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April 11, 1999  
(abridged version)

### The Desperate Proposal Pattern

In my work on the 1961 Vietnam decision-making for the Pentagon Papers, as I collected documents, I discerned patterns — for example, a recurrent and usually successful, though apparently non-rational, form of recommendation that I labelled the **Desperate Proposal Pattern**:

"This recommended course is the *only* one that has a chance of winning. The others have no chance. They're all no-win; therefore..."

Or else:

"This course is the *only* one that rules out clear-cut defeat in the short-run, or which minimizes the probability of it."

Or it does both:

"This course is the *only* one that has some chance of winning in the long run, *and* rules out losing in the short-run."

Such an argument defines the Desperate Proposal Pattern, which is used not only frequently but usually successfully against arguments for other courses of action. No estimate is presented of *how large* the chance is of winning (or failing) with the recommended course, nor of the *consequences and costs of failing* with it, compared with the consequences of other courses which might be less dire. There is no basis for judging that a "victory" might cost more than it was worth, or that a chance of victory might be associated with too great a danger of catastrophe to be worth risking.

In such evaluations, too much is left unsaid, uncalculated. This represents, on its face, non-rational decision-making. It is non-rational... unless — or, as if — literally *all* that mattered was to *assure a possibility of "winning,"* whatever the costs and risks of the course that seems to offer that chance and/or *rules out*, or minimizes the probability of, a clear-cut *defeat* in the short-run.

It is the Vince Lombardi principle of choice: "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing." All that matters in choosing among options is the probability of victory that each offers, with no differentiation of types or costs of "victory." An option that offers significantly less than certainty of short-run failure and humiliation is seen as *decisively* preferable to those that offer *certain* short-run failure, *whatever the other consequences, costs or risks of that option* compared to the other options in either the short- or long-run.

This can be conceptualized (or rationalized) by a "utility function" with only two values, 0 and 1, for *defeat* and *victory* — no stalemate, no different levels of defeat or victory, and no differentiation in associated costs of the different risks.

The pattern of behavior that I discovered for recommending and choosing implied just this type of evaluation, if it was to be seen as "rational" in any sense. Whether "rational" or not, it was, in fact, a *reliable* basis to foresee that advisors and deciders would behave *as if* they assigned such values, as if a certain kind of "victory" or of "defeat" had an *absolute* priority and was to be sought or avoided against all alternatives, "at all costs, no matter what the long-run risk."

Decision-makers are prone to accept such "two-valued" evaluations of all outcomes as either "victory" or "defeat," "success" or "loss", "acceptable" or "unthinkable." The decision-maker acts as if he (usually male) sees only one kind of success and one kind of failure. Usually this is in reference to *himself*, to his own (or perhaps his party's, his administration's) power, image, prestige, and maintenance in office. He sees his own humiliation, or loss of office or power, as "catastrophic"—indistinguishably catastrophic compared to other types of catastrophe such as: entry into and continuation of a costly, escalating, hopelessly stalemated war; vast destruction of a weaker enemy nation without justification; huge loss of life among his own people and enemy civilians; or even vast and irreversible damage to global ecology by use of nuclear weapons or by other avoidable man-made processes such as global warming.

Could any human who is not clinically insane really act as if his losing an election was equivalent to any of these disasters? If one of them was seen as *certain*, no. But if his losing an election, or suffering some other clearcut setback or embarrassment, was seen as *certain* in the short-run, *unless* he averted it in the short-run (say, with certainty) by a course that entailed one or more of these risks (especially, in the longer-run) with *less than certainty*, then historical experience shows that the answer is *yes*.

The sort of leaders we and other nations have elected or tolerated have acted precisely "as if" they regarded these two sorts of dangers — one personal and the other societal or global — as equivalently negative or disastrous. This means that they have felt justified in choosing a course of action that would, in the short run, certainly avoid the personal disaster (or make it less than certain), *even if* this course entailed a positive but less-than-certain chance of the other, long-run social or global disaster. In a "desperate crisis" (i.e., one in which their power or office-holding is at stake), they will often choose such a course over an alternative course that offers *no* danger of societal/global catastrophe in either the short- or long-run, but which poses a certainty or near-certainty in the short-run of humiliation and defeat. This is especially true when all courses of action conforming to public norms are seen as guaranteeing failure or loss of power.

*An empirical rule:* there is no limit to the number of human "others" that a man or woman in power will endanger, afflict, or destroy in order to avert an otherwise-certain, short-run loss of power (or perhaps even, prestige) — or even to make such an outcome less-than-certain.