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"Coercive Diplomacy" in the Light of Vietnam:  
Some Preliminary Notes

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Daniel Ellsberg draft  
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In 1964, North Vietnam was guiding and supporting the VC insurgency in South Vietnam in a number of ways corresponding exactly to the forms of U.S. involvement in the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion ("Cuba I," in bureaucratic argot). In order to compel North Vietnam to "stop doing what she was doing" and "to leave her neighbors alone," the U.S. Government launched a series of "pressures" in what some officials may have regarded as the pattern of successful coercion in the 1962 Missile Crisis, "Cuba II." It failed.

Meanwhile, in part stimulated by such confrontations as the Berlin Crisis of 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis, a literature was appearing by such strategic analysts as Thomas Schelling and Herman Kahn on "crisis management" and the use of demonstrative force and threats of "escalation" to support "coercive diplomacy."<sup>1</sup> Both the form and apparent aims of the process of threatening and then bombing North Vietnam from the early spring of 1964 through the late spring of 1965 appeared so closely similar to the analytical models of these theorists--as they were quick to recognize, with the

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, "Escalation and its Strategic Context" by Herman Kahn, in National Security: Political, Military and Economic Strategies in the Decade Ahead (New York, 1963); Herman Kahn, On Escalation (New York, 1965); Thomas C. Schelling, Arms and Influence (New Haven, 1966). (Most of Schelling's book had appeared earlier, and for its theoretical framework it drew heavily upon his pathbreaking work in bargaining theory, The Strategy of Conflict (Cambridge, 1960) ).

Tonkin Gulf reprisals drawing unwontedly enthusiastic approval from Schelling<sup>1</sup>--that some have conjectured a conscious application of their formal strategies by policy-makers.

That genesis seems highly unlikely. The bureaucratic roots of the coercive policy go back at least to 1961, when it was proposed on a contingent basis by Maxwell Taylor and Walt Rostow, both influential proponents in the 1964-65 period. What seems more plausible is that such writers as Schelling and Kahn were expressing analytically in the '60's premises and orientations that were widely shared in the official, semi-official and academic circles in which they moved. They drew, in general and abstract form, tactical conclusions, specific instances of which were quite likely to be invented independently by officials confronting particular conflict situations of that period.

However, the correspondence in principle seems valid. Thus, the trial of the coercive tactics in the case of North Vietnam seems a fair

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<sup>1</sup>"If the American military action was widely judged unusually fitting, this was an almost aesthetic judgment. If words like "repartee" can be applied to war and diplomacy, the military action was an expressive bit of repartee. It took mainly the form of deeds, not words, but the deeds were articulate...that night's diplomacy was carried out principally by pilots, not speechwriters." (Schelling, Arms and Influence, p. 142.)

Kahn's book, appearing too soon after the event to incorporate more than brief comments on the reprisal (On Escalation, pp. 54, 261) is more reserved, if not grudging: "I fear, though, that the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and the recent crisis in the Bay of Tonkin in the summer of 1964 may have given some government policy-makers and their staffs a greater sense of skill and capability in command and control than is completely justified, even if some feeling of increased "technical" competence is not completely misleading" (p. 256).

test of the theory, as of the actual preconceptions of officials. What is to be learned from this experience of failure, contrasting with the earlier success?

It appears that some of the limitations and unrealities of the models, when reexamined in the light of the Vietnam experience, do seem to have characterized the thinking of policy-makers, in ways that help explain why a policy that should have been seen as highly unpromising was adopted and why it did fail. On the other hand, some realistic complications ignored in the abstract analyses were, in fact, well appreciated by officials. (This is another reason for doubting any blind application of the theories). A number of these neglected complexities seem so critical, both to official thinking and to actual events, as to make the relevance of the existing analytical work to other actual crises both limited and suspect: even for analysing the perspectives and choices of actual decision-makers, let alone for prescribing "optimal" behavior or predicting the likely course of events.

The suggestion that, for certain key policy-makers, the intellectual framework of the approach against North Vietnam was "born of the Cuban missile crisis," is Henry Brandon's.

That brilliant success in averting thermonuclear war by the application of the coolest of cool rationalism--the "graduated response"--provided one of the new wisdoms of the nuclear age. President Kennedy, after weighing all the odds and 'trying to understand the implications of every move,' rejected the direct and immediate use of force. He decided in favor of a slow crescendo of military measures that avoided direct confrontation and immediated retaliation,

but clearly pointed at the possible and likely consequences if the graduated response was allowed to reach its climax.

...John Kennedy, his brother Robert, McGeorge Bundy, and Robert McNamara were the architects of this flexible strategy and the true believers in the intellectual process and its rational products. Robert Kennedy's history of the Cuban missile crisis is the textbook to the graduated response, and convincingly proves its validity. It therefore became the answer to containing the risks of direct nuclear confrontation that threaten every time a superpower is involved in war or a warlike situation. It succeeded in Cuba against the Soviet Union: logic suggested that it ought also to be effective---or more so, since it had to deal with actual conflict--against a small country such as North Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

Of the four "architects" mentioned, Bundy and McNamara were still predominant among Presidential advisors in 1964-65. And both were, indeed, ardent advocates of the "graduated" bombing policy actually adopted in the spring of 1965. (Likewise, Dean Rusk; and Walt W. Rostow, articulate though offstage in both crises).

Yet, as one who myself participated in and later studied both the Cuban Missile Crisis and the 1964-65 escalation process in Vietnam, I had never been specially struck by the similarities in the two approaches, as opposed to some major differences. After all, the one case amounted to an elaborate threat-process, leading up to an explicit (private) ultimatum promising decisive, though both limited and risky, action if U.S. terms, embodying significant concessions, were not

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<sup>1</sup>Henry Brandon, The Anatomy of Error (Boston, 1969), pp. 155-56.

met.<sup>1</sup> It was, as it was designed and hoped to be, successful before it ever became violent. The other was conceived from the beginning essentially as a program of violent, if demonstrative, pressures. This was, as planned, preceded by non-violent signals, but with no expectations that these alone could be effective.

Given the many other differences as well, could it really be that Cuba II was a critical influence on the thinking of, say, McNamara and Bundy in the later Vietnam crisis? On the first reading Brandon's comments recently, I doubted it. But on referring to the "textbook" cited by Brandon, I find the evidence powerfully suggestive.

In Robert Kennedy's account of "the thirteen days" in 1962, the President

knew he would have to act. ...What that action would be was still to be determined. But he was convinced from the beginning that he would have to do something...Secretary McNamara, by Wednesday, became the blockade's strongest advocate. He argued that it was limited pressure, which could be increased as the circumstances warranted. Further, it was dramatic and forceful pressure, which would be understood yet, most importantly, still leave us in control of events."<sup>2</sup>

The similarity is unmistakable to the arguments in late 1964 for what John T. McNaughton labelled the policy of "progressive squeeze-and -talk," in contrast to the JCS-preferred alternative he termed

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<sup>1</sup>Both the ultimatum and the concession--informing Khrushchev privately that U.S. IRBMs in Turkey would be removed "within a short time after this crisis was over"--were matters of the highest degree of secrecy within the U.S. Government, guessed-at but not revealed until Robert Kennedy's memoir, Thirteen Days (New York, 1969): pp. 106-109. To make the threat acceptable, of course, Kennedy denied to Dobrynin that it was an "ultimatum"; to make the offer giveable, he denied that it was a "quid pro quo."

<sup>2</sup>Robert F. Kennedy, Thirteen Days (New York, 1969), pp. 33-34.

"full/fast squeeze." \*Moreover, not only is the chosen(former) approach similar, as perceived by its proponents, but the whole set of options and arguments correspond in the two cases.

In both crises the JCS favored a large-scale, comprehensive initial attack: in the Cuban case, "five hundred sorties, striking all military targets, including the missile sites, airfields, ports and gun emplacements"; in the case of North Vietnam, a "sharp sudden blow," including Haiphong and Phuc Yen, an airfield near Hanoi, in initial attacks.

In both cases, the JCS "forcefully presented their view that"[flexible alternatives] would not be effective." In the earlier case, they had a powerful civilian ally: Dean Acheson, who argued in a "clear and brilliant way" that "an air attack and invasion represented our only alternative."<sup>1</sup> More recently, Acheson has confirmed this description of his views, reporting without apparent embarrassment or change of heart his conviction at that time that the air attack was "the necessary and only effective

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<sup>1</sup>Op. cit., pp. 36, 38. Italics added.

\*This option was described as : "Present policies plus an orchestration of communications with Hanoi and a crescendo of additional military moves ...The scenario would be designed to give the U.S. the option at any point to proceed or not, to escalate or not, and to quicken the pace or not."

method of achieving our purpose."<sup>1</sup> (*Italics added*)

That this judgment was flatly mistaken is indicated rather backhandedly at the end of his account: "The amazing result was that by the very next morning this hundred-to-one shot certainly appeared to be paying off."<sup>2</sup>

All this may well have made its own impression on certain participants. Kennedy admits that it had been "with some trepidation" that he

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<sup>1</sup>Dean Acheson, "Dean Acheson's Version of Robert Kennedy's Version of the Cuba Missile Affair," *Esquire*, February, 1969, p. 76. Acheson stresses that his own preferred choice was: "simultaneous low-level bombing attacks on the nuclear installations." But this notion was a non-starter. As Acheson puts it, "the narrow and specific proposal...constantly became obscured and complicated by trimmings added by the military." According to Kennedy, McNamara reported to the ExCom that Acheson's proposal, "a surgical air strike, as it came to be called--was militarily impractical in the view of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that any such military action would have to include all military installations in Cuba, eventually leading to an invasion." (*Ibid.*, p. 34). This position was predictable, and effectively ruled out Acheson's scheme; and Acheson seems clearly to have preferred even the JCS version to the blockade.

Experience both in Cuba and later in North Vietnam suggests that the JCS may have had a better grasp of the reliability and limits of one-slice aerial "surgery" than did Acheson. When USAF pilots, after years of training for nuclear war in planes designed for that alone, finally were unleashed to drop high explosives on North Vietnam in February, 1965, their first few missions produced such low estimates of target damage that McNamara directed that these results be deleted from public reports. As for Cuba, we counted about one-third more missiles being transported away from Cuba after the crisis than any form of reconnaissance or intelligence had ever spotted, earlier, on the island; so even accurate bombing on a single strike--or for that matter, repeated strikes--would have failed to be as "decisive" as Acheson fantasied.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 46.



had brought himself to argue against Acheson, of whom he was "a great admirer"; listening to him on the Berlin crisis a year earlier, "I had thought to myself that I had never heard anyone so lucid and convincing and would never wish to be on the other side of an argument with him."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, "I supported McNamara's position in favor of a blockade. This was not from a deep conviction that it would be a successful course of action, but a feeling that it had more flexibility and fewer liabilities than a military attack."<sup>2</sup>

Despite success of this alternative to the "necessary and only effective" course, Acheson apparently still sees no reason to reevaluate his original judgment of "hundred-to-one" odds against; the President, he concludes, had been "phenomenally lucky." But for others, the crisis was surely a test not only of the chosen course of action but of the credibility of arguments that it could not work. This may well have been remembered two years later, when the JCS were again pressing the necessity of all-out, fast-paced bombing, and intelligence analyses (while not quoting 100-to-1 against the more deliberate, "limited, flexible" program adopted) held out little promise that anything less would decisively influence of the North Vietnamese leadership.

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<sup>1</sup>Kennedy, op. cit., p. 38

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 37

If so, the hopeful inference was mistaken, the memory a trap; a tragic one, for Vietnamese even more than for Americans. For this

"controlled, graduated" coercive strategy was a hundred-to-one shot.

To be sure, there are those (like McGeorge Bundy) who point out that coercion of the Hanoi leadership was not all that was intended from the bombing program, or even, from the point of view of certain participants, the main objective. Yet the probable failure, and its consequences for later escalation and failure, of the coercive aim was certain to outweigh any imaginable side-benefits; whether from temporarily reassuring and "stablizing" the Saigon regime<sup>1</sup> to proving to allies and domestic critics that we would, as one official once put it, "walk the last mile for a friend."

Nothing that has happened has suggested that the approach advocated by the JCS would have worked any better, or been anything but an unprecedented disaster, in either case. Yet warning might have been taken from the reasons for the fact, recognized by all, that verbal and non-violent demonstrative action alone--effective in the case of Cuba II--would not be adequate to get North Vietnam to meet our demands. The same factors that made non-violent pressures inadequate and violent ones look "necessary" in the 1964-65 situation would operate: (1) to keep those violent

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<sup>1</sup>Which was, in fact, overtutned by a half-abortive coup within two weeks of the Pleiku "retaliation," and whose civilian facade was finally discarded by the ARVN leadership in June, 1965. To be reminded now of the "success" of the three-year bombing of North Vietnam--or even the first month of it--in terms of such modest, supposedly reasonable purposes is like being told by a major arsonist that his "true primary aim" was to toast marshmallows (he has the sticky fingers, he assures us, if not the marshmallows, to show he succeeded).

measures limited and ambiguous, (2) thus to make them "insufficient," while encouraging still stronger means, and (3) to make stronger attacks, as well, inadequate.

Why was it, after all, that the contemplated "crescendo of military measures"<sup>1</sup> could comprise no more than words and maneuvers in the one case, yet be effective against the world's most powerful opponent; where in the other, pitting the U.S.A. against one of the world's smaller agricultural countries, it was expected, correctly, that nothing less than "messages" delivered by bomber pilots would do, and even they would probably fail?

The answers had to do with differences between the two cases in: (1) the U.S. demand, as weighed by the opponent; (2) the importance of the stakes as seen by the U.S. public (and allies); (3) the means available to enforce the demand, and the relative effectiveness, costs (as affected by the opponent) and legitimacy (as seen by the U.S. public).

These differences in turn affected: (a) how sure the North Vietnamese leaders had to be that the U.S. would carry out its ultimate threats, before they would consider yielding to our demands; (b) how credible, over time, the U.S. was in fact able to make these threats, even with

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<sup>1</sup>A phrase used by Brandon in 1969 to describe the Cuba II strategy, and used by John McNaughton in 1964 to characterize "progressive squeeze-and-talk" option against North Vietnam.

the use of limited "demonstrations."<sup>1</sup> But differences that led to different measures led, as well, to differences in effect and prospects for success.

In both cases, the "crescendo" was designed, at least in part, to compel an adversary to withdraw certain recently infiltrated items: missiles in the one case, cadres, "regroupees" and units in the other.

In the case of Cuba II:

1. The items to be removed could be seen by Americans as direct threats to their lives; as immediately and isgnificantly shifting the strategic balance of power; and as likely to influence, decisively and soon, the course of the Berlin Crisis, threatening nuclear war and/or the cohesion of the Western alliance.<sup>2</sup>
2. The extreme secrecy, public deception and direct high level lies of the Soviets supported the most ominous interpretations of their move;

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<sup>1</sup>See D. Ellsberg, "The Theory and Practice of Blackmail," P-3883, the RAND Corporation, July 1968 (originally delivered as a Lowell Lecture, Boston, March, 1959). In the technical terms of that analysis of coercion, factor (a) above would be described as North Vietnam's "critical risk," facing the specific U.S. threats and demands, and factor (b) North Vietnam's actual or perceived risk. The U.S. "problem," as coercer, was to make (b) greater than (a), by actions that affected one or both. But compared to the adversary's position in Cuba II, (a) looked much higher for North Vietnam, (b) much lower, and the U.S. ability to affect either, very small.

<sup>2</sup>The first two of these perceptions were highly questionable--indubitable though they seemed to Acheson--and might have been widely questioned if the crisis had lasted much longer; but they were plausible first impressions, certain to be politically dominant for two weeks or more.

at the same time they indicated a "bad conscience" and provided a political vulnerability.

3. The items were in an area where, virtually all Americans agreed, the opponents "had no business" and their very presence was directly challenging, whereas we had the tradition, supposed "right," and strategic necessity of intervening there.
4. The first violent U.S. move in Cuba (unless--as briefly considered-- it were against the SAMs alone) would<sup>1</sup> decisively and quickly destroy the offending items. (Thus, unless they were removed first under threat, they could quickly be removed by force; and this by limited means that, at worst, would not destroy the surrounding society).
5. Neither officials nor public in America doubted that the items were wholly controlled and could be removed by the opposing leadership: i.e., that our demand could be met.
6. The stakes appeared less than vital for the opponents--i.e. they could comply without sacrificing the survival of their regime or society-- and smaller than they were for us.<sup>2</sup>
7. Although the specific move had been a surprise, the opposing officials

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<sup>1</sup>It was believed (but see earlier footnote).

<sup>2</sup>Though the retreat may have contributed to the downfall of Krushchev himself. Many of our officials perceived the relative stakes similarly in the case of North Vietnam. They were mistaken.

were known relatively well, and regular, relatively trusted channels of diplomatic communication existed between the heads of state.

Given some of the factors above, within a few days of the opening of the crisis, both NATO and OAS allies had indicated sympathetic support, and (by OAS action) U.S. intervention had been given the color of international legitimacy.

Moreover, in the course of the week following the President's speech, there was ample demonstration of support for the President's purposes-- even to the extent of accepting considerable risks, or pressing him to go further--among Congress, press and public. Indeed, the reaction of Congressional leaders to the President's revelations just before his speech was unsettling to Kennedy in its "emotional criticism" of his moderate initial steps; even Senator Fulbright "strongly advised military action rather than such a weak step as the blockade."<sup>1</sup> But though the President was "upset" by the meeting, which his brother perceived as "a tremendous strain" on him, this congressional mood--made publicly evident in the course of the week--was, of course, a source of immense strength in the coercive bargaining of the final day of the crisis. The unexpectedly widespread and firm support for the President's leadership in the crisis, at home and abroad, presented the Soviets with little opportunity or temptation to make counterthreats.

None of this could have been foreseen with certainty. The support

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<sup>1</sup>Kennedy, op. cit., p. 54.

might not have been there. To this extent Acheson's worries were reasonable; the decisive moves he wanted might have been forestalled, politically, in the course of the week.<sup>1</sup> Yet if that had happened, it would have exposed public and allied attitudes that should raise questions about the fitness of the President's carrying out such an action at all. If the public, or Congress, (or allies) did not, in fact, agree that the risks for all were worth taking, should the President trust his own judgment to the extent of imposing such risks upon them? Did he have the right? The question does not answer itself; but to say the least, the burden of proof would be upon him, and upon the advocates of such a course, to justify it. Moreover, it would be far less prudent than otherwise to proceed, for in the event of initial failure, his early, reluctant support would surely fade quickly; which is to say that failure would be likely, since it would pay his opponent to hold out till this happened.

In the event, Kennedy's ultimatum, delivered on Saturday night through Robert Kennedy to Dobrynin, carried the utmost weight of credibility, far more than it could have conveyed a week earlier. Though none of the "crescendo of military measures" during the week had, short of the ultimatum, slowed the Russian installations of the missiles, they joined with the indications of political support to make that final warning maximally believable.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Acheson emphasizes the coming to operational status of the missiles as imposing the time urgency; but this in itself did not call for a fait accompli, either when the bases were discovered or a week later. Given Acheson's confidence in "reasonable" Soviet responses to military action, it is not clear why this should have made so much difference anyway. Obviously, Acheson was concerned about queasiness in the masses, if not in the President himself, especially after the missiles approached readiness.

<sup>2</sup>The shooting-down of a U-2 on Saturday morning added a crucial element of Schelling's "threat that leaves something to chance," in a way that has not yet been fully revealed. But that is another story.

Whatever the realistic odds on the success of a process of "pressures" and threat at the start of the week, they were vastly higher by week's end.

This is not to say that the remaining risks of the commitment process in Cuba II were prudent or worth taking.<sup>1</sup> Ted Sorensen notes at the end of Robert Kennedy's memoir that, had he lived: "It was Senator Kennedy's intention to add a discussion of the basic ethical question involved: what, if any, circumstance or justification gives this government or any government the moral right to bring its people and possibly all people under the shadow of nuclear destruction?"<sup>2</sup> None of the memoirists of the Kennedy or Johnson eras seem to have confronted this question (which is most relevant to the subject of this seminar). It is not easy to guess just how Robert Kennedy would have answered it, if he had lived and changed a few years longer.

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<sup>1</sup>My own doubts on this score have grown steadily ever since: especially as research such as Graham Allison's has brought to light the remarkably high estimates among members of the ExCom of the risk of nuclear war, many in the neighborhood of 1/3. Even for the stakes as they saw them, it would seem culpably irresponsible to have pressed the course they did in the light of such expectations (which were not shared, rightly or wrongly, at lower levels).

I can agree with Acheson on one score (Ibid., p. 46): "One should not play one's luck so far too often." But I thank God his gamble was not tried; nor can I share his contemptuous inference that Khrushchev's retreat--evidently in the face of similar expectations--showed "befuddlement," "loss of nerve," a "maudlin" reaction ("He went to pieces when the military confrontation seemed inevitable. But he need not have done so.") (on the other hand, if I did share Acheson's disappointed appraisal, I would worry even more than I do about the reliability of Acheson's earlier "trained lawyer's analysis" of the low risks of a surprise attack on the missiles, since it presumed that Khrushchev's response would have been coolly and rationally restrained.

<sup>2</sup>Op. cit., p. 128.



The points to be made here are simply that circumstances surrounding Cuba II did make it likely that political support would be forthcoming for locally-decisive violent action; that this support was exhibited, during a non-violent phase of threats and preparations, underpinning these threats and indicating that political support would be maintained, at least for some period, if the threats failed and violent action were necessary; and that therefore, the threats were effective.

None of this could be expected with respect to the Rolling Thunder strategy against North Vietnam. Nor did U.S. officials expect it.

Why did they not start with such forceful but non-violent pressures as a blockade of Haiphong and Cambodia? In part, because this would not be even as decisive as the blockade of Cuba. But more (since it would, nevertheless, have been "pressure") because it would have raised immediately risks of direct conflict with Russia or China (and complaints from our allies). And neither the U.S. public nor the officials themselves really thought that this issue was worth that: at least, if it could possible be avoided.

Why not seek Congressional support, a Resolution or debate, directly on the larger issues of the war and the bombing strategy; rather than misleadingly, on the essentially phony issue (or occasion) of "protecting U.S. combat units"? Why not at least seek the support of Congressional leadership, at the last moment before launching the strikes (as in Cuba II)? Because it was most unlikely that such support would be forthcoming, early or late: at least, without simultaneously demonstrating great doubts and division.

Why, throughout 1964-65, were precise demands never spelled out to the Hanoi leadership or the VS, either publicly or privately? Internal analyses in the Government did list such specific hopes as DRV removal of cadres, re-groupings, units; the ending of radio communications to the VC; ending of in-

filtration and supply; public DRV directives to the VC to lay down their arms. Why were no such proposals communicated precisely?

In part because, in contrast to Cuba II, our coercive means did not include the capability to enforce such results unilaterally. We could punish Vietnamese in North and South; and we could, with U.S. troops, block VC total victory in the cities of South Vietnam. But two things we could not do (the very two we could do, physically, in Cuba, where the offending items were missiles, not people, brought in by sea): stop all infiltration from North to South, or eliminate the Communist organization in North or South.

Nor were our officials sure that Hanoi could be brought to do these things by any pressures; not united on how much it would be worth to try. For a number of advisors, it did not seem prudent to commit the U.S. even privately, much less publicly, to demands they might well want to compromise later. (Public demands would also have created public pressures for monitoring and enforcement procedures, another area where "tacit compromise" might prove desirable). Thus, the "progressive squeeze-and-talk" option attracted support from a diverse coalition of advisors in late '64 in part precisely because it did not specify just what the "talk" would be about, or when it would start, or end.

The results of all these considerations, in 1964: threats and demonstrative actions that were vague and contradictory; an overall pattern ambiguous with respect to what was threatened, what was demanded, and the likelihood that any pressure at all would be carried out.

The year started with public statements by both President Johnson and Secretary Rusk in February that "those engaged in external direction and supply" of guerrillas in South Vietnam "would do well to be reminded and to

remember that this type of aggression is a deeply dangerous game."<sup>1</sup> During the summer the same warning was conveyed privately to the Hanoi leadership. Yet during the year, while infiltration grew, ARVN suffered setbacks and politics grew ever more unstable in Saigon, no U.S. action resulted. There was, to be sure, the Tonkin Gulf "reprisal"; but that was carefully (even tententiously) related to attacks on Americans, not to supply of guerrillas; and even this restricted criterion for retaliation was called into question when attacks on U.S. planes at Bien Hoa and on the Brink's BOQ brought no response.

Well, there was a reason for all this non-action:<sup>2</sup> the election.

Precisely.

It was perfectly obvious that the mood of the electorate promised the greatest possible majority (the largest in history, in fact) to a campaign platform opposing Goldwater's advocacy of various recklessnesses, including bombing. The credibility of warnings to Hanoi had to yield to the political benefits of implied promises not to send American boys or even planes to fight in Southeast Asia.

Reportedly Johnson regrets, now, that he may have given Hanoi (along with the U.S. electorate) a "misleading signal" about his own real intentions and determination in the campaign of '64. Probably he did not. But that was not what they would mainly watch for. The signal they probably caught--and they were not wrong--was that it was politically rewarding for him in 1964 to imply to the public he was not leading them toward a large war in Asia. They

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<sup>1</sup>Department of State Bulletin, March 16, 1954.

<sup>2</sup>Aside from the fact, unnoticed by most high-level advisors, that the coercive bombing strategy was a rotten idea.

knew they could assure him a large, long war, if he chose to start one at all.

They may or may not have foreseen the precise impact of the resulting "credibility gap." But the mood of the public, foretold by Johnson's tactics and confirmed by his success, could only reassure them on the ultimate outcome: or at the very least, on the relative merits of holding on under pressure and prolonging the war, while raising its costs for America.

The reasons why it was hard for the Johnson Administration to send a clear and strong coercive message were undoubtedly evident to them, and they could expect them to inhibit the escalation process itself, as well.

These reasons for failing to express precise demands or threats or to foretell unequivocally in word or deed the carrying out of threats, of course, had nothing to do with unfamiliarity with the works of Kahn and Schelling. They reflected reservations and divisions about the conflict within and among officials, but much more, within the public. And these, in turn, reflected the simple facts of the situation, plus the fact that, as seen (quite reasonably) by the public, not one of the characteristics of the Cuba II confrontation listed earlier applied in Vietnam. It was not that the American people, in just two years, had turned "soft" or apathetic. There was just no way to convince the great majority of the public, over a prolonged period, that the issues and stakes in Vietnam were equivalent to those posed by Cuba II or Berlin.

This did not preclude a massive, prolonged conflict, given the unwillingness of the American public to "lose" a violent contest, once started. Nor did it preclude willingness or even pressure from part of the public and Congress to accept utmost violence and risk in pursuit of victory, once frustration had

built up. But that would be countered by intense opposition from another part of an increasingly-polarized public, if not by prudence and scruples in the minds of high-level policy-makers themselves.<sup>1</sup>

There were other inhibitions, as well, on the actual escalation process that had already showed up clearly in 1964 as inhibitions on the "signalling" process. Instability of the GVN: fear that heavy pressure on North Vietnam might cause reprisals in the South that would crack ARVN or the GVN. Pressure by hawks in the U.S. (if encouraged too much or too soon by publicly adopting their view of the challenge and military possibilities) for a war effort in the South that would destroy the Great Society budget, or for attacks in the North that would risk general war with Russia or China and cause revulsion destroying the cohesion of our alliances and domestic society. Even tactical considerations: with so few rewarding targets to threaten in North Vietnam, one could be pressed into "destroying the hostages" too soon, earlier than Hanoi's hopes of winning in the South could be frustrated.

All of these did operate once the bombing started. Hanoi and Haiphong (in contrast, say, to Pyongyang) were not destroyed, nor was Haiphong mined. The dikes were not destroyed. There was no mobilization of U.S. reserves, hence no invasion of North Vietnam. Till 1970, neither Cambodia nor Laos were invaded. No nuclear weapons were used, or threatened.

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<sup>1</sup>I have always suspected that one reason why the recommendations of the JCS for unrestricted bombing of North Vietnam were never followed--quite apart from fear of Communist China or Russia, or even of public reaction--was that President Johnson and his main advisors did not personally feel justified in doing to the cities, towns and population of North Vietnam what we had done to Germany, Japan, or even North Korea. Perhaps I am wrong, in guessing they did not feel it would be right, or that they had a right, to do this. A hypothetical test would be to speculate what might have happened to the North Vietnamese if all news of their fate could have reliably been suppressed.

Intelligence analyses had indicated only two ways in which pressure on North Vietnam might bring the kinds of concessions U.S. officials had (privately) in mind. First, a high likelihood, or the experience, of the extreme measures mentioned above, for a sustained period. Second, lesser pressures on the North (of the sort actually carried out) combined with the certainty of being blocked from victory by U.S. presence in the South for an indefinite period.

But from a coercive point of view, it was virtually impossible to convince the Hanoi leaders either that the U.S. could sustain maximally brutal attacks upon their population (even though the U.S. President could undoubtedly commence such a program) or that the U.S. could certainly bear the costs they were capable of imposing in North and South indefinitely. And that was not because they were blinded by ignorance or ideology, but because they were not blind to realities of U.S. politics.

Moreover, they knew one thing that U.S. intelligence analysts were not able to teach their superiors, who--almost totally ignorant of their opponents and the history of the conflict--had to learn it from experience: that there was essentially no chance that they, the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party in Hanoi would cave in, or lose control, or even make significant concessions in what was, for their Party and themselves, a vital struggle, in response to bombing of the sort the U.S. did conduct, let alone to less, or to mere threats of more, or to the temporary presence of massive U.S. forces in the South. So U.S. politics would have time to become relevant.

They could have been wrong about the ultimate restraints that U.S. politics implied in a prolonged war. They could yet be proved wrong. But, adver-

saries worthy of Dean Acheson's respect<sup>1</sup>, they were not ones to "go to pieces" before a military confrontation with the U.S.; they could be counted on to "play it cool." For this contrast with Khrushchev in Cuba II, their countrymen paid.

The Cuban Missile Crisis, then, was a poor school for the conflict with North Vietnam and the Viet Cong. Would the strategic analysts have been better teachers to our statesmen?

No. Briefly, their analyses embody as premises or limitations nearly all of the peculiar characteristics of the Missile Crisis (as it is conventionally perceived) that make that crisis a misleading and over-simplified paradigm for most conflicts, including Vietnam. Conflicts are presented almost invariably as a duel, between the President and a personalized foe. Totally omitted are elements of structure, diversity and conflict within the opposing governments and societies. This includes not only the political considerations discussed above, but the bureaucratic aspects that have increasingly received attention from such analysts as Andrew Marshall, Richard Neustadt, Graham Allison and Morton Halperin.

Among results of this abstraction from bureaucracy and politics are (1) greatly over-simplified notions of the aims, objectives, interests, influencing diplomatic and military behavior on both sides (only a few of those bearing on the bombing of North Vietnam have been mentioned here); (2) greatly exaggerated confidence in the likelihood or possibility of sending clear, unambiguous "signals" to "an opponent," or to read signal-like meaning in opposing military behavior. Moreover, in the light of U.S./Vietnam relations, the

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<sup>1</sup>In contrast, Acheson makes it clear, he would no sooner sit down to a serious crisis with Nikita Khrushchev again than play high-stakes poker with an hysterical woman.

scope and impact of simple ignorance of the adversaries (and allies; and countrymen) seems far underrated in these writings. All of this tends to make national "coercion" a grossly imprecise and uncertain process: and in failing, or partly succeeding, a far crueller and more dangerous one than these analyses hint.