

The Essence of Decision

Graham Allison (1971)

Table of Contents

- History of the Cuban Missile Crisis
- *Thirteen Days clips*
- *Essence of Decision*

The Cuban Missile Crisis

- JULY 1962. Raul Castro, brother of Cuban Premier Fidel Castro, visits Moscow. The Soviet Union begins large-scale shipments of technicians and military aid to Cuba.
- AUGUST 1962. Soviet shipments continue. U.S. intelligence establishes the presence of air defense missiles in Cuba. Rumors of offensive missiles in Cuba spark Republican attacks on the Kennedy administration.
- SEPTEMBER 1962. The U.S. and the U.S.S.R. trade warnings of a nuclear confrontation if Cuba becomes a base for Soviet offensive weapons or if the United States should invade Cuba.
- SUNDAY, OCTOBER 14. Major Richard Heyser completes a U-2 photo reconnaissance flight over Cuba, the first without cloud cover in nearly two weeks.
- MONDAY, OCTOBER 15. Intelligence analysts at the National Photographic Interpretation Center "read out" the U-2 film and identify a medium range ballistic missile site near San Cristobal.

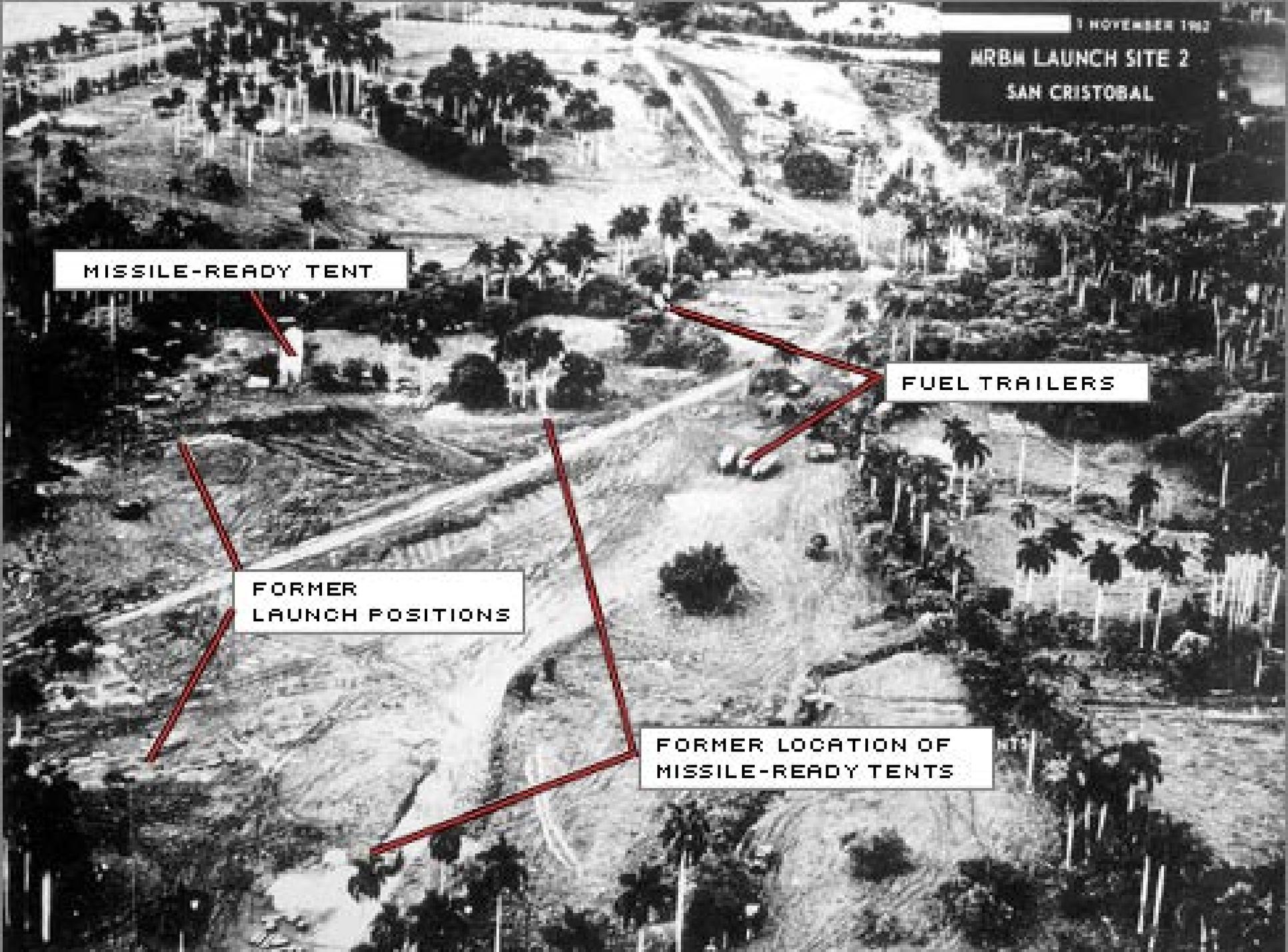
HRBM LAUNCH SITE 2
SAN CRISTOBAL

MISSILE-READY TENT

FUEL TRAILERS

FORMER
LAUNCH POSITIONS

FORMER LOCATION OF
MISSILE-READY TENTS



- TUESDAY, OCTOBER 16. The thirteen days marking the most dangerous period of the Cuban missile crisis begin. President Kennedy and principal foreign policy and national defense officials are briefed on the U-2 findings. Discussions begin on how to respond to the challenge. **Two principal courses are offered: an air strike and invasion, or a naval quarantine with the threat of further military action.**
- WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 17. Military units begin moving to bases in the Southeastern U.S. Photos from another U-2 flight show additional sites and 16 to 32 missiles. Kennedy attends a brief service at St. Matthew's Cathedral in observance of the National Day of Prayer. He has lunch with Crown Prince Hasan of Libya, and then makes a political visit to Connecticut in support of Democratic congressional candidates.
- THURSDAY, OCTOBER 18. Kennedy is visited by Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, who asserts that Soviet aid to Cuba is purely defensive and does not represent a threat to the United States. Kennedy, without revealing what he knows of the existence of the missiles, reads to Gromyko his public warning of September 4 that the "gravest consequences" would follow if significant Soviet offensive weapons were introduced into Cuba.

- FRIDAY, OCTOBER 19. President Kennedy leaves for a scheduled campaign trip to Ohio and Illinois. In Washington, his advisers continue the debate over the necessary and appropriate course of action.
- SATURDAY, OCTOBER 20. Kennedy returns suddenly to Washington and after five hours of discussion with top advisers **decides on the quarantine**. Plans for deploying naval units are drawn and work is begun on a speech to notify the American people.
- SUNDAY, OCTOBER 21. After attending Mass at St. Stephen's Church with Mrs. Kennedy, the President meets with General Walter Sweeney of the Tactical Air Command who tells him that an air strike **could not guarantee 100% destruction of the missiles**. Kennedy informs British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan of the situation by telephone.
- MONDAY, OCTOBER 22. Kennedy phones former Presidents Hoover, Truman and Eisenhower to brief them on the situation. Meetings to coordinate all actions continue. Kennedy formally establishes the Executive Committee of the National Security Council and instructs it to meet daily during the crisis. Kennedy briefs the cabinet and congressional leaders on the situation.

- President Kennedy writes to Nikita Khrushchev, Premier of the Soviet Union, prior to addressing the American public on live television: “... I have not assumed that you or any other sane man would In this nuclear age, deliberately plunge the world into war which it is crystal clear no country could win and which could only result in catastrophic consequences to the whole world. Including the aggressor.”
- At 7:00 p.m. Kennedy speaks on television, revealing the the evidence of Soviet missiles in Cuba and calling for their removal. He also announces the establishment of a naval quarantine around the island until the Soviet Union agrees to dismantle the missile sites and to make certain that no additional missiles are shipped to Cuba. Approximately one hour before the speech, Secretary of State Dean Rusk formally notifies Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin of the contents of the President's speech.

- TUESDAY, OCTOBER 23. Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Edwin Martin seeks a resolution of support from the Organization of American States. Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson lays the matter before the U.N. Security Council. The ships of the naval quarantine fleet move into place around Cuba. Soviet submarines threaten the quarantine by moving into the Caribbean area. Soviet freighters bound for Cuba with military supplies stop dead in the water, but the oil tanker Bucharest continues towards Cuba. In the evening Robert Kennedy meets with Ambassador Dobrynin at the Soviet Embassy.
- WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 24: Chairman Khrushchev replies indignantly to President Kennedy's October 23 letter stating in part:
 - "You, Mr. President, are not declaring a quarantine, but rather are setting forth an ultimatum and threatening that if we do not give in to your demands you will use force. Consider what you are saying! And you want to persuade me to agree to this! What would it mean to agree to these demands? It would mean guiding oneself in one's relations with other countries not by reason, but by submitting to arbitrariness. You are no longer appealing to reason, but wish to intimidate us."

- THURSDAY, OCTOBER 25. Soviet freighters turn and head back to Europe. The Bucharest, carrying only petroleum products, is allowed through the quarantine line. U.N. Secretary General U Thant calls for a cooling off period, which is rejected by Kennedy because it would leave the missiles in place.
- During the debate in the Security Council, U.S. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson confronts his Soviet U.N. counterpart Valerian Zorin with photographic evidence of the missiles.
- FRIDAY, OCTOBER 26. A Soviet-chartered freighter is stopped at the quarantine line and searched for contraband military supplies. None are found and the ship is allowed to proceed to Cuba. Photographic evidence shows accelerated construction of the missile sites and the uncrating of Soviet IL-28 bombers at Cuban airfields.
- In a private letter, Fidel Castro urges Nikita Khrushchev to initiate a nuclear first strike against the United States in the event of an American invasion of Cuba.
- John Scali, ABC News reporter, is approached by Aleksander Fomin of the Soviet embassy staff with a proposal for a solution to the crisis.
- Later, a long, rambling letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy makes a similar offer: removal of the missiles in exchange for lifting the quarantine and a pledge that the U.S. will not invade Cuba.

- SATURDAY, OCTOBER 27. A second letter from Moscow demanding tougher terms, including the removal of obsolete Jupiter missiles from Turkey, is received in Washington. An American U-2 plane is shot down over Cuba by a Soviet-supplied surface-to-air missile and the pilot, Major Rudolph Anderson, is killed.
- At a tense meeting of the Executive Committee, President Kennedy resists pressure for immediate military action against the SAM sites. At several points in the discussion, Kennedy insists that removal of the American missiles in Turkey will have to be part of an overall negotiated settlement. The Committee ultimately decides to ignore the Saturday letter from Moscow and respond favorably to the more conciliatory Friday message. Air Force troop carrier squadrons are ordered to active duty in case an invasion is required.
- That night, Robert Kennedy meets secretly with Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. They reach a basic understanding: the Soviet Union will withdraw the missiles from Cuba under United Nations supervision in exchange for an American pledge not to invade Cuba. In an additional secret understanding, the United States agrees to eventually remove the Jupiter missiles from Turkey.

- SUNDAY, OCTOBER 28. The thirteen days marking the most dangerous period of the Cuban missile crisis end. Radio Moscow announces that the Soviet Union has accepted the proposed solution and releases the text of a Khrushchev letter affirming that the missiles will be removed in exchange for a non-invasion pledge from the United States.
- “In order to eliminate as rapidly as possible the conflict which endangers the cause of peace, to give an assurance to all people who crave peace, and to reassure the American people, who, I am certain, also want peace, as do the people of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Government, in addition to earlier instructions on the discontinuation of further work on weapons construction sites, has given a new order to dismantle the arms which you described as offensive, and to crate and return them to the Soviet Union.”
(Khrushchev’s Letter)

- WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 21. Just over a month after the crisis began, the President terminates the quarantine after the conclusion of tense discussions at the United Nations over the disposition of Soviet nuclear bombers and submarine bases. The U.S. is satisfied with the progress made in dismantling and withdrawing the missiles. Three decades later a Soviet military spokesman would reveal that tactical nuclear weapons, nine Luna missiles and six mobile launchers with a range of thirty miles and the explosive power of half the Hiroshima bomb, had been available for use at the discretion of Soviet field commanders in the event of an American invasion.

Clips

- Chapters 4-7
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 24-25
- Chapter 28

Graham T Allison

- Government Professor at Harvard
- Assistant Secretary of Defense for Policy and Plans during the Clinton Administration
- Founding dean of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government
- Revolutionized the field of foreign policy decision making in 1971 with *Essence of Decision* which will question the rational actor paradigm.

Essence of Decision

- Title comes from a JFK speech: "*The essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer - often, indeed, to the decider himself.*"
- Allison takes up this challenge.
- Allison adopts a case study approach with a broad (claimed) domain of applicability
- This original case is the Cuban Missile Crisis

The Argument

- When he first wrote the book, Allison contended that political science and the study of international relations were saturated with rational expectation theories inherited from the field of economics. Under such a view, the actions of states are analyzed by assuming that nations consider all options and act rationally to maximize their utility.
- Allison attributes such viewpoints to the dominance of economists such as Milton Friedman, statesmen such as Robert McNamara and Henry Kissinger, disciplines such as game theory, and organizations such as the RAND Corporation. However, as he puts it:
-

The Argument (cont'd)

- “ It must be noted, however, that an imaginative analyst can construct an account of value-maximizing choice for any action or set of actions performed by a government.”
- Or, to put it bluntly, this approach (which Allison terms the "Rational Actor Model") violates the law of falsifiability. Also, Allison notes that "rational" analysts must ignore a lot of facts in order to make their analysis fit their models.
- In response, Allison constructed three different ways (or "lenses") through which analysts can examine events: the "Rational Actor" model, the "Organizational Process" model, and the “Bureaucratic/Governmental Politics" model.

Questions

- 1. Why did the Soviet Union decide to place offensive missiles in Cuba?
- 2. Why did the United States respond to the missile deployment with a blockade?
- 3. Why did the Soviet Union withdraw the missiles?

Rational Actor Model

- Describes a state's behavior as that of a perfectly rational individual, who is normally assumed to have perfect situational knowledge, and who attempts to optimize whatever values/goals are sought in a given situation.
- The actions of states are analyzed by assuming that nations consider all options and act rationally to maximize their utility.
- Under this model:
 - Governments are treated as the primary actor.
 - The government examines a set of goals, evaluates them according to their utility, then picks the one that has the highest "payoff."

- Allison explains the crisis like this:
- 1. John F. Kennedy, in 1961, revealed that the Soviet Union, despite rhetoric, had far fewer ICBMs than it claimed. In response, Nikita Khrushchev ordered nuclear missiles with shorter ranges installed in Cuba. In one move, the Soviets bridged the "missile gap" while scoring points in the Cold War. Based on Kennedy's failure to back up the Bay of Pigs invasion, they believed the U.S. wouldn't respond harshly.
- 2. Kennedy and his advisors (ExCom) evaluated a number of options, ranging from doing nothing to a full invasion of Cuba. A blockade of Cuba was chosen because it wouldn't necessarily escalate into war, and because it forced the Soviets to make the next move.
- 3. Because of mutually assured destruction by a nuclear war, the Soviets had no choice but to bow to U.S. demands and remove the weapons.

Crisis

- High saliency (perception of threat)
- Short time horizon (high anxiety)
- Imperfect information

- The Rational Model does not apply

Organizational Process

- An "organizational process" model in which the decision maker operates under time and information constraints, and does not seek an optimal solution. Instead, the decision maker engages in "satisficing" behavior and attempts to find a solution which achieves a set (minimum) goal, and minimizes risk of failure.
- Allison noted there were many facts that the rational model had to ignore, such as why the Soviets failed to camouflage the nuclear sites during construction, but did so only after U-2 flights pinpointed their locations.
- He cited work by James G. March and Herbert Simon, which argue that existing governmental bureaucracy places limits on a nation's actions, and often dictates the final outcome. He then proposed the following "organizational process" model propositions:
 - * When faced with a crisis, government leaders don't look at it as a whole, but break it down and assign it according to pre-established organizational lines.
 - * Because of time and resource limitations, rather than evaluating all possible courses of action to see which one is most likely to work, leaders settle on the first proposal that adequately addresses the issue, which Simon termed "satisficing."
 - * Leaders gravitate towards solutions that limit short-term uncertainty (emphasis on "short-term").
 - * Organizations follow set "repertoires" and procedures when taking actions.

- Allison explains the crisis like this:
- 1. Because the Soviets never established nuclear missile bases outside of their country at the time, they assigned the tasks to established departments, which in turn followed their own set procedures. However, their procedures were not adapted to Cuban conditions, and as a result, mistakes were made that allowed the U.S. to quite easily learn of the program's existence. Such mistakes included such gaffes as supposedly undercover Soviet troops decorating their barracks with Red Army Stars viewable from above.
- 2. Kennedy and his advisors never really considered any other options besides a blockade or air strikes, and initially, were almost unanimously in favor of the air strikes. However, such attacks created massive uncertainty because the U.S. Air Force couldn't guarantee it would disable all the nuclear missiles. Because the U.S. Navy already had considerable strength in the field, and because Kennedy was able to communicate directly with the fleet's captains, members fell back on the blockade as the only safe option.
- 3. The Soviets simply did not have a plan to follow if the U.S. took decisive action against their missiles. Khrushchev's communications indicated a high degree of desperation. Without any back-up plan, the Soviets had to withdraw.

A Third Lens

- Allison proposed a third model, which takes account of court politics (or "palace politics"). While statesmen don't like to admit they play politics to get things done, especially in high-stakes situations such as the Cuban missile crisis, they nonetheless do.

Bureaucratic Politics

- A "bureaucratic politics" model in which state actors seek to achieve separate goals, which may conflict with each other. In this case, various individuals, representing various organizational interests, engage in a process to achieve a negotiated group decision which will represent the policy of the state.
- The agreed upon policy may erode over time, as the situation changes dynamically, as organizational interests evolve, and as individuals gain and lose bureaucratic power, status, and access to critical information.
- “Where you sit determines where you stand.”

- Allison proposed the following propositions for this model:
- A nation's actions are best understood as the result of politicking and negotiation by its top leaders.
- Even if they share a goal, leaders differ in how to achieve it because of such factors as personal interests and background.
- Leaders have different levels of power based on charisma, personality, skills of persuasion, and personal ties to decision makers.
- Because of the possibilities of miscommunication, misunderstandings, and downright disagreements, different leaders may take actions that the group as a whole would not approve of.

- Allison explains the crisis like this:
- 1. Khrushchev came under increasing fire from the Presidium because of Kennedy's revelation of the Soviet lack of ICBMs, as well as American successes in Berlin. Also, the Soviet economy was being stretched, and military leaders were unhappy with Khrushchev's decision to cut the size of the army. Placing missiles in Cuba was a cheap and quick way for him to secure his political base.
- 2. Because of the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, Republicans in the U.S. Congress made Cuban policy into a major issue for the upcoming congressional elections later in 1962. Therefore, Kennedy immediately decided on a strong response rather than a diplomatic one. Although a majority of ExCom initially favored air strikes, those closest to the president - such as his brother and Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, and special counsel Theodore Sorensen - favored the blockade. At the same time, Kennedy got into arguments with proponents of the air strikes, such as Air Force General Curtis LeMay. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Kennedy also distrusted the CIA and its advice. This combination of push and pull led to the implication of a blockade.
- 3. With his plans thwarted, Khrushchev tried to save face by pointing to American missiles in Turkey, a position similar to the Cuban missiles. While Kennedy refused to move these missiles "under duress," he allowed Robert Kennedy to reach a deal with Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, in which the Turkish missiles (which Kennedy ordered removed prior to the crisis) would be quietly removed several months later. Publicly, Kennedy also agreed never to invade Cuba.

Implications

- When the book was first published, Allison's primary message was that the concept of mutually assured destruction as a barrier to nuclear war was unfounded. By looking at organizational and political models, such an outcome was quite possible - nations, against what was predicted by the rational viewpoint, could indeed "commit suicide."
- He pointed to several incidents in history that seemed to back this assertion. His most salient point: the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor with the full knowledge that they lacked the industrial capacity and military might to win a war against the U.S. Nevertheless, they did so anyway.

- He also believed that the organizational model explained otherwise inexplicable gaffes in military history. To return to 1941, he noted that the U.S. intercepted enough evidence to indicate that Japan was about to attack Pearl Harbor, yet the commander did not prepare. The answer, Allison revealed, was that what the intelligence community viewed as a "threat of attack," the commander interpreted as a "threat of sabotage." This miscommunication, due to different viewpoints, allowed the attack to be pulled off.
- Likewise, the political process model explained otherwise confusing affairs. Allison pointed to the decision by General Douglas MacArthur to defy his orders during the Korean War and march too far north. The reason was not a "rational" change in U.S. intentions, but rather, MacArthur's disagreements with Harry Truman and other policymakers.
- Above all, he described using rational actor models as dangerous. By using such models (and modes of thinking), people made unreliable assumptions about reality, which could have disastrous consequences. Part of what allowed the attack on Pearl Harbor to be pulled off was the *assumption* that, since Japan would lose such a war, they would never dare attack. The *assumption* under MAD is that nobody will ever start a nuclear war because of its consequences. However, humans do not act in a rational manner, which history has proven time and again.

Critiques

- Milton Friedman has contended that, even if rational-expectation theories do not describe reality *per se*, they should be retained since they provide accurate predictions. Allison replies that Friedman has not provided enough evidence to demonstrate his theories actually predict anything, and criticizes his arguments as unscientific.
- Allison was strongly criticized for using his added theories to make his own assumptions. One of the most cited: according to his political model, he postulated that Kennedy must have made an "under the table" agreement concerning the Turkish missiles, probably using his brother as a liaison. However, when tapes of EXCOM's proceedings were released in the 1990s, it turned out that Allison was entirely correct, which both silenced these critics and added to the book's stature.