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Author(s): Karen Guttieri, Michael D. Wallace and Peter Suedfeld
Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/174379
Accessed: 17/03/2013 20:04

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The Integrative Complexity of American Decision Makers in the Cuban Missile Crisis

KAREN GUTTIERI
MICHAEL D. WALLACE
PETER SUEDFELD
University of British Columbia

The focus of this study is the integrative complexity of information processing of Kennedy administration officials before, during, and after the Cuban missile crisis (CMC). Three elements of the CMC decision-making environment have been commonly noted: a high level of stress, ideological disputes among the decision makers, and the need to present a policy outcome palatable to the American public. Overall, American leaders maintained moderate levels of integrative complexity through even the most dangerous moments of the crisis but showed a pattern compatible with the cognitive manager and disruptive stress models of complexity change in response to environmental challenge. There was no significant difference in the complexity of remarks of the so-called hawks and doves among the Kennedy team, calling into question either the veracity of the alleged rift or the manifestations of value conflict in complexity data. Leadership statements made in camera were significantly more complex than public presentations.

Interest and evidence have combined to elevate the 13 days in October 1962, known as the Cuban missile crisis (CMC), to the status of folklore in international relations. The episode was well documented and historically significant. Its lessons have been debated at length. Practitioners have cited the lessons of the CMC in support of disparate positions on American arms

AUTHORS' NOTE: This research was made possible by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to M. D. Wallace. Karen Guttieri would also like to thank the Council for Doctoral Fellowship support. We are grateful for the assistance of Susan Bluck, Aparna Kurl, Kim Thachuk, Kelly Wong, and Gary Daniel Steel in collecting and scoring the materials, and for the helpful comments of Ned Lebow. Address correspondence to any of the authors at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. Karen Guttieri and Michael D. Wallace are in the Department of Political Science (postal code V6T 1Z1); Peter Suedfeld is in the Department of Psychology (postal code V6T 1Z4).

JOURNAL OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION, Vol. 39 No. 4, December 1995 595-621
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policy. Academics have subjected the experience to repeated and detailed scrutiny. One speaks of "CMC scholars" in reference to those familiar with stacks of documents and secondary analyses of the crisis. Market share is hard won in the highly competitive "cottage industry," as Allison (quoted in Blight and Welch 1989, 111) called CMC research.

The popular belief that this episode brought the superpowers closer to nuclear war than any event before or since accounts in part for fascination with the CMC. Likewise, the particular scrutiny of decisions and decision processes has to do with the dangerous nature of nuclear weapons and the burden of decision on leadership created by their existence. As a possible outcome to any conflict, whether missile sites in Cuba or inspections in North Korea, nuclear war is a worst-case scenario that looms large, no matter how slight its probability. Nuclear crisis politics are characterized by their intensity and rapid pace. The circumstances in which nuclear crisis politics are played out seem extraordinary:

Note the environment in which the game is played: inordinate uncertainty about what must be done, the necessity that something be done, and crucial consequences of whatever is done. These features force responsible men to become active players. The pace of the game—hundreds of issues, numerous games, and multiple channels—compels players to fight to "get each other's attention," to "see the facts," to assure that they "take the time to think seriously about the broader issue." (Allison 1969, 710)

One hopes that, with the Strategic Air Command at Defense Condition 2 and all other U.S. forces at Defense Condition 3, as they were in October of 1962 (Sagan 1985), American leaders would be clear-thinking individuals. In the time since the crisis, the "rationality" of American leaders has been a popular subject for academic discussion. Here, one finds theoretical disputes about criteria for determining rationality in addition to empirical disputes about the facts of the events (Welch 1989; Herek, Janis, and Huth 1989). The deliberations and activities of the American leadership group (President John F. Kennedy and the other members of the executive committee of the National Security Council [NSC], usually referred to as the ExComm) have, understandably, attracted copious scholarly attention.

A stream of declassifications of documents and ongoing revelations from participants (Garthoff 1987; Blight and Welch 1989; Lukas 1987, 1992;

1. There are five gradations of Defense Condition (DEFCON) status, the lowest of which is DEFCON 5, or peacetime alert. U.S. Strategic Air Command (SAC) was routinely kept at DEFCON 4 during the cold war. According to Sagan (1985, 101), heightened DEFCON status during the Cuban missile crisis was in effect from October 22 to November 20, 1962. SAC DEFCON 2 preparations included alert duty, canceled leave for personnel, continuous airborne circulation of bombers and tankers, enhanced ground runway alert, and heightened readiness of 90 Atlas and Titan intercontinental ballistic missiles (Sagan 1985, 109).
Tolchin 1992) has fed continuing academic interest in the CMC. Both primary and secondary literatures have expanded accordingly. Recent revelations have invigorated revisionist accounts of the events of the crisis (Nathan 1992; Thompson 1992; Hershberg 1991). Among developments of the past 5 or 6 years, most notable is the wide acceptance now accorded to the view that President Kennedy did in fact negotiate, or would have put on the table, a compromise solution to the crisis: in exchange for Soviet withdrawal of intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) and medium range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) from Cuba, he agreed to withdraw American IRBMs from Turkey (Blight and Welch 1989). The image of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy secretly agreeing to a quid pro quo in a meeting with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin on October 27 (Blight and Welch 1989) contrasts markedly with prior conventional wisdom on the crisis. Kennedy was thought to have delivered an ultimatum to the Soviets at that time (e.g., see Abel 1966). The incongruity between public and private versions of U.S. policy now appears striking. The U.S.-Soviet relationship dynamic was more cooperative than many had imagined (Blight and Welch 1989).

Fortunately, in tandem with modern social science methodology, this new evidence also facilitates systematic analysis by providing a larger body of data. Our study uses evidence—derived from primary source materials—about the Cuban crisis that has become available only in the last 5 or 6 years. Interpretive disputes and empirical disputes about historical facts are not amenable to our analysis. Our research is motivated by a fundamental interest in cognition, specifically in the integrative complexity of information processing.

For this article, we have identified a number of propositions commonly found in discussions of the crisis and cast them in terms amenable to complexity analysis. We identified three elements of the decision-making environment that have been commonly noted: the stressful nature of the enterprise of nuclear crisis decision making, the existence of ideological differences among the decision makers, and the perception that their political survival depended on bringing about a policy outcome palatable to the American public. There are probably as many ways to assess the roles of these factors in the CMC as there are CMC scholars. Because our interest is in cognition, our study focuses narrowly on the influence of stress, disagreement, and the domestic political problem on the integrative complexity of information processing. The next section reviews some of the developments in integrative complexity research that informed our application of the methodology to the CMC. In the Method section, we explain how we expect these influences to present themselves in leaders’ integrative complexity scores.
In the analysis of information processing, one may differentiate between approaches that focus on the content and those that focus on the structure of communications (see, inter alia, Suedfeld, Tetlock, and Ramirez 1977). Structural approaches concentrate on such variables as the conceptual rules used in thinking, deciding, and interrelating (Schroder, Driver, and Streufert 1967). Integrative complexity theory, which originated in the work of Harvey, Hunt, and Schroder (1961), is one of the best researched structural approaches (Suedfeld, Tetlock, and Streufert 1992). Integrative complexity scores, as hallmarks of information-processing structure, may provide a more reliable indicator of intentions and decisions (e.g., as early warnings of impending war or surprise attack) than the more easily manipulated content of communications.

The measurement of integrative complexity assesses the degree to which a person is found to differentiate (recognize different perspectives, characteristics, or dimensions of stimuli) and integrate (form connections among the differentiated perspectives, characteristics, or dimensions) in information processing. According to conceptual complexity theory (Harvey, Hunt, and Schroder 1961; Schroder, Driver, and Streufert 1967), differentiation and integration are stable personality traits of cognitive style. Integrative complexity theory emphasizes differentiation and integration as aspects of information processing that vary not only among individuals but also from situation to situation for each individual (Suedfeld, Tetlock, and Streufert 1992).

Integrative complexity scores are based on analysis of the subject’s verbal (written or oral) statements. Complexity is scored on a 1-7 scale. Nodal points on the scale are the scores of 1, 3, 5, and 7. At the score of 1, the subject exhibits undifferentiated thinking, with no consideration of alternative dimensions or viewpoints. The nodal point of 3 marks differentiation, in which the subject recognizes and acknowledges as legitimate more than one dimension or perspective. The nodal point of 5 is achieved when the subject integrates dimensions or perspectives into a relational system. Higher order synthesis is required for a score of 7. For example, theoretical thinking (integrations of integrations) might be found at the highest level of complexity, as compared to empirical analysis at the level of 5. Transition points are represented by scores of 2, 4, and 6 (Baker-Brown et al. 1992). The appendix provides examples of the nodal scores selected from the database used for this article.

Environmental factors play an important role in determining the level of complexity at which an individual processes information, and the individ-
ual’s complexity level, in turn, affects the behavioral response to particular environmental conditions. Conversely, changes in leaders’ complexity will affect their decisions and thus the situation.

Among national decision makers, crisis situations (especially those in which violent conflict is present or imminent) may be expected to have the greatest impact on complexity because it is under these conditions that the stakes are highest and the risks greatest. Several studies have reported that a decrease in leaders’ integrative complexity precedes the onset of violent conflict. Suedfeld and Tetlock (1977) found that leader complexity dropped between the preliminary and climactic phases of two crises culminating in war—World War I and the Korean conflict. Suedfeld, Tetlock, and Ramirez (1977) replicated this finding in the context of recurring wars in the Middle East. A complexity decrease may also precede decisions that provide uncompromising, unidimensional crisis solutions other than war (Ballard 1983).

In three other crises occurring at approximately the same times as World War I and the Korean conflict, involving some of the same nations and some of the same individual leaders but resolved without war (the Agadir Incident of 1911, the Berlin Blockade of 1948, and the CMC), leaders’ complexity levels remained stable or rose from the early to the late phases. For example, President Kennedy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk maintained a reasonably high level of information-processing complexity throughout the CMC (Suedfeld and Tetlock 1977). Similarly, Raphael (1982) observed declines in complexity in the months immediately preceding the onset of the two major Berlin crises but increases between the early and late phases of the crises. Such findings have counterparts in the experimental literature, from sophisticated international simulations (Driver 1962) to laboratory studies of social perception (Paulhus and Lim 1994), attention, and cognition (starting with Easterbrook 1959).

Decreases in complexity prior to simplifying resolutions in critical situations have been explained in terms of the impact of disruptive stress on decision makers during the crisis (Suedfeld and Bluck 1988; Suedfeld, Tetlock, and Ramirez 1977). The term stress is used in Antonovsky’s (1979) sense—that is, as psychological strain that remains when the tension induced by environmental demands is not successfully overcome. It is this residue of strain—that is, that which exceeds the individual’s or group’s coping resources—that is manifested by the disruption of complex information processing. According to this hypothesis, problems whose implications are of extreme importance receive a major share of the decision maker’s attention and psychological resources, leading to high levels of complexity; however, the decision maker’s resources can eventually become depleted (e.g., if too many other demands are made on those resources, if the situation continues
too long without a satisfactory solution emerging, if the potential outcomes become too threatening, or if the decision maker becomes fatigued, rushed, or distracted). At that point, the slope of the complexity curve turns downward.

It is important here to emphasize that the integrative complexity scale is a descriptive and in no sense a normative or evaluative dimension (Suedfeld 1992; Suedfeld and Tetlock 1991; Tetlock 1992). To be sure, there will be many circumstances in the conduct of foreign policy in which the ability to process information in a complex way will confer considerable advantage on a decision maker. This happens, for example, when protagonists are engaged in the pursuit of multiple, noncongruent goals in multilateral negotiations or, more generally, in situations characterized by non-zero-sum payoff structures. The view that complex information processing is very often functional with reference to leaders’ goals at the international level is bolstered by some empirical evidence: it has been shown to be associated with the peaceful resolution of international disputes (Suedfeld and Tetlock 1977; Suedfeld, Tetlock, and Ramirez 1977) and lengthy tenure in office (Wallace and Suedfeld 1988).

On the other hand, high levels of complexity are neither required nor universally beneficial. According to the cognitive manager model (Suedfeld 1992), it is preferable to gear one’s efforts to perform the tasks of differentiation and integration so as to adjust to situational requirements. Complex strategies are often more costly than simpler ones in both time and effort, and may divert attention and resources from crucial to trivial information (Suedfeld and Wallbaum 1992; Tetlock and Boettger 1989). The distractions and delays of highly complex processing may lead to disaster in any situation in which time is an important factor. In other cases, for example, when the decision maker is faced with an intractable foe, complex information processing may result in concessions that the opponent can use to strengthen his or her position for the next confrontation. For example, Hitler’s complexity during the Munich negotiations was considerably lower than Chamberlain’s (Suedfeld 1988, 1992). There are several other circumstances in which high complexity may be unproductive or counterproductive (Suedfeld 1988; Suedfeld and Tetlock 1991). In short, no particular level of complexity is good, valuable, or successful per se; its preferability is dependent on the particulars of the situation.

Although complexity is but one aspect of leadership performance, along with such characteristics as insight, intuition, decisiveness, empathy, and so forth, performance and the structure of information processing during crises are theoretically linked. This connection is perceived by scholars of historical and current events, even without an explicit recognition of the integrative complexity variable per se. In judging the performance of policymakers, a
decision analyst is likely to consider factors related to the two components of complexity—differentiation and integration: evidence that the policymaker considered a number of dimensions of the problem or perspectives on it and searched for alternative solutions (i.e., differentiation), weighed the alternatives in light of their probabilities of success, and chose a course of action designed to maximize positive values and minimize losses, based on theoretical beliefs about the effects of those actions and other considerations such as morality, tradition, and values (i.e., integration). According to these criteria, a policymaker operating on the simple end of the complexity scale does not consider multiple perspectives, dimensions, or alternatives. Consequently, he or she would not meet predetermined standards of good cognitive processing, regardless of how successful a solution emerged. It may be noted that an implicit recognition of complexity-related factors has been established to exist among individuals not trained in the theory nor in the social sciences (Suedfeld et al. forthcoming).

Scholars of the CMC define the quality of decision in a variety of ways: as a function of the process that leads to the development and choice of a policy, in terms of their evaluation of the emerging policy itself, or their views about the consequences of the policy. Most frequently, CMC scholars refer to consequences—that is, the achievement of the specific policy objective of removing Soviet missiles from Cuba while averting nuclear war. This successful resolution may be one reason why the CMC has become the preeminent case study of nuclear-era crisis management.

The academic question about the CMC, explicit or implicit, has become, How did the Kennedy administration avert nuclear war (Blight 1990)? To some, political psychology need contribute only to the understanding of deterrence theory to explain the outcome. Maxwell Taylor, then chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, for example, reflected on the outcome as inevitable because of U.S. nuclear superiority (Blight and Welch 1989, 80-1). In contrast, others allege that Kennedy’s diplomatic maneuvers, including a quid pro quo involving American Jupiter missiles in Turkey, saved the day. But most who have been drawn to the study of the CMC have developed a more than passing interest in the political psychology of crisis decision making. Their question has been, “How did American leaders manage to stay coolheaded enough for the demands of nuclear crisis diplomacy?” The intensity and pace of nuclear crisis create a climate that would seem to distort perception and mitigate against effective decision making.

The large amount of CMC material available for scoring affords us the opportunity to explore the role of cognitive factors in some detail. Given the enormous stakes and the potentially catastrophic outcome, what effect did the crisis have on the information-processing complexity of the president and
his leadership group? Was the impact of the crisis uniform, or did it vary throughout the group, and to what might any variations be attributed? Did the audience to which communications were directed have an impact on complexity? Much analysis of the CMC—psychologically based and otherwise—has been anecdotal. By contrast, complexity studies use systematic analysis based on an objective, quantitative assessment of leadership statements at the time periods in question. The complexity method also holds the advantage that it is amenable to comparison of findings across a wide variety of crises and leadership groups (see Wallace and Suedfeld 1988).

HYPOTHESES

Our research interest concerns variations in complexity on a number of dimensions. We first examined variations in individual leaders’ complexity scores over time, which may be attributable to cognitive management and to disruptive stress. Second, we looked at subgroups within the leadership team, in which we sought to uncover significant differences in complexity that corresponded to the factional division of the ExComm into hawks, who called for early military action to deal with the perceived threat, and doves, who counseled patience and diplomacy. Third, we measured whether statements that individuals made for public consumption were significantly more or less complex overall than their private statements. Our examination of key U.S. policymakers draws on their written and oral statements during this period.

Hypothesis 1: Cognitive Management and Disruptive Stress

Adapting the definition proposed by Selye (1956), we can think of crisis-induced stress as psychological and physical “wear and tear” produced in the course of responding to a number of stressors characteristically present in crisis. When the physiological, social, emotional, and cognitive demands of an environment require coping responses, adaptive mechanisms come into play. Psychological models of challenging environments include some that focus on stimulus overload and exhaust, arousal and emotional experience (attributional models), and uncertainty and unpredictability (control models). The cognitive manager model (Suedfeld 1992) portrays cognitive reaction to such stressors as analogous to the general adaptation syndrome (Selye 1956). The mobilization of cognitive resources in response to the recognition of a crisis is analogous to the alarm reaction. In the second stage, resistance, an ongoing level of relatively high complexity (depending on the perceived importance of the problem compared to other, concurrent demands), prevails.
If, finally, the exhaustion stage is reached, it is mirrored in a growing incapacity for highly complex information processing. Thus we would expect high complexity as the ExComm groped its way toward a final decision. However, as the process continued, disruptive stress because of fatigue and information overload could lead to a leveling off or even a reversal of this trend in the later stages of the crisis.

The issue of whether disruptive stress could be predicted in the CMC is complicated by the absence of any direct psychological or physiological measures of stress. However, there is consensus that during international crises, decision makers' performance may be adversely affected as powerful stresses are generated by multiple interactions among the following elements: threats to vital national interest, the enormous risks of war in the nuclear age, the fatigue of lengthy deliberations, uncertainty about the opponent’s intentions, an increase in the volume and confusion of intelligence data, growing difficulties in maintaining tactical control as forces move to higher states of alert, the intense time pressures of crisis, and the complex synergy that rapidly develops between the demands of crisis management and the pressures of domestic politics (Bracken 1983; Gottfried and George 1989; Gottfried and Blair 1988; Wallace 1991). These issues were well communicated by Allison's (1969, 710) previously quoted comment concerning the CMC.

To focus on just one factor as an example, the perception of time pressure has been commonly identified as a stressor on the decision-making team of the ExComm (Blight and Welch 1989, 34; Kennedy 1971, 86-7; Sorensen 1965, 713-6; Holsti 1972, 180-4). According to Schlesinger (1965, 803), “the deadline defined the strategy.” Laboratory research has shown that the stress of time pressure is correlated with lower complexity. Under limited completion time and approaching deadlines, behavior in simulation experiments becomes both less differentiated (Maule and McKie 1990) and less integrated (Schroder, Driver, and Streufert 1967). Suedfeld and Coren (1990, 360) theorized that in response to time pressure,

the resulting content may be the response that is dominant in the subject’s response hierarchy; what is omitted may be the qualifications, awareness of alternatives, and thoughts about relations among alternatives—in other words, differentiated and integrated thinking about the issue.

It is likely that stress increases as the amount of time in crisis experienced by the leadership lengthens. No one doubts that tremendous pressures weighed on the Kennedy team. The ExComm operated under a multiplicity of time constraints: When would the news of the Soviet missile placement become public? When would the missiles become operational? When would Soviet ships en route to Cuba reach the blockading American naval task
force? Most accounts of the crisis paint a picture of an inexorable increase in stress as events progressed. As one key participant put it, "We believed that we were running out of time" (Bundy 1988, 423).

Aside from time pressure, the ExComm also had to ponder the possible consequences of their actions, whether these were to be a conventional military engagement in the Caribbean, Soviet escalation in the form of an attack on Berlin or Turkey, or even the use of nuclear weapons. Not to be discounted either were the symbolic gains and losses that accompany crisis brinkmanship: if the Soviet placement of missiles in Cuba was a test of U.S. resolve, a less-than-decisive response could put the United States at a disadvantage in future disputes.

Domestic political considerations were also important (see, e.g., Allison 1969; Lebow 1981, 1990; Blight and Welch 1989; Bundy 1988; Steel 1969, cited in Lebow 1990; Stone 1966, cited in Lebow 1990). Revisionist historians in particular have emphasized the concerns of the ExComm with the domestic politics angle (Lebow 1990; Nathan 1975; Wills 1982).

It thus seems appropriate to assume that the ongoing crisis posed a cumulative challenge and depleted the coping resources of the ExComm members over time. Whether it depleted those resources to the point of reaching the stage of exhaustion (and complexity decrease) is the empirical question addressed in Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2: Differences within the Leadership Group

Conventional wisdom on the CMC has it that the ExComm was divided between hawks and doves on such important questions as the significance of the missiles in Cuba and the appropriate U.S. response to the Soviet move. The decision to blockade the island of Cuba (officially described as a quarantine, because under international law, a blockade is an act of war) has been presented in Allison’s (1971) classic account as the result of debate between hawks, who wanted rapid military action, and doves, who preferred a greater reliance on diplomacy. Lebow (1990) emphasized the seriousness of the division when he argued that the need to maintain consensus in the ExComm was perceived by the president as a greater pressure than any external strategic considerations.

The case can be made that because doves hesitated to use force and because their policy advocacy statements would then have to reconcile the need to maintain resolve with their desire for nonmilitary solutions, their side would have to generate comparatively complex solutions. Hawks, on the other hand, could concentrate on the single goal of removing the missiles, even if this required armed conflict.
There are two lines of previous research on which to base hypotheses concerning complexity differences within the leadership group. One is the generally higher complexity preceding negotiated rather than bellicose solutions (Suedfeld and Tetlock 1977; Suedfeld, Tetlock, and Ramirez 1977). This may imply that leaders who advocate negotiated outcomes may themselves think more complexly about the issue than those supporting armed confrontation. The one study that analyzed individual differences in this regard (Wallace, Suedfeld, and Thachuk 1993) supported that hypothesis.

The second basis is the work of Tetlock (1983a, 1984, 1986) on value pluralism. His studies showed that individuals who experience value conflict—that is, a need to reconcile two important goals that seem to be mutually incompatible—deal with the situation in a more complex way than those who focus mostly on one value or goal and who have no difficulty in abandoning the alternative.

In the case of the ExComm, the relevant demarcation is between hawks and doves. If the inference from the Wallace, Suedfeld, and Thachuk (1993) study is applied, we would predict that doves will show higher integrative complexity than hawks. On the other hand, the value conflict hypothesis does not predict such a sharp difference. Both groups would be striving for the same set of shared goals: the removal of the Soviet missiles without starting a war between the superpowers, the retention of public support within the United States, and minimal cost to the Kennedy administration. There is no reason to expect that either hawks or doves would experience more conflict among these considerations, and, therefore, move toward higher levels of complexity, than their counterparts: the disagreement would center on the means (the appropriate use of military force) by which these consensual goals could best be attained. Note that we are not positing links between complexity and dispositional or personality traits such as aggressiveness, nor are we suggesting that such traits underlay the hawk-dove dimension.

**Hypothesis 3: Public and Private Communications**

The existing literature takes differing views on whether the audience being addressed has an important impact on the complexity of communications. Some studies have found no significant differences between private letters or diaries on one hand and books, articles, and speeches on the other (Suedfeld and Bluck 1993; Suedfeld and Rank 1976). Others have argued that there is higher complexity when the audience may be in less-than-complete agreement with the source than in private communications or those to wholly supportive groups (Hagafor and Brehmer 1983; Levi and Tetlock 1980; Tetlock 1983b, 1985a, 1985b; but see also Suedfeld and Wallbaum.
In a close-knit, elite group advising an admired leader, groupthink may also reduce private complexity (Janis 1972). On the other hand, one might argue that the ExComm members would want to present a united front and an image of decisiveness to the public, in which case—assuming that complexity is subject to impression management factors (see below)—public messages should be less complex than intragroup exchanges. Thus previous findings do not point to a clear-cut prediction.

The relative influence of domestic politics on the Kennedy administration’s actions and statements has been and continues to be an issue in the literature on the Cuban crisis (Allison 1969, 1971; Blight and Welch 1989; Lebow 1990). In numerous public statements prior to the discovery of the missiles in October, Kennedy took the position that Soviet nuclear weapons would never be tolerated in Cuba. This public commitment certainly conditioned the administration’s response. On September 4, Kennedy warned the Soviets concerning their forces in Cuba; on September 7, he requested authority to call up reservists; and on September 13, he announced that “if at any time the Communist buildup in Cuba were to endanger or interfere with our security in any way . . . [or if Cuba should] become an offensive base of significant capacity for the Soviet Union, then this country will do whatever must be done to protect its own security and that of its allies” (1962c, 12). He had congressional support for this tough stance (Bundy 1988): Joint Congressional Resolution No. 230, sanctioning the use of force, passed in late September.

Although the level of integrative complexity does not in itself indicate the degree to which the decision makers attempted to accommodate domestic public opinion in their policies, integrative complexity differences between public and private presentations of policy by the U.S. leadership would imply the existence of an audience effect. It is of course a commonplace that political leaders modify the content of their utterances to take account of their audience; whether the structure of information processing is affected as well is a different question (see Suedfeld, Tetlock, and Ramirez 1977).

Tetlock’s (1981) application of impression management theory to complexity postulates that complexity can be so manipulated. This explanation was developed to explain evidence of complexity shifts before and after political elections. Tetlock posits that leaders may deliberately simplify statements in campaigns but retain higher complexity when discussing their policies while in power. In the larger picture, Tetlock (1985c, 1568) argued, “Soviet and American policy-makers use rhetoric to create climates of opinion supportive of what they plan to do in the near future.” Integratively simple statements are used to communicate “firmness and resolve and unwillingness to back away from core commitments.” However, a clear-cut
separation of impression management motives and other factors may be impossible (Tetlock and Manstead 1985); self-presentation is one of many such influences whose significance differs from situation to situation (Suedfeld, Tetlock, and Streufert 1992). Suedfeld (Suedfeld 1994; Suedfeld and Bluck 1988; Suedfeld, Tetlock, and Ramirez 1977; Suedfeld, Wallace, and Thachuk 1993) identified a number of instances in which complexity changes were in a direction that contradicted the manifest content of communications or what would seem to be optimal public relations. Such findings emphasize the difficulty of manipulating underlying cognitive structure—that is, complexity—for image-building purposes.

Although skeptical about impression management as a general explanation, Suedfeld and Bluck (1988, 630) acknowledged that in the case of leaders planning a surprise attack, “it is possible that maintained complexity is more relevant to public presentations of the government’s openly stated positions than to the top secret considerations of advisers and staffs.” Given the secrecy of the missile trade (Soviet missiles in Cuba in exchange for American missiles in Turkey), the reverse may be true in the case of the CMC: Kennedy planned a compromise in secret while using combative rhetoric in public. The evidence available offers the opportunity to compare public and private rhetoric, but not specifically to investigate the role of impression management.

METHOD

DATA GENERATION AND ORGANIZATION

First, we charted changes in the complexity scores of key administration officials over time. The sample included both written statements and transcriptions of recorded oral statements. The time span sampled ran from January 1962 to April 1963. Our sample included public utterances as well as those intended for a private audience, for the most part, Kennedy’s close advisors. Sources included public statements gathered from the files of the John F. Kennedy Library and from the U.S. Department of State. Our sample of private deliberations was primarily obtained from transcriptions of audiotapes made of the ExComm meetings of October 16 and 27, 1962. Declasification and publication of these transcripts facilitated our search for private statements. Most of the private materials, such as letters and memoranda,

2. Excerpts from the original transcripts (Kennedy presidential recordings 1962a, 1962b) have been published in International Security (see “White House Tapes” 1985; “October 27, 1962” 1987-88).
were obtained from the president’s office files and National Security files of
the archives of the John F. Kennedy Library.

We sought to gather a large number of utterances for as many members
of the ExComm as possible, from time frames both well before and after the
alleged resolution of the crisis. When possible, we used writings and trans-
scribed oral utterances that were directed specifically to the crisis or, when
this was not possible, those that touched on some aspect of relevance to the
crisis (e.g., relations with the Soviet Union, defense policy, or Latin American
affairs). The scoring unit is usually defined as a paragraph, although short
paragraphs may be combined and longer paragraphs that skip from theme to
theme may be broken up. The essential factor in identifying the utterance unit
is the completion of the speaker’s train of thought (topic sentence). Sampling
and blind scoring were performed according to the standard guidelines for
complexity researchers (Baker-Brown et al. 1992). Interjudge correlations
were at or above the acceptable level of $r = .85$.

In the case of political speeches, an interesting issue arises when a
complexity score may be attributed to a speaker who did not write his own
statement. Very high correlations are typically found between the complexity
level of material known to have been personally written by the leader and
that of material written by an aide but disseminated in the name of the leader.
To begin with, leaders are likely to select ghostwriters whose thinking
processes conform to those of the employer. Further, particularly in the case
of important communications, leaders read the statement beforehand and
make any adjustments deemed necessary. Public transmission constitutes an
endorsement that is not made if there is a clash between how the message is
phrased and the signer’s level of information processing (e.g., Suedfeld and
Tetlock 1977). The CMC study offers further research insights into this issue
because we were able to obtain various drafts of some speeches.

DISAGGREGATIONS OF THE DATA SET

We divided our data set into three time periods, one of which we further
subdivided, for a total of four time periods (Table 1). Based on the consensus
in the literature, we consider the crisis as beginning on October 16, 1962, the
day the president received conclusive evidence of Soviet IRBM and MRBM
bases in Cuba. We, therefore, coded as precrisis those statements made
between January and October 15, 1962. Postcrisis statements are those made
after October 29, 1962 (the day after the U.S.S.R. announced that it would
withdraw all of its missiles from Cuba, effectively ending the military
TABLE 1
Crisis Phases and Dates

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crisis period was further subdivided into early and late stages. These could equally well be called the closed and open periods, respectively, so named because the ExComm deliberated secretly on the matter prior to October 22, the date on which Kennedy transformed a hitherto secret crisis into a public one by his television address to the American people outlining the facts of the Soviet missile deployments and his plans to force their removal (some interesting differences in the cognitive processes of the ExComm at the beginning and end of the crisis are analyzed in Purkitt and Dyson 1990).

We further disaggregated our data set in two ways. First, subgroups within the ExComm were identified as hawks or as doves. Although there has been some controversy as to these categorizations, we followed Allison's (1969, 714-5) classic differentiation between ExComm members who were early advocates of an air strike and those who preferred a diplomatic track or quarantine. We compared the complexity scores of some of the individuals Allison identified as belonging to those groups: Rusk, Taylor, Paul Nitze, and Douglas Dillon (hawks) were compared with Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and Robert F. Kennedy (doves).

Lastly, to examine the effects of intended audience on complexity, we generated separate comparisons for public and private statements. Included in private utterances were internal Kennedy administration memos and letters, as well as the ExComm transcripts. The public sample included speeches and press conferences.

It should be noted that because of differing availability of materials across various categories, the number of scored paragraphs differs from comparison to comparison. All statistical analyses, therefore, were performed of necessity on unequal sample sizes. To ensure that our results were not biased by this, we used an N-way ANOVA design, with actor identity as a variable, and checked for interaction effects. In the event, uneven sample sizes did not produce a significant effect on the results.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

HYPOTHESIS 1: COGNITIVE MANAGEMENT AND DISRUPTIVE STRESS

When we look at the ExComm team collectively and examine the crisis period as a whole, there is little evidence of disruptive stress in ExComm members’ complexity scores (Table 2). There was no significant change in the mean complexity of the U.S. leaders from the precrisis to the crisis phase, $F(2, 8) = 2.06, ns$. These findings are compatible with those reported by Suedfeld and Tetlock (1977). Of course, temporal aggregations of a week or more do not allow us to isolate the impact of even the most vital transient events, such as the downing of an American U-2 aircraft by a Soviet surface-to-air missile fired from Cuba on October 27 (Blight and Welch 1989). Table 2, therefore, also shows the more precise picture that is obtained when we divide the data for the 13-day crisis period into the two subperiods representing the early (closed) and late (open) stages, as described previously. The mean complexity score was higher in the early, secret deliberation phase of the crisis than in the precrisis phase (prior to the October 16 discovery of missile sites in Cuba). Complexity scores dropped again in the late-crisis period, after Kennedy’s October 22 public statement. They rose once more after the crisis was considered over on October 28. When the data are grouped in this way, we observe a more complex, statistically significant pattern of change, $F(3, 12) = 3.89, p < .05$.

Post hoc pairwise comparisons of the time periods showed the pattern predicted by the combined cognitive-manager/disruptive-stress models: an increase in complexity as the challenge was recognized and coping mechanisms were activated, with the allocation of significant resources to dealing with the problem (precrisis to early crisis, the alarm and resistance stages), and a decrease as the situation continued without resolution and with the elimination of some options (early to late crisis periods, the exhaustion stage). Although the curve shows recovery to higher levels once a solution had been found and implemented (late crisis to postcrisis), this difference did not reach statistical significance.

When we disaggregate the data by taking sample means for individual actors, the same inverted-U pattern generally prevails. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy was an exception: he followed an idiosyncratic pattern, showing higher average complexity in the late-crisis phase after the October 22 announcement and a sharp postcrisis drop (see Table 3).
TABLE 2
Mean Integrative Complexity of the National Security Council Executive Committee

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Precrisis</th>
<th>Crisis</th>
<th>Postcrisis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean complexity score</td>
<td>$1.93_a$</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>2.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean complexity score</td>
<td>$2.73$</td>
<td>$1.97$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Pairs of scores sharing a subscript are significantly different from each other by one-tailed t test, $df = 4, p < .02$.

HYPOTHESIS 2: DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE LEADERSHIP GROUP

Our comparison of the complexity of the so-called hawks and doves showed no significant differences. This could be explained for public statements, for which ExComm members might have felt the need to take a united stance for both domestic and Soviet consumption; but in fact, complexity differences among hawks and doves were also surprisingly small in private communications.

One explanation is that the hawk position was not, in fact, as uncomplicated as it appears to be when portrayed by the doves. Any form of military action against Cuba itself, and, almost inevitably, against the numerous and capable Soviet forces stationed there, would itself involve weighing many complex alternative plans, as the transcripts of the ExComm debates make clear.

Another category of explanations may be that the division of the Kennedy team into hawks and doves is too simplistic, the assignment of individuals to these categories is inaccurate, and/or any ideological differences between the groups were actually too insignificant to show up in our analysis. For example, Kennedy has been depicted in crisis narratives as playing the role of moral conscience in the ExComm because of his argument that an early air strike would be a “Pearl Harbor in reverse” (quoted in Sorensen 1965, 684). However, Kennedy also said the following on October 16:

We should also think of . . . whether there is some other way we can get involved in this through, uh, Guantanamo Bay, or something, er, or whether there’s some ship that, you know, sink the Maine again or something.” (Kennedy presidential recordings 1962a, 27)
Finally, a comparison of the integrative complexity of hawks and doves could be simply misdirected, missing the point. There are two possibilities. Following Lebow’s (1990) analysis, the significance of the debate (regardless of whether one side is more complex than the other) rests with its effect: President Kennedy’s perception that he needed to create a consensus. Looking at it this way, Kennedy’s high complexity, and the similarity of the complexity scores of hawks and doves, may be partially accounted for by the president’s focus on consensus, which led him to acknowledge the various perspectives of his team members and to integrate them in his own statements, while simultaneously playing down disputes.

As a last—and our preferred—alternative explanation, we propose that the hawk-versus-dove distinction is a matter of the content of communications and beliefs and, therefore, is not reflected in the structural index used here. This explanation is compatible with the theoretical status of integrative complexity as independent of political viewpoint or specific decisions being considered (Suedfeld, Tetlock, and Streufert 1992).

HYPOTHESIS 3: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COMMUNICATIONS

As Table 4 indicates, private utterances showed significantly higher complexity for most ExComm members studied. This pattern suggests a greater willingness to explore, qualify, and put forward alternatives when one is not in the glare of the public eye.

The finding of significant differences between public and private complexity involves a confound in the relatively high average complexity during the early-crisis phase (see Table 2). In this narrow time frame, October 16-22,
TABLE 4
Mean Complexity Scores by Audience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Private</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Precrisis</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postcrisis</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>2.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All periods*</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>2.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*t(5) = −3.19, one-tailed p = .012.

the Kennedy administration met secretly on the subject of Cuba. Few public statements were made during this time, particularly by those whose roles normally involved fewer occasions for speaking in public. Separating the audience effect from other factors is thus complicated by the uneven distribution of public and private statements among the various time periods. We had to consider that if there is indeed an audience effect, our use of predominantly private statements in the early-crisis data set might be the reason for our finding of high average complexity in that phase.

To compare the early- and late-crisis phases, we isolated the sample of private utterances, which, thanks primarily to declassification of the ExComm transcripts, is large enough for comparison. Aside from a few memos between administration officials, private complexity during the early- and late-crisis periods is largely a comparison of two transcribed ExComm meetings. Comparisons on those two dates show the ExComm members’ complexity in the same forum but at different times: meeting secretly before going public versus meeting in the eleventh hour of a very public crisis.

Table 5 shows mean complexity scores in one specific forum, ExComm deliberations, on two specific days, October 16 (from the early-crisis phase) and October 27 (from the late-crisis phase). In the ExComm meeting on October 16, the administration faced a novel situation and charted a tentative course. The discussions on that day included a debate about the range of action required in response to the Soviet move. The ExComm’s effort to grasp the dimensions of the problem and its debate over a range of possible responses were reflected in relatively high complexity scores.

All ExComm members studied, except Robert F. Kennedy, were less complex on October 27. Stressors in the immediate environment that could account for the complexity drop shown by four of the five members are easy to identify. By October 27, the administration had pursued its course of action for a number of days and had notified the nation and the world that the United States was resolved to compel the Soviets to withdraw their missiles from
TABLE 5
Mean Complexity by Participant and Crisis Phase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>October 16, 1962</th>
<th>October 27, 1962</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John F. Kennedy</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert F. Kennedy</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>3.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert S. McNamara</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGeorge Bundy</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dean Rusk</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive committee average</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cuba. Starting with President Kennedy’s announcement to the nation on October 22, many public references were made by the president and other key officials to nuclear arsenals and the threat of nuclear war. The environment of October 27 was made more perilous by the shooting down of a U.S. reconnaissance plane over Cuba, raising the probability of a hot war and increasing time pressure as the joint chiefs pressed for additional mobilization in response. Furthermore, the Kennedy team was confused by the receipt of two very different letters from the Soviets: a letter from Khrushchev dated October 26 asking only for a noninvasion pledge, and a letter of October 27 suggesting the removal of U.S. missiles from Turkey in exchange for a Soviet missile withdrawal from Cuba (the second letter, incidentally, was much higher in integrative complexity than the first, $M = 4.0$ vs. 1.94, respectively). Our finding of lower ExComm complexity scores on October 27 is thus consistent with the tremendous pressure confronting the ExComm on that date.

How might one account for the different pattern shown by Robert F. Kennedy, who was more complex on October 27 than on the October 16? It has recently been revealed that Kennedy discussed a missile trade with Ambassador Dobrynin on Saturday, October 26, the evening before the second ExComm meeting for which we have a record (Blight and Welch 1989). One possibility is that the relatively high complexity scores of both Kennedy brothers on October 27 reflect their privileged knowledge that the resolution of the crisis was already at hand.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Several directions for further research emerge from our study. First, the cognitive-manager/disruptive-stress model is supported by our finding that
the complexity of the Kennedy team actually went up in the early-crisis period but that, perhaps because of a combination of fatigue and the eleventh-hour atmosphere of the October 27 meeting, complexity dropped in the late-crisis period (see Table 2). When we looked specifically at five administration leaders, we found that the Kennedy brothers evidenced a complexity level relatively higher than that of McNamara, Bundy, or Rusk. Do the anomalous results for the Kennedys themselves derive from their knowledge of a secret agreement with Soviet leaders concerning the resolution of the crisis? We cannot say definitively from these data, but the idea that disruptive stress decreases with the psychological rather than the historical or “actual” resolution of the crisis has been advanced before (Ballard 1983; Suedfeld, Corteen, and McCormick 1986).

If such a phenomenon exists, accommodating it would complicate archival research. Complexity analysts would need to read not only the historical record but also the materials revealing the decision makers’ state of mind and their own demarcations of the temporal periods of crisis and its resolution. Using personal diaries or (with great caution!) ex post facto interviews might shed some light on this.

The very fact of a secret agreement is a humbling reminder to decision analysts as to the limitations of evidence and hence our ability to make inferences about decision processes. Also, the temporal demarcations of crisis, postcrisis, and so on are in themselves significant, and in future work, we intend to expand our study to include the longer period following the crisis, during which the United States and the U.S.S.R. agreed to establish a hot line and signed the Partial Test Ban Treaty.

Next, there is the negative finding that the supposed hawks and doves within the decision-making group were not significantly different in complexity of information processing. The situation for U.S. military planners may have been more complex than previously supposed. Soviet sources at the Havana meetings, part of a series of five meetings titled “The Causes and Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis,” which began in 1987, have said that there were 43,000 Soviet troops stationed in Cuba, rather than the 10,000 thought to have been there, and that, in addition to 20 nuclear warheads intended for use on medium-range missiles, there were nine tactical nuclear weapons for use against a potential American invasion force (see Lukas 1992; Tolchin 1992). There has been a recent debate about whether U.S. military planning was geared for invasion of Cuba and whether, with the settlement of the CMC, U.S. policymakers conclusively abandoned the possibility of such an invasion (Nathan 1992; Pear 1992; Garthoff 1987).

In future work, we shall examine the ExComm and analogous material more finely to determine how group processes influence complexity, once...
enough additional ExComm data has been declassified to allow the recovery of something approximating a true time series. Of particular interest is whether the interaction among group members produces sequential complexity effects. For example, in dialogue, is an integratively complex statement likely to be met with a similarly complex response? Or would the next speaker be more likely to simplify, to contradict the first more forcefully, or to support the first and channel the discussion toward conclusion? Does it matter who the speakers are? There is no doubt that further research into the link between integrative complexity and leadership roles is warranted.

The issue of impression management requires further exploration. Previous evidence on whether self-presentation motives affect complexity has been mixed (Suedfeld and Rank 1976; Suedfeld, Tetlock, and Streufert 1992). Here, we have been able to compare public and secret utterances during a major international crisis involving threat of nuclear war. We discovered critical differences in the complexity of public and private statements. Nevertheless, the mechanism underlying the public-private difference is not established. Other explanations are feasible, but we cannot rule out the possibility that thematic structure can be affected by external, including political, motives, similarly to the content of utterances.

Conventional wisdom on the CMC emphasizes the administration’s crisis management skills and internal divisions, and the pressure on the ExComm to satisfy the American public. Given that this event has come to be considered the prototypic cold war nuclear crisis, debate about its meaning and lessons is perhaps inevitable (see Blight and Welch 1989; Bobrow 1989; Lukas 1987). Present-day hawks and doves continue to disagree on issues that were contentious in the 1962 crisis, particularly the nature of Soviet intentions and the proper role of nuclear weapons in U.S. military strategy. The meaning and lessons of the CMC, in turn, are seen by each camp to support contemporary policy positions (Guttieri 1990; Lukas 1987). On the whole, the hawks view the crisis as a missed opportunity by the American administration to take action against the communist regime in Cuba (Cline 1989). On the other hand, the doves generally view the crisis as a dangerous confrontation caused in large measure by a misunderstanding of Soviet motives and intentions (Lebow 1981).

The measurement of the integrative complexity of leaders’ information processing promises to provide valuable substantive insights not only into these issues and crisis behavior per se but also into leaders’ simultaneous interactions with their colleagues, opponents, and the broader context within which they operate.
APPENDIX
Sample Utterances and Complexity Scores

Score of 1: Single, undifferentiated perspective

You know, it seems to me we’re missing a bet here. I think that we ought to take this case to—send directly to Khrushchev by fast wire the most violent protest, and demand that he—that he stop this business and stop it right away, or we’re going to take those SAM-sites out immediately. That’s what I’d tell him. I’d tell him this is a—I’d just use one of the (mixed voices) messages he sent us and I’d send it right off, now. I wouldn’t even talk to anybody about it. We sat for a week, and everybody was in favor of doing it, and I’d make that part of the message. I’d tell him we’re going to conduct surveillance, as announced by the President, and one shot and in we come, and he can expect it. If he wants to sit down and talk about this thing, he can call off his gunfire and do it right away. (John McCone, Director, Central Intelligence Agency, during the National Security Council Executive Committee meeting on October 27, 1962 [Kennedy presidential recordings 1962b, 57])

Score of 3: Differentiated alternatives

Your question suggests the reason why we have made a great effort to achieve nonnuclear options, so that we cannot have nuclear war forced on us because we have no other choice. Suppose you were to start from the premise that nuclear war is unthinkable and that you are not capable of fighting a nonnuclear war. If that is true, then you have no military foundation at all for your policy. No sane man wants nuclear war, or any kind of war. But war has to be conceivable in support of vital national interests. Otherwise you have no real national power. You have to meet three tests. First, you have to have the power to support your policy. Second, you have to know you have that power. Third, he—the other side—has to know you have that power, and he has to believe that you will use it if your vital interests are threatened. (Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense, interview with Saturday Evening Post Magazine [McNamara public statements 1962, 1928-31, emphases added])

Score of 5: Synthesis of differentiated perspectives

There is another lesson that every veteran has learned. Wars solve no problems by themselves. They only give us another chance to work on the problems that lead to wars. In fact, the problems of war and the problems of peace cannot be separated from each other. Individual freedom is both a condition and an objective of a peaceful world, and inequality of opportunity is as much a source of international difficulties as it is an obstacle to domestic tranquillity. We need better schools not only to train scientists and engineers for national defense, but also to produce experts who can find economical ways to turn salt water into fresh. And we need time to educate humanists who can teach us how to use less of our working time destroying each other and less of our leisure time destroying ourselves. These problems are the greatest challenge that this occasion puts before us. It must not be said that those whose sacrifice we
celebrate fought and died in vain. We honor our veterans better by silence than by speech, so that we can remember what they meant to us and what they did for us. And we honor them better with actions than with words, using the freedom for which they fought to build the future in which they believed. (McNamara, address at the annual national Veterans’ Day ceremony, press release no. 1834-62, with Veterans’ Day statement and press release no. 1730-62, Arlington National Cemetery, VA, November 11, 1962 [McNamara public statements, 1962, 1945-25, emphases added])

Score of 7: Differentiated dimensions, integrated outcomes, superordinate schema of reduction of probability of either intentional or unintentional war initiated by either party

But fortunately the goals of deterrence, of defense, and of arms control are not always in conflict. For example, when we improve our command and control systems, we improve our deterrent to aggression and, at the same time, we decrease the chance of a completely uncontrolled war, should deterrence fail. We have installed a number of both administrative and physical safeguards for our nuclear weapons which reduce as far as possible the chances of unauthorized use. The great emphasis we have placed on forces which can survive a nuclear attack from the Soviet not only serves to deter Soviet aggression but also greatly reduces the pressure on us to act precipitately in a crisis, thus decreasing the danger of inadvertent or accidental war. (McNamara, remarks on the national educational television program State Department Briefing: Five Goals of U.S. Foreign Policy [McNamara public statements 1962, 1798-1801, emphases added])

REFERENCES


