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Health and Stress During International Crisis: Neglected Input Variables in the Foreign Policy Decision-Making Process *

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Many variables influence the behavior of political leaders in decision-making situations. In the foreign policy realm, Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin, Paige, and Allison among others have provided some reasonably clear conceptual frameworks to aid in the sorting out of variables.¹ In each one of these differing perspectives, however, very little was done to examine the individuals themselves who are part of the policy making process. Instead, emphasis has been on the concepts of rationality, organization, routine, process, standard operating procedures, and national interests and goals.

What has been lacking in foreign policy decision-making studies is a perspective on and insight into the behavior of individuals. While it is a truism to point out that people make policy, and that individuals are biological and psychological beings, it is also nevertheless true that very little empirical political research has been done on the behavior of foreign policy elites as people in political decision-making situations. One obvious reason for this paucity is that the researcher seldom has the opportunity to observe real foreign policy decision-makers at work, particularly if they are operating in small, intimate groups. It is at this level that personal characteristics appear to be most important and weigh most heavily on the decisional process.

Yet it is precisely this type of data which is most difficult to generate; and furthermore, even if we had a large body of data on which to draw, we seem to lack sufficient theoretical underpinnings to channel our observations into a coherent framework which would be meaningful to foreign policy making analysts.

On area which appears reasonably manageable from a research point of view involves the question of the influence of health and stress on the behavior of individual decision-makers. Foreign policy elites not

* Sincere thanks to Richard H. Cady for his always perceptive comments.

¹ R. C. Snyder, H. W. Bruck, and B. Sapin, *Foreign Policy Decision-Making* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1962); G. D. Paige, *The Korean Decision* (New York: The Free Press, 1968); and G. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).

only are subjected to the normal and cumulative stresses of day-to-day decision-making, they are also peculiarly vulnerable to the intense stresses of an international crisis.

WORK-STYLE AND ILLNESS

What type of behavior is expected of elites who are acting in small decisional groups during, for example, international crisis? While this question cannot be definitively answered at this time, it seems reasonable to assume that behavior which is consistent with Western administrative work-styles will emerge as the most desirable type of behavior. Salek Minc points out that an individual who displays a "high degree of occupational leadership" in Western societies normally exhibits the following work-style characteristics:

- "1. He has a broad time perspective and strong orientation to the future.
- "2. He seems to be self-directed and self-disciplined.
- "3. He is detached from strong desires for immediate gratification.
- "4. He selects activities for potential achievements, not for the pleasure of work itself.
- "5. Although in every choice there must be an emotional element, once this choice is made, further emotional influences are subordinated to rationally patterned behavior.
- "6. He is reliable. When necessary, he drives himself to work through rational self-imposition.
- "7. He has a conscious awareness of responsibility and is rarely motivated by actual enthusiasm."²

The critical observation to be made about this list of work-style characteristics, as Minc emphasizes, is that it correlates very positively with a profile of the coronary-prone individual.³ That is, the "coronary candidate" monitors his own social behavior, suppresses his emotions, rigorously controls his drives and impulses, and is competitive and future oriented. Numerous studies have demonstrated this correlation.⁴

² S. Minc, "Civilized Pattern of Activity, Cardiac Adaptation, and Ischemic Heart Disease," in W. Raab, *Prevention of Ischemic Heart Disease* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles A. Thomas, 1966), pp. 156-162.

³ Minc, *ibid.*, p. 157.

⁴ See, for example, F. Dunbar, *Psychosomatic Diagnosis* (New York: P. B. Hoeber, Inc., 1943); N. N. Miles, S. Waldfogel, E. L. Barrobee, and S. Cobb, "Psychosomatic Study of 46 Young Men with Coronary Artery Disease," *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 16 (November-December, 1954); and S. E. Cleveland and D. L. Johnson, "Personality Patterns in Young Males with Coronary Disease," *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 24 (November-December, 1962).

The very nature of the Western administrative work-style, then, has a debilitating effect upon the health of elites who are subjected to the social pressures of the work-style. In order to conform to the requisite behavior, an individual could very likely create within himself those physiological conditions which might predispose him to coronary heart disease.

THE EFFECTS OF SITUATIONAL STRESS

Not only do the normal expectations of elite administrative behavior, therefore, have an enervating effect upon health, but the situational context can also contribute to the increase of stress upon an individual; and, indeed, decision-makers in international crisis situations are men often operating under the very debilitating conditions of high stress. Consequently, the study of stress may provide some powerful insights into the behavior of foreign-policy elites, as well as furnish clues as to how substantive policy choices were influenced by human stress.

As Lazarus has observed, the term "stress" always "conveys the idea that the person . . . is beset by powerful pressures which greatly tax the adaptive resources of the biological or psychological system."⁵ From a homeostatic perspective, stress is always some type of stimulus condition that results in systemic disequilibrium. Central to this conceptualization is the understanding that the adaptive capabilities of an organism are interacting with a powerful set of stimuli from the environment.

From a political point of view, the stimuli from the environment may be termed as events. A "stressful event" can be defined as "any charge in the environment which typically induces a high degree of emotional tension and interferes with normal patterns of response."⁶ Moreover, the stressfulness of an event can be enhanced when motivation to act is very strong. Thus, an international crisis can fit rather nicely into a stress framework by reconceptualizing crisis as a stimulus configuration in the external political environment of a nation which induces a major degree of emotional tension in individual decision-makers who are highly motivated to respond to the demands of the stimulus.

Mention should be made of a distinction that was first advanced by Hans Selye to clear up some possible terminological misunderstandings. Selye preferred to designate the environmental stimulus situation as the stressor and the changed conditions in the organism as stress.⁷

⁵ R. Lazarus, *Psychological Stress and the Coping Process* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966), p. 10.

⁶ I. L. Janis and H. Leventhal, "Human Reaction to Stress," in E. Borgatta and W. Lambert, *Handbook of Personality Theory and Research* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1968), p. 1043.

⁷ H. Selye, *The Physiology and Pathology of Exposure to Stress* (Montreal: Acta, 1950).

Furthermore, following Lazarus it is appropriate to refer to the adaptation of the organism to its changed conditions as a stress reaction. Thus, an international crisis event can be conceptualized as a stressor which results in adaptive behavior on the part of individual decision-makers. Because the decision-makers are lawfully charged with the responsibility of resolving the crisis, they can be termed as highly motivated to act. The stressor then induces a condition of stress in the decision-maker.

Reference should be made to the curvilinear relationship between the condition of stress and performance. It has been widely demonstrated that low to moderate levels of stress facilitate cognitive efficiency but that when stress is increased to a very high level, efficiency is impaired; indiscriminate vigilance takes place; and poor judgment and avoidance behavior results.⁸ Because of the difficulties of measurement, no attempt has ever been made to assess the impact of the levels of stress on the behavior of decision-makers while they are engaged in the resolution of international crises. While most of the evidence to support the curvilinear hypothesis on stress and performance has come from experimental research, very little work has been done utilizing real situations; and virtually nothing has been done in an international political context.

The one exception is Howard Lentner's study of the crisis management machinery of the Department of State.⁹ As part of his research Lentner administered a questionnaire to seventy-nine low to middle-range Foreign Service Officers regarding their perceptions of the frequency of psychological stress, anxiety, and tension that they observed or felt during an international crisis situation. Lentner's findings are quite clear: when asked whether a crisis heightens the sense of urgency which in turn produces increased stress, 85% responded in the "always" or "often" categories. Similarly, 75% agreed that a crisis always or often increases the tension among the participants who are involved in resolving it. But as Lentner himself points out, "the most important views of crisis are held by principal officers in government," and these were not the individuals who responded to the questionnaire. To put it differently, the effects of stress may fall even more strongly on and are

⁸ See, for example, I. L. Janis and S. Feshbach, "Effects of Fear Arousing Communications," *Journal of Abnormal Social Psychology*, 48 (January, 1953), pp. 78-92; A. S. Luchins and E. H. Luchins, *Rigidity of Behavior* (Eugene: University of Oregon Books, 1959); E. Duffy, *Activation and Behavior* (New York: Wiley, 1962); and I. L. Janis, *Stress and Frustration* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971).

⁹ H. Lentner, "The Concept of Crisis as Viewed by the United States Department of State," in C. F. Hermann, *International Crisis: Insights from Behavioral Research* (New York: The Free Press, 1972), 112-133.

more critical to the key foreign policy actors who make rather than execute the decisions in crisis situations.

In an attempt to get at the phenomenon of the key decision-makers themselves, Charles Hermann conceived of a very comprehensive simulation study based upon the well-known Inter-Nation Simulation game prepared by Guetzkow and Cherryholmes.¹⁰ When the participants in the simulation assumed that the game had been completed, the experimenters, in an effort to induce stress, arbitrarily extended the game in order to create deadlines for response. These deadlines put the participants under time pressures to respond to the demands of the changed simulation situation. Though Hermann's work is exceedingly informative and insightful, and though Hermann himself is aware of the necessity, but virtually impossibility, of measuring real decision-makers, it must be noted that his simulation data deals neither with political elites nor addresses itself to the question of real stress in which a human organism finds itself in jeopardy. These difficulties continue to confront political scientists who are involved in foreign policy decision-making studies.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Earlier in this article it was pointed out that theory-informed data on the influence of health and stress ought to be collected in order to gain some insights into the behavior of individual foreign policy decisional elites. Physicians have frequently decried the lack of attention that political scientists devote to the study of the impact of health variables on political behavior. For example, L'Etang examined the fragmentary medical biographies of a handful of military and political leaders of World War II and concluded that illness played a major role in their decisional behavior.¹¹ Halberstam reflected on the medical requirements for future occupants of the White House.¹² And Lee, focusing on what he felt was the high incidence of insanity among heads of estate, called for stringent physical and psychological examinations.¹³

Yet a far more scientifically rigorous research effort is needed if we are to discover clear evidence of the influence of health on political elite behavior. One approach which deserves mention involves the comparative examination of the memoirs of statesmen. These works con-

¹⁰ C. F. Hermann, *Crises in Foreign Policy* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

¹¹ H. L'Etang, *The Pathology of Leadership* (New York: Hawthorne, 1970).

¹² M. J. Halberstam, "Who's Medically Fit for the White House," *New York Times Magazine* (October 22, 1972), p. 39ff.

¹³ R. V. Lee, "When Insanity Holds the Scepter," *New York Times* (April 12, 1974), p. 31.

tain a surprisingly rich body of information about health and illness. Interdisciplinary teams of physicians and political scientists ought to be able to develop insightful and imaginative coding schemes that will be useful in comparative analysis. Physicians who are employed in large organizations such as the Department of State should be encouraged to lend their experience and expertise to political scientists who are trying to interpret medical information in political autobiographies.

Those who have intimately observed policy-making behavior have long suspected that health and stress play a rather large role in decisional policy choice. The task now is to demonstrate it scientifically.