

The Myth of Rationality in Situations of Crisis

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How do people behave under severe pressure, when they have only minutes to make major decisions? That is a question of profound significance in the nuclear age.

Stimulation, a small amount of stress, increases an individual's ability to react rationally. However, once the tension passes a certain threshold, fear and anxiety set in and have an adverse effect. Individuals regress to conventional reaction patterns not suitable in the new situation, rather than becoming engaged in finding creative solutions. Fear of the enemy is intensified by propaganda and political pressure. Tension increases. "All or nothing" solutions become the focus. Any action begins to seem better than no action at all. The urge to act can be so strong that actions are taken even if the consequences could be disastrous.

Conflict and Group Dynamics

The danger is enhanced by certain group dynamics. In crisis situations, lower level groups tend to report information that they believe high-level groups want to hear. Under strong pressure, groups tend to react with increasing conformity. They become more open to suggestion, allowing a domineering leader to be the deciding force. A group's perception of reality is often distorted by a misreading of relevant data. Sometimes information is even screened and tailored to fit the group's preconception of reality.

Pressure to reach internal agreement, to be a member of the team, pushes individuals to join the majority view.

An American social psychologist, Irving Janis, has analyzed President Kennedy's decision to support the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961. (1) How could a president with such normally brilliant advisors be so mistaken? Why was the decision made to invade in spite of intelligence reports which indicated that Castro's army was 140 times stronger than the potential invasion force? Part of the answer, according to Janis, is that the close assistants of the president mutually influenced each other in a direction which they thought was expected of them, without protesting.

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Let us look at some of the factors that explain why the president took the fatal step. Kennedy had just gained power. In his administration, one could observe an elation similar to what one might observe in a battle unit that had gone from victory to victory. Nobody around the president argued strongly against the invasion, and in an atmosphere of apparent agreement, no one revealed his personal doubts. Although strong objections to the invasion were stated in three written reports, one report was kept away from the president and the other two were kept from internal circulation by the president himself. One member was asked to hold back his skepticism in order to support the president, and the secretary of state did not allow experts on Cuba in his department to review the invasion plans. At the final meeting, the president invited the members to an open trial voting — a situation which puts pressure on individuals to agree with the majority.

This episode shows that even groups and leaders who have the best of intentions can go wrong under the influence of group dynamics. Human beings are not infallible. They can and do act irrationally under pressure, even if self-created.

Human Fallibility

A statement by former US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara illustrates the critical importance of human frailty and the time needed for decision making:

Are you so certain we'll never again, in the whole history of the human race, have another conflict? I'm not. Read history... Look at Berlin in 1961 or Cuba in 1962, or the events since that time. We damn near had war in 1967. I'll never forget, I went to the Pentagon, as I always did at seven in the morning, and at seven-fifteen the duty officer called.

He said, “Mr. Secretary, Kosygin wants to talk to the president. What should I say?” And I said, “Why the hell did you call me?” And he said, “Well, the hotline ends in the Pentagon.” Now, I’d been secretary seven years and... I didn’t even know it ended in the Pentagon. This was the first time the hotline had ever been used, except for exercises. And he said (as you know, it is not a telephone, it’s a teletype), “The teletype station, or the end of the hotline is in the Pentagon.” Damned if I knew it. But I said, “Look, we’re spending \$80 billion a year for defense. You better get a few of those damn dollars and get that hotline patched over to the White House immediately. And I’ll call the president and tell him Kosygin wants to talk.”

So I called him, and I knew Johnson never was up at seven o’clock in the morning... Johnson came on the line and, you know, he’s groggy and sleepy, and he says, “God damn it, Bob. Why’d you call me at this time?” I said, “Mr. President, Kosygin wants to talk to you.” “What the hell do you mean?” “Well,” I said, “he’s on the hotline; the hotline ends in the Pentagon.” “Well, what do you think I ought to say?” “Why don’t we say you’ll be down in twenty minutes. In the meantime, I’ll get Dean Rusk and we’ll meet you down there in the Situation Room.”

So we got over there and it was one of those dreary, tough messages. I don’t know whether it’s ever been declassified but the essence of it was: “If you want war, you’ll have war.” You know, Nasser was saying our aircraft were bombing (which they absolutely were not) the Jordanian forces. We had turned a carrier around in the world to go from west to east. It had been going west, we turned it around to go east toward Israel, and that’s what led to this thing.

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But the point of the story is simply that: Are any of you prepared to say that we won’t bungle into conflict? I’m not. I don’t know when it’s going to occur, how it’s going to occur, but the risk of deterrence failing, the risk of bungling into a confrontation that nobody intended, and nobody wants, and nobody planned, is very high. (2)

US Senator Charles Percy has described the panic surrounding another real-life experience, a false alarm at NORAD command headquarters:

At the time we had that false alarm - that must have been a six-minute period, because it seemed like hours to us - panic broke out. It was a very frightening and disconcerting thing. You wonder what recommendation they would have made at the end of those minutes, until they discovered that it was just an electronic problem. (3)

Who Holds the Trigger?

Ultimately, the risk of accidental nuclear war involves everyone who has contact with nuclear weapons. Who are these people? In the US, congressional testimony has demonstrated a surprisingly wide use of drugs and alcohol among military personnel who monitor radars for signs of a nuclear attack. While such information is not available from the USSR, it is known that alcohol is a serious social problem, and it would be unreasonable to believe that the problem is absent among Soviet military forces.

Many people, whether from isolation, boredom, or stress, seek refuge in alcohol and drugs. All reports seem to indicate that the consumption of alcohol is high in the military forces, both in the East and the West. The Burt study from the United States revealed that 27 percent of military personnel were reported to function less well in their work because of alcohol. (4) The same study also reported a high prevalence of drug abuse.

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To illustrate the size of the problem, during the years 1975 through 1977, 120,000 people in the US military forces had direct contact with nuclear weapons. In this politically quiet period, 5,000 people were removed from service each year because of alcohol, drug abuse, delinquency, or extremely deviant behavior. (5) Persons with acute psychoses are usually removed swiftly, but an alcoholic might remain in service a long time before action is taken.

Hope for Sanity?

While the danger of intended nuclear war is decreasing as world leaders realize that it would be suicide, the risk of an unintended war is growing. Because of the effects of group dynamics, because of simple human frailties, and because of the decreasing time for decision making in a crisis, the opportunity for a war to start by misjudgment is increasing.

The situation is, as I have tried to show, gloomy. But, when people were fighting slavery, the situation was also dismal - many thought that slavery could not be abolished. Even so, laws against slavery were instituted. In fact, little more than a hundred years ago slavery was legal in the United States and serfdom was legal in Russia. In the progress made since that time lies hope for the future.

References

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