

1997

Soccer Fields and Submarines in Cuba: The Politics of Problem Definition

Patrick J. Haney

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Haney, Patrick J. (1997) "Soccer Fields and Submarines in Cuba: The Politics of Problem Definition," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 50 : No. 4 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol50/iss4/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

Soccer Fields and Submarines in Cuba

The Politics of Problem Definition

Patrick J. Haney

H.R. HALDEMAN RECALLS THE DAY in September 1970 that Henry Kissinger charged into his office with a thick file under his arm. He slammed the file down on Haldeman's desk and said, "Bob, look at this." It was a series of eight-by-ten-inch air reconnaissance photos. "Well? Well?" he demanded.

"Well, what?" Haldeman asked in return.

Kissinger explained that the pictures were of Cienfuegos, on the southern shore of Cuba. "It's a Cuban seaport, Haldeman, and these pictures show the Cubans are building soccer fields," Kissinger said. "I have to see the president right now. Who's in there with him?" Haldeman told Kissinger that John Ehrlichman was meeting with the president but that he could go right in if it was urgent. But, Haldeman asked, for what reason? Was Kissinger going to burst into the Oval Office in the middle of an economic conference and shout, "The Cubans are building *soccer fields*?" Had he consumed too much "bubbly" the night before?

Haldeman writes, "Kissinger stuffed the pictures back in the file and said, as patiently as he could, 'Those soccer fields could mean war, Bob.'" Haldeman asked how the soccer fields could mean war; Kissinger replied, "Cubans play *baseball*. Russians play soccer."¹

Dr. Haney is assistant professor of political science at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. His research focuses on U.S. foreign policy and crisis decision making. He has published articles in *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and *International Interactions*, and he is co-editor of *Foreign Policy Analysis* (Prentice Hall, 1995). He is the author of *Organizing for Foreign Policy Crises: Presidents, Advisers, and the Management of Decision-Making* (Univ. of Michigan Press, 1997).

Earlier versions of the theoretical part of this article were presented to International Studies Association conferences in Chicago (1995) and San Diego (1996). The author would like to thank Jeanne Hey, Ole Holsti, Lynn Kuzma, Bill Mandel, Brian Ripley, Don Sylvan, and Chuck Taber. He also thanks Erin Carriere for her research assistance, and the Committee on Faculty Research at Miami University.

© by 1997 Patrick J. Haney

Naval War College Review, Autumn 1997, Vol. L, No. 4

68 Naval War College Review

While Kissinger's observation that Cubans did not play soccer in 1970 was incorrect, the inference that the Soviets were building some kind of naval facility at Cienfuegos, at least opening the possibility of another Cuban crisis, was on the mark.² Yet this incident never grew into a full-blown episode in U.S. foreign policy, and no U.S. force was used. There are no great books about this incident, and there have previously been only a few scholarly articles about it.³ Discussion of the incident usually shares space in the memoirs and biographies of participants with other matters of U.S. foreign policy during September and October 1970. The Cuban submarine base incident had all the markings of a major crisis, but it never blossomed into one.

This article examines that 1970 case with a particular eye toward the politics of problem definition, in an effort to understand how events come to be defined as crises, or non-crises, and to appreciate the prerogative that decision makers enjoy in this area. It will be argued that crises are more than just shocks to a policy-making system, easily identified as "crises." Rather, as the Cuban incident highlights, crises are situations that are interpreted as part of a subjective, psychological, and political process, and are then represented by decision makers in certain ways. Situations require definition by policy makers, and the process of defining situations for which policy is to be made is something students of foreign policy need to understand better. The extent to which crises are socially and politically constructed and represented has been underappreciated by scholars in the field; this article tries to address these issues, in an introductory way.

Studying Crises

In common use, the term "crisis" usually implies an important situation, a violent or potentially violent one, a turning point.⁴ In an effort to build systematic theory about foreign policy behavior, scholars have attempted to define more precisely what constitutes a crisis. Definitions generally emerge from one of two approaches to the study of international politics—systemic and decision-making. In the systemic approach, a crisis "is a situation which disrupts the system or some part of the system."⁵ Here, crises are related to such terms as change and conflict. There is an implicit assumption that attention should principally concentrate on actions and events as objective realities.

Decision-making approaches have largely focused on crisis as a situational variable, not unlike a stimulus-response model: "crisis acts as a stimulus; the decision represents the response."⁶ This emphasis has led to one of the most common ways in which crises are defined in decision-making research in political science: as situations characterized by levels of *threat*, *time* to respond, and *surprise*. Crises threaten national goals, restrict the amount of time available

for a decision to be reached, and surprise decision makers by their occurrence.⁷ A related decision-making approach defines crisis as a situation “caused by a change in the international or domestic environment that generates a perception in the minds of policymakers of a threat to important goals or values, with significantly increased probability of hostilities, and a short time for response.”⁸

The above should indicate that there is little consensus in the field about the exact definition of a crisis.⁹ Still, as one leading scholar has noted, there is “general agreement that crises are marked by severe threat to important values and that time for coping with the threat is finite.”¹⁰ The evidence of the behavioral consequences of surprise has not been strong enough to merit the inclusion of surprise as a necessary element of a crisis, and the stipulation that crises must involve perception of a significant probability of armed conflict may be too restrictive. Finally, while many agree that a crisis is likely to involve stress for participants, no commonly agreed-upon measure of this stress is available to researchers.¹¹

With one definition or another, scholars of international relations and American foreign policy have largely taken it as given that crises are clear, predefined, identifiable shocks that are recognized by all when they occur. But the empirical phenomena we study indicate that crises are not always, or necessarily, like that. For example, at some point President George Bush *decided* that the situation in the Persian Gulf in 1989–1990 was a “crisis” for U.S. foreign policy. In 1996, members of the Clinton administration concluded that actions of Saddam Hussein’s military in northern Iraq *warranted* a “crisis response,” and Tomahawk missiles were launched. In 1970, although the situation along the South Vietnamese border with Cambodia had been relatively constant, a “crisis” was *depicted* by President Richard Nixon to justify military operations by U.S. forces in Cambodia. Again, confusing events in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964 sufficed for President Lyndon Johnson to commit U.S. forces more deeply into the Vietnam War, whereas a much less ambiguous *casus belli* four years later—the seizure of the USS *Pueblo*—drew almost no response from the same president.¹²

The effort to systematize crisis situations and the study thereof is an important one that should be appreciated. However, basic questions are left insufficiently explored by both of the traditional approaches. To do better, we need to go beyond the notion that crises are “events” that happen in the international relations systems, and even the recognition that crises exist in the perceptions of decision makers. We must also study the ways in which leaders define situations as crises, non-crises, or as something in between. How does a crisis come to be conceived as such within the decision-making system? Why does one stream of events come to be a crisis, while a similar one does not? We must

70 Naval War College Review

begin to address questions at this level; they are essential questions for both the theory and practice of foreign policy.

Some theorizing begins with the "decision," making it the unit of analysis, and then focuses on how decision makers define the situations they face. As has been noted in previous research, information is "selectively perceived" according to decision makers' "frame of reference."¹³ Reinforcing this point, two recent scholars have argued that "much (perhaps all?) of politics is constituted in language. Language becomes the medium within which politics is constituted, modified, and played out. Representations, which themselves are linguistic, do not point to the objects that they represent, but rather are themselves components in webs of socially constituted rights, rules, responsibilities, and other such conventions."¹⁴ They argue that "politics involves the selective privileging of representations."¹⁵ This perspective has not been much applied to studies of foreign policy and foreign policy crises, but it should be; it draws our attention to the politics of problem representation and definition as an essential component of a crisis or non-crisis situation.

One decision to which such a perspective has been applied is the construction of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Why, that researcher asked (as is rarely asked), did U.S. decision makers see the missiles as an intolerable threat to peace that the United States had an obligation to remove? Why was there a crisis over the missiles in Cuba at all?¹⁶ That scholar's view is that "national interests are socially constructed: they are defined and redefined in particular historical instances through a more or less overt process of ideological construction."¹⁷ This process of social construction provides decision makers with "the categories through which sense impressions are classified, and hence comprehended, as particular 'objects,' 'actions,' 'events,' and 'situations.'"¹⁸

Another perspective suggests that what is needed now is for analysts to move beyond the "why" questions that we have traditionally pursued in our research to the "how-possible" questions. We might examine "how meanings are produced and attached to various social subjects/objects, thus constituting particular interpretive dispositions which create certain possibilities and preclude others."¹⁹ We thus focus attention on how policymakers create and construct realities.²⁰

When we pull these different views of problem definition together, it is possible to see four levels of crisis or non-crisis construction: social or cultural construction, where shared symbols are used to create meaning; linguistic construction, where language is a set of signs that build meaning; cognitive construction, where individuals build meaning in their perceptions of reality; and political or strategic construction, where individuals and groups compete to create their preferred interpretation of reality as opposed to those of others.²¹

In this article, strategic construction will receive the most attention, though

some will be paid to the process of cognitive construction, especially for President Nixon and Henry Kissinger. Problem construction and definition at these levels involves examining how and why an issue is moved to a position where a decision-making group prepares or readies a response to an issue, and exploring what happens then and why. This emphasis is not dissimilar to the analysis pursued in the “bureaucratic politics” paradigm, with its stress on politics and bargaining in an organizational and psychological environment.

We shall explore the politics of problem definition by examining the case of the Soviet submarine base discovered in 1970 to be under construction in Cuba. The evidence is drawn from secondary sources, biographies, and memoirs, as well as scholarly and newspaper articles. The purpose is to take a “first cut” at explaining how and why this case was politically constructed and defined as a non-crisis. The discussion begins with an outline of what transpired in the episode, then applies a more analytic perspective to the politics of the episode, with special attention to Nixon and Kissinger.

The Non-Crisis at Cienfuegos

The events that would come to be focused on Cienfuegos built up over considerable time. Between 20 and 27 July 1969 a Soviet naval deployment group including two Foxtrot-class diesel-powered attack submarines, a submarine tender, a guided missile cruiser, two guided missile destroyers, and a naval oiler visited Havana. (A November-class nuclear-powered attack submarine had accompanied this force but did not enter any Cuban port.) In May 1970, two Foxtrot submarines, a guided missile cruiser and destroyer, a submarine tender, and a nuclear-powered Echo II-class submarine carrying cruise missiles visited cities in Cuba, including Cienfuegos. This time the nuclear-powered vessel did put into port. Also, three pairs of Tu-95 Bear strategic bombers operated from Cuba while the ships were present.²²

There was movement on the diplomatic front as well. On 4 August 1970, the Soviet chargé d'affaires in the United States, Yuli Vorontsov, asked (in Ambassador Anatoli Dobrynin's absence) for a reaffirmation of the Kennedy-Khrushchev “understanding” that had followed the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. By that implicit agreement, the United States had assured the Soviet Union that it would not invade Cuba; the Soviets for their part had agreed to remove their missiles from Cuba and promised not to place any offensive weapon or related delivery system on its territory.²³ The reason for the new request was not well understood in Washington, but it would take on more meaning as a part of the politics of September 1970, which was to be a busy month for the Nixon administration.²⁴ Salvador Allende won a slim plurality in a three-way race for the presidency of Chile on 4 September—at which point the administration began to consider

72 Naval War College Review

ways to prevent Allende from taking office. The Middle East peace process was dragging on, and on this subject the relationship between the secretary of state, William P. Rogers, and the national security adviser, Henry Kissinger (whom Nixon had pulled out of the negotiations), was as rife with conflict as were relationships between the states of the region. Also, Jordan faced civil war against internal Palestinian forces opposed to King Hussein and aided by tanks from Syria. As for the war in Vietnam, Kissinger's secret talks in Paris resumed on 7 September. By mid-September Nixon's popularity rating had fallen below 50 percent for the first time since he had taken office. Of such times Kissinger would joke, "We can't have a crisis this week, my schedule is full."²⁵ It was in the midst of all this that intelligence data, especially from a series of flights by U-2 photographic reconnaissance aircraft, indicated that the Soviets were building on an island in the port of Cienfuegos a submarine base capable of servicing nuclear submarines.

First, on 9 September 1970 a Soviet flotilla was reported to have arrived at Cienfuegos. It included a submarine tender, a guided missile cruiser, a guided missile destroyer, an oceangoing tug, and an *Alligator*-class LST (landing ship, tank) that carried two special-purpose barges apparently designed to service nuclear submarines.²⁶ According to notes made at the time by the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, there were seven Soviet ships, military and auxiliary, in Cienfuegos on 9 September.²⁷ U-2 flights were ordered to monitor activity in Cuba. On 16 September aerial photography showed construction in the harbor at Cienfuegos.²⁸ "A submarine tender was anchored to four buoys in the deep-water basin, and submarine nets were strung across the harbor. A large complex of barracks, administrative buildings, and recreation facilities was almost completed on Alcatraz Island."²⁹

On Friday, 18 September, a meeting of the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG), the body charged with crisis management in the Nixon White House, was held concerning the situation in Jordan.³⁰ After the meeting the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Richard Helms, stayed behind to talk to Kissinger about the "fairly large facility" at Cienfuegos. Among other things, Helms reported to Kissinger, it included a soccer field. A CIA analyst noted that Cubans played little soccer, so it probably was there "to provide recreation for Soviet seamen."³¹ Kissinger then went to see H.R. Haldeman in order to inform the president (the meeting that produced the exchange with which this article began). Kissinger told Nixon that the presence of a Soviet submarine tender (capable of servicing the new Yankee-class ballistic missile submarine that had recently begun patrolling the North Atlantic), in combination with the other construction underway at Cienfuegos, was "ominous"; it would greatly increase the strategic capability of the Soviet Union against the United States.³² Over the next few days, additional U-2 reconnaissance showed

the initial assessments to be accurate—a submarine base was indeed under construction at Cienfuegos.

Nixon and his main advisers had different opinions about how to proceed. Nixon did not want a new Cuban crisis, certainly not at that moment.³³ Secretary Rogers also wished to avoid “high-level tension.”³⁴ Contrariwise, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that the base be removed, and Kissinger believed that the development could not be ignored. He was informed at a CIA briefing that the “support facility” would increase by 33 percent the amount of time Soviet submarines could be within range of the United States. He put Cuba on the WSAG agenda and scheduled a National Security Council meeting with Nixon.³⁵

The administration was trying to keep the matter quiet, but columnist C.L. Sulzberger broke the story in the *New York Times* on 25 September.³⁶ Nevertheless, Nixon did not himself comment in public but ordered Kissinger to give a background briefing to the press.³⁷ Kissinger told reporters that the government was watching developments in Cuba closely and that the United States would “view the establishment of a strategic base in the Caribbean with the utmost seriousness.”³⁸ He made the point that all “offensive weapons” must be removed and remain out of Cuba. Kissinger met with Ambassador Dobrynin later in the day and told him that his words had been carefully chosen to provide the Soviets a graceful way out. “Moscow should be under no illusion,” Kissinger later recalled saying; “We would view continued construction with the ‘utmost gravity’; the base could not remain.”³⁹ The Soviets responded on 5 October, after Nixon and Kissinger had returned to Washington from a trip to Europe. They affirmed the 1962 understanding and made a commitment that no base would be built in Cuba that would be large enough to service Yankee-class boats and thereby violate the understanding.⁴⁰

There were a few further incidents involving Soviet naval activity in Cuba, as definitions of “base” were worked out, but for the most part this episode ended here. Nixon writes in his memoirs, “The crisis was over. After some face-saving delays, the Soviets abandoned Cienfuegos.”⁴¹ Nixon further argues that “through strong but quiet diplomacy we had averted what would have been known as the Cuban Nuclear Submarine Crisis of 1970 and which, like its predecessor, might have taken us to the brink of nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union.”⁴² Others certainly agree that Nixon had avoided a crisis.⁴³

As one student of the events around Cienfuegos has noted, this incident had intrinsic significance—the Soviet submarine base and its measurable strategic advantages for the Soviets—and also symbolic significance as an implicit rejection by the Soviets of American-imposed limits on their freedom of action.⁴⁴ Beyond this, I argue that this case has significance for students and

74 Naval War College Review

practitioners of U.S. foreign policy who are interested in the nature and politics of foreign policy crises and non-crisis. This case illustrates the latitude afforded decision makers to define situations as crises or not, and how situations exist not “objectively” but only to the extent that decision makers so perceive them. Kissinger remembers that Secretary Rogers “wanted any paperwork [on the episode] restricted to a minimum so that we did not ‘create a crisis in the public mind.’ The key issue, of course, was not whether there was a crisis in the public mind but whether there existed a crisis objectively, whether we could accept a permanent Soviet naval base in Cuba.”⁴⁵ Kissinger here frames the matter as intrinsically a crisis. Why and how did Nixon, Kissinger, others in the administration, and the Joint Chiefs form different views about the nature of the problem at Cienfuegos and then come to different conclusions about how to proceed? How do we explain and understand the process by which this situation came (at least at the outset) to be defined, and therefore dealt with, as less of a “crisis” than Kissinger believed “objective circumstances” dictated?

Explaining this incident may be aided by a constructivist framework, that is, by exploring the politics of problem representation. Let us review how Nixon’s and Kissinger’s representations of the problem at Cienfuegos came to be formed, and how careful strategic moves by the national security adviser caused Nixon’s view, which initially predominated, ultimately to move closer to his own.

The Politics of Problem Definition with Cienfuegos

In order for a situation to come to be defined as a crisis by policy makers, it must first come to their attention out of the flow of potential problems that might merit concern. A problem must then be moved to where responses are prepared. The processes of placing an issue on the policy-making agenda and of constructing an interpretation of it are inherently political. Attention to the cognitive and strategic levels of problem construction or definition and recognition of its place in the standard bureaucratic politics paradigm may help us understand and explain U.S. policy in this case, as well as others.⁴⁶

There are important cognitive and strategic levels of problem definition in this case. President Nixon, as noted, did not want to have a crisis in Cuba on his hands in September 1970. “A new Cuban missile crisis, especially at that moment . . . would force the cancellation of his eagerly anticipated trip to Europe and distract from the crisis in Jordan.”⁴⁷ He also believed the previous crisis in Cuba had been ill handled by President John Kennedy, who had pushed Khrushchev into a nearly impossible position with respect to international prestige. He wished to take a different path, to see the issue at Cienfuegos within the context of what he would later call “hard-headed detente.”⁴⁸ “In view of what had happened in the 1962 crisis, I decided that I would not force a

public confrontation unless I had no other choice, and I would not deal with the Soviets from anything less than a position of unyielding strength.”⁴⁹ H.R. Haldeman recalls that Nixon rejected the option to “go public” and confront the Soviets with a crisis of war or peace. “Nixon was determined to go the other way, toward peace with the Soviets. He was interested in the long-term solid structure of peace, not just a quick and flashy triumph.”⁵⁰

Nixon believed that while the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in competition, they shared common interests that made it mutually advantageous to compromise. “Our common interest was to ensure that our differences did not lead us into a shooting war.”⁵¹ Reflecting upon detente and the Cienfuegos episode in his 1971 report to Congress on the state of U.S. foreign policy, Nixon argued that “the nature of nuclear power requires that both the Soviet Union and we be willing to practice self-restraint in the pursuit of national interest. . . . Confrontation may arise from a mistaken perception of a posture of an adversary. Such a mistake can lead to a failure to appreciate the risks and consequences of probing for advantages or testing the limits of toleration. We believe that this was involved to some degree in the events which led up to the Middle East crisis last year. It may have been a factor in Soviet naval actions in the Caribbean in the fall of 1970. There the Soviet Union took new steps which would have afforded it the ability to again operate offensive weapons systems from this Hemisphere. That would have been contrary to the understanding between us. Only after a period of discussion did we reaffirm our understanding and amplify it.”⁵² For Nixon, “the crises in the Middle East and the Caribbean had underlined once again the dangers of unmitigated competition between us.”⁵³ He believed the Soviets had set back detente with their “adventurism in Cuba.”⁵⁴

With this cognitive construct, Nixon defined the problem in Cienfuegos as important but not a “crisis,” a matter to be dealt with not publicly or through brinkmanship but through quiet diplomacy. On 19 September, Nixon urged Kissinger to play down the problem; “He did not want some clown senator demanding a blockade.”⁵⁵ Nixon wrote in his memoirs, “The success of the policy of keeping the crisis low key depended on keeping a tight lid on the story. I knew from the 1962 experience that a serious war scare would sweep the country if the real story of Cienfuegos hit the headlines.”⁵⁶

This point suggests a link between the cognitive and strategic levels of problem definition for the president. Nixon had defined the problem for himself, and a policy of quiet, non-urgent diplomacy followed from that definition. The politics began when Nixon engaged others to ensure that his policy preference, if not his problem definition, was adopted. Crucial to his goal was silence. Nixon understood that the situation at Cienfuegos could be construed differently than he did, with different implications for policy response. Nixon sought to limit

76 Naval War College Review

this possibility by restricting who would know about the situation in the first place. He ordered his staff not to brief the press, and in particular he tried to keep Henry Kissinger busy, since he knew his adviser disagreed with him.

Nixon responded to Kissinger's presentation of the activities in Cuba with a note: "I want a report on a crash basis on: (1) What CIA can do to support *any* kind of action which will irritate Castro; (2) What actions can we take which have not yet been taken to boycott nations dealing with Castro; (3) Most important, what actions can we take, covert or overt, to put missiles in Turkey—or a sub base in the Black Sea—anything which will give us some trading stock."⁵⁷ Kissinger saw these as delaying tactics, or, as he calls them in his memoirs, time-wasting options.⁵⁸ He preferred and sought a different course.

The events of September 1970—Chile, Cuba, Jordan, Vietnam—were, according to one of Kissinger's biographers, related in his mind to "a pattern of Soviet conduct designed to test the resolve of the United States."⁵⁹ "Kissinger felt deceived" by failed Soviet reassurances about the Middle East and therefore thought it all the more important that the U.S. show resolve in Cuba.⁶⁰ According to his memoirs, on 1 June 1970, after the second visit of the Soviet navy to Cuba in May, he sent a message to Nixon indicating "it will be important to keep our eye on this situation."⁶¹ Later that June, Kissinger recalls, the NSC staff expert on Latin American affairs, Viron P. Vaky, called his attention to a CIA study that suggested the Soviets might intend to build a new installation in Cuba for either surface ships or reconnaissance aircraft.⁶²

On 16 September, Kissinger had breakfast at the White House with C.L. Sulzberger of the *New York Times*. He told Sulzberger, among other things, about "Soviet horsing around in Cuba." One scholar concludes that this was partly a calculated leak designed to pressure Moscow, and partly a product of Kissinger's compulsion to talk. We might also consider it as to some extent intended to pressure the U.S. policy-making system to see the issue from Kissinger's perspective. It was on this basis that Sulzberger published his 25 September column about the issue.⁶³

Ray Cline, a former CIA official and then director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, on or about 17 September provided a cautious assessment of the Cienfuegos situation. He told Under Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson, who would later brief the House Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, "Look, I don't think this is a crisis but you ought to at least be aware that something new and unusual is going on in Cienfuegos."⁶⁴ Johnson took Cline's report to Kissinger, and it was then that the real action began. On 18 September, Kissinger had his encounters with Helms, Haldeman, and the president.

Sometime later, Kissinger gave a briefing to the senior White House staff. "John Ehrlichman [a Nixon aide] recalls that Kissinger's introduction was 'laden with crisis.' . . . All in all, Ehrlichman remembers it as a somber briefing."⁶⁵ Kissinger defined the Soviet activity at Cienfuegos as part of a pattern of Soviet testing of U.S. resolve, a major threat to U.S. interests that had to be met directly and promptly—"those soccer fields may mean war." His definition was supported by others. Kissinger was briefed by the CIA that afternoon that the Soviets "were establishing a support facility [in Cienfuegos] for naval operations in the Caribbean and the Atlantic." The result would be a "quantum leap in the strategic capability of the Soviet Union against the United States."⁶⁶ Kissinger records in his memoirs that the Nixon administration faced the "nightmare of policymakers: simultaneous crises in widely separated parts of the globe."⁶⁷

The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended removing the Cienfuegos base by whatever means necessary.⁶⁸ Admiral Zumwalt recalls that he was struck by the combination of Soviet ships in Cienfuegos and the construction underway at the port. "I was concerned by this and I expressed my concern to Admiral [Thomas H.] Moorer [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs] and Secretary [of Defense Melvin] Laird, submitting on 17 September a memorandum urging this apparent Soviet effort to establish a base not be accepted."⁶⁹ He believed the Soviets were testing U.S. firmness at Cienfuegos and that a passive response would "tempt the Soviets to intransigence in other situations."⁷⁰ He also was concerned that the base, if completed, would pose a severe threat to the United States by increasing "by half the number of submarine missiles within firing range of the U.S."⁷¹

Alexander Haig, then Kissinger's deputy at the NSC, characterized the Soviet construction at Cienfuegos as "reckless." He believed "the base at Cienfuegos was a far more serious threat than the missile bases that had precipitated the Cuban Missile Crisis." Haig saw the construction as a "flagrant violation" of the understanding that had ended the 1962 crisis.⁷²

"The need to show military resolve," Kissinger felt, "was critical."⁷³ Kissinger found himself taking a more hawkish position than either the president or the secretary of state; indeed, it was at this point, on 18 September, that Rogers urged him by telephone to avoid "high level tension."⁷⁴ He knew, therefore, that he would have to act carefully if he was to construct the situation differently. He began by scheduling discussions of the Washington Special Actions Group on the matter; Cuba became a last-minute addition to the WSAG agenda for 19 September. No staff work had been completed on the issue, and "opinions gyrated randomly in a conversational style."⁷⁵ At the meeting Kissinger argued against a legalistic approach. The 1962 crisis, he asserted, had been a crisis not because the Soviets had done anything illegal but because they had done something contrary to U.S. interests. "The current case was similar," in

78 Naval War College Review

Kissinger's view.⁷⁶ He writes in his memoirs that the Nixon advisers had difficulty understanding the strategic importance, as he saw it, of the situation in Cienfuegos—that if the United States acquiesced now it would be difficult to resist further Soviet expansion later.⁷⁷

While all at the WSAG meeting agreed on the facts, reactions to the facts varied. The president and the secretary of state “wished to avoid a crisis atmosphere” until the administration’s response was determined.⁷⁸ Kissinger directed WSAG representatives from each agency to submit assessments and recommendations by 21 September. The State Department was to solicit the views of Soviet expert Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson, who responded “that the Soviet move was largely symbolic; it was a symptom of their inferiority complex.”⁷⁹ The State Department itself proposed a quiet negotiation between Secretary Rogers and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. The Defense Department and the Joint Chiefs argued that the base had to be removed and suggested that U.S. reserve forces be called up. Rogers took the adamant position that the United States should do nothing about the base in the short run and that the issue should be kept secret.⁸⁰

Kissinger called a new meeting of the WSAG on 24 September to implement the president’s wishes, with which he disagreed.⁸¹ Kissinger wished to act quickly, but Nixon was in no hurry. Kissinger recalls that he “saw the Soviet move as going beyond its military implications; it was part of a process of testing under way in different parts of the world. . . . I strongly favored facing the challenge immediately lest the Soviets misunderstand our permissiveness and escalate their involvement to a point where only a major crisis could remove the base. I opposed time-wasting moves such as waiting for a Gromyko-Rogers conversation in a month’s time. The Soviets knew we were photographing Cienfuegos almost daily; if we did nothing they had to assume that we were acquiescing.”⁸²

One biographer of Kissinger believes that “faced with a President who would not take the tough road, Kissinger treated him like any other bureaucratic enemy, and leaked to the press.”⁸³ I would argue further that Kissinger pursued two tracks on the strategic level of problem definition: he leaked information to the outside, and he withheld information from the inside. Kissinger notes that it was difficult to persuade the president of his point of view on the matter, and that indeed he never really did. He writes that Nixon accepted his analysis but wished to wait until after the November off-year congressional elections to confront the Soviets and so accepted Rogers’ recommendations in the meantime.⁸⁴ Ultimately, Kissinger writes, Nixon took the more hawkish approach because of an “accidental” briefing by the Department of Defense that explained more about Cienfuegos than had been intended.⁸⁵ Kissinger had

sent instructions to the Defense Department about what to say should the Cuba issue come up in a briefing (since he had already planted the story with Sulzberger). When the question did arise, however, the DoD briefer mistakenly told reporters all he knew on the issue, and the next morning the story hit the headlines.⁸⁶

With the 25 September Sulzberger article, Kissinger achieved his interim goal of constructing at least a mild sense of urgency in Congress and the public; for Nixon to do nothing was now politically unfeasible at home. Articles began running in the newspapers almost daily. While Senator William Fulbright urged a diplomatic resolution to the problem, Congressman Dante Fascell, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, argued for a quick U.S. response and called for hearings on the issue. L. Mendel Rivers, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, agreed: "We cannot live with this new Soviet threat at our doorstep."⁸⁷ Kissinger wrote later that he told the president "that we had no choice now except to face the Soviets down. . . . When the options were starkly defined, Nixon was always decisive. He understood immediately that waffling could only increase our dangers."⁸⁸ Nixon now approved Kissinger's plan to brief the press "on background" (as an unnamed official) that the administration viewed the situation with "utmost seriousness" and to convey to Ambassador Dobrynin that the United States viewed continued construction at Cienfuegos with "utmost gravity" and that the base could not remain—but that if the ships left Cienfuegos, the United States would consider their activities to have been an exercise.⁸⁹ Kissinger's background comment was published 26 September on page 1 of the *New York Times*.⁹⁰

The secretary of state was baffled by Kissinger's warning to Moscow and criticized him for indulging in Cold War rhetoric.⁹¹ Rogers had the same information as Kissinger but drew less apocalyptic conclusions about Soviet intentions. He did not think the base would upset the balance of forces in the Caribbean and did not think the Soviets were looking for trouble. Kissinger later recalled that he and Rogers had quite a "blowup" about the incident.⁹²

The *Times* reported on 30 September that there was disagreement inside the Nixon administration about the nature of the problem at Cienfuegos and that Moscow had publicly declared that it was not building a base in Cuba.⁹³ In Madrid at the time, Kissinger reportedly called the article "an act of treason."⁹⁴ On 1 October, the same paper reported that the U.S. response was based on dated and dubious information.⁹⁵ Over the next two weeks, as many in the administration declined to sustain Kissinger's alarm, a skeptical public and congressional reaction developed. Nixon himself wanted the situation calmed down and hoped for Soviet assurances that there would be no submarine base at Cienfuegos, presumably so he could move on to other matters. But on 15 October, reporting about the mix of opinions about the nature of the "crisis"

80 Naval War College Review

at Cienfuegos, journalist Max Frankel wrote in the *Times* that administration officials might be basing their fears on some classified development. Frankel reported that "the [publicly known] evidence that the Russians might be planning a nuclear-submarine base in Cuba was far from convincing and there are some indications that the Administration's warnings to Moscow on this point came out sounding more ominous than had been intended. But the warning itself was not idly made, officials insist, still implying that some secret developments justified them in fearing the worst."⁹⁶ It is not clear whether this was a reference to Kissinger, and if so, whether he had claimed to have, or really did have, secret information that bolstered his problem definition and policy preference. Neither Kissinger nor Nixon make any reference in their memoirs to any additional classified data about Cuba. But it is an interesting, possibly strategic, leak.⁹⁷

The second "track" of Kissinger's efforts to define the situation on a strategic level was to keep a tight hold on information inside the bureaucracy. Indeed, this case has been cited as an example of Kissinger's penchant for doing so.⁹⁸ Admiral Zumwalt recalls how it worked. Zumwalt sent a copy of his initial memorandum about Cienfuegos to Rear Admiral Rembrandt Robinson, who (as NSC liaison) represented the Joint Chiefs at the White House. A few days later, Robinson came to see Zumwalt with a draft of a paper Kissinger had asked him to write "that stated unequivocally that the United States would not accept at Cienfuegos or anywhere else in Cuba a base that could be used by Russian ships armed with strategic weapons."⁹⁹ Zumwalt asked why the paper was not being routed through the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, and the Joint Chiefs; Robinson replied that Kissinger did not wish to bring Secretary Rogers into delicate foreign policy matters.¹⁰⁰ Also, it may not be coincidental that the initial WSAG meeting about Cienfuegos had available, as noted, no prepared staff work, which left participants ill informed and dependent on whatever information Kissinger chose to tell them. Kissinger ordered tight restrictions on sharing the information within the bureaucracy and was upset to learn of information-sharing across the bureaucracy, such as by Zumwalt and Robinson. By controlling who knew what, Kissinger put himself in a better strategic position inside the bureaucracy to influence the politics of problem definition. Kissinger succeeded in moving U.S. policy toward the view that emerged from his problem definition, and he did it through political maneuvering.

Three Crucial Weeks

The Soviets eventually, of course, provided assurances that they were not building a permanent submarine base at Cienfuegos, and the Soviet Union and

the United States reaffirmed the 1962 understanding that had concluded the Cuban Missile Crisis. It is interesting to note that little changed at Cienfuegos after this. Soviets ships, including nuclear-powered and nuclear weapons-carrying submarines, continued to call at Cienfuegos from time to time, though with much less U.S. public attention. In this sense it could be argued that Nixon's problem definition and policy preference ultimately prevailed—we do not look on Cienfuegos as a crisis, though it probably had all the objective attributes of one. But Kissinger's view, as a result of his strategic political moves, carried the day for three crucial weeks.

There were many forces, institutions, and personalities at work in the making of U.S. policy in the Cienfuegos non-crisis. To understand how and why the nation responded as it did, we need to understand the politics of problem definition in the case. We have focused here primarily on the cognitive and strategic levels of problem definition, and specifically on Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, in a first approximation of the process by which the U.S. response was produced.

There is reason to believe that position and interests are themselves the consequences of deeper processes of social construction and the development and competition of ideas.¹⁰¹ The non-crisis at Cienfuegos provides an example of this, but it is not the only case that suggests the importance of the political process of defining situations. For example, it has been recently argued that in the 1973 October War, Soviet compellence backfired when the United States responded to a threat (of unilateral Soviet intervention to force a ceasefire) by redefining the issue as a test of American resolve.¹⁰² Similarly, during the 1962 crisis Robert McNamara argued to the "ExCom"* that the missiles in Cuba were not a military problem but rather a domestic political one; but not everyone agreed.¹⁰³ A recent reevaluation of decision making in the Cuban missile crisis supports the view that the politics of how problems are represented and defined is central to—and precedes—determination of how they are approached.¹⁰⁴

The case of the submarine base at Cienfuegos offers a useful window into these issues. It presents an episode in which there was disagreement among policy makers about how the situation should be defined, and thus over what the U.S. response should be. The Cienfuegos case, aside from its intrinsic interest, reminds scholars and practitioners alike of the complex nature of foreign policy crises and the inherently political nature of their first step in shaping the problem—deciding whether they have one.

* Or "Executive Committee," formed by President Kennedy to deal with this specific crisis.

Notes

1. H.R. Haldeman, with Joseph DiMona, *The Ends of Power* (New York: Times Books, 1978), pp. 85–6 (emphasis adjusted). See also Stephen A. Ambrose, *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician 1962–1972* (New York:

82 Naval War College Review

Simon & Schuster, 1989), p. 381; Raymond L. Garthoff, "Handling the Cienfuegos Crisis," *International Security*, Summer 1983, pp. 48–9; and Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 638.

2. This assessment by Kissinger was not altogether correct; soccer in fact had a following in Cuba by this time. Garthoff further notes that contrary to Kissinger's claim in his memoirs to have made this (dubious) deduction, CIA analysts had already made the same (incorrect) point. See Garthoff, "Handling Cienfuegos," p. 49, n. 2. See also Ambrose; Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power* (New York: Summit Books, 1983); and Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

3. Garthoff, "Handling Cienfuegos." See also Leslie K. Fenlon, "The Umpteenth Cuban Confrontation," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, July 1980, pp. 40–5.

4. James A. Robinson, "Crisis: An Appraisal of Concepts and Theories," in Charles F. Hermann, ed., *International Crises* (New York: Free Press, 1972). See also Herman Kahn, *On Escalation* (New York: Praeger, 1965); and Anthony J. Weiner and Herman Kahn, *Crisis and Arms Control* (Harmon-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Hudson Institute, 1962).

5. Charles F. Hermann, "International Crisis as a Situational Variable," in James N. Rosenau, ed., *International Politics and Foreign Policy*, rev. ed. (New York: Free Press, 1969), pp. 411–2. See also Ole R. Holsti, "Theories of Crisis Decision Making," in Paul G. Lauren, ed., *Diplomacy* (New York: Free Press, 1979).

6. Hermann, "International Crisis," in Rosenau, ed., p. 413.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 414. See also Charles F. Hermann, "Some Issues in the Study of International Crisis," in Hermann, ed., *International Crises*.

8. Richard G. Head, Frisco W. Short, and Robert C. McFarland, *Crisis Resolution: Presidential Decision Making in the Mayaguez and Korean Confrontations* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1978), p. 30. See also Michael Brecher, "A Theoretical Approach to International Crisis Behavior," *Jerusalem Journal of International Relations*, vol. 3, nos. 2–3 (1978), pp. 5–24.

9. Michael Haas, "Research on International Crisis: Obsolescence of an Approach?" *International Interactions*, vol. 13 (1986), pp. 23–58.

10. Ole R. Holsti, "Crisis Decision Making," in Philip F. Tetlock, Charles Tilly, Robert Jervis, Jo L. Husbands, and Paul C. Stern, eds., *Behavior, Society, and Nuclear War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), p. 12.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 12–3.

12. There is an excellent new study available on the events in the Tonkin Gulf in 1964. See Edmund Moise, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996).

13. Richard C. Snyder, H.W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin, eds., *Foreign Policy Decision Making* (New York: Free Press, 1962), pp. 87, 177.

14. Donald A. Sylvan and Stuart J. Thorson, "Ontologies, Problem Representation, and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 36 (1992), p. 716.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 731. See also D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988).

16. Jutta Weldes, "Constructing a Nuclear Crisis: The 'Cuban Missile Crisis' and U.S. National Interests" (presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Atlanta, Ga., 1992), p. 2. See also Jutta Weldes, "Constructing National Interests," *European Journal of International Relations*, vols. 2–3 (September 1996), pp. 275–318; and Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996).

17. Weldes, "Constructing a Nuclear Crisis," p. 5.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

19. Roxanne Lynn Doty, "Foreign Policy as Social Construction: A Post-Positivist Analysis of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 37 (1993), p. 298.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 303. See also Shafer; Donald A. Sylvan and James F. Voss, eds., *Problem Representation in Foreign Policy Decision Making* (forthcoming); and Valerie M. Hudson with Christopher S. Vore, "Foreign Policy Analysis Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," *Mershon International Studies Review*, vol. 39 (1995), pp. 224–5.

21. My thanks to Chuck Taber at SUNY-Stony Brook for distilling this framework. Specific approaches to each of these levels tend to differ quite a bit from each other; I have tried here to encapsulate the general perspective of each.

22. Barry M. Blechman and Stephanie E. Levinson, "U.S. Policy and Soviet Subs," *New York Times* October 22, 1974. See also Raymond L. Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*, rev. ed. (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1994), p. 90, and Blechman and Levinson's "Soviet Submarine Visits to Cuba," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, September 1975, pp. 30–9. John E. Moore [Captain, R.N., Ret.], *The Soviet Navy Today* (New York: Stein and Day, 1976), discusses these visits on pp. 31–2.

23. See Kissinger, pp. 634–5.

24. Garthoff, "Handling Cienfuegos," pp. 49–50; Kissinger, p. 632; and Ambrose, p. 380.
25. Isaacson, p. 287.
26. Garthoff, "Handling Cienfuegos," p. 48; Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*, pp. 87–94; and Kissinger, p. 635.
27. Elmo R. Zumwalt, *On Watch* (New York: Times Books, 1976), p. 311.
28. Ambrose, p. 381.
29. Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1990), p. 486.
30. The Washington Special Actions Group was one of several interdepartmental groups centered in the NSC that were established by Kissinger and Nixon. Kissinger, in his capacity as special assistant to the president for national security affairs, managed both the NSC and these interdepartmental groups. See Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1980), pp. 155, 177.
31. Isaacson, p. 295.
32. Kissinger, p. 639; Ambrose, p. 381; and Isaacson, p. 296.
33. Isaacson, p. 296.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 286; and Kissinger, p. 639.
35. Isaacson, p. 296.
36. C.L. Sulzberger, "Ugly Clouds in the South," *New York Times*, 25 September 1970, p. 43.
37. Ambrose, p. 382.
38. Kissinger, p. 646.
39. Kissinger, p. 647; and Nixon, *RN*, pp. 487–8.
40. Kissinger, p. 649.
41. Nixon, *RN*, p. 489. Nixon's assertion is not entirely true, as Ambrose (p. 383) points out. See also the 1974 testimony by Blechman and Levinson in House Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, *Soviet Naval Activities in Cuba: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 93rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 20 November 1974; Blechman and Levinson, "U.S. Policy and Soviet Subs"; Fenlon, pp. 40–5; and Kissinger, p. 651.
42. Nixon, *RN*, p. 489.
43. Ambrose, p. 383.
44. Garthoff, "Handling Cienfuegos," p. 47.
45. Kissinger, p. 639.
46. Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).
47. Isaacson, p. 296.
48. Richard Nixon, "Hard-Headed Detente," *New York Times*, 18 August 1982, p. A21.
49. Nixon, *RN*, p. 486.
50. Haldeman with DiMona, p. 88.
51. Nixon, "Hard-Headed Detente," p. A21.
52. U.S. President, *U.S. Foreign Policy for the 1970s*, Report to Congress (Washington: 1971), pp. 158–60.
53. U.S. President, *U.S. Foreign Policy for the 1970s*, Report to Congress (Washington: 1972), p. 21.
54. Nixon, *RN*, p. 497.
55. Isaacson, p. 298.
56. Nixon, *RN*, p. 488.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 486; Ambrose, p. 381; and Kissinger, p. 642.
58. Kissinger, p. 642.
59. Isaacson, p. 285.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 299.
61. Kissinger, p. 637.
62. *Ibid.*
63. Isaacson, p. 292.
64. Hersb, p. 253.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
66. Kissinger, pp. 638–9.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 639.
68. Alexander M. Haig, *Inner Circles* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), p. 253; Isaacson, p. 304.
69. Zumwalt, p. 311.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 313.
71. *Ibid.*
72. Haig, *Inner Circles*, pp. 251–2.
73. Isaacson, p. 296.
74. *Ibid.*
75. Kissinger, pp. 639–40; and Isaacson, p. 298.

84 Naval War College Review

76. Isaacson, p. 298.
77. Kissinger, p. 640.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid.
80. Haig, *Inner Circles*, p. 253.
81. Kissinger, pp. 640–3.
82. Ibid., p. 641.
83. Hersh, p. 254.
84. Kissinger, pp. 641–2.
85. Ibid., pp. 644–5.
86. Isaacson, p. 307; and Kissinger, p. 645.
87. John W. Finney, "Rivers Cites Soviet Power in New Defense Fund Plea," *New York Times*, 29 September 1970, p. 3.
88. Kissinger, p. 645; and Isaacson, p. 307.
89. Kissinger, pp. 646–7.
90. Haig recalls being sent to remind Dobrynin about the U.S. position while Kissinger and Nixon were on their way to Europe, though neither Nixon nor Kissinger seem to remember Haig playing the central role he claims in his memoirs. Haig reports that on 27 September Kissinger, en route to the Mediterranean, telephoned and told him to call on Dobrynin and repeat Kissinger's message that the United States would not accept a submarine base at Cienfuegos. He recalls that he then told Dobrynin, "Either you take those weapons out and dismantle the base at Cienfuegos Bay or we will do it for you." See Haig, *Inner Circles*, p. 254; and also Alexander M. Haig, *Caveat* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), p. 100. Dobrynin, Haig writes, was furious. Kissinger was no more pleased; he claimed Haig had exceeded his authority and "may have started a war." See Haig, *Inner Circles*, p. 255.
91. Strategic Arms Limitation Talks negotiator Gerard Smith recalled that during the SALT negotiations a Soviet delegate remarked to him, "When one bloody submarine goes to Cuba everyone in America goes crazy." See Gerard Smith, *Doubletalk* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), p. 215.
92. Marvin Kalb and Bernard Kalb, *Kissinger* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), pp. 211–2.
93. Tad Szulc, "White House Charge on Cuba Puzzles U.S. Officials," *New York Times*, 30 September 1970, p. 2.
94. Hersh, p. 255.
95. Bernard Gwertzman, "Moscow Scoffs at Sub-Base Issue," *New York Times*, 1 October 1970, p. 1.
96. Max Frankel, "U.S.-Soviet Ties: An Uncertain Crisis," *New York Times*, 15 October 1970, p. 12.
97. Hersh, p. 257.
98. Garthoff, "Handling Cienfuegos."
99. Zumwalt, p. 311.
100. Ibid. See also Isaacson, p. 310. The CNO also thought that the revised draft ultimately given to Ambassador Dobrynin was too loosely worded; see Zumwalt, p. 311.
101. See Doty, for example; see also Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, eds., *Ideas and Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993); Edward Rhodes, "Do Bureaucratic Politics Matter? Some Disconfirming Findings from the Case of the U.S. Navy," *World Politics*, vol. 47 (1994), pp. 1–41; Shafer, Sylvan and Thorson; and Sylvan and Voss.
102. In Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), p. 275.
103. Ibid., p. 97.
104. Sylvan and Thorson.