

Naval War College Review

Volume 41
Number 4 *Autumn*

Article 3

1988

Systematic Analysis of Defense Issues: The Role of the Congress

Alice M. Rivlin

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

Recommended Citation

Rivlin, Alice M. (1988) "Systematic Analysis of Defense Issues: The Role of the Congress," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 41 : No. 4 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol41/iss4/3>

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.

Systematic Analysis of Defense Issues: The Role of the Congress

Alice M. Rivlin

In a representative democracy, national security decisions are necessarily political. The subject of this paper is the role of systematic analysis in raising the level of that political debate, especially in the Congress. I will focus first on what systematic analysis means, or rather, what it ought to mean. Briefly, I believe that to advance informed debate on national security issues we need something more than sophisticated models relevant to narrow sets of choices involving weapons systems. What is needed are tools for thinking clearly about alternative futures for the United States, its allies, and enemies; about the national security policies that might be appropriate to these futures; and about the consequences and costs of these policies.

I will then concentrate on the role of the Congress in debating and deciding future national security policies. I believe it is in the national interest to involve the Congress, as well as the public and the news media, much more heavily than we do now, in informed discussions of national security objectives and broad policy options and, if possible, reduce Congressional concerns with narrower issues of implementation.

To some members of the national security establishment, more Congressional involvement on any level is a frightening prospect. Indeed, some appear more willing to risk their lives to bring about free elections in distant places than to deal with their own freely elected representatives in the halls of Congress.

This wariness of Congress is not surprising. We live in an incredibly dangerous and rapidly changing world. Those who know the most about the military dangers worry, understandably, that the public and their elected representatives are too unsophisticated, too shortsighted, or too self-centered to understand the nature of the threats and to make the sacrifices necessary to meet them. But this wariness is also self-defeating. It leads to

Dr. Rivlin is a Senior Fellow with the Economic Studies Program at The Brookings Institution and was the first director of the Congressional Budget Office.

Congressional frustration and ultimately to a lack of public trust in those charged with the defense of the Nation. It leads to stop-and-go and feast-or-famine budgeting, to micromanagement, to military decisions made on grounds of local or regional economic gain and, in the end, to superficial support for national security policies that is liable to crumble at crucial times.

In a word, the only hope for strong, sensible national security policies in modern America is *glasnost*. The American national security establishment must be willing to engage patiently in public education and discuss, openly, major national security issues, uncertainties, and alternative postures. Only if there is real dialogue, complete with a willingness to listen as well as to preach, can the national security establishment hope to build the public understanding and depth of support needed for effective defense.

Systematic Analysis in Perspective

In the 1980s, no one harbors the illusion that systematic analysis is a magic tool for decision making that can substitute for judgment, experience, or common sense. No one thinks that systematic analysis can eliminate risk, uncertainty, or the necessity for guesswork. We all have learned that models are only as good as their assumptions, and that assumptions about the future are inherently and irredeemably uncertain. We all know that hard-to-quantify factors such as dedication, *esprit de corps*, and morale are crucial issues in determining the outcome of any process that involves people. We have learned, sometimes to our sorrow, that minor misspecifications can lead to major errors, especially if the planning period is long. We realize that information is always imperfect and the cost of improving it is often high. Indeed, most of us probably have seen analyses that, underneath the fancy computer models and multicolor graphics, were fundamentally so bad that using them to decide anything was patently inferior to the old-fashioned gut reaction or random draw.

Moreover, there are reasons why it is often far more difficult to apply the tools of systematic decision making in the national security arena than in private or public nondefense decisions. The level of risk and uncertainty surrounding military choices is often especially high. The typical civilian decision maker is plagued with the usual uncertainties about cost, performance, and the impact of outside forces. For the military there must be added the acute difficulties of dealing with rapidly advancing and unpredictable technologies, requirements that weapons systems and organizations perform almost infinitely varied tasks under highly unpredictable conditions, limited opportunities for realistic experimentation, and the necessity of guessing the intentions and motivations of enemies (and allies) with cultures and political structures totally unlike our own. Moreover, it can be argued that the Navy presents

the most difficult decisionmaking problems of all because its missions are so varied and its weapons systems so long-lasting.

In this context, the most that can be said for the various tools of systematic analysis is that, if used intelligently, they offer some hope of more manageable decision making. They provide a framework for identifying key assumptions, for sorting out the known from the unknown, for differentiating the quantifiable from the unquantifiable, and for figuring out what is the most efficient or effective plan of action under certain conditions or in the context of a particular scenario about the future. The tools of systematic analysis do not make complex problems easier, but they do make it possible for the human brain to think about them in a more organized way—and that is a major contribution.

The risks stem from the fact that the tools are such fun. There is always the danger that very bright, ingenious people faced with a large problem will become fascinated by a small piece of it that may be susceptible to modeling and quantification, immerse themselves in refining and elaborating fancy apparatus for solving the subproblem, and forget the larger one all together. This is dangerous for several reasons. It may focus scarce talent on seeking the right answers to relatively unimportant questions. It may actually lead to wrong decisions because no one notices that the basic assumptions being used to simplify the solution to the subproblem are quite inappropriate in the real world, or because the larger context has, while painstaking ingenuity was being applied to solution of the subproblem, totally changed. In either case, systems analysis is likely to reinforce the tendency of professional experts to develop special languages for communicating with each other, thereby separating themselves from those outside their immediate circle.

The problem of experts knowing more and more about less and less and losing the ability to communicate with ordinary mortals is certainly not attributable to systems analysis. The problem exists in law, medicine, music, and other fields not amenable to systems analysis. But the use of systems analysis in the national security area, together with rapid advances in weapons technology, has reinforced the mystique of the Defense Establishment.

This widening gulf between the national security experts and the public at large—including the informed public interested in policy issues—is one of the major impediments to the formation of well-articulated national security policies that command broad support. The experts, immersed in the technical details of military balance between the United States and the Soviet Union, tend to focus on the short run and have little interest in the kind of relationship the two powers ought to be trying to achieve in the long run. The public, on the other hand, has little knowledge of, and less interest in, such esoteric questions as stability conditions and verification

but has a high level of concern about how the two powers will manage their relationship in the years to come. Bringing these two conversations together is the objective of a major current project designed to determine how the public perceives alternative futures for the U.S.-Soviet relationship and how these views change in response to information and opportunities to discuss alternative futures and their implications.

While the gulf between experts and the public may be no greater in national security than in other areas, it matters more because effective national security policy depends on sustained public support and willingness to sacrifice. If the public fails to understand, for instance, international financial policies of the Government, these policies may, nevertheless, be relatively easy to implement. But if the public does not have a clear view of U.S. defense posture and the reasons for it, its willingness to pay the taxes necessary to support modern forces, to serve in the military, and to make other sacrifices may be either low or subject to rapid erratic swings. If few people understand, for example, the strategic rationale for an MX missile or the stability argument for its mobility, it may be difficult to generate substantial political support for running it around the tracks in anybody's backyard. Similarly, if scarcely anyone understands the reasoning behind rapid modernization of conventional forces, the increased funding voted at the request of a popular President may disappear when public attention is drawn by the press to expensive coffeepots and toilet seats.

The Dialogue between the Administration and Congress

Let us assume for the sake of argument that an ideal administration arrives at its defense budget proposals in the most thoughtful way possible. Present and future threats to U.S. security are thoroughly assessed and periodically reevaluated. The tendency to refight the last war is resisted, although lessons of the past are, of course, thoroughly learned. Long-range and intermediate-range plans are argued out, then translated into budget requests. Interservice rivalry is kept at the level needed to maintain high morale but never results in duplication of weapons or unworkable chains of command. Finally, a lean, efficient industrial base competes to furnish weapons and other goods and services on schedule and at minimum cost.

Having achieved all that, how should this ideal administration go about selling the defense budget to Congress? One model (let's call it the Board of Directors model) assumes that Congress is primarily composed of intelligent, well-informed citizens with the best interests of the country at heart, capable of understanding the main thrust of arguments about defense postures and the force structures necessary to support them, eager to get the most for the taxpayers' money, but too busy and too sensible to want

10 Naval War College Review

to meddle in the details of defense management unless there is clear evidence that the managers are not doing their jobs well.

In working with this type of Congress, the administration would strengthen its case by sharing many of the analyses used to arrive at its own decisions. It should certainly reveal long-range and intermediate-range plans and thoroughly discuss major uncertainties surrounding these plans. It should make the best possible estimates of costs and of the pace of future technological development, but clearly reveal how uncertain these are in order to prepare the Congress for the possibility that things will not go according to schedule. A Congress thoroughly immersed in this kind of discussion would presumably want to examine important supporting analyses and question their assumptions. It might also want to discuss alternatives that were rejected and hear the rationale for discarding them.

This thoughtful discussion of national security policy in the Congress, well-covered in the media, would give both the Congress and the public a thorough understanding of threats to U.S. security, what was being done to meet them, why it was expensive, and why actual military operations and even loss of life might sometimes be necessary. The risk, of course, is that this thoughtful Congress, and the public it represents, might not always agree with the military establishment's view of the world and how to respond to it. They might ask very hard questions: Exactly why do we need a 600-ship navy? Is there a firm rationale for the 600 or is it just a convenient round number? Have we budgeted the manpower needed to operate 600 ships? What are those additional aircraft carriers actually going to do? Does an offensive maritime strategy against the Soviets really make sense? Is there a less expensive, less risky alternative? Questions of this nature might end up on the front page or the evening news; they might even be answered differently than proposed by the administration. From the administration's viewpoint there is considerable risk, but there is also the potential gain of gradually building public understanding and solid support for policies undertaken.

Another assumption the administration might make about the Congress could be called the Ward Heeler model. The assumption is that the people elected to the House and the Senate are basically small-time politicians with little understanding of or concern for the complex public issues of our time. Their principal objective is to be reelected, and their principal means of doing so is to bring visible benefits, especially jobs, to their states and districts. In addition, they respond easily to flattery and like to play with expensive toys, so it is a good idea to let them have their pictures taken in the cockpit of an F-14. This model is a bit insulting, so it is never spelled out very clearly, except by stand-up comedians and by academics (who call it the public choice model).

An administration dealing with this type of Congress should take a different approach to justifying the defense budget. Rationales for higher spending should be simple, direct, and nonanalytical. Emphasis should be on people or things of which potential adversaries have more. Procurement should be as high a fraction of the budget as feasible, with a wide geographical distribution. Arguments for new weapons systems should emphasize where they would be made, not what they would do. Ships, for example, should be constructed in as many states as possible and home-ported in every coastal town with a sailing marina. Cost is not particularly important, except when the Government is buying identifiable small items easily priced in a hardware store.

The real Congress, of course, lies somewhere between these two models. There are some ward heelers and some genuine statesmen. Most manage to mix legitimate concern for the well-being of their constituents, which is a function of their job in a representative democracy, with genuine dedication to the good of the Nation, which often appeals to their constituents as well. Moreover, I suspect that of the two, the model that will dominate depends in part on how the administration treats the Congress over a period of years. Both models are partially self-fulfilling. Intelligent people who are challenged to think about important issues will usually rise to the occasion, especially when presented with relevant information and comprehensive analysis. Representatives treated like ward heelers may act accordingly. Moreover, if they do not feel they are being asked to participate in genuine debate about important choices or fundamental directions of policy, they may jump into small decisions as a way of exerting power. Micromanagement by Congress may be an outgrowth of the frustration caused by feeling excluded from macro-decisions.

What Administrations Can Do

The next few years are likely to present a real opportunity for thoughtful reexamination of U.S. defense posture. Our relationship with the Soviets may be undergoing fundamental changes. The post-World War II alliances may be creaking and shifting. New threats may arise in parts of the world to which we have given scant attention. Moreover, in the Congress, as in the rest of the country, the generation that fought in—or even remembers—World War II is passing from leadership. Members are younger, better educated, and less likely to have served in the military. Furthermore, the economy is growing more slowly than in the 1950s and 1960s. The deficit must be closed and public resources are likely to remain scarce for a long time. Hence, for many diverse reasons, the time may be right for reexamination of basic questions such as: What role should the United States

be trying to play in the world? What kind of military forces do we need? How are we going to pay for them?

Whether this debate is informed and constructive or merely a shouting match depends in part on how well successive administrations deal with Congress. I would hope that administrations would consciously treat the Congress as a capable, helpful board of directors, thereby, raising the quality of debates and decisions.

This would mean:

- Thinking through long-range plans and sharing them with Congress.
- Undertaking and disclosing analyses of major force structure and weapons system options.
- Recognizing the Congress' need for independent analyses of these and other options by committee staffs, the Congressional Budget Office, and other Congressional agencies.
- Inviting dialogue between administration and Congressional analysts, discussion of each other's assumptions, and mutual efforts to improve the Congressional and public understanding of problems and solutions.

All of this does not mean that Congressional decisions will be nonpolitical, legislators are elected to represent the political views and needs of their constituents. Moreover, the politics is not limited to Congress. The services and the Secretary of Defense also represent constituencies with needs and views. Indeed, a "competing constituencies" model of administration and Congressional interaction may be more realistic than either of those I have just discussed.

This role of the DoD as representative of a constituency is perhaps most obvious when it comes to decisions about pay and benefits, especially benefits of great importance to the career military, such as retirement. In these types of decisions, modeling and systematic analysis can be extremely helpful in illustrating the long-term costs and consequences of alternative patterns of pay and benefits. Independent analysis by Congressional agencies is needed to explore options and assumptions that the politics of the Pentagon might make the Secretary of Defense reluctant to suggest.

But, while politics will and should remain important to both the administration and Congress, the more that can be done to focus attention on major issues affecting the effectiveness of national defense, the greater the likelihood of benefits to the country as a whole. Leadership to raise the quality of debate probably has to originate with the administration.

What the Congress Can Do

While the administration can challenge the Congress to raise the quality of debate about national security issues and the defense budget, Congress itself needs to overhaul its own decision-making procedures. As the Odeen

Committee, of which I was a member, pointed out in its report (Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University, *Toward A More Effective Defense*, 1985): "No legislature in the world devotes as much time, energy, and talent to decision making on the defense budget as does the U.S. Congress. Nevertheless, almost everyone involved in the process, within the Congress itself and in the executive branch, has expressed dissatisfaction with both the outcome of this effort and the process itself. Changing the way Congress reviews the budget would not only improve legislative oversight of defense policy, but also would encourage and reinforce reforms in the Pentagon."

Congress suffers from work overload of its own making—reviewing the defense budget too often in too many committees and in too great detail. It reviews the defense budget at least three times in each chamber (in connection with authorization and appropriation bills and budget resolutions). Too rarely are controversial weapons systems given either a full go-ahead or a final death warrant; they just limp from one review to the next. The whole process suffers from excessive detail and short-term focus and misses the major long-term issues that need to be understood and debated if the effectiveness of defense is to improve.

The Odeen Committee recommended several reforms that would help the Congress obtain a better grip on major issues and raise the quality of Congressional debate on the defense budget. One recommendation was to make defense budget decisions less often by moving to multiyear budgeting. Indeed, last year the Department of Defense made a serious effort to move to a biennial budget. Unfortunately, while the DoD apparently found the two-year approach both feasible and useful, the Congress, especially the appropriations committees, remains less than fully converted.

The increasingly redundant functioning of the authorizing and appropriating committees is another impediment to thorough discussion of major issues and encourages competitive micromanagement. Consolidating the two committees into a single defense program committee might improve Congressional effectiveness in the defense area. Alternatively, as recommended by the Odeen Committee, the roles of the authorizing and appropriating committees could be more clearly differentiated: "The armed services committees should review the department's long-range plan, insist that it be based on realistic outyear forecasts of resources, and debate the underlying issues of overall defense policy that the plan reflects. The appropriating committees should focus their attention on the decisions necessary to translate the defense program approved by the armed services committees into a two-year budget."

Major opportunities exist for improving decision making on national security issues both in Congress and the administration and, in the process,

the public's understanding of the importance of strong, effective defense. Systematic analysis has a major role to play—along with leadership, judgment, common sense, and reform of decision-making procedures—for improvement in the quality of debate and decision making on national security issues.

This paper was presented on 3 December 1987 to the 1987 Seapower Forum, sponsored by the Center for Naval Analyses. The views expressed are solely those of the author and should not be ascribed to the trustees, officers, or other staff members of The Brookings Institution.

— ψ —

“Wars usually last longer and cost more than governments expect; and they rarely achieve the political goals that might justify the risks, the cost and the pain.”

Piers Mackesy
*War without Victory: The Downfall of Pitt,
1799-1802*
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, p. 225)