinese general secretary and American president should:

- have open and direct communications channels
- invest in building rapport and appreciation of how the other is thinking
- be in touch immediately and constantly in the event of a crisis or other circumstances that could give rise to misunderstanding and misjudgment.

To think only of a crisis hotline is to underestimate the need for open channels and rapport at the top. When president-to-president communications are filtered,

**Figure 17.3**  
U.S. and Chinese Decisionmaking Systems



staged, and otherwise managed by their respective institutions, it is no better than only counting on institutional contact. An analog is the way U.S. presidents and British prime ministers communicate frequently, easily, and candidly—except this is if anything more important in the Sino-U.S. case because of the probability of crises and the danger of mistakes. Periodic summits are necessary but not sufficient. With the latest communications technology, there are many ways for the individuals atop the Chinese and U.S. decisionmaking systems to correspond. (Email? Texting? FaceTime?)

Such familiarity is a far cry from the usual formal contact between Chinese and American leaders, and also something one U.S.-China expert describes as “hard to imagine” for China’s typically guarded leaders.<sup>46</sup> Such closeness cannot be easy for leaders of two countries that do not see eye to eye on a great many important issues. Add in the fact that each may be operating with suspicion toward the other—per their cognitive models—and the idea of trustful, regular, personal communication between leaders may seem far-fetched. Perhaps, but the very reasons to doubt that this can happen are arguments for starting to work in this direction, between incumbents as well as from one to the next. The consequences of misjudgment leading to conflict between China and the United States require it.

The better the rapport is in normal times, the greater the clarity and understanding in crises. In the Sino-U.S. case, military timetables—in which hours or even minutes matter—make presidential control and contact imperative. To the extent that there is room for doubt about the strength of Chinese political control of the PLA, this can be mitigated by crisis co-management by leaders on both sides. Although Chinese civilian leaders are moving to regain tight control of the military—“the Party commands the gun,” as Mao said—the possibilities exist that PLA actions could create circumstances that would limit policymakers’ ability to deescalate a crisis.<sup>47</sup> It could be that the most important input to Chinese leaders in a crisis, other than the PLA’s, is from the President of the United States.

### **Institutions**

In thinking about institutions, it is better to use the broad, classical definition—i.e., predictable practice—than the narrow view that institutions are mere organizations. In this sense, the United States and China should institutionalize their relationship from top to bottom. The existing Sino-U.S. Strategic and Economic Dialogue provides an excellent foundation. But dialogue is insufficient when the world’s two strongest powers could, at any time, find themselves at loggerheads (e.g., in one of the scenarios just described). The shared interests of the United States and China argue for institutional connectivity.

During the Cold War, the United States had to manage an adversarial relationship with the Soviet Union and a cooperative one with Western Europe and Japan. It did the former in several arms-control negotiation and verification processes, the UN Security Council, and other venues; it did the latter in the G-7, NATO, and other set-

tings. After the Cold War, the United States and Russia set up the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission (named for the two vice presidents) that covered space, energy, trade and business development, defense conversion, science and technology, health, agriculture, and environmental problems.

Because China and the United States are at once potential adversaries and leading stakeholders in the global system, the institutions of their bilateral relationship should reflect this. There could be standing groups to deal with maritime security, military-to-military contacts, cyber security, space, nuclear weapons and policy, WMD proliferation, and security confidence-building measures, along with a host of economic issues. In addition, groups should be set up to share concerns and information on potential hot spots, such as Korea, Taiwan, and maritime disputes. This is not to suggest that the United States should—or that China would—compromise its positions and its interests in such regular contacts. Rather, it is to ensure that respective positions and any misperceptions behind them be exposed directly and clearly.

Naturally, U.S. allies would worry that their interests are being discussed with China and possibly compromised in their absence (just as U.S. allies got nervous about the United States and Soviet Union talking “over their heads”). Therefore, the United States would have to work overtime to inform its allies before and after discussions with China. Of course, the United States must take care not to reach actual bilateral agreements with China that affect the security of others, especially U.S. allies. At the same time, given the value of straight talk in bringing misunderstandings into the open, the United States cannot afford to limit contact with China in order to soothe its friends’ anxieties. Again, there is no assurance that China is prepared to discuss with the Americans issues it feels that it can more advantageously pursue one-on-one with its less powerful neighbors. As in the suggestion that U.S. and Chinese leaders ought to communicate regularly, the goal of broader and deeper institutional linkage will require U.S. persistence and patience, which has been rewarded by the quality of Sino-U.S. dialogue achieved so far at U.S. initiative.

### **Information**

In addition to the flow of information between U.S. and Chinese officialdoms, there is no substitute for other private and quasi-public institutions and individuals to share information on Chinese and American cultures, societies, politics, and all matters of common interest and concern. If anything, such Sino-American exchanges are more advanced than official ones, owing to the swelling flood of Chinese students in the United States, the initiative of many U.S. institutions to establish programs with or in China, and robust business relationships based on investment and trade. So the model is in place, and what it will take now is for more universities, think tanks, civil-society groups, and so on to participate.

One of the most important functions of nongovernmental (yet informed) channels is to conduct crisis games in order to uncover and explain points of misperception

and misjudgment. Because we identified risks of mistakes in all four of the scenarios described earlier, it would be good to simulate such a crisis with the involvement of knowledgeable proxies of Chinese and American decisionmakers and military commanders. If the respective governments want to keep tabs on, influence, and even participate “unofficially” in such exercises, so much the better. Of course, intelligence can be gleaned from these encounters, but since the risk of mistakes correlates with poor information about one another, this is not altogether deleterious.

More generally, counterintelligence organizations of both countries do their best to spot risks amid these innumerable contacts. It would be most unfortunate, though, if this constricted the flow of information between China and the United States that could lessen misunderstanding. When it comes to Sino-American contacts, the benefit-risk assessments in both countries should weigh the risk of the loss of secrets against the risk of not expanding understanding of each other.

The divergence of U.S. and Chinese interests on a number of matters not only keeps both on guard but also limits the scope for exchanging intelligence. After all, the United States and the Soviet Union never pursued intelligence sharing. But there are two fundamental differences between that case and this one. First, as noted, there are many global matters on which U.S. and Chinese interests converge: terrorism, WMDs, international crime, stability in the Middle East, energy security, and cyberspace security among them. Generally speaking, the United States has the best intelligence and China has among the best intelligence on these shared challenges. The second difference is that the United States is not isolated from China as it was from the USSR, which was somewhat isolated from the world. The amount of open information the United States and China have about each other is unbounded, which is a good thing. The scope for intelligence sharing should take this into account. Intelligence about the issues that could give rise to Sino-U.S. confrontation, mainly in the region, has to be guarded more tightly. Still, it is simplistic to think of China and the United States in a zero-sum intelligence game, especially when both sides have reasons to want the other to have accurate perceptions. Again, the goal is to make respective cognitive models as close to reality as can be.

## Conclusions

Even as China and the United States are pursuing economic and other areas of cooperation at the global level, it appears that relations are getting worse when it comes to security, especially as regards territorial disputes and military rivalry in the Western Pacific: “There is a pronounced increase in Sino-American strategic competition within the region.”<sup>48</sup> Although this competition is not so intense that either Beijing *or* Washington is wired to make imprudent decisions that could lead to war, it is reinforcing

mutual strategic distrust, which in turn could lead to interactive decisionmaking in which prudence could suffer.

As we have stressed, when leaders and institutions form and use flawed models of reality, errors get made, including on matters of war and peace. It seems that Chinese and American decisionmakers both rely on models that are infused with strategic distrust and could be biased toward risky brinkmanship. Moreover, their models are mutually reinforcing and could thus make crises more likely and harder to defuse. Short of removing all sources of Sino-U.S. friction—impossible, at least in East Asia—it is essential to improve objectivity in perceptions and rationality in decisionmaking. This demands the best possible use of information in order to bring both Chinese and U.S. strategic models into line with reality.

In conclusion, two factors—the interplay between U.S. and Chinese strategic decisionmaking and the role of third parties—counter the complacent belief that war between China and the United States would be too devastating to happen. Even past errors of Chinese and American leaders—Deng in underestimating the difficulties of defeating Vietnam, Bush in underestimating the dangers of pacifying Iraq—are unlikely to be repeated when war with another great and nuclear power is at stake. Yet Sino-U.S. conflict caused by strategic distrust and spiraling errors, possibly precipitated by the actions of a third party, is increasingly plausible.

The risk of conflict due to U.S. or Chinese strategic misjudgment may also be mitigated by the three general remedies for preventing blunders described in the preceding chapter:

- independent mechanisms with a mandate to analyze, critique, and advise on such matters before final decisions are taken
- enforcement of standards of analytic objectivity, rigor, and documentation
- human-computer teaming to explore what-ifs in order to counter unwarranted reliance on scripting the future and confidence in controlling events.

While we have specified how such reforms could be instituted on the American side, the case is as strong that they should be instituted on the Chinese side as well. While we are not in a position to specify how, it is especially important that Chinese military planning and operations be subordinate to strategic decisionmaking. Our sense is that Chinese political leaders know this, that they are working to ensure it, and that the PLA knows it too.

In addition to applying these general measures, the Sino-U.S. case demands major improvement in understanding and communications between the two decisionmaking systems at every level, from student exchanges to presidential channels. In terms of our analytic framework, *the most promising source of information that would correct flaws in Chinese and U.S. models is the other country*. Indeed, the goal should be that China and the United States create a common body and a regular flow of objective information

on which their respective models of reality are based. This simple idea runs counter to tight control of information, which is what adversaries do. But the risks of the erosion of secrecy must be weighed against the risks of misunderstanding. In any case, in today's world, governments must come to understand that controlling information is close to impossible, especially between the world's two biggest and largely integrated economies.

Given the importance of communications to reduce strategic distrust, realism is needed. In the discouraging words of one Chinese scholar: "People usually suppose that more contact and cooperation between nations, as well as between individuals, generates more mutual understanding and friendlier feelings. This does not appear to be true in the current China-U.S. interaction." When U.S. "correspondents and non-governmental organizations [create] instability in Chinese society by fueling anti-government sentiment and political dissension, . . . distrust cannot be wiped out by bilateral dialogues, however sincere the participants may be."<sup>49</sup> Not exactly sentiments that auger greater expanded communications at all levels.

The Chinese are not alone in doubting that dialogue will dispel strategic distrust and reduce the danger of confrontation. As the former deputy secretary of state James Steinberg has written: "Despite the extraordinary intensity of the engagement between the two sides, both informed and casual observers see signs of trouble—a potential spiral . . . that, left unattended, could see a deterioration in the relationship that might, in the worst case, lead to conflict."<sup>50</sup> Does this mean that the remedies for strategic distrust just prescribed are doomed to fail? The answer depends on whether China and the United States have fundamental, objective reasons to distrust each other. On this, opinions differ widely in both countries. Those who believe that established powers and rising powers inevitably clash will argue that no amount of communication will prevent antagonism.

We disagree. In a "rational world," American and Chinese interests are for the most part compatible, which suggests that *general* strategic distrust is largely subjective and thus conducive to correction if exposed to objective information. The areas where American and Chinese interests in fact diverge—mainly over specific Chinese territorial claims in the Western Pacific—are less likely to lead to crises and mistakes if managed in an atmosphere of strategic trust.

We are especially encouraged by the awareness of Chinese leaders of the perils of conflict and the need for better communications. As this is written, President Xi Jinping called for greater Sino-U.S. military contact, saying that any conflict between the two countries would be a global disaster—a sentiment obviously shared by American leaders.<sup>51</sup>





## Findings and Recommendations

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### Findings

Strategic blunders can happen when decisionmakers rely on defective cognitive models of reality. This can at once result from and aggravate faulty intuition, egotism, arrogance, hubris, grand but flawed strategic ideas, underestimating the enemy and the difficulties and duration of conflict, overconfidence in war plans, ignoring what could go wrong, stifling debate, shunning independent advice, and penalizing dissent—conditions that can be especially dangerous if accompanied by excessive risk taking based on an overestimation of the ability to control events. The key to bridging the gap between a defective model and objective reality is *information*, amply supplied and well used. Sadly, decisionmakers, like most of us, may be more receptive to information that supports rather than threatens their beliefs, preconceptions, and models.

Historical cases suggest that failures to close the gap between subjective models and objective reality—thus, susceptibility to blundering—strongly correlate with poor use of information. It follows that improvements are needed in how leaders and institutions use information so that better cognitive models will enable them to make better choices.

While this prescription is simple to state, implementing it is anything but. Decisionmakers may be disinclined to admit that they use information poorly, much less filter or manipulate it to their liking. What leader is going to point to the image in the mirror as the main risk of blundering into war? Even if some are self-aware enough to recognize their shortcomings, those with excessive self-confidence, unsound intuition and strategic thinking, resistance to objective advice and analysis, and other decision-making disabilities are likely not to be among them. Presidents who pride themselves on decisiveness are no more inclined to rethink their instincts when challenged by others than they are of their own accord.

Think of the heavy smoker who is at once susceptible to disease and not open to persuasion that smoking can cause it. Conversely, a leader who is likely to accept—better yet, to seek—conflicting opinion is probably less likely to blunder in the first place. Although one can hope that voters will choose such leaders, relying on this would itself be folly. Moreover, history suggests that nondemocratic leaders are if anything

more prone to blunder, if only because they can be more arbitrary. So counting on people to change—or on changing people—to prevent blunders appears unpromising.

Perhaps the people and institutions around the decisionmaker—like the heavy smoker’s family and friends—can be trusted to intervene and correct such cognitive failure. Don’t count on it. Government institutions near to the center of power are beholden to that power and hence lack the independence, often the guts, to insist on objectivity. Advisors, cabinet secretaries, military commanders, and bureaucracies think that they are there to serve leaders, not to critique and frustrate them. U.S. NSC staffers, for instance, usually consider themselves to be presidential staff first and foremost—there to support, not to defy—and presidents most definitely share that view. Yet, as the law states, one of the duties of the NSC is “to assess . . . [the] *risks* of the United States in relation to . . . actual and potential military power” (our emphasis), which clearly is meant to encompass decisions to go to war. On top of this, the people who staff these institutions have ambitions that could be derailed if they speak truth to power, or so they fear.

Institutions close to decisionmakers can even be drawn into the same subjective perception of reality—like inhalers of secondhand smoke, breathing the same information. We have found that the very leaders who most needed objective input because of their propensity to blunder—Napoleon, Hitler, Japan’s military leaders, Argentina’s dictators, the Soviet Politburo—tend to have the greatest sway over those around them. As a result, the imprudence or irrationality of the leader can infect those in the best position to impart rationality and prudence. This can also work in reverse: The collective thinking of the German military establishment was contagious to Kaiser Wilhelm II, who rubber-stamped their plan to renew U-boat attacks on U.S. vessels.

Case after case shows that government institutions are not dependable safeguards against strategic mistakes. One might think that separate branches of government (Congress, in the U.S. case), intelligence agencies, and media would provide such independence and checks. However, as the case of the U.S. decision to invade Iraq most recently suggests, these institutions cannot always be counted on to challenge the chief decisionmaker.

## Recommendations

How then is it possible to remedy failures in the use of information that increase the risk of blundering into war? We have three main recommendations.

First, governments need formal sources of independent policy analysis and advice—at least on matters of war and peace—with both detachment from and access to decisionmakers. Neither military officers nor intelligence officials can be counted on for this because they are under decisionmakers’ control and not supposed to dispute policy. In the United States, such an independent source could take the form of

a strategic advisory body with access to all intelligence as well as to the best possible analytic capabilities, also disinterested. Given its statutory mandate, which includes the duty to assess risks, the NSC is a suitable institution into which to plug such a body (though the standing NSC staff itself lacks the independence to play that role). Although this body would have no decisionmaking authority or responsibility, it would be duty bound to provide the president and the rest of the NSC with impartial analysis of underlying beliefs, objectives, assumptions, estimates of the adversary, prospects for success, options, contingencies, and risks before—preferably well before—a final decision is made. If a president actively seeks such independent advice and analysis, so much the better. However, the president should receive and acknowledge this input whether or not he or she welcomes or agrees with it. Although the process would be covered by executive privilege, its output would be a matter of historical and eventually public record.

Second, this same body should set and insist on the highest standards of analytic objectivity and rigor: clarity in setting out the problem, assumptions, and facts; balanced consideration of options and their pros and cons; logical basis for recommendations, consistent with facts; articulation of implications and alternative consequences; and documentation. Most reputable research institutions have quality-assurance processes that could serve as a model for how governments should make decisions, *especially* those involving war and peace. By these standards, analyses supporting all eight blunders we studied would have failed categorically. Along with its own independent advice, the entity would be responsible for reviewing and grading the integrity of the analysis conducted by the institutions responsible for staffing the decisionmaker—in the U.S. case, State, Defense, the NSC staff, and so on.

Third, the independent analysis performed for and by such a body should make use of proven enhancements in analyst-computer teaming capabilities and methods. It is relatively simple, with the help of commercially available technology, to explore any number of contingencies, detours, and fractals that might develop if, as often happens, decisionmakers' scripts fail. Interdependent variables include enemy response and adaptation, performance of one's own forces, environmental conditions, popular reactions, boomerang effects of one's actions, uncertain estimates, and pure chance—far too many possibilities to figure out manually. Most of the needed technology-enhanced analytic capability lies outside the government but could readily be made available by the analytic organization on which the independent advisory body depends. Cultural and psychological resistance to using computers to help make decisions about war and peace is no more than superstition; in fact, a variety of important matters of public policy and complex private enterprises are already being informed by advanced analytic tools. It hardly makes sense that matters of strategic importance should be exempted.

While these recommendations specifically apply to the U.S. government, there is no reason why they cannot be tailored to others. Of particular interest is China. After all, the main motivation for this study is to learn why blunders happen in order to

avoid one involving the United States and China. Obviously, China is different from the United States: Its distribution of authority and its decisionmaking processes are more opaque; civil-military relations are less clear and steady; its government-media relations are less arm's length; and the opportunity to question, much less challenge, its top leaders is more constricted. Nonetheless, the principles of access to impartial analysis, analytic standards, and use of the best possible tools can still be applied.

It is important that both the United States and China heed the lessons and dangers of strategic miscalculations. Our judgment is that the danger of war by error between China and the United States, while not alarming, is high enough to take steps to lower it, given the potential consequences. This is especially so because the involvement of third parties as well as the military strategies of the two indicate a potential dangerous dynamic of crisis instability. The danger of blunder is not so much because either China or the United States on its own will commit a misjudgment that trumps the obvious inhibitions both have about conflict—though this cannot be excluded. Rather, it is because misconceptions, miscalculations, and misjudgments of one side may interact with those of the other side to increase the risks of binary blunder. Even the general measures we just recommended might not provide adequate protection against such compounding mistakes.

With this in mind, we offer three additional ideas regarding China and the United States.

First, the President of the United States and general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (and Chinese president) should form the sort of relationship that goes well beyond occasional summits and having a hotline. In essence, the two need a facility for communication and a rapport that goes beyond that of “knowing your enemy,” for China and the United States are far more than enemies to each other. A better model is the White House–to–Downing Street contact and understanding that American presidents usually have with the UK prime minister, obviously taking into account that the United States and China are not allies or entirely open to one another. If nothing else, such regular and candid contact would increase the information each has about the other's fears, perceptions, goals, and problems—thus helping to bring respective cognitive models into accord with objective reality. It could also facilitate crisis management if better understanding is created in quiet times.

Second, the institutional connections between the United States and China should go beyond the existing U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, not because it has been unsuccessful but because it has been successful. The concept of dialogue does not quite address the need to link Chinese and American strategic decisionmaking systems (as argued in the preceding chapter). Constant contact between national-security institutions is of paramount importance. Military-to-military contacts and collaboration have been frustrating but are obviously important, both with and apart from civilian contact. Overall, the goal, in addition to practical work, is to

mine information from these institutional links that can correct errors in models of reality and prevent blunders.

Third, intellectual connectivity should continue to expand, especially as it involves Chinese and American strategic communities (think tanks, universities, retired officials, officers, etc.). As there is at the institutional level, there is much already going on in this domain—but there is no way to do too much. One of the most important methods is to conduct joint crisis-management games involving persons with knowledge of how U.S. and Chinese decisionmakers and institutions think. From this, traps, misperceptions, and issues can be isolated, analyzed, reported, and even publicized. Nongovernmental institutions can do this much better than government ones. At the same time, the scope for Sino-U.S. intelligence sharing should be considered with a view to improving the accuracy of perceptions and the objectivity of models.

To be clear, prescriptions for more Sino-American communication, from generals to the general public, may not be enough to dispel strategic distrust, for there is no denying that the two powers have differences of perception and of interests in the objective world. But these differences are finite and circumscribed—surely not worth the cost of war to both powers and the world. Thus, there is a need not only for still more communication but also for both governments to institute the general decision-making checks and critiques we recommend.

## Conclusions

“A phenomenon noticeable throughout history is the pursuit by governments of policies contrary to their own interests”: So said Barbara Tuchman, and we have found no evidence to contradict her.<sup>1</sup> Our worry is the future—not only in some abstract wish that wars by misjudgment can become a thing of the past but also out of specific concern about this century’s two strongest powers. With due respect for the great historian, we cannot accept her pessimism about treating the “wooden-headedness” of leaders and institutions. If ways can be found to improve the use of information by those who make strategic decisions—to confront power with truth—it could reduce the likelihood and severity of bad decisions. We suggest some such ways.

Perhaps the best treatment for those who might have to decide on matters of war and peace is to have them read how Napoleon’s ego kept him from realizing the obvious countermove of Czar Alexander; how Hitler made essentially the same mistake; why Japan’s military leaders thought they could defeat a much stronger power; what the Soviets were thinking when they launched an invasion of Afghanistan that would lead to their own demise; and why in the world Argentina’s junta thought that “Iron Lady” Thatcher would surrender the Falklands without a fight.

If nothing else is learned from this book, it should be the lesson that leaders who blunder into war may be among the casualties.



## Notes

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### Chapter One: Introduction

<sup>1</sup> Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam*, New York: Random House, 2011, p. 4. Tuchman states that to qualify for “folly,” a decision or policy must meet three criteria: It could have been perceived as such in its own time, not just in hindsight; there must have been a feasible alternative course of action; and it must involve group failure, not just individual failure.

<sup>2</sup> B. Fischhoff, “Hindsight Is Not Equal to Foresight: The Effect of Outcome Knowledge on Judgment Under Uncertainty,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1975, p. 288. Fischhoff uses three experiments on college students to explain how historical judgments are often distorted by an overestimation of how much information would have been available at the time the decision was made.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1997, for explanation of the role of information in the functioning of the mind and in decisionmaking.

<sup>4</sup> Tuchman, 2011, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Tuchman, 2011, p. 6.

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<b>Conflict</b>	<b>Combatant Deaths</b>	<b>Combatant Deaths of Side Starting Conflict</b>
Napoleon’s invasion of Russia	600,000	400,000, France and allies
World War I	10 million	3 million, Germany and Austria
World War II	20 million	6 million, Germany and Japan
Korean War	450,000	225,000, North Korea
Soviet invasion of Afghanistan	100,000	15,000, Soviet Union
Iran-Iraq War	500,000	200,000, Iraq
Gulf War	21,000	20,500, Iraq

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NOTE: These figures were compiled from numerous authoritative sources.

<sup>7</sup> William Eckhardt, “War-Related Deaths Since 3000 BC,” *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 1991. The claim that 90 percent of the victims of modern wars were civilians appears to be something of a morbid old wives’ tale. Eckhardt’s comprehensive study finds that on average half the deaths caused by war have happened to civilians “from century to century.”

<sup>8</sup> These wars were started by Iraq, Argentina, Japan, France, and North Korea, respectively.

<sup>9</sup> Klaus Knorr is a professor of international politics at Princeton University. This was also observed by James D. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3, 1995 (see Chapter Two).

<sup>10</sup> David C. Gompert, John Gordon IV, Adam Grissom, David R. Frelinger, Seth G. Jones, Martin C. Libicki, Edward O’Connell, Brooke Stearns Lawson, and Robert E. Hunter, *War by Other Means—Building Complete and Balanced Capabilities for Counterinsurgency*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-595/2-OSD, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, “How David Beats Goliath: When Underdogs Break the Rules,” condensed version, *The New Yorker*, May 11, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> In the case of Iraq, U.S. decisionmakers were on the mark in expecting the invasion itself to be quick and successful. Where they erred was in thinking that Iraq would then settle down and not require prolonged U.S. presence and lead to heavy losses and costs.

<sup>13</sup> See Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed., New York: Longman, 1999. This system is consistent with the both the rational actor model and the bureaucratic politics model.

<sup>15</sup> In fact, individuals and institutions may not be constant in the course of making strategic decisions. Leaders might change—or their views might change in fundamental ways. Institutions also might change, perhaps by leaders looking for greater allegiance and less dissension.

<sup>16</sup> Traditionally, rationality in decisionmaking is consistent with the concept of the *economic man*. As Herbert A. Simon explained decades ago: “This man is assumed to have knowledge of the relevant aspects of his environment which, if not absolutely complete, is at least impressively clear and voluminous. He is assumed also to have a well-organized and stable system of preferences, and a skill in computation that enables him to calculate, for the alternative courses of action that are available to him, which of these will permit him to reach the highest attainable point on his preference scale.” Herbert A. Simon, “A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 69, No. 1, February 1955, p. 99. Simon introduced a new concept of *bounded rationality*. Used more recently by economists, political scientists, and psychologists, this concept assumes that individuals do not behave in ways that are perfectly consistent with this concept of the economic man due to limits in time, cognitive ability, and information. This study assumes that individual decisionmakers strive for perfect rationality, but because of constraints, they are “bounded” in their rationality.

<sup>17</sup> For an analysis of U.S. institutions and their bearing on presidential decisionmaking, see Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1980.

<sup>18</sup> The concept of groupthink is considered by some scholars to be outmoded. It has given way to a more nuanced and valid concept of group decisionmaking bias, which is the sense in which we will use it. See S. G. Straus, A. M. Parker, and J. B. Bruce, “The Group Matters: A Review of Processes and Outcomes in Analytic Teams,” *Group Dynamics*, Vol. 15, 2011.



- <sup>19</sup> Yaacov Y. I. Vertzberger, *The World in Their Minds: Information Processing, Cognition, and Perception in Foreign Policy Decisionmaking*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990.
- <sup>20</sup> Pinker, 1997, p. 83.
- <sup>21</sup> Vertzberger, 1990, p. 1.
- <sup>22</sup> David Gompert et al., *Battle-Wise: Seeking Time-Information Superiority in Networked Warfare*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2006.
- <sup>23</sup> Gompert et al., 2006, p. 24.
- <sup>24</sup> Herbert A. Simon, *Models of Bounded Rationality: Empirically Grounded Economic Reason*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1962.
- <sup>25</sup> Since Simon, the notion that the human mind relies on summaries, shortcuts, and snapshots is common to literature on perception and decisionmaking in several fields and popularized by Malcolm Gladwell in *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2005.
- <sup>26</sup> As Pinker (1997) explains, the mind is wired to recall and use information that seems especially relevant to the problem at hand. When a model biases judgment as to what is relevant, information consistent with it is favored over that which is not.
- <sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the difference between intuition and reasoning, see, among others, Kahneman, 2011; Gary Klein, *The Power of Intuition: How to Use Your Gut Feelings to Make Better Decisions at Work*, New York: Random House, 2004; and Gompert et al., 2006.
- <sup>28</sup> The relationship between intuition and reasoning in the context of military operations is explained in Gompert et al., 2006.
- <sup>29</sup> Tuchman, 2011, pp. 246–377.
- <sup>30</sup> Science is divided over whether people are becoming more capable or less capable decisionmakers. One school argues that humans are becoming smarter because more-stimulating environments are causing brain “hardware” to develop. Another speculates that cognitive acuity is lower now than, say, two thousand years ago because humans are now less exposed to daily life-threatening dangers. At best, brain development is too gradual to produce wiser strategic decisions.
- <sup>31</sup> For exploration of the connection between personality disorders and flawed strategic decisionmaking, see David Owen and Jonathan Davidson, “Hubris Syndrome: An Acquired Personality Disorder? A Study of US Presidents and UK Prime Ministers over the Last 100 Years,” *Brain*, Vol. 132, No. 5, 2009. Also see Roy Porter, *A Social History of Madness: Stories of the Insane*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987. Porter states: “The history of madness is the history of power. Because it imagines power, madness is both impotence and omnipotence. It requires power to control it” (p. 39).
- <sup>32</sup> There is work on whether and how decisionmaking skills can be improved through training; we will return to this.
- <sup>33</sup> Among the decisionmakers covered in this study, a number are said to have had unusually high intelligence: Napoleon Bonaparte, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Adolph Hitler, and Henry Kissinger. However, an important school of thought holds that IQs are not indicative of the sort of mental ability and temperament that makes up an effective leader—emotional intelligence is also important. See, for example, Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, New York: Bantam Books, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Clive Thompson, *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better*, New York: Penguin Press, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Pinker, 1997.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, David C. Gompert and Irving Lachow, "Transforming U.S. Forces: Lessons from the Wider Revolution," Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, IP-193, 1999.

## Chapter Two: The Information Value Chain and the Use of Information for Strategic Decisionmaking

<sup>1</sup> There is a rich literature on the causes of war and peace in both political science and history. This chapter cannot do full justice to all the works and only points out several studies that illustrate the importance of information.

<sup>2</sup> Thucydides also identifies a number of immediate causes of conflicts, which can range from economic grievances to political disputes. See Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, New York: Penguin Books, 1974; and P. J. Rhodes, "Thucydides on the Causes of the Peloponnesian War," *Hermes*, 115 Bd., H. 2, 2nd Quarter, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Lowell Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence in Thucydides*: Vol. 11, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975.

<sup>4</sup> J. Steinberg, "The Copenhagen Complex," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1966; Ernest R. May, "*Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*," New York: Oxford University Press, 1973; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976; Richard Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decisionmakers*, New York: Free Press, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Tuchman, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Vertzberger, 1990, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Fearon, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Spencer D. Bakich, *Success and Failure in Limited War: Information and Strategy in the Korean, Vietnam, Persian Gulf, and Iraq Wars*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Jervis, "Political Implications of Loss Aversion," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Special Issue, 1992; Jack S. Levy, "Prospect Theory and International Relations: Theoretical Applications and Analytical Problems," *Political Psychology*, 1992; Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk," *Econometrica*, Vol. 47, No. 2, 1979; George W. Downs and David M. Rocke, "Conflict, Agency, and Gambling for Resurrection: The Principal-Agent Program Goes to War," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 38, No. 2, May 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Jervis, "War and Misperception," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 1988.

<sup>11</sup> For example, see the business and management literature on knowledge management or knowledge value chains: Thomas H. Davenport and Laurence Prusak, *Working Knowledge: How Organizations Manage What They Know*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Business Press, 2000; Tim Powell, "The Knowledge Value Chain (KVC): How to Fix It When It Breaks," presented at KnowledgeNets 2001, New York City, May 2001; Dominique Foray, *The Economics of Knowledge*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press,

2004. See also Department of the Defense, *Doctrine for Intelligence Support to Joint Operations*, Joint Publication 2-0, March 9, 2000; M. Fricke, "The Knowledge Pyramid: A Critique of the DIKW Hierarchy," *Journal of Information Science*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 2009; J. F. Fagan III, "A Theory of Intelligence as Processing: Implications for Society," *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2000; Loch K. Johnston, "Making the Intelligence 'Cycle' Work," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-intelligence*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1986; Edward Waltz, *Knowledge Management in the Intelligence Enterprise*, Boston: Artech House, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of the role of information, please see the later section on technology and the value chain.

<sup>13</sup> This section draws from Dominic D. P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, *Failing to Win: Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> For discussions of how leaders perceive international conflict as victories and defeats and how views of the same conflict varied over time, see Johnson and Tierney, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 117.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Wheeler, "How the Telegraph Helped Lincoln Win the Civil War," *History News Network*, 2006; Tom Wheeler, *Mr. Lincoln's T-Mails: The Untold Story of How Abraham Lincoln Used the Telegraph to Win the Civil War*, New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> John Bray, *Innovation and the Communications Revolution: From the Victorian Pioneers to Broadband Internet*, London: The Institution of Engineering and Technology, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Jim Gee, Mark Button, and Steve Kelly, *Intelligent Intelligence: The Importance of Organisational Intelligence to the Making of Good Quality Business Decisions*, Center for Counter Fraud Studies, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Human brains, however, are still more efficient per unit size and energy consumption. See Mark Fishcetti, "Computers Versus Brains," *Scientific American*, October 25, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Lawson, "40 Years Ago, Ethernet's Fathers Were the Startup Kids," *PCWorld*, May 20, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Quentin R. Skrabec Jr., *The 100 Most Significant Events in American Business*, Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2012, p. 235.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Cushion and Justin Lewis eds., *The Rise of the 24-Hour News Television: Global Perspectives*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> The U.S. government currently prohibits the selling of satellites with higher than 0.5-m resolution. Higher-resolution satellites, however, are already available and in use by government agencies. See Monique Romeijn, "Digitalglobe Request US Government to Lift Restrictions on Commercial Satellite Imagery," Satellite Imaging Corporation, October 27, 2013. According to one source, the U.S. government may have already developed spy satellites with a resolution of five to six inches by 1998. See Robert Windrem, "Spy Satellites Enter New Dimension," *NBC News*, August 8, 1998. For declassified imageries now available to decisionmakers, see Nicholas M. Short, "Military Intelligence Satellites," Federation of American Scientists, undated.

<sup>24</sup> Jim Nash, "In the Fog of Battle Acoustic Sensors Pinpoint Gunfire by Measuring Air Movement," *Scientific American*, April 30, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Karen Norrgard, "Forensics, DNA Fingerprinting, and Codis," *Nature Education*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2008, p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> Matthieu Pélissié du Rausas et al., “Internet Matters: The Net’s Sweeping Impact on Growth, Jobs, and Prosperity,” McKinsey Global Institute, May 2011. Also, according to Dean et al., “The Internet Economy in the G20: The 4.2 Trillion Growth Economy,” Boston Consulting Group, March 29, 2012, online retail accounted for 5 percent of total U.S. retail in 2010. This will grow to 7.1 percent in 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Cisco, “Cisco’s Visual Networking Index Forecast Projects Nearly Half the World’s Population Will Be Connected to the Internet by 2017,” press release, May 29, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Brenner, “What Is Big Data?” *SAP Business Innovation*, May 9, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Dominic Barton, “Age of Disruption,” Project Syndicate, January 7, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Oliver Burkeman, “Forty Years of the Internet: How the World Changed Forever,” *The Guardian*, February 14, 2014; Brenner, 2012; Steve Lohr, “The Age of Big Data,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Kelley, “CIA Chief Tech Officer: Big Data Is the Future and We Own It,” *Business Insider*, March 21, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Technology helps automate particular processes and shield these processes from human error. It is, however, not free from human error because humans have to write the algorithms and program the processes.

<sup>33</sup> It is important to note that though advanced technology has helped enhance data gathering and processing, we do not live in a world of perfect, complete information. It is still difficult to understand what and how people and adversaries think. Authoritarian governments that have strong control over their people and domestic information flows are still hard for outside observers to penetrate and understand. Countries, as well as individuals, can also implement a variety of countermeasures to prevent information leaks or to manipulate leaked or shared information to deceive adversaries. See D. W. Larson, “Good Judgment in Foreign Policy: Social Psychological Perspectives,” in *Good Judgment in Foreign Policy: Theory and Application*, ed. Stanley Allen Renshon and Deborah W. Larson, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> It is important to note here that in making decisions of war and peace, leaders generally do not face the situation of having too much useful information or too many options to choose from. Psychological research does show that having too much information and choice can make it difficult for individuals to decide. See Barry Schwartz and Andrew Ward, “Doing Better but Feeling Worse: The Paradox of Choice,” in *Positive Psychology in Practice*, ed. P. A. Linley and S. Joseph, Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> One of the groundbreaking books on the role government institutions have on foreign policy is Graham and Zelikow, 1999. Their Models II and III, on organizational behavior and governmental politics, illuminate the complexities in how governments function and influence decisionmaking. Alexander George (1980) also wrote about how presidents can rely on and use advisory systems to help them produce sound decisions.

<sup>36</sup> For one of the best works on the cognitive aspects of U.S. intelligence analysis, see Richards J. Heuer Jr., *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*, doc no. 0160590353, Central Intelligence Agency, 1999. For more recent works, see Richard Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007; Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010; Paul R. Pillar, *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

<sup>37</sup> For a helpful discussion of confirmation bias, see J. Klayman and Y.-W. Ha, “Confirmation, Disconfirmation, and Information in Hypothesis Testing,” *Psychological Review*, Vol. 94, 1987; S. Schulz-Hardt et al., “Biased Information Search in Group Decision Making,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 78, 2000.

<sup>38</sup> Alfred R. Berkeley III et al., *Intelligence Sharing Information: Final Report and Recommendations*, National Infrastructure Advisory Council, January 10, 2012; Nathan Sales, “Share and Share Alike: Intelligence Agencies and Information Sharing,” George Washington Law & Economics Research Paper, *George Washington Law Review*, Vol. 78, No. 2, 2010; AFCEA Intelligence Committee, “The Need to Share: The U.S. intelligence community and Law Enforcement,” white paper, AFCEA International, April 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Heuer, 1999. For a discussion of common “cognitive shortcuts” and empirical evidence that suggests they often lead to poor decisions, see D. Kahneman, P. Slovic, and A. Tversky, *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

<sup>40</sup> B. Fischhoff and R. Beyth-Marom, “Hypothesis Evaluation from a Bayesian Perspective,” *Psychological Review*, Vol. 90, 1983.

<sup>41</sup> There is a large body of work in psychology, political psychology, and foreign policy that focused on why it is difficult to change the beliefs and biases of individuals or leaders. As early as 1969, Alexander George laid out of the concept of operational code, or a master set of beliefs that an individual’s beliefs are organized around. See Alexander L. George, “The ‘Operational Code’: A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decisionmaking,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1969. For a review of the political psychology works over time, see Robert Jervis, Robert Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence*, Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985; Robert Jervis, “Understanding Beliefs,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 27, October 2006; Jack S. Levy, “Psychology and Foreign Policy Decision-Making,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, 2nd ed., ed. Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. For works in psychology about status quo bias, see W. Samuelson and R. Zeckhauser, “Status Quo Bias in Decision Making,” *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1988; H. R. Arkes and C. Blumer, “The Psychology of Sunk Cost,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol 35, No. 1, 1985; B. M. Staw, “Knee-Deep in the Big Muddy: A Study of Escalating Commitment to a Chosen Course of Action,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1976.

<sup>42</sup> Dominic D. P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, “The Rubicon Theory of War: How the Path to Conflict Reaches the Point of No Return,” *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2011. People also tend to switch from more deliberative to more heuristic processing under time pressure. See also Kahneman, 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, New York: Free Press, 1973; Dominic D. P. Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004; Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon, “Why Hawks Win,” *Foreign Policy*, 2006; Tuchman, 2011.

<sup>44</sup> For a study of the effect of confidence levels on group decisionmaking during uncertainty, see J. A. Sniezek, “Groups Under Uncertainty: An Examination of Confidence in Group Decision Making,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol. 52, 1992.

<sup>45</sup> A potential example of the difficulty of evaluating threats and the importance of particular roles of government agencies is the current debate on the ability of the National Security Agency (NSA) to prevent terrorist attacks by accessing individual metadata, or communications data that include phone logs. The President’s Review Group on Intelligence and Communications Technologies, for example, discusses how intelligence agencies tend to “expand beyond their initial scope” and that the intel-

ligence agencies failed to provide a single example of how NSA monitoring of metadata prevented a terrorist attack. See John Cassidy, "Inside the White House NSA Report: The Good and the Bad," *The New Yorker*, December 20, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> Political phenomena are difficult to predict and judge, even for experts. However, experts who are more willing to improvise and update their beliefs to changing situations are more capable of exercising better prediction and judgment than experts who adamantly adhere to one major ideology or understanding of the world. See Philip Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Larson, 2003, p. 6.

<sup>48</sup> Larson, 2003, p. 7.

<sup>49</sup> Larson, 2003, p. 9.

<sup>50</sup> Graham and Zelikow, 1999, p. ix.

<sup>51</sup> George, 1969.

<sup>52</sup> For a full discussion of the limits of human rationality in decisionmaking, especially the effect of time sensitivity, see Simon, 1962.

<sup>53</sup> Alexander George, "Analysis and Judgment in Policymaking," in *Good Judgment in Foreign Policy: Theory and Application*, ed. Stanley A. Renshon and Deborah Welch Larson, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003, pp. 262–263.

<sup>54</sup> Leonie Huddy, Stanley Feldman, and Erin Cassese, "On the Distinct Political Effects of Anger and Anxiety," in *The Affect Effect: Dynamics of Emotion in Political Thinking and Behavior*, ed. W. Russell Neuman, George E. Marcus, Ann N. Crigler, and Michael Mackuen, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> For more examples and analysis of overconfidence in decisionmaking, see D. A. Moore and P. J. Healy, "The Trouble with Overconfidence," *Psychological Review*, Vol. 115, No. 2, 2008; J. F. Yates, "Judgment and Decision Making," *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, Vol. 4, No. 1, January/March 1991.

<sup>56</sup> Kahneman and Renshon, 2006; Johnson, 2004.

<sup>57</sup> Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; A. Tversky and D. Kahneman, "The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice," *Science*, Vol. 211, No. 4481, 1981.

<sup>58</sup> David A. Welch, "Culture and Emotion as Obstacles to Good Judgment: The Case of Argentina's Invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas," in *Good Judgment in Foreign Policy: Social Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Stanley A. Renshon and Deborah Welch Larson, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003. See also the literature on strategic culture—for example, P. J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996; A. I. Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998.

<sup>59</sup> Ole R. Holsti and Alexander L. George, "The Effects of Stress on the Performance of Foreign Policy-Makers," *Political Science Annual*, Vol. 6, 1975.

<sup>60</sup> James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies, and Nations*, New York: Random House, 2005; J. E. McGrath, *Groups: Interaction and Performance*: Vol. 14, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984.

<sup>61</sup> At the judgment stage, authoritarian leaders may have to appeal to a smaller audience or selectorate to stay in power. Authoritarian leaders, however, are likely to still face political and economic constraints on their decisions. In democratic societies, the media may have greater freedom to report on their leader's foreign policy decisionmaking process, creating additional constraints and pressures for leaders to be careful of what is discussed and considered and how the public and international community may react.

<sup>62</sup> Studies, however, show that "portraying the adversary as evil constrains future policy options available to the [leader], whereas exercising good political judgment entails maximizing one's leeway." S. J. Wayne, "Bad Guys and Bad Judgments," in *Good Judgment in Foreign Policy: Theory and Application*, ed. Stanley A. Renshon and Deborah W. Larson, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003, p. 315; Larson, 2003.

### Chapter Three: Napoleon's Invasion of Russia, 1812

<sup>1</sup> It should be said that when he decided to invade Russia, Napoleon was already encountering military adversity in the Iberian campaign, mainly opposed by British forces abetted by superior British sea power. Indeed, the difficulty of defeating the British in Iberia contributed to his decision to turn his strategic attention to Russia.

<sup>2</sup> The Treaty of Tilsit came at the expense of Prussia and Austria, which had been defeated by Napoleon. In addition to major concessions to France, the treaty also rewarded Russia for accepting France's winnings and for siding with France against still-unbeaten England.

<sup>3</sup> This factor in Napoleon's decision to invade Russia is featured in Theodore Ayrault Dodge's analysis in *Napoleon's Invasion of Russia*, London: Frontline Books, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Napoleon to his troops, quoted in Dodge, 2008, p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> Napoleon's address at his headquarters in Vilkoviski, June 22, 1812, as described in Dodge, 2008, pp. 44–45.

<sup>6</sup> Simply stated, the Continental System was a political-economic construction intended by Napoleon to reinforce the cohesion and commerce of Europe under French influence and his control. It consisted mainly but not exclusively of nations over which Napoleon had extended dominion by force or other means. Great Britain was excluded, though its sea power enabled it to survive economically through access to resources and markets outside the Continental System.

<sup>7</sup> Dodge, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Dodge, 2008, p. 39.

<sup>9</sup> Napoleon's letter to the king of Wurttemberg, quoted in J. Christopher Herold, *The Age of Napoleon*, New York: American Heritage Publishing, 1963, p. 90; emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> Napoleon to his troops, quoted in Dodge, 2008, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> Napoleon's military doctrine, which stressed the maneuver and strike of superior force to rout enemy forces at a chosen place and time, proved irrelevant in the Russian campaign.

<sup>12</sup> Napoleon at Vilkoviski, quoted in Dodge, 2008, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> Dodge, 2008, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> Dodge, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> A quote from Napoleon, recorded by the French Ambassador to Russia, Narbonne, on March 5, 1812; quoted in Herold, 1963, p. 290.

<sup>16</sup> Herold, 1963, p. 184.

<sup>17</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, "How David Beats Goliath: When Underdogs Break the Rules," *The New Yorker*, May 2011.

<sup>18</sup> This observation is inferred from the analysis of Dodge (2008) and Herold (1963).

<sup>19</sup> Gompert et al., 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Dodge, 2008, p. 278.

<sup>21</sup> Dodge, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Dodge, 2008, p. 179.

<sup>23</sup> Napoleon quoted in Dodge, 2008, p. 194.

<sup>24</sup> These Napoleonic traits are evident from Dodge (2008) and Herold (1963).

<sup>25</sup> In the assessment of Dodge, "not one of the Russian commanders was a great soldier" (2008, p. 278).

<sup>26</sup> Herold, 1963, p. 333.

<sup>27</sup> Herold, 1963, p. 339.

<sup>28</sup> Dodge, 2008, p. 30.

<sup>29</sup> Dodge, 2008, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Herold, 1963, p. 287.

<sup>31</sup> Armand Augustin Louis de Caulaincourt's memoirs, quoted in Herold, 1963, p. 289.

<sup>32</sup> Dodge, 2008, p. 29.

<sup>33</sup> Napoleon quoted in Dodge, 2008, p. 30.

<sup>34</sup> Dodge, 2008, p. 30.

<sup>35</sup> Herold, 1963, p. 340.

<sup>36</sup> Herold, 1963, p. 288.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Herold, 1963, p. 287.

<sup>38</sup> Herold, 1963, p. 291.

<sup>39</sup> Dodge, 2008, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Reported by Dodge, 2008; and Herold, 1963.

<sup>41</sup> Dodge, 2008, p. 278.

<sup>42</sup> Dodge, 2008, p. 30.

<sup>43</sup> Dodge, 2008.



## Chapter Four: The American Decision to Go to War with Spain, 1898

- <sup>1</sup> A government board of inquiry at the time was unconvinced that the Spaniards had blown up the *Maine*.
- <sup>2</sup> These paragraphs are drawn from Evan Thomas, *The War Lovers: Roosevelt, Lodge, Hearst, and the Rush to Empire, 1898*, New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2010.
- <sup>3</sup> The underlying sources of the U.S. decision to go to war with Spain are developed at length in Thomas, 2010.
- <sup>4</sup> Letter to from Roosevelt to a friend, Robert Ferguson, quoted in Thomas, 2010, p. 60.
- <sup>5</sup> Mahan's ideas (published in his *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*) are discussed in David Gompert, *Sea Power and American Interests in the Western Pacific*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-151-OSD, 2013.
- <sup>6</sup> Mahan wrote: "Force is never more operative than when it is known to exist but is not brandished" (*The Interest of America in International Conditions*, 1910).
- <sup>7</sup> Thomas, 2010, quoting an article by Lodge in the *North American Review*.
- <sup>8</sup> Roosevelt to Lodge, quoted in Thomas, 2010, p. 69.
- <sup>9</sup> The other persistent, if unrealistic, U.S. strategic notion in the nineteenth century was to conquer Canada.
- <sup>10</sup> *New York Times*, December 18, 1895, front page.
- <sup>11</sup> *Washington Post* editorial.
- <sup>12</sup> The British did not entirely give up trying to oppose the attempt of the increasingly powerful upstart Americans to rid its hemisphere of European might and influence. Britain did try to rally other European states against the United States, but without effect.
- <sup>13</sup> Thomas, 2010, p. 202.
- <sup>14</sup> Thomas, 2010, p. 147.
- <sup>15</sup> Thomas, 2010, p. 177.
- <sup>16</sup> An investigation led by Admiral Hyman Rickover seventy-five years later determined that the explosion was most likely caused by a coal fire followed by an internal explosion. Thomas, 2010, pp. 215–220.
- <sup>17</sup> Thomas, 2010, p. 212.
- <sup>18</sup> According to Evan Thomas, McKinley delayed, until it was leaked, a second (less unbiased) investigation report that pointed the finger at Spain for the destruction of the *Maine*.
- <sup>19</sup> Thomas, 2010, p. 229.
- <sup>20</sup> Thomas, 2010, p. 241.

## Chapter Five: Germany's Decision to Conduct Unrestricted U-boat Warfare, 1916

<sup>1</sup> The *Lusitania* was actually a British liner, but 128 Americans were lost when it was sunk.

<sup>2</sup> Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann, an ally of the military, quoted in Tuchman, 2011, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Bethmann-Hollweg quoted in Tuchman, 2011, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Tuchman, 2011, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Ambassador to Germany James Gerard reported that Ludendorff, not Wilhelm II, was the real decisionmaker behind the scenes.

<sup>6</sup> Tuchman, 2011, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Holtzendorff quoted in Tuchman, 2011, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> Hindenburg quoted in Tuchman, 2011, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Tuchman, 2011, p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> Bethmann-Hollweg quoted in Tuchman, 2011, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> The results of the German U-boat decision are covered in Fred Iklé, *Every War Must End*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. troops saw their first major action in March 1918. By July, one million U.S. troops had joined Allied forces in France, and were then streaming in at ten thousand per day. Frederick Taylor, *The Downfall of Money*, New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> The failure of the final German offensive in mid-1918 was mainly the result of British and French military opposition. Moreover, hardship in Germany due to the British blockade was becoming severe. At the same time, the presence of two million American troops in France importantly contributed to the conclusion reached by German leaders that there was no good alternative to seeking a negotiated peace. Moreover, U.S. troops played a decisive role in fighting around Chateau-Thierry. See, e.g., Taylor, 2013, pp. 33–35.

<sup>14</sup> Tuchman explains that while both sides on the Western Front “were approaching exhaustion in resources as well as in military ideas, [by then] Germany was living on a diet of potatoes and conscripting fifteen-year-olds” (Tuchman, 2011, p. 26.)

<sup>15</sup> So eager was the German Navy to get engaged that it dispatched U-boats to begin tracking neutral shipping even before Berlin made the decision to resume attacks. Tuchman, 2011, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> Tuchman, 2011, pp. 28–29.

<sup>17</sup> Tuchman, 2011, pp. 28–29.

<sup>18</sup> The success of German admirals in persuading the then-young kaiser to regard Great Britain as an enemy and to embark on a major ship-construction program is detailed in Robert Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War*, New York: Random House, 1991.

<sup>19</sup> The argument over the kaiser's role in the prosecution of the war in general and the U-boat decision in particular has lately been informed by new documents indicating that he “was wholly incapable of fulfilling the role allotted to him as supreme war lord: to coordinate the combined efforts of the army, navy, and civilian administration in pursuit of a successful outcome to the war. His thinking on key

questions like war aims, foreign policy, or domestic political reform was simply too contradictory, too incoherent, and too erratic to make any sense to the people around him. As a result he was increasingly sidelined by other personalities and institutions, especially the Supreme Army Command.” Historical Commission of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences, *Wilhelm II als Oberster Kriegsherr im Ersten Weltkrieg: Quellen aus der militärischen Umgebung des Kaisers 1914–1918* [*Kaiser Wilhelm II as Supreme Warlord in the First World War: Sources from the Military Environment of the Emperor 1914–1918*], Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Tuchman, 2011, pp. 27–29.

## Chapter Six: Woodrow Wilson’s Decision to Enter World War I, 1917

<sup>1</sup> Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Russia’s Bolshevik Revolution are discussed in Stephen Kinzer, *The Brothers: John Foster Dulles, Allen Dulles, and Their Secret World War*, New York: Time Books, 2013, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, “An Unpublished Prolegomenon to a Peace Note,” circa November 25, 1916, quoted in Justus D. Doenecke, *Nothing Less Than War: A New History of America’s Entry into World War I*, Studies in Conflict, Diplomacy and Peace Series, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011, p. 227. Wilson’s abiding disapproval of European power politics, whether German, British, or other, is convincingly presented in John Milton Cooper Jr., *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> The failure of the 1916 Anglo-French counteroffensive at the Battle of the Somme and the bloody five-month stalemate that ensued can be regarded as the point at which all sides understood that the killing could continue for years. As the previous case indicated, it was at this point when German leaders began to contemplate a high-risk strategy to defeat Great Britain by severing its transatlantic supply line.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Doenecke, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson’s “peace without victory” speech, quoted in Doenecke, 2011, p. 243.

<sup>6</sup> Doenecke, 2011, p. 243.

<sup>7</sup> Doenecke, 2011, p. 235.

<sup>8</sup> There is some disagreement among historians about whether the Zimmermann telegram pushed the United States over the brink to war. However, it seems that the leaking of the telegram was a major factor in shifting and unifying public opinion.

<sup>9</sup> Kinzer, 2013, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> This interpretation is drawn mainly from Cooper, 2009, and Doenecke, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Other American notables in attendance were Franklin D. Roosevelt, Bernard Baruch, John Foster Dulles, Allen Dulles, and Walter Lippman.

<sup>12</sup> Wilson quoted in Kinzer, 2013, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Cooper, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> This interpretation is based on Cooper (2009) and Doenecke (2011). RAND colleague Chris Chivvis suggests that Wilson had concerns about the readiness of Americans to play a world role and thought that the League of Nations was the best way to encourage them to do so. In any case, Wilson was wrong in his belief that the United States could be induced to provide international leadership.

<sup>16</sup> Politics reinforced Wilson's hesitation, in that he was reelected in 1916 partly because he had kept the United States out of the war.

## Chapter Seven: Hitler's Decision to Invade the USSR, 1941

<sup>1</sup> The principal source for this case study is Barton Whaley, *Codeword Barbarossa*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1973.

<sup>2</sup> In this case the terms *Russia* and *Soviet Union* are used interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> Whaley, 1973, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Fritz, *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011, pp. 93–94.

<sup>5</sup> Fritz, 2011, p. 94.

<sup>6</sup> Whaley, 1973, p. 13; under the secret agreement, Russia would gain control over East Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Bessarabia.

<sup>7</sup> Whaley, 1973, p. 134.

<sup>8</sup> Whaley, 1973, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> David Stahel, *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Stahel, 2009, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Stahel, 2009, p. 102.

<sup>12</sup> Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999, p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> Whaley, 1973, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Alan Clark, *Barbarossa: The Russian German Conflict*, New York, Quill, 1985, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Stahel, 2009, p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> Whaley, 1973, p. 134.

<sup>17</sup> Whaley, 1973, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Whaley, 1973, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Gorodetsky, 1999, p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> Whaley, 1973, p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Gorodetky, 1999, pp. 75–85.

<sup>22</sup> Whaley, 1973, p. 175.

<sup>23</sup> Whaley, 1973, p. 140.

<sup>24</sup> Whaley, 1973, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> Whaley, 1973, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Leni Riefenstahl, *Leni Riefenstahl: A Memoir*, New York: Picador, 1987, p. 295; Alexandros Papagos, *The Battle of Greece, 1940–1941*, Athens: J.M. Scazakis “Alpha” Editions, 1949.

<sup>27</sup> See Whaley, 1973, for details on Hitler’s deception plans.

<sup>28</sup> See the list of these eighty-four warnings in Whaley, 1973, pp. 25–129, 132–187.

<sup>29</sup> Stahel, 2009, pp. 135–136, 247–250.

<sup>30</sup> Stahel, 2009, pp. 62–63.

<sup>31</sup> Clark, 1985, p. 287.

<sup>32</sup> For example, see Walter C. Langer, *The Secret Wartime Report on the Mind of Adolf Hitler*, New York: Basic Books, 1972; Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–1945: Nemesis*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.

<sup>33</sup> Stahel, 2009, pp. 44–45, 71–72, 143–144, 196. At one point in the planning process, German military planners thought that the campaign would last nine to seventeen weeks. Stahel, 2009, p. 43.

<sup>34</sup> Stahel, 2009, p. 138.

<sup>35</sup> Clark, 1985, p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Christian Zentner, Friedemann Bedürftig, and Amy Hackett, *The Encyclopedia of the Third Reich*, New York: Macmillan, 1991, pp. 47–48; Louis Leo Snyder, *Encyclopedia of the Third Reich*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976.

<sup>37</sup> Clark, 1985, p. 26.

<sup>38</sup> Clark, 1985, p. 27.

<sup>39</sup> Whaley, 1973, p. 91.

<sup>40</sup> Whaley, 1973, pp. 136, 138.

<sup>41</sup> Whaley, 1973, pp. 136, 138.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Hooker, “‘The World Will Hold Its Breath’: Reinterpreting Operation Barbarossa,” *Parameters*, Spring 1999.

<sup>43</sup> Stahel, 2009, p. 52.

<sup>44</sup> Stahel, 2009, p. 53.

<sup>45</sup> Stahel writes: “The Achilles heel upon which all rested was logistics” (2009, p. 127).

<sup>46</sup> Stahel, 2009, p. 196.

<sup>47</sup> Clark, 1985, p. 43.

<sup>48</sup> Whaley, 1973.

<sup>49</sup> Geoffrey A. Hosking, *Rulers and Victims: The Russians in the Soviet Union*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 242.

<sup>50</sup> Details of the lend-lease program can be found in Warren F. Kimball, *The Most Unsordid Act: Lend-Lease, 1939–1941*, Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969.

<sup>51</sup> Clark, 1985, pp. 42–43.

<sup>52</sup> Stahel, 2009, p. 138.

<sup>53</sup> See Whaley, 1973, for details.

<sup>54</sup> Hooker, 1999, pp. 150–164. Stahel (2009) also concludes that splitting the panzer group was a major folly of the German strategy.

<sup>55</sup> Hooker, 1999.

<sup>56</sup> Whaley, 1973, p. 138.

## Chapter Eight: Japan’s Attack on Pearl Harbor, 1941

<sup>1</sup> The principal reference for this chapter is Herbert Feis, *The Road to Pearl Harbor*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1950; when other references are not cited, the source is usually Feis. Other useful histories to consult on this period include: Robert J. C. Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961; Jonathan Utley, *Going to War with Japan, 1937–1941*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985; Michael Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919–1941*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987; Joseph Grew, *Turbulent Era: A Diplomatic Record of Fourth Years 1904–1945*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952; Waldo Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988; Robert J. C. Butow, *John Doe Associates: Backdoor Diplomacy for Peace, 1941*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974; Mark Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006; Eri Hotta, *Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> See Barnhart, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Barnhart (1987) argues in *Japan Prepares for Total War* that this attack into northern China was the key decision that eventually led to Pearl Harbor.

<sup>4</sup> Amnon Sella, “Kholkhin-Gol: The Forgotten War,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Ralph B. Smith, “The Japanese Period in Indochina and the Coup of 9 March 1945,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2, September 1978.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, 1978.

<sup>7</sup> On the history of the Flying Tigers, see Daniel Ford, *Flying Tigers: Claire Chenault and His American Volunteers, 1941–1942*, New York: HarperCollins, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Gompert, 2013, pp. 55–59.

- <sup>9</sup> See U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1939*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1955; for cable from Grew, see pp. 605–611.
- <sup>10</sup> Feis, 1950, p. 38.
- <sup>11</sup> Feis, 1950, p. 106. In this cable, Grew changed his position and gave a “green light” to economic sanctions.
- <sup>12</sup> Feis, 1950, p. 74.
- <sup>13</sup> Hotta, 2013, p. 54.
- <sup>14</sup> See Butow, 1974.
- <sup>15</sup> Tim Lanzendörfer, “The Route South: The Japanese Occupation of Southern Indo-China, and the American Embargo,” *The Pacific War: The U.S. Navy*, undated.
- <sup>16</sup> Butow, 1961, p. 208.
- <sup>17</sup> Feis, 1950, p. 212.
- <sup>18</sup> Hotta, 2013, pp. 137–138.
- <sup>19</sup> Lanzendörfer, undated.
- <sup>20</sup> Feis, 1950, p. 216.
- <sup>21</sup> Butow, 1961, p. 210.
- <sup>22</sup> Hotta, 2013, p. 144.
- <sup>23</sup> Butow, 1961, pp. 210–211.
- <sup>24</sup> Lanzendörfer, undated.
- <sup>25</sup> Lanzendörfer, undated.
- <sup>26</sup> There was some initial confusion about the extent of the oil embargo.
- <sup>27</sup> See Patrick J. Buchanan, “Why Did Japan Attack Us?” *The American Cause*, December 11, 2001. Also see Robert Higgs, “How US Economic Warfare Provoked Japan’s Attack on Pearl Harbor,” Ludwig von Mises Institute, December 7, 2012.
- <sup>28</sup> Feis, 1950, p. 276.
- <sup>29</sup> This is explored in Trachtenberg, 2006, pp. 79–139.
- <sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Record, *Japan’s Decision for War in 1941: Some Enduring Lessons*, Strategic Studies Institute, February 2009, p. 7.
- <sup>31</sup> Hotta, 2013, p. 15.
- <sup>32</sup> Butow, 1961, p. 315.
- <sup>33</sup> Eric Larrabee, *Commander in Chief: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, His Lieutenants, and Their War*, Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2004, p. 79.
- <sup>34</sup> Butow, 1961, pp. 320–323.

<sup>35</sup> Feis, 1950, pp. 309–310.

<sup>36</sup> Hotta, 2013, p. 127.

<sup>37</sup> Tuchman, 2011, p. 31.

<sup>38</sup> Butow, 1961, p. 155.

<sup>39</sup> Butow, 1961, pp. 15–16.

<sup>40</sup> Feis, 1950, p. 81.

<sup>41</sup> Hull quoted in Butow, 1961, p. 183.

<sup>42</sup> Feis, 1950, p. 81.

<sup>43</sup> Hotta, 2013, p. 34. Konoye argued that the peace was based not on promotion of democracy but on a desire for the United States and the UK to continue to exercise economic imperialism.

<sup>44</sup> Feis, 1950, p. 211.

<sup>45</sup> Also see Hotta, 2013, p. 73.

<sup>46</sup> Tuchman, 2011, p. 29.

<sup>47</sup> Feis, 1950, p. 109.

<sup>48</sup> Record, 2009, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> Hotta, 2013, p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> Feis, 1950, p. 195.

<sup>51</sup> Butow, 1961, p. 212.

<sup>52</sup> Hotta, 2013, p. 55.

<sup>53</sup> Feis, 1950, p. 96.

<sup>54</sup> Hotta, 2013, p. 20.

<sup>55</sup> Hotta, 2013, p. 105.

<sup>56</sup> Gordon W. Prange, Donald M. Goldstein, and Katherine V. Dillon, *Pearl Harbor: The Verdict of History*, New York: Penguin Books, 1991, pp. 479–484.

<sup>57</sup> Letter from Yamamoto to Navy Minister Shimada dated October 24, 1941, reprinted in Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, *The Pearl Harbor Papers*, New York: Brassey's, 1993, pp. 118–119.

<sup>58</sup> Tuchman, 2011, pp. 29–30.

<sup>59</sup> Prange, 1991, pp. 498–489.

<sup>60</sup> Prange, 1991, pp. 479–481.

<sup>61</sup> See Hotta, 2013, pp. 55–56.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Peter Wetzler, *Hirohito and War: Imperial Tradition and Military Decision Making in Prewar Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998, pp. 51–52.



<sup>63</sup> See Hotta, 2013, Chapters Twelve and Thirteen.

<sup>64</sup> These are not the exact three options as outlined by Tojo, which were: no war, go to war quickly, and diplomacy without dismissing the possibility of war. They are Tokyo's more realistic options. See Hotta, 2013, p. 230.

<sup>65</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II: Sicily-Salerno-Anzio, January 1943–June 1944*: Vol. 9, Boston: Little and Brown, 1954.

<sup>66</sup> Prange, 1991, p. 72.

<sup>67</sup> Tuchman, 2011, pp. 29–30.

<sup>68</sup> Yamamoto's letter to Navy Minister Koshiro Oikawa, January 7, 1941, in Goldstein and Dillon, 1993, p. 116.

<sup>69</sup> Tuchman, 2011, p. 31.

## Chapter Nine: U.S.-Soviet Showdown over the Egyptian Third Army, 1973

<sup>1</sup> Author Gompert was involved in U.S. crisis management and “shuttle diplomacy” as special assistant to Secretary of State Kissinger. Observations based on his personal involvement will be noted accordingly.

<sup>2</sup> William Burr, ed., *The October War and U.S. Policy*, electronic briefing book, National Security Archive, October 7, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Memorandum from William B. Quandt to Brent Scowcroft, “Arab-Israeli Tensions,” October 6, 1973, National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, National Security Council Files, box 1173, 1973 War (Middle East) 6 Oct. 1973 File No. 1; cited in Burr, 2003, document 13.

<sup>4</sup> Transcript, “Secretary's Staff Meeting,” October 23, 1973, 4:35 p.m., National Archives, Transcripts of Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger Staff Meetings, 1973–1977, Box 1; cited in Burr, 2003, document 63.

<sup>5</sup> CIA, declassified analytic memorandum of October 13, 1973, declassified and released on October 15, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> CIA, declassified analytic memorandum of October 13, 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Author's observation from direct personal involvement.

<sup>8</sup> According to Department of State, Operations Center, Middle East Task Force, Situation Report #43, “Situation Report in the Middle East as of 0600 Hours EDT, Oct. 19, 1973,” National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, National Security Council Files, box 1173, 1973 Middle East War, 19 Oct. 1973-File No. 14: “The Israelis feel they now have turned the corner in the war and that the initiative on both fronts is now in Israel's hands.” That the “smell of victory” might make Tel Aviv unwilling to accept a cease-fire pointed to a dangerous problem: the impact on U.S.-Soviet relations if the Israelis devastated the army of one of Moscow's major clients.

<sup>9</sup> CIA, declassified analytic memorandum of October 13, 1973.

<sup>10</sup> Kissinger told the Israelis: “We would understand if [they] felt they required some additional time for military dispositions.” When the dangers of this advice became clear, and the Israelis had launched a major offensive against Egypt’s Third Army, Kissinger wrote that he “had a sinking feeling that [he] might have emboldened them.” U.S. Embassy Soviet Union Cable 13148 to Department of State, 21 October 1973, National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, Henry A. Kissinger Office, box 39, HAK Trip—Moscow, Tel Aviv, London—October 20–23, 1973 HAKTO, SECTO, TOSEC, Misc; cited in Burr, 2003, document 51; and “Memcon Between Meir and Kissinger, October 22, 1973, 1:35–2:15 p.m.,” National Archives, Record Group 59, Department of State Records, Subject-Numeric Files 1970–1973, POL 7 US/Kissinger; cited in Burr, 2003, document 54.

<sup>11</sup> In a first-time Brezhnev-to-Kissinger message, the Soviets protested the “flagrant deceit on the part of the Israelis” to violate the cease-fire. From the accounts of Kremlin insiders, an angry Brezhnev had begun to suspect that Kissinger had “fooled [them] and made a deal when he was in Tel Aviv.” “Message from Brezhnev to Kissinger as Read by Minister Vorontsov to the Secretary on the Telephone on October 23, 1973 at 10:40 a.m.,” National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, Henry A. Kissinger Office, box 69, Dobrynin/Kissinger Vol. 20, October 12–November 27, 1973; cited in Burr, 2003, document 60.

<sup>12</sup> “Message from Brezhnev to Nixon, October 24, 1973, Received at the State Department, 10:00 p.m.,” National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, Henry A. Kissinger Office, box 69, Dobrynin/Kissinger Vol. 20 (October 12–November 27, 1973); cited in Burr, 2003, document 71.

<sup>13</sup> Brezhnev personally added the sentence on unilateral action. No one in the Politburo intended any military moves in the Middle East or expected a U.S. military reaction to what amounted to a Soviet bluff. “Memcon Between Kissinger and Huang Zhen, 25 October 1973, 4:45–5:25 p.m.,” National Archives, Record Group 59, Department of State Records, Records of the Policy Planning Staff, Director’s Files (Winston Lord), 1969–1977, Box 374, China—Sensitive, July 1973–February 1974; cited in Burr, 2003, document 72.

<sup>14</sup> CIA declassified analytic memorandum of October 13, 1973.

<sup>15</sup> According to documents in the National Archives, believing a “permanent Middle East settlement” to be a critically important goal, Nixon wanted a U.S.-Soviet agreement reached on “general terms,” which would make it easier for both superpowers “to get [their] clients in line.” Probably suspecting that Kissinger was too partial to Israeli interests, Nixon wanted his advisor to take a tough approach to both sides. As neither the Israelis nor the Arabs would approach “this subject . . . in a rational manner,” Nixon believed that Moscow and Washington had to impose a settlement in order to “bring the necessary pressures on [their] respective friends.” Facing continued attack in the Watergate scandal and no doubt seeing great political advantage in a diplomatic success, Nixon wanted Brezhnev to know that if they could reach a settlement, “it would be without question one of the brightest stars in which we hope will be a galaxy of peace stemming from the Nixon-Brezhnev relationship.” Upon learning of Nixon’s thinking, Kissinger conveyed to Scowcroft his “shock.” He argued that if he carried out the instructions, it would “totally wreck what little bargaining leverage [he] still [had].” Nixon’s vision of the superpowers imposing their will on wayward clients was wholly inconsistent with Kissinger’s determination to extricate the Soviet Union from the Middle East peace process. “Situation Room Message from Peter Rodman to Kissinger, TOHAK 20, 20 October 1973, Transmitting Memorandum from Scowcroft to Kissinger,” National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, Henry A. Kissinger Office, box 39, HAK Trip—Moscow, Tel Aviv, London—October 20–23, 1973, TOHAK 1-60; cited in Burr, 2003, document 47; and “Message from Kissinger to Scowcroft, HAKTO 06 [20 October 1973],” National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, Henry A. Kissinger Office, box 39, HAK Trip—Moscow, Tel Aviv, London—October 20–23, 1973, HAKTO, SECTO, TOSEC, Misc; cited in Burr, 2003, document 48.

<sup>16</sup> “Memcon Between Kissinger and Huang Zhen, 25 October 1973, 4:45–5:25 p.m.,” National Archives, Record Group 59, Department of State Records, Records of the Policy Planning Staff, Director’s Files (Winston Lord), 1969–1977, Box 374, China—Sensitive, July 1973–February 1974; cited in Burr, 2003, document 72.

<sup>17</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Thomas Moorer ordered U.S. military commands to raise their alert levels to DEFCON III, which meant putting nuclear-armed units on the “highest state of peacetime alert” (DEFCON II would mean that nuclear forces were ready for imminent use). In addition, as the Washington Special Action Group became aware of other Soviet military moves—the alerting of some East German units and the preparation of transport planes to fly to Egypt from Budapest—it reinforced the DEFCON III by alerting the 82nd Airborne Division and ordering movements of aircraft carriers toward the Eastern Mediterranean.

<sup>18</sup> “Nixon to Brezhnev, 25 October 1973, Delivered to Soviet Embassy, 5:40 a.m.,” National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, Henry A. Kissinger Office, box 69, Dobrynin/Kissinger Vol. 20 (October 12–November 27, 1973); cited in Burr, 2003, document 73.

<sup>19</sup> “Nixon to Brezhnev, 25 October 1973, Delivered to Soviet Embassy, 5:40 a.m.,” National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, Henry A. Kissinger Office, box 69, Dobrynin/Kissinger Vol. 20 (October 12–November 27, 1973); cited in Burr, 2003, document 73.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Burr, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995.

<sup>22</sup> Kissinger correctly understood Arabs’ interests and thus the U.S. opportunity with them, as evident in Transcript, “Secretary’s Staff Meeting,” October 23, 1973, 4:35 p.m., National Archives, Transcripts of Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger Staff Meetings, 1973–1977, Box 1; cited in Burr, 2003, document 63.

<sup>23</sup> A good example of this is the declassified October 13, 1973, CIA memorandum, which cogently and helpfully explained Israeli options after achieving the upper hand.

<sup>24</sup> “Situation Room Message from Peter Rodman to Kissinger, TOHAK 20, 20 October 1973, transmitting memorandum from Scowcroft to Kissinger,” National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, Henry A. Kissinger Office, box 39, HAK Trip—Moscow, Tel Aviv, London—October 20–23, 1973, TOHAK 1-60; cited in Burr, 2003, document 47.

<sup>25</sup> Walter Isaacson’s 1992 biography of Kissinger cites some of this material. For example, on October 6, Kissinger urged Nixon’s assistant, General Alexander Haig, to keep Nixon in Florida in order to avoid “any hysterical moves” and to “keep any Walter Mitty tendencies under control.” Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.

<sup>26</sup> Author’s observation based on involvement.

<sup>27</sup> The author’s observations about the inner workings of Kissinger’s decisionmaking are based on personal involvement in the State Department in October 1973.

## Chapter Ten: China’s Punitive War Against Vietnam, 1979

<sup>1</sup> Bruce A. Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795–1989*, New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 284.

- <sup>2</sup> The two most notable recent works that see this war in a more positive light are Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011; and Henry Kissinger, *On China*, New York: Penguin Books, 2011.
- <sup>3</sup> King C. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications*, Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1987, pp. 50–64.
- <sup>4</sup> Elleman, 2001, p. 286.
- <sup>5</sup> Xiaoming Zhang, “Deng Xiaoping and China’s Decision to Go to War with Vietnam,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2010, p. 6.
- <sup>6</sup> Vogel, 2011, pp. 483–484.
- <sup>7</sup> Elleman, 2001, p. 287.
- <sup>8</sup> Vietnam had begun bombing Cambodia as early as July 1978.
- <sup>9</sup> Kenneth G. Weiss, “Power Grows Out of the Barrel of a Gunboat: The U.S. in Sino-Soviet Crises,” Center for Naval Analyses, Professional Paper 376, December 1982, pp. 55–56.
- <sup>10</sup> Zhang, 2010, p. 20.
- <sup>11</sup> Vogel, 2011, p. 950.
- <sup>12</sup> Kissinger, 2011, p. 370.
- <sup>13</sup> Zhang, 2010, p. 19.
- <sup>14</sup> Vogel, 2011, p. 950.
- <sup>15</sup> Official Chinese figures put the number of Chinese casualties aiding Vietnam at around four thousand, but Chinese scholars estimate the figure to be in the tens of thousands. See Vogel, 2011, p. 487.
- <sup>16</sup> Elleman, 2001, p. 285.
- <sup>17</sup> Vogel, 2011, p. 487.
- <sup>18</sup> Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000, p. 214.
- <sup>19</sup> Vogel, 2011, pp. 485–492.
- <sup>20</sup> For a brief overview of the PLA’s use of force abroad and its use of force against India and Vietnam, see Mark A. Ryan, David M. Finkelstein, and Michael A. McDevitt, eds., *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949*, Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2003.
- <sup>21</sup> Chinese leaders were familiar with using force to defend territorial disputes and had used force, for example, against India in 1962 and the Soviet Union in 1969.
- <sup>22</sup> Edward C. O’Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*, New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 78.
- <sup>23</sup> O’Dowd, 2007, p. 78.
- <sup>24</sup> Kissinger, 2011, p. 356.
- <sup>25</sup> Kissinger, 2011, pp. 356–359.

- <sup>26</sup> K. Chen, 1987, p. 86.
- <sup>27</sup> Vogel, 2011, p. 948.
- <sup>28</sup> Quote from Vogel, 2011, p. 948. See also Zhang, 2010, pp. 17–19.
- <sup>29</sup> K. Chen, 1987, p. 89.
- <sup>30</sup> Zhang, 2010, p. 19.
- <sup>31</sup> Vogel, 2011, p. 949.
- <sup>32</sup> K. Chen, 1987, p. 88.
- <sup>33</sup> Zhang, 2010, pp. 27–28.
- <sup>34</sup> Zhang, 2010, pp. 20–21.
- <sup>35</sup> China began probing Vietnamese positions along the border in October 1978. By November, China was moving army units closer to the war front by rail. See O’Dowd, 2007, pp. 50–54.
- <sup>36</sup> O’Dowd, 2007, pp. 111–121.
- <sup>37</sup> Zhang, 2010, p. 22.
- <sup>38</sup> Zhang, 2010, pp. 19–22.
- <sup>39</sup> K. Chen, 1987, pp. 92–93.
- <sup>40</sup> Vogel, 2011, pp. 949–951.
- <sup>41</sup> June Teufel Dreyer, “Deng Xiaoping: The Soldier,” *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 135, Special Issue: “Deng Xiaoping: An Assessment,” September 1993.
- <sup>42</sup> O’Dowd, 2007, p. 3; and Elleman, 2001, p. 285.
- <sup>43</sup> Early works on the Sino-Vietnam War (even Elleman, 2001) assess Chinese strength as near 200,000–250,000 troops. A recent authoritative study by O’Dowd estimates that China deployed more than 400,000 troops. See O’Dowd, 2007, p. 3.
- <sup>44</sup> O’Dowd, 2007, p. 73.
- <sup>45</sup> O’Dowd, 2007, p. 88.
- <sup>46</sup> Elleman, 2001, p. 285.
- <sup>47</sup> O’Dowd, 2007, pp. 72–73.
- <sup>48</sup> Chinese sources claim that when Xu Shiyou received the order to withdraw, he believed that he could take Hanoi within two hours. See Chen Tingyi, “Xu Shiyou De Zuihou Yizhan, Daxia Liangshan Hou Buxiang Zhebing” [“Xu Shiyou’s Final Battle: Unwilling to Withdraw After Advancing to Liangshan”], *Chinaiiss.com*, 1992.
- <sup>49</sup> Experts credit the Sino-Vietnam War as well as Deng’s economic reforms and opening for creating a thaw in China’s relations with Southeast Asia in the 1980s. Previously, relations between China and Southeast Asia were hostile. See Richard Sokolsky, Angel Rabasa, and C. Richard Neu, *The Role of Southeast Asia in U.S. Strategy Toward China*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-1170-AF, 2001, pp. 30–31.

<sup>50</sup> Weiss, 1982, p. 86; Vogel, 2011, p. 960.

<sup>51</sup> Xiaoming Zhang, “China’s 1979 War with Vietnam: A Reassessment,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 184, December 2005, p. 868.

<sup>52</sup> Elleman, 2001, pp. 284–285.

<sup>53</sup> Weiss, 1982, pp. 63–67.

<sup>54</sup> Kissinger, 2011, p. 371.

<sup>55</sup> Kissinger, 2011, p. 373.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Yahuda, “Deng Xiaoping: The Statesman,” *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 135, Special Issue: “Deng Xiaoping: An Assessment,” 1993. For more information on how China settled territorial disputes with Vietnam and other countries, see Taylor M. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China’s Territorial Disputes*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008.

<sup>57</sup> Zhang, 2010, p. 20.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Baum, *Burying Mao: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 88.

<sup>59</sup> Vogel, 2011, pp. 959–960.

## Chapter Eleven: The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 1979

<sup>1</sup> The Soviet decision not to intervene militarily in Poland (see Chapter Twelve) was heavily influenced by the struggles being experienced in Afghanistan.

<sup>2</sup> Svetlana Savranskaya and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan a Case of Mission Creep, According to New Book and Original Soviet Documents: The Dead End Published in English for the First Time*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 396, Washington, D.C.: National Security Archive, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Savranskaya and Byrne, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Gompert et al., 2008, p. 242.

<sup>5</sup> Prior to the Soviet intervention, the U.S. chargé d’affaires, Adolph Debs (later assassinated), urged the State Department to pay more attention to Afghanistan, lest it irreversibly fall into Soviet orbit.

<sup>6</sup> Savranskaya and Byrne, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Failure to gain release of the American hostages in Tehran was viewed as harder evidence of Carter’s fecklessness. Still, his admission that he was, in effect, surprised and disappointed that the Soviets would invade another state was politically damaging.

<sup>8</sup> Savranskaya and Byrne, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Savranskaya and Byrne, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> The belief of Soviet leaders—though not of officers and agents in the field—that a brief and nonviolent intervention would work is consistent across accounts of the decisionmaking.

<sup>11</sup> Savranskaya and Byrne, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Savranskaya and Byrne, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> As noted elsewhere, Soviet officers and agents in the field reported such information, though intermediate managers discouraged and in some cases prevented it from being passed up the line. Savranskaya and Byrne, 2012.

## Chapter Twelve: The Soviet Decision Not to Invade Poland, 1981

<sup>1</sup> The Soviet Suslov Commission, consisting of Suslov, Gromyko, Andropov, and Ustinov, proposed a plan in August 1980, subsequently approved by the full Politburo, to bring four Soviet tank and mechanized divisions in the three military districts adjoining Poland up to full combat readiness.

<sup>2</sup> The position taken by Kulikov at the 1997 Jachranka Conference concerning the crisis—also attended by Jaruzelski, Kania, Brzezinski, and others—was that there were never plans to intervene in Poland, not even in late 1980.

<sup>3</sup> The United States was also warning the Poles that a crackdown on Solidarity would trigger a tough reaction.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Kramer, “Soviet Deliberations During the Polish Crisis, 1980–1981,” Special Working Paper No. 1, Cold War History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., April 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Kramer, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> At the Politburo meeting on April 2, Brezhnev still advocated “as a back-up option the possibility of convening the seven member-states” of the alliance, presumably to authorize their joint armed intervention. But four days later he told the Czechoslovak Communist Party congress in Prague that the way out of the Polish crisis was now in Polish hands. The “Soiuz” maneuvers ended, and while menacing overflights of Poland by Soviet aircraft flying supplies to Soviet bases on its territory continued for several more days; for all intents and purposes the military option had been abandoned.

<sup>7</sup> Kramer, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> There is no evidence that any further Soviet tank or motorized divisions in the USSR were brought up to full combat readiness over the next year. If Kania and Jaruzelski had instead been amenable to the entry of Soviet forces on December 8 (the scheduled starting date for the “exercises”), the scenario undoubtedly would have been carried out as planned. But because the Polish leaders were not yet ready to accept allied troops, Moscow’s plans had to be put on hold.

<sup>9</sup> Army General Anatolii Gribkov, the first deputy commander-in-chief of the Warsaw Pact’s Joint Armed Forces, from 1976 to 1988, who was deeply involved in Soviet military planning vis-à-vis Poland, wrote in 1992: “Was there a viable plan to send allied troops into Poland? Yes, there was such a plan. What is more, reconnaissance of entry routes and of concentration points for allied forces was carried out with the active participation of Polish officials. Recently, the view has been put forth that if martial law had not been introduced in Poland on 13 December 1981, allied troops would have entered Poland. Let me emphasize that there were indeed such plans, and the Polish state and military leadership knew about them. But there was not, and could not have been, any final decision on whether to send in troops.” Quoted in Kramer, 1999, p. 184.

<sup>10</sup> Marshal Viktor Kulikov, the commander-in-chief of the Warsaw Pact, emphasized this point when he spoke with Kania and Jaruzelski in Warsaw in early April 1981: “Our common goal should be to resolve the crisis without having to send allied armies into Poland. All socialist states should strive toward this end. Unless the Polish state security organs and Polish army are deployed, outside support cannot be expected, since it would cause international complications. The Polish comrades must try first to solve their problems on their own.” “Report on Meeting Between Kulikov and East German Generals on 7 April 1981,” in the “Poland, 1980-82: Internal Crisis, International Dimensions” compendium, edited by Malcolm Byrne, Pawel Machcewicz, and Christian F. Ostermann, doc. no. 50, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Kramer, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Far from having “saved” Poland from a Soviet invasion, Jaruzelski appears to have been promoting the very thing he now claims to have prevented. None of this is meant to gloss over that Jaruzelski in some ways was a stronger figure than Kania, but, unlike Kania, he was willing in the end to comply with Moscow’s demands. His compliance initially gave rise to final preparations for the “lesser of two evils”—that is, martial law—but when the critical moment came in late 1981, he seems to have embraced the “greater of two evils,” Soviet military intervention. By December 1981 (and perhaps earlier), Jaruzelski was pleading with Soviet leaders to send troops into Poland to assist with the martial law operation, and by all indications he was devastated when his requests were turned down. Jaruzelski’s profound disappointment upon learning that he would not receive external military assistance was due to his continued lack of confidence that the martial law operation would succeed. According to Kania, Jaruzelski had long feared that chaotic turmoil might ensue and that Polish units would be unable to cope with violent upheavals on their own. See Francis J. Meehan, “Reflections on the Polish Crisis,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars), “Cold War Flashpoints,” No. 11, Winter 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Kramer, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Kramer, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Ustinov and Gromyko echoed Andropov: Ustinov let Jaruzelski know that “the Poles themselves must resolve the Polish question. We are not preparing to send troops onto the territory of Poland.” Gromyko argued: “We must somehow try to dispel the notion that Jaruzelski and other leaders in Poland have about the introduction of [Soviet] troops. There cannot be any introduction of troops into Poland.” “Transcript of Meeting of the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, December 10, 1981,” document no. # 3B3F5A3C-0813-9003-E61F6E745757D4FB, Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

<sup>16</sup> The Soviets did increase economic aid for Poland, though this was just a temporary patch, since the underlying economic problems in Poland and elsewhere could only be solved with a degree of reform that most communists opposed.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski views Carter’s hot-line message of December 3 as a factor in the Soviet decision not to intervene. See Kramer, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> The second stage of troop mobilizations, involving another five to seven Soviet divisions, would have been carried out only if “the situation in Poland deteriorate[d] further” and “the main forces of the Polish Army [went] over to the side of the counterrevolutionary forces.” “Special Dossier on the Polish Crisis of 1980,” August 28, 1980, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Library of Congress, Volkogonov Collection, Reel 18, Container 27; translated by Malcolm Byrne.

<sup>19</sup> Translation of Soviet deliberations from the Politburo session of December 10, 1981, quoted in Kramer, 1999.



<sup>20</sup> Kramer, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> The roles and sentiments of Brezhnev, Honecker, and other communist leaders are well covered in Vojtech Mastny, *The Soviet Non-Invasion of Poland in 1980–81 and the End of the Cold War*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1998.

## Chapter Thirteen: Argentina’s Invasion of the Falklands (Malvinas), 1982

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Kinney, “Anglo-Argentine Diplomacy and the Falklands Crisis,” in *The Falklands War: Lessons for Strategy, Diplomacy, and International Law*, ed. A. R. Coll, and A. C. Arend, Boston: G. Allen and Unwin, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Kinney, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Kinney, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Deputy Secretary of State Walter Stoessel made a hasty and regrettable statement that the United States would remain “right down the middle.”

<sup>5</sup> Author Gompert was a senior State Department official at the time of the Falklands War and associated diplomacy. He was a member of Secretary Haig’s negotiating team and attended all discussions with both parties. This and other observations, as noted, are based on the author’s involvement and recollections, many of which have been published.

<sup>6</sup> The only respect in which Argentine forces performed effectively against British forces was in air-to-surface attacks (using French Exocet missiles) on British naval combatants. However, the British casualties that resulted only enflamed British public opinion and removed any doubt that 10 Downing Street would fight until victory was complete. Even had more Royal Navy ships been sunk or disabled, the British would not have been prevented from retaking the Falklands from the hungry and homesick Argentine troops on the islands.

<sup>7</sup> Author’s observation based on direct involvement.

<sup>8</sup> Nora Femenia, “Emotional Actor: Foreign Policy Decision-Making in the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas War,” in *Social Conflicts and Collective Identities*, ed. Patrick G. Coy and Lynne M. Woehrle, Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000, p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> Author’s observations based on involvement.

<sup>10</sup> Costa Méndez did not view the occupation as a use of force so much as a maneuver to strengthen Argentina’s otherwise weak negotiating hand. The Sunday Times of London Insight Team, *War in the Falklands: The Full Story*, New York: Harper and Row, 1982, pp. 28–30.

<sup>11</sup> It might be said that in Costa Méndez the junta got just the person it wanted. He was a fervent nationalist yet experienced and “pro-Western” enough to understand the United States and the United Kingdom: “As it turned out, his appointment was to be disastrous [for the junta]. . . . [H]is assessment of how Britain and America would react to seizing the islands was fatally misjudged.” The Sunday Times Insight Team, 1982, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Femenia, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Femenia, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Femenia, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Femenia, 2000, p. 54.

<sup>16</sup> Author's observation based on involvement.

## Chapter Fourteen: The U.S. Invasion of Iraq, 2003

<sup>1</sup> Sources used for this case include: Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004; Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2008; Richard Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009; Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*, New York: Vintage Books, 2007; Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2003 to 2005*, New York: Penguin, 2007; Jervis, 2010; Betts, 2007; Pillar, 2011; Bing West and Ray Smith, *The March Up: Taking Baghdad with the 1st Marine Division*, New York: Bantam, 2003; James Dobbins et al., *Occupying Iraq: A History of the Coalition Provisional Authority*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-847, 2009; John Keegan, *The Iraq War*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004; Richard Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror*, New York: Free Press, 2004; Tommy Franks, *American Soldier*, Norwalk, Conn.: Easton Press, 2004; Alexander Thompson, *Channels of Power*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> See Glenn Kessler, "Claims of Saddam's 'Far-Reaching' Ties to al-Qaeda Are a Stretch," *The Washington Post*, July 20, 2014, p. A4.

<sup>3</sup> Clarke, 2004, p. 274.

<sup>4</sup> Reuters on report of the Watson Institute, March 14, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> See "Public Sees U.S. Power Declining as Support for Global Engagement Slips," *America's Place in the World 2013*, Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, December 3, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Freedman, 2008, p. 400.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East*, New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> Ivo Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003, pp. 104, 130.

<sup>12</sup> Clarke, 2004, p. 268.

<sup>13</sup> Ricks, 2007, pp. 31–32.

<sup>14</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 48; and Haass, 2009, p. 229.

<sup>15</sup> See Clarke, 2004, for a detailed account of the Bush administration and September 11.

<sup>16</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 46.

- <sup>17</sup> Haass, 2009, p. 235.
- <sup>18</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 81.
- <sup>19</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 42.
- <sup>20</sup> Freedman, 2008, p. 265.
- <sup>21</sup> The possibility of using Iraqi territory for future U.S. contingencies with Iran was discussed among U.S. officials in Baghdad and Washington in 2004.
- <sup>22</sup> Woodward, 2004, pp. 9–12.
- <sup>23</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 70.
- <sup>24</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 187.
- <sup>25</sup> Freedman, 2008, p. 242.
- <sup>26</sup> Freedman, 2008, p. 401.
- <sup>27</sup> Daalder and Lindsay, 2003, p. 120.
- <sup>28</sup> Quoted in Ricks, 2007, p. 60.
- <sup>29</sup> See The White House, *The National Security Strategy*, September 2002; and Ricks, 2007, p. 60.
- <sup>30</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 22.
- <sup>31</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 25.
- <sup>32</sup> Daalder and Lindsay, 2003, p. 130.
- <sup>33</sup> Louis Fisher, “Deciding on War Against Iraq: Institutional Failures,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 118, No. 3, 2003.
- <sup>34</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 31.
- <sup>35</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 4.
- <sup>36</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 31.
- <sup>37</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 32.
- <sup>38</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 2.
- <sup>39</sup> Woodward, 2004, pp. 52–53.
- <sup>40</sup> Daniel Eisenberg, “We’re Taking Him Out,” *Time*, May 5, 2002.
- <sup>41</sup> Freedman, 2008, p. 404.
- <sup>42</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 39.
- <sup>43</sup> Haass, 2009, p. 213.
- <sup>44</sup> See Haass, 2009, pp. 222–223, for a similar assessment.
- <sup>45</sup> Pillar, 2011, p. 16.

- <sup>46</sup> Haass, 2009, p. 16.
- <sup>47</sup> Haass, 2009, p. 220.
- <sup>48</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 4.
- <sup>49</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 42.
- <sup>50</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 21.
- <sup>51</sup> Haass, 2009, p. 216.
- <sup>52</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 50; Gordon and Trainor, 2007, p. 26.
- <sup>53</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 59.
- <sup>54</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 65.
- <sup>55</sup> Haass, 2009, p. 223.
- <sup>56</sup> Freedman, 2008, p. 404.
- <sup>57</sup> Daalder and Lindsay, 2003, p. 79.
- <sup>58</sup> Pillar, 2011, p. 51.
- <sup>59</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 25.
- <sup>60</sup> Daalder and Lindsay, 2003, p. 87.
- <sup>61</sup> Haass, 2009, p. 234.
- <sup>62</sup> Daalder and Lindsay, 2003, p. 143.
- <sup>63</sup> Freedman, 2008, p. 398.
- <sup>64</sup> Clarke, 2004, p. 243.
- <sup>65</sup> Haass, 2009, pp. 211, 234.
- <sup>66</sup> Daalder and Lindsay, 2003, p. 119.
- <sup>67</sup> Clark, 2004, p. 266.
- <sup>68</sup> Haass, 2009, p. 231.
- <sup>69</sup> Betts, 2007, p. 114.
- <sup>70</sup> Betts, 2007, p. 119.
- <sup>71</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 56.
- <sup>72</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 53.
- <sup>73</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 55; Haass, 2009, p. 231.
- <sup>74</sup> Haass, 2009, p. 215.
- <sup>75</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 54–55.
- <sup>76</sup> Clark, 2004, pp. 266–267.

<sup>77</sup> Betts, 2007, p. 92.

<sup>78</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 54.

<sup>79</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 49.

<sup>80</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 58.

<sup>81</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 55.

<sup>82</sup> Haass, 2009, p. 230.

<sup>83</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 53.

<sup>84</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 52.

<sup>85</sup> Betts, 2007, p. 124.

<sup>86</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 53–55.

<sup>87</sup> Betts, 2007, p. 93. Senators Bob Graham and Richard Durbin complained about this but could not get the reservations made public.

<sup>88</sup> Haass, 2009, p. 231. Vice President Cheney had made several trips to CIA headquarters to try to establish this link, but the evidence was not there. See Betts, 2007, p. 93.

<sup>89</sup> Ricks, 2007, p. 52.

<sup>90</sup> For a full discussion of the intelligence failure, see Jervis, 2010, pp. 123–155.

<sup>91</sup> Pillar, 2011, p. 70.

<sup>92</sup> Pillar, 2011, p. 72.

<sup>93</sup> Fisher, 2003.

<sup>94</sup> Ricks, 2007, pp. 62–63.

<sup>95</sup> Pillar, 2011, p. 71. Pillar argues that the NIE gave Democrats cover to vote according to their political needs (p. 70).

<sup>96</sup> Keegan, 2004, p. 125.

<sup>97</sup> A. Thompson, 2009, p. 146.

<sup>98</sup> Pillar, 2011, p. 39.

<sup>99</sup> A. Thompson, 2009, p. 146.

<sup>100</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441, November 16, 2002.

<sup>101</sup> *The Guardian*, February 5, 2003.

<sup>102</sup> Hans Binnendijk and Richard Kugler, *Seeing the Elephant*, Dulles, Va.: Potomac Press, 2006, pp. 228–231.

<sup>103</sup> The meeting was attended by author Binnendijk.

<sup>104</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 408.

<sup>105</sup> Keegan, 2004, pp. 3–5.

<sup>106</sup> Keegan, 2004, pp. 3–5.

<sup>107</sup> Woodward, 2004, p. 408.

<sup>108</sup> The intelligence community produced two studies. The first was “Principal Challenges in Post-Saddam Iraq,” which correctly foresaw a long, difficult, and turbulent occupation with a deeply divided Iraqi society and severe economic difficulties. The second was “Regional Consequences of Regime Change in Iraq,” which also accurately foresaw that the invasion would be a magnet for Islamic extremism. See Pillar, 2011, pp. 55–58.

## Chapter Fifteen: Making Sense of Making Mistakes

<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that career military officers in positions of political authority seem to be no less prone to making strategic mistakes than civilian politicians. As noted in the Polish case, Jaruzelski said he would impose martial law only if the Soviets assured him of intervention if it did not succeed—an assurance the Soviets refused to give.

<sup>2</sup> Vertzberger, 1990, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> This is an insight from Andrew Parker’s review of this work.

<sup>4</sup> We know from the Falklands case that as soon as the British dispatched their forces, the Argentines knew that the result would be their defeat and humiliation.

<sup>5</sup> See Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky, 1982, pp. 306–334, on general tendencies toward risk aversion.

<sup>6</sup> S. Lichtenstein, B. Fischhoff, and L. D. Phillips, “Calibration of Probabilities: The State of the Art in 1960,” in *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, ed. D. Kahneman, P. Slovic, and A. Tversky, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Kahneman and Tversky, 1979.

<sup>8</sup> See Fischhoff, 1975, p. 288.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, the State Department’s Policy Planning shop produced analysis indicating that the script would not survive; but it was ignored by decisionmakers and staffs predisposed to invade Iraq and unreceptive to ideas that could delay or derail their effort.

<sup>10</sup> Our thanks to Robert Jervis for posing this question.

<sup>11</sup> Gompert et al., 2006.

## Chapter Sixteen: Possible Remedies

<sup>1</sup> Tuchman, 2011, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Such discipline is akin to consideration of alternative futures embodied in “robust decisionmaking,” developed at RAND and elsewhere.

- <sup>3</sup> This example was shared by author Binnendijk.
- <sup>4</sup> These observations were by A. Parker; the term was coined by F. Yates at the University of Maryland.
- <sup>5</sup> The National Security Act of 1947, Title I, Section 101(b) (1); emphasis added.
- <sup>6</sup> Authors Gompert and Binnendijk make this observation on the basis of having served on the NSC staff a combined four times under four different presidents.
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. nongovernmental organizations such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies are asked from time to time conduct independent examinations of problems with which the Executive Branch is wrestling. Also, the Department of Defense and other government agencies use federally funded research and development centers (e.g., the Institute for Defense Analysis and the several at the RAND Corporation) to provide independent analysis.
- <sup>8</sup> The distinction between *nonpartisan* and *bipartisan* is that the latter may include partisan representatives in some agreed balance.
- <sup>9</sup> During Ronald Reagan's first administration, team B examined and then challenged many of the assumptions and directions of policy toward the Soviet Union (essentially, containment). This contributed to a more assertive policy, including the Strategic Defense Initiative. While one can claim in hindsight that this particular team B overestimated the Soviet threat, it can also be argued that it saw weaknesses in the Soviet system that could be exploited. In any case, the point here is not that team B is bound to be more right than team A, but that there can be tolerance for and utility in independent analysis and advice.
- <sup>10</sup> These standards are derived from RAND's standards for how to assure quality in research and analysis.
- <sup>11</sup> Dodge, 2008, makes much of this in explaining that Napoleon's decision to invade Russia lacked the disciplined analysis ("ability to grasp facts") of his earlier, successful strategic decisions.
- <sup>12</sup> Thompson, 2013.
- <sup>13</sup> Thompson, 2013.
- <sup>14</sup> These methods have been developed and used by RAND and several other institutions in support of research, analysis, and planning of military and other complex public-policy matters.
- <sup>15</sup> This work is taking place at RAND and elsewhere

## Chapter Seventeen: The Sino-U.S. Case

- <sup>1</sup> The particular problem in this regard is that China has a more restrictive "sovereign" view than the United States of what is permissible in two-hundred-mile exclusive economic zones. The United States (and most other states) believes that surveillance activities are not proscribed, whereas China asserts that they are.
- <sup>2</sup> The apt term *strategic distrust* is coined by Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust*, Washington, D.C.: John L. Thornton China Center, Brookings Institution, 2012.
- <sup>3</sup> The term *strategic distrust* is also used by Wang Jisi in Nina Hachigian, ed., *Debating China: The U.S.-China Relationship in Ten Conversations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Forrest E. Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-614-AF, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> The United States has actively sought Chinese participation in exchanges and operational practices aimed at preventing incidents at sea.

<sup>6</sup> Hachigian, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> This analysis is informed by Hachigian, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Wu Xinbo in Hachigian, 2014, pp. 199–201.

<sup>9</sup> Wu Xinbo in Hachigian, 2014, pp. 199–201; and Xu Hui in Hachigian, 2014, pp. 153–173.

<sup>10</sup> Wu Xinbo in Hachigian, 2014, pp. 199–201.

<sup>11</sup> Chinese feelings of resentment, impatience, and confidence concerning China's stature and rights in East Asia appear to be unaffected by prospects for cooperation with the United States on global economic and security issues.

<sup>12</sup> Xu Hui in Hachigian, 2014, p. 166.

<sup>13</sup> Xu Hui in Hachigian, 2014, p. 165.

<sup>14</sup> Revealingly, the Chinese do not use the term *A2AD* but instead talk of deterring or countering U.S. military intervention. The capabilities are, of course, the same, but the perspective is not.

<sup>15</sup> Wang Jisi in Hachigian, 2014, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Wang Jisi in Hachigian, 2014, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> Wu Xinbo in Hachigian, 2014, pp. 198–200.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Green in Hachigian, 2014, p. 206.

<sup>19</sup> Xu Hu quoting the American pundit Charles Krauthammer ("in the 1980s") in Hachigian, 2014, p. 166.

<sup>20</sup> David C. Gompert and Terrence Kelly, "Escalation Cause: How the Pentagon's New Strategy Could Trigger War with China," *Foreign Policy*, August 2, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Wang Jisi in Hachigian, 2014, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Lieberthal in Hachigian, 2014, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher P. Twomey in Hachigian, 2014, p. 155.

<sup>24</sup> Xu Hui in Hachigian, 2014, p. 164.

<sup>25</sup> This section is based on David Gompert, "Preparing for the End," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 55, No. 3, June/July 2013, which was informed by input from Bruce Bennett at RAND.

<sup>26</sup> "Inside the Cult of Kim," *Economist*, April 6–12, p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> This analysis presupposes that North Korea has not developed the capability to deliver a nuclear weapon on U.S. soil by the time of its collapse.

<sup>28</sup> Of the roughly twenty South Korean divisions, perhaps half would be available to move into North Korea, given that the south would insist on holding back the balance to defend the DMZ and pre-



venting massive refugee influx. Moreover, although South Korean forces have improved, are superior to Northern forces, and are capable of turning back an invasion, their capacity to neutralize North Korean offensive capabilities and to stabilize North Korea should not be overestimated. South Korean forces have not been designed for large, rapid, offensive operations at a distance.

<sup>29</sup> The Chinese claim covers all the waters within the “Nine-Dotted Line,” which includes the Spratly Islands, the Paracel Islands, the Scarborough Reef, and the Macclesfield Reef—virtually the entire South China Sea and its islands. Chinese claims are variously disputed by Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, and Taiwan (Republic of China). The World War II settlements did not resolve ownership questions, which have become hotly contested only with the discovery of abundant resources.

<sup>30</sup> According to reports in *Kyodo News*, March 2010, Chinese officials are said to have stated that China’s South China Sea claims are on a par with Chinese interests in Taiwan and Tibet. Chinese diplomats mentioned the South China Sea and core interest in 2009 through private channels, which is what *Kyodo News* captured in 2010. However, the Chinese government (when subject to subsequent questioning) has refrained from directly stating the South China Sea is a core interest. In August 2013, the Chinese government further made a statement to clarify what it meant by core interests: internal stability; sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national unity; and social and economic development. The article specifically mentions that China never claimed that the entire South China Sea was a core interest, just that China claims sovereignty over “certain islands and islets.”

<sup>31</sup> See Richard A. Bitzinger, “Recent Developments in Naval and Maritime Modernization in the Asia-Pacific: Implications for Regional Security,” in *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders, Christopher D. Yung, Michael Swaine, and Andrew Nien-Dzu Yang, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Gompert, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Current RAND work on A2AD is being done by Terrence Kelly, Duncan Long, and David Gompert—2014 and 2024 scenarios.

<sup>34</sup> Arguably, China is already having some success with subtle intimidation of rival claimants—e.g., the Philippines in the case of Scarborough Shoal. If and as this pattern becomes more flagrant, the United States may react even if not obligated to do so by treaty.

<sup>35</sup> Already, Chinese space-based sensors and missile-bearing submarines can operate in the South China Sea; likewise, Chinese medium-range ballistic missiles and future intermediate-range ballistic missiles could cover this area.

<sup>36</sup> This has been reiterated by U.S. spokespeople in connection with the intensified dispute since 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Kimberly Hsu, *Air Defense Identification Zone Intended to Provide China Greater Flexibility to Enforce East China Sea Claims*, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, January 14, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Kosuke Takahashi and James Hardy, “Japan Sees Big Rise in Scrambles Against Chinese Aircraft,” *IHS Jane’s Defence Weekly*, April 9, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> This is a possibility highlighted by Michael Chase from RAND.

<sup>40</sup> Brad Glosserman, “China’s Challenge and the U.S.-Japan Alliance,” *PacNet*, No. 23, November 22, 2013.

<sup>41</sup> In this regard, the authors agree with and thank James Przystup of the National Defense University that the United States can gain both greater insight into and greater influence over Japanese attitudes and actions toward the Senkakus and other potential flashpoints with China by intensifying joint planning of how different scenarios should be handled.

<sup>42</sup> The U.S. position is based the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act.

<sup>43</sup> See Richard Bush, *Uncharted Strait: The Future of China-Taiwan Relations*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth Lieberthal in Hachigian, 2014, p. 6; emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup> Gompert and Kelly, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Chase of RAND points out that Xi Jinping *might* be more comfortable with this sort of rapport than his predecessor, Hu Jintao, who was in turn more relaxed than Jiang Zemin before him. So the prospects of such personal relations may hinge as much on the personal characteristics of individual Chinese leaders as on the workings of the Chinese political system more generally.

<sup>47</sup> While there have been numerous examples of the military evidently taking actions with clear political guidance—e.g., revealing a new fighter on the eve of a visit to China by the U.S. secretary of state—the creation of the National Security Council, in addition to Central Military Commission, as mentioned earlier, should strengthen civilian control. At least it suggests civilian determination to exert stronger control.

<sup>48</sup> This is the main finding of Michael Green in Hachigian, 2014, p. 212, and elsewhere.

<sup>49</sup> Wang Jisi in Hachigian, 2014, p. 11.

<sup>50</sup> James Steinberg in Hachigian, 2014, p. 223.

<sup>51</sup> Reported in *Bloomberg News*, July 8, 2014.

## Chapter Eighteen: Findings and Recommendations

<sup>1</sup> Tuchman, 2011, p. 1.

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The history of wars caused by misjudgments, from Napoleon's invasion of Russia to America's invasion of Iraq, reveals that leaders relied on cognitive models, or simplified representations of their worlds, that were seriously at odds with objective reality. *Blinders, Blunders, and Wars* analyzes eight historical examples of strategic blunders regarding war and peace and four examples of decisions that turned out well, and then applies those lessons to the current Sino-American case. Leaders' egos, intuitions, unwarranted self-confidence, and aversion to information that contradicted their views prevented them from correcting their models. Yet advisors and bureaucracies can be inadequate safeguards and can, out of fawning or fear, reinforce leaders' flawed thinking.

War between China and the United States is more likely to occur by blunder than from rational premeditation. Yet flawed Chinese and American cognitive models of one another are creating strategic distrust, which could increase the danger of misjudgment by either or both, the likelihood of crises, and the possibility of war. Although these American and Chinese leaders have unprecedented access to information, there is no guarantee they will use it well when faced with choices concerning war and peace. They can learn from *Blinders, Blunders, and Wars*.

As a general remedy, the authors recommend the establishment of a government body providing independent analysis and advice on war-and-peace decisions by critiquing information use, assumptions, assessments, reasoning, options, and plans. For the Sino-U.S. case, they offer a set of measures to bring the models each has of the other into line with objective reality.



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