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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE DECISION PROCESS IN THE MAYAGUEZ INCIDENT

Character of the control problem. Control from Washington is a tenuous thing at best. Stress should be placed on Washington's larger goals and policy objectives -- and these should be closely monitored. By contrast, some latitude must be provided to the field with respect to the measures to achieve those objectives, in particular to adapt to sudden changes by the opponent. Otherwise a plan of action may become frozen -- and fail to adapt to changing local conditions.

In Washington we are at the end of the communication chain stretching some 12,000 miles. Information on conditions on the scene is thin and may be inaccurate (and may be impeded); the first reports are likely to be inaccurate. Information on opponent intentions is hard to obtain, and surmises can be quite wide of the mark. The many uncertainties raise questions regarding the up-to-dateness and precision of the view in Washington. Moreover, one is attempting to coordinate the actions of tens of thousands of men -- and too many and too frequent changes of signal is all too likely to engender confusion in the field. In view of the character of the problem, Washington's role should be to define the larger goal, insure that plans are consistent with that goal, provide some flexibility, and to monitor changes -- while attempting to avoid too many and too frequent interventions.

It is desirable that specific guidance focus on goals and categories rather than individual actions. In vital areas exceptions will have to be made -- but the nature of exceptions is to keep them few and far between. Washington deliberations tend to concentrate to too great an extent on specific actions and alternative actions. Insufficient attention is given to the alternative possibilities in response to the many hypothetical moves that an opponent can make. To the extent that one concentrates attention on our own side's specific actions, one devotes less time to recognizing and responding to the fact that one is dealing with a reacting opponent who may alter his plans and actions as soon as he observes the United States make a move.



Character of deliberations. For rapidly changing circumstances, formal NSC meetings tend to be too stylized. There is a pattern of presentation and procedural routines understandable in a formal setting but wasting energy when the problem is immediate rather than longer term. Additionally, NSC meetings are intermittent and important actions may be delayed until such a meeting can take place -- in the attempt to establish consensus or obtain Presidential approval in a formal setting. Retrospectively, an example of this sort was the absence of pressure to elicit approval of the destruction of the Cambodian boats in the cove at Koh Tang Island. If they had been destroyed at first light, some of our problems could have been avoided. In retrospect this would seem to be the wisest action, though it could have turned out more poorly than the actual events that were magnificently successful in the outcome.

My own conclusion is that in a crisis there should be far more frequent and informal consultation and exchange of information. One would be in a better position to adjust to the changing events, more or less continuously rather than in pulsating bursts. More informal discussion in a smaller group would reduce the amount of updating required and a rehashing of misunderstandings, alleged or real. In the stylized NSC setting, particularly if the President has been prebriefed on issues that some of the other participants do not know, considerable waste of time may ensue and productive activity be curtailed. Also such continuous consultation may abridge any gap between the President and his White House advisers, on the one hand, and the Department of Defense, on the other. The former are concerned that nothing go awry -- and are searching for apparent mistakes; the latter have far more information and are in the position of having to execute any decisions in a rather fluid situation.

Character of Directives. Presidential orders should be written and should be verified. In the absence of such an unequivocal procedure, there are too many opportunities for looseness in interpretation (as a result of all auditors hearing something different) and of inconsistencies (as orders and apparent orders multiply). In addition, of very great importance is the avoidance of multiple sources of orders going to multiple receivers. If there are many sources of orders from the White House going to the NMCC, inevitably there will be confusion. There should be one funnel into one predesignated place.

