Deterrence and Perception | *Robert Jervis*

In the most elemental sense, deterrence depends on perceptions. But unless people are totally blind, we need not be concerned with the logical point that, if one actor's behavior is to influence another, it must be perceived. Rather what is important is that actors' perceptions often diverge both from "objective reality" (or later scholars' perceptions of it, which is as good a measure as we can have) and from the perceptions of other actors. These differences, furthermore, both randomly and systematically influence deterrence. Unless statesmen understand the ways in which their opposite numbers see the world, their deterrence policies are likely to misfire; unless scholars understand the patterns of perceptions involved, they will misinterpret the behavior.

An example both shows that the problem extends to perceptions of third parties as well as main adversaries and underlines the way in which attempts at deterrence can not only fail but backfire if the assumptions about others' perceptions are incorrect. In order to mobilize British assistance in the American–Japanese political conflict of 1907–1908, President Theodore Roosevelt sought to portray the situation as quite tense. He expected that Britain would then aid him by restraining Japan. Unfortunately, and contrary to the President's assumption, the British perceptions of both him and the Japanese differed from those that Roosevelt held: "The British felt it was Washington, not Tokyo, which stood in need of a warning." As Hardinge, the Permanent Under Secretary of the Foreign Office, put it: "the President is playing a very dangerous game, and it is fortunate that he has such cool-headed people as the Japanese to deal with."[1] Thus, rather than moving Britain closer to the

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1. Charles Neu, *An Uncertain Friendship* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 199.

United States, as Roosevelt expected, his actions made that country *less* willing to cooperate in opposing Japan.

In light of the dangers inherent in misperceptions, one might expect that statesmen would pay careful attention to how others perceive them. In fact, this is usually not the case. While they are aware that determining others' intentions and predicting others' behavior is difficult, they generally believe that their own intentions—especially when they are not expansionist—are clear. As a result, they rarely try to see the world and their own actions through their adversary's eyes,[2] although doing so would be to their advantage. If a policy is to have the desired impact on its target, it must be perceived as it is intended;[3] if the other's behavior is to be anticipated and the state's policy is a major influence on it, then the state must try to determine how its actions are being perceived. One would think, therefore, that every government would establish an office responsible for reconstructing the other's view of the world and that every policy paper would have a section that analyzed how the alternative policies would be seen by significant audiences. One theme of this essay is that the failure to undertake this task—and I do not mean to imply that it would be easy to accomplish—explains many cases of policy failure. It is hard to find cases of even mild international conflict in which both sides fully grasp the other's views. Yet all too often statesmen assume that their opposite numbers see the world as they see it, fail to devote sufficient resources to determining whether this is actually true, and have much more confidence in their beliefs about the other's perceptions than the evidence warrants.

Misperception and the Failure of Deterrence

One actor deters another by convincing him that the expected value of a certain action is outweighed by the expected punishment. The latter is composed of two elements: the perceived cost of the punishments that the actor

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2. The British tried to do this, with some success, during World War II. See Donald McLachlan, *Room 39* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), pp. 252–258.
3. Of course accidents can lead to desired ends in ways decision-makers had not intended, but I do not think this is common. One example may be the U.S. Navy's unauthorized harassment of Soviet submarines in the Cuban Missile Crisis which probably helped convince the Soviet leaders that the confrontation was too dangerous to be permitted to continue. See Alexander George, David Hall, and William Simons, *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), pp. 112–114.

can inflict and the perceived probabilities that he will inflict them. Deterrence can misfire if the two sides have different beliefs about either factor.

(MIS)PERCEPTIONS OF VALUE

Judging what constitutes harm is generally easier than estimating whether threats will be carried out, but even here there is room for differences which can undermine deterrence. On occasion, what one person thinks is a punishment another may consider a reward. The model is Br'er Rabbit. Only rarely do states in international politics want to be thrown into a brier patch; but Teddy Roosevelt's threat to intervene in the Cuban internal conflict of 1903 comes close. He declared that, if American property were raided in the course of the fighting, he would have to send in troops. Unfortunately, both factions believed that American intervention would work in their favor and busily set to work harassing Americans and their property.[4]

One could not have coerced Pol Pot by threatening to destroy his cities and a similar, if less extreme, point lies behind some of the current U.S. strategic policy. As former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown has argued, the United States must "take full account of the fact [sic] that the things highly valued by the Soviet leadership appear to include not only the lives and prosperity of the peoples of the Soviet Union, but the military, industrial and political sources of power of the regime itself."[5] This requires targeting the army, internal security forces, and the Communist Party. A related argument is that the Soviet leaders are ethnic Russians who care about maintaining the dominance of Great Russia and who would be deterred by

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4. Allan Millet, *The Politics of Intervention* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1968). The point is nicely made in an anecdote about a British General made by B.H. Liddell Hart:

> Jack Dill was a delightful man for any enthusiast to meet or serve. But he was quite unable to understand that the average officer did not share his burning ardour for professional study and tactical exercises. An illuminating example of that incomprehension occurred in his way of dealing with the major commanding a battery attached to his brigade who had failed to show the keenness Dill expected. To emphasize his dissatisfaction Dill told this officer that he would not be allowed to take part in the remaining exercises—a punishment, drastic in Dill's view, which was a great relief to the delinquent, who had been counting the days until he could get away to join a grouse-shooting party in Scotland.
> —*The Liddell Hart Memoirs, 1895–1938* (New York: Putnam's, 1965), p. 72.

5. Harold Brown, *Department of Defense Annual Report Fiscal Year 1981* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), p. 67. It should also be noted that if these arguments are correct, the threat to carry out these attacks would be no more credible than the threat to attack Soviet cities because there would be no reason for the Soviet response of retaliating against American cities to be different.

the threat to attack it but spare the other areas of the USSR, thereby enabling the other nationalities to rise up and either gain their independence or dominate the postwar state. Without endorsing the answers he provides, one can completely agree with Brown's argument that "our strategy has to be aimed at what the Soviets think is important to them, not just what we might think would be important to them."[6] But this kind of analysis must be carried to its logical conclusion, not stopped at a point which is convenient to the analyst's political predilections. To argue that the Russians could be deterred by threatening to destroy the party and internal security forces implies not only that these instruments are needed to maintain Communist rule, but also that the Soviet leaders realize this. This may be correct, but if they believe what they say, they will think the regime enjoys the support of the population and so might conclude that the party would regenerate after the war. American leaders do not think that the destruction of the state apparatus in a war would permanently end democracy; would the Soviets have so little faith in their regime that they would lack comparable beliefs?

As we have seen, threats of coercive war can misfire if the state does not understand what the opponent values. Threats to use brute force, on the other hand, do not involve this pitfall, but they do require the state to determine how its adversary evaluates the military balance—how it estimates who would win a war. This issue arose in the 1930s as the British leaders debated how to deter Hitler. Some felt that "economic stability"—which required that military spending be kept relatively low—contributed to this goal: "The maintenance of our economic stability . . . [could] be described as an essential element in our defense system . . . without which purely military effort would be of no avail. . . . Nothing operates more strongly to deter a potential aggressor from attacking this country than our stability. . . . This reputation stands us in good stead, and causes other countries to rate our power of resistance at something far more formidable than is implied merely by the number of men of war, aeroplanes and battalions which we should have at our disposal immediately on the outbreak of war. But were other countries to detect in us signs of strain, this deterrent would at once be lost."[7] On the other hand, Churchill stressed the need for larger military

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6. U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Hearings on Nuclear War Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981), p. 10.
7. Sir Thomas Inskip, Minister for Coordination of Defense, quoted in Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, Vol. 5 1922–1939* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 891.

forces: "an immense British army cast into the scales" was a great deterrent "and one of the surest bulwarks of peace."[8] Neither side in the argument, however, tried as hard as it might have to learn exactly how Hitler saw the world and what sort of configuration of forces might have deterred him.

Deterrence can also be undercut if the aggressor does not understand the kind of war which the status quo state is threatening to wage. The Japanese had no doubt that the United States would fight if they attacked Pearl Harbor. But many of Japan's leaders thought that the stakes for the U.S. were not sufficiently high to justify an all-out effort and that the Americans would instead fight a limited war, and, being unable to prevail at that level of violence, would agree to a settlement which would give Japan control of East Asia. Similarly, Hitler expected Britain and France to fight in September 1939 but doubted that they would continue to do so after Poland was defeated. Britain especially, he believed, had sufficient common interest with Germany to conclude a peace treaty after limited hostilities. In neither case did either side understand the other's beliefs or values. Indeed, the German and Japanese perceptions of their opponents would have seemed to the latter so out of touch with reality as to hardly deserve consideration. British and American statesmen knew their own outlooks so well that they thought it obvious that others knew them also. To have recognized that alternative views were possible would have implied that their self-images were not unambiguously correct and that their past behavior might be interpreted as indicating a willingness to sacrifice friends and agree to less than honorable settlements.

Because Britain, France, and the United States did not understand the other side's expectations, their deterrence strategies could not be effective. Their task was not only to convince their adversaries they would fight if pushed too far, but also that they would continue to fight even after initial reverses.[9] Doing this would have been extremely difficult since it would have involved presenting evidence and making commitments about how they would behave a few years later under grave circumstances. But had the statesmen been aware of the German and Japanese perceptions, they might

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8. Quoted in ibid, p. 945.
9. Churchill had a better understanding of the problem. In 1938 he stressed to a German diplomat that "a war, once started, would be fought out like the last to the bitter end, and one must consider not what might happen in the first few months, but where we should all be at the end of the fourth year." Quoted in ibid., p. 964. For a related argument, see Alan Alexandroff and Richard Rosecrance, "Deterrence in 1939," *World Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (April 1977), pp. 404–424.

have at least made some efforts. For example, President Franklin Roosevelt could have stressed the American tradition of vacillating between isolation and extreme involvement in international politics, of seeing the world in Manichean terms, of fighting only unlimited wars. Prime Minister Chamberlain might have done better explaining why he had abandoned appeasement, why Britain could not allow any power to dominate the continent, and why it would have no choice but to resist even if the military situation was bleak.

Similarly, throughout the 1960s, the U.S. misjudged how much North Vietnam valued reunification and believed that an American threat to fight a prolonged war and inflict very heavy punishment on the North[10] could dissuade the North from continuing its struggle. American decision-makers paid a great deal of attention to how to make their threats credible, but their misjudgment led them to ignore what was actually the crucial problem—that the North was willing to fight the sort of war the U.S. was threatening rather than concede. The Americans might not have been able to solve the problem even had they been aware of it, but as it was they never even came to grips with it.

(MIS)PERCEPTIONS OF CREDIBILITY

Misperceptions of what the target state values and fears probably are less important causes of deterrence failure than misperceptions of credibility. Conclusions are difficult to draw in this area, however. Although many arguments about deterrence turn on questions involving credibility, scholars know remarkably little about how these judgments are formed and altered. For example, how context-bound are these estimates? Obviously the credibility of a threat is strongly influenced by the specific situation in which it is issued. The threat to go to war in response to a major provocation could be credible when the threat to so respond to a minor insult would not. But there also is a component of credibility that inheres in the threatener, not the situation. In the same circumstance, one country's threat can be credible where another's would not be. Part of this difference of course comes from the country's strength, its ability to carry out the threat, and its ability to

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10. As Walt Rostow put it, "Ho has an industrial complex to protect; he is no longer a guerilla fighter with nothing to lose." Quoted in Department of Defense, *Pentagon Papers*, Senator Mike Gravel, ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), Vol. III, p. 153. That North Vietnam absorbed almost unprecedented punishment is shown by John Mueller, "The Search for the Single 'Breaking Point' in Vietnam: The Statistics of a Deadly Quarrel," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (December 1980), pp. 497–519.

defend against the other's response. But there's more to it than this. Some states have reputations for being bolder, more resolute, and more reckless than others. That is, states are seen to differ in the price they are willing to pay to achieve a given goal. But it is not clear how these reputations are established and maintained or how important they are compared to the other influences on credibility. We cannot predict with great assurance how a given behavior (e.g., refusing to change one's position on an issue) will influence others' expectations of how the state will act in the future.

To start with, does reputation attach to the decision-maker, the regime, or the country? If one president acts boldly, will other states' leaders draw inferences only about him or will they expect his successors to display similar resolve? After a revolution, do others think the slate has been wiped clean or does the reputation of the earlier regime retain some life? If one kind of regime (e.g., a capitalist democracy) displays willingness to run high risks, do others draw any inferences about the resolve of similar regimes? How fast do reputations decay?

On these points we have neither theoretically grounded expectations nor solid evidence. In another area, we at least can be guided by a good theory. One of the basic findings of cognitive psychology is that images change only slowly and are maintained in the face of discrepant information. This implies that trying to change a reputation for low resolve will be especially costly because statements and symbolic actions are not likely to be taken seriously. Only the running of what is obviously a high risk or engaging in a costly conflict will suffice. On the other hand, a state with a reputation for standing firm not only will be able to win disputes by threatening to fight, but has the freedom to avoid confrontations without damaging its image. But these propositions, although plausible, still lack empirical evidence.

The question of the relative importance of beliefs about the state's general resolve as compared to the role of other factors is also impossible to answer with any precision. How much do states make overall judgments about the prices others are willing to pay as opposed to looking primarily at the specific situation the other is in? In other words, how context-bound are estimates of how others will behave?[11] The debate over the validity of the domino theory reminds us both of the importance of this topic and the difficulty of

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11. This question can be linked to the "levels of analysis" problem in international politics—i.e., the question of whether the main causes of a state's behavior are to be found in its internal characteristics or its external environment—but a full discussion would take us far afield.

coming to grips with it. If others were more impressed by America's eventual defeat in Vietnam than by the fact that it was willing to fight for years for a country of little intrinsic value, they would adjust downward their estimate of American resolve. But by how much? If there is another Berlin crisis, will the Vietnam-influenced reputation be as significant as others' judgment of the value of Berlin to the U.S.? When the new situation closely resembles a previous one in which the actor displayed low resolve, others are likely to expect similar retreat.[12] But when the situation is very different, it is not clear whether a judgment of the state's overall resolve has much impact on others' predictions of its behavior.

Even when these questions are not hypothetical, they are usually hard to answer, as is illustrated by the ambiguous nature of the events that followed the American defeat in Indochina. Has the Soviet Union drawn far-reaching inferences from the American retreat? Have the NATO allies lowered their estimates of the probability that the United States would respond to Soviet pressure or military moves in Europe? Have the Third World countries come to see the U.S. as less reliable? Since 1975, the Soviets have taken a number of actions inimical to American interests, the Europeans have voiced doubts about the credibility of the U.S. promise to protect them, and Third World states have been quite troublesome. But these problems do not present a sharp break from the pre-Vietnam era. It is easy to attribute any behavior contrary to American wishes to the lack of resolve which some observers think the U.S. displayed in Indochina. But it is much harder to establish that this is a better explanation than local conditions or general trends such as the increase of Soviet power.

We can turn this example around and ask about the impact of the U.S. attempt to rescue the hostages in Iran. Others probably have raised their estimates of the likelihood that the United States would respond similarly in other cases in which American citizens were taken prisoner. But have perceptions of American resolve to run risks in other kinds of situations been altered? One of the main arguments in favor of using force was that they would be, that U.S. promises and threats would be more credible. But scant evidence supports this view. The cost the U.S. foresaw in this case was not Soviet intervention, but adverse Third World reaction; would others expect the United States to act strongly in later situations when the costs to be

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12. For a paradoxical exception to this generalization, see discussion of *Mayaguez* incident below.

incurred were of a very different kind? Others would draw such an inference if they employed the concept of "willingness to incur costs" or "propensity to act with boldness" as a homogeneous category. They might, of course, be correct to do so. The willingness to act in the face of Third World opinion might be linked to a willingness to defy the threat of a Soviet military response. But we know little about whether such global characteristics are possible or whether statesmen make them.

One can also ask whether the inference would have been different had the rescue mission succeeded, or had it resulted in the death of the hostages. Ironically, this logic dictates that the impact on U.S. credibility would have been greater in the latter case than in the former. Had the hostages been killed, observers would probably have thought that the American leaders knew the operation was terribly risky. If they projected this pattern of risk-taking onto later events, they would conclude that the U.S. would act even when it might not succeed. By contrast, if force had succeeded and others assumed that the Americans had been confident that this was going to be the result, they would not see the act as so bold. I admit this argument is strained, and indeed I doubt that observers would follow the train of reasoning I have presented. But this uncertainty underscores the difficulty of determining the inferences people do draw in these situations.

The crucial question is the degree to which observers make general judgments about others' credibility rather than basing their predictions largely on the nature of the specific situation and, if the situation is a continuing one, on the history of the other's behavior concerning it. To a significant extent, deterrence theory rests on the assumption that such general judgments are important. It is this which makes it both possible and necessary for a state to credibly threaten to react to an attack on an unimportant third country by a response which will involve greater costs than the intrinsic value of the third area. Such a threat can be credible because what the state will lose by not responding is not just the third country, but also its reputation for protecting its interests, a reputation that is more valuable than the costs of fighting. By the same logic, this response is necessary, because to fail to rise to the challenge is to lead others to doubt the state's willingness to pay costs to defend the rest of the status quo. Both prongs of this reasoning depend on actors' making relatively context-free judgments of credibility.

Even if they do, the way in which these judgments are made can defeat significant aspects of the theory and practice of deterrence. When an actor either carries out or reneges on a threat, observers can make either or both

of two kinds of inferences that will influence his future credibility. First, they may alter their estimate of what I have elsewhere called his "signaling reputation"—i.e., his reputation for doing what he says he will do.[13] The bargaining tactic of commitment, so well known in deterrence literature, is supposed to be effective because the state increases its cost of retreating by staking its reputation on standing firm. But this tactic will work (and this explanation of actors' behavior will be appropriate) only if actors try to determine how likely it is that others will live up to their promises and threats rather than predicting their behavior solely on the basis of estimates of what they value and the prices they are willing to pay to reach various objectives. This is the second kind of inference actors draw from others' past behavior. It ignores statements and other signals that can be easily manipulated and looks only at whether the other stood firm, compromised, or retreated in the past, irrespective of what he said he would do. If this kind of inference is dominant, then signals of commitment have little impact.

To use Schelling's terms, actors would be able to issue warnings, but not threats.[14] This would mean that an actor could not deter others by symbolically committing himself to a course of action and staking his reputation on living up to his pledges.

Finally, an ironic possibility should be noted. A concern for reputation can lead states to act and draw inferences in a pattern opposite from the one that we—and most other analysts—imply. This is not to dispute the common starting point; states often refuse to back down not because of the immediate and direct costs of doing so, but because of the belief that a retreat will be seen as an indication of general weakness and so lead others to expect retreats in the future. But the desire to counteract such undesired consequences may lead a state that has retreated on one issue to pay especially high costs to avoid defeat on the next one. Thus the United States was not only willing but anxious to use force to free the *Mayaguez* because it wanted to show others that its evacuation of Indochina did not mean that it would not defend its other interests—the very consequence which it had predicted would follow from a defeat in Vietnam and which justified its participation in the war. If others understand this logic and expect states to behave in this

13. Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 20–26, 66–112.
14. Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 123–124.

way—to follow retreats with displays of firmness—then reputations for carry-ing out threats do not influence estimates of credibility because—to com-pound the paradox—reputations are so important that states must rebuild them when they are damaged. If you have been caught bluffing in poker, are others likely to call you in the next round in the belief that you bluff a lot or are they unlikely to do so because they think that you know it is no longer safe to bluff? To the extent that the latter is the case, perceptions of credibility are influenced by the state's recent behavior, but in a way which produces equilibrating negative feedback rather than the positive feedback of the dom-ino dynamics.[15]

JUDGING THE ADVERSARY'S ALTERNATIVES
Deterrence works when the expected costs of challenging the status quo are greater than those of accepting it; deterrence may fail and defenders be taken by surprise not only if their threats are insufficiently credible or directed at the wrong values, but also if the defenders fail to grasp the expansionist's dismal evaluation of the alternatives to fighting. Although the deterring state realizes that its adversary has strong incentives to take action—or else deter-rence would not be necessary—it usually thinks that the latter has a wide range of choice. Furthermore, the deterring state almost always believes that the adversary is tempted to act because of the positive attraction of the gains he hopes to make. In fact, however, the other state often feels that it has little choice but to act because, if it does not, it will not merely forgo gains, but will suffer grave losses.[16] Status quo powers often underestimate the pressure that is pushing the other to act and therefore underestimate the magnitude of threat and/or the degree of credibility that will be required to make the other refrain from moving. The pressures felt by Japan in the fall of 1941 and by China in the fall of 1950 illustrate why the target state can feel it must act even though it knows some sort of war will result. China and Japan perceived the alternative to fighting not as maintaining the status quo—which was tolerable—but as permitting a drastic erosion of the posi-tions they had established. Because the status quo states did not understand

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15. It is possible, of course, that under some circumstances a retreat leads statesmen to expect other retreats and that under other conditions they draw the opposite inference, but we do not know enough to specify the conditions.
16. Ole Holsti, "The 1914 Case," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (June 1965), pp. 365–378; Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Conflict* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

this, they did not grasp the difficulty of the job of deterrence that they were undertaking. This is one reason why they thought that their superior power was clearly sufficient to keep the adversary at bay.

The case of the Chinese entry into the Korean War is especially striking since the United States did not even grasp the Chinese fear that, if the U.S. conquered North Korea, it would threaten China. American leaders had no such intention and thought this clear to everyone, just as they felt that their unwillingness to fight a limited war in 1941 was clear to all. Again, not only was there a major difference in perceptions, but one of which both sides were unaware. Deterrence failed; but more than this, the deterrence strategy could not be adequately crafted since it was not based on a correct assessment of what the other side valued and feared. Similarly, the basic question of whether deterrence was possible was not adequately faced. In neither instance did the United States consider that even a well-developed deterrence policy might fail and therefore that it should balance the costs of war against the costs of making concessions; since deterrence seemed likely to succeed, the painful alternative of sacrificing some values and abandoning some foreign policy goals was not to be taken seriously.

Self-Deterrence

The previous sections provided some reasons why inaccurate or conflicting perceptions can lead to failures of deterrence. Most treatments of this subject deal with cases like surprise attack in which statesmen *incorrectly* believe that they have deterred others. While this problem is fascinating and important, we should not neglect the less dramatic other side of this coin: states can successfully deter others unintentionally or unknowingly. Because actors can perceive things that are not there, they can be deterred by figments of their own imagination—"self-deterrence," if you will. An example is the British fear throughout the 1930s that Germany would wipe out London at the start of a world war.[17] Although the Germans fed this fear by exaggerating their air strength, the enormity of the gap between the British beliefs and the German activities indicates that most of the explanation must lie with the former's perceptual predispositions. Ingenious deception schemes rarely work unless they fit with what the target already believes.

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17. The most thorough treatment is Uri Bialer, *The Shadow of the Bomber: The Fear of Air Attack and British Politics, 1932–1939* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1980).

The British made two notable errors. First, they greatly overestimated the damage that would be caused by each ton of bombs dropped. Perhaps even more startling than the fact that their estimate was off—by a factor of 25—is the low level of effort that they put into developing the estimate.[18] Since British policy rested in significant measure on the belief that war would entail what would later be called "unacceptable damage," one would think that great care would have been devoted to estimating how much damage aerial bombardment would cause. In fact, almost all British analyses rested on a simple and badly biased extrapolation from the few raids on London during World War I. No competing studies were generated; no alternative sources of data or methods were used.

This error was compounded by a fundamental misreading of German air policy and air strength. The British belief that Hitler had the intent and the capability to make British cities his prime target was incorrect on both counts. The German air force was predominantly designed to support ground troops. Doctrine, plans, and aircraft for strategic bombardment did not exist.[19] The effort Germany mounted in the summer of 1940 in circumstances that neither side anticipated was an improvised one.

Part of the explanation for these errors is that the German bombing raids of the First World War left a strong imprint on the decision-makers. The public had demanded greater protection and panic had been a significant problem. But I do not think that purely cognitive or unmotivated factors were of primary importance. That is to say, the misperceptions and miscalculations cannot be accounted for by innocent intellectual and information-processing errors—such as mislearning from history—that would have been corrected had they been pointed out to the decision-makers. Rather, the errors served important functions and purposes for those who were making them. To a significant extent, the errors were *motivated* ones, in the sense of being useful to the actors, of facilitating valued actions, positions, or attitudes. We usually adduce perceptions and calculations as proximate expla-

18. For a good discussion, see Paul Bracken, "The Unintended Consequences of Strategic Gaming," *Simulation and Games*, Vol. 8 (September 1977), pp. 300–315.
19. Even during the first years of the war, Hitler did not pay careful attention to the bombing campaign against Britain. See R.J. Overy, "Hitler and Air Strategy," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 15 (July 1980), pp. 410–412. Later Hitler placed great faith in the new terror weapons, the V-1 and the V-2, but he never analyzed the probable effect of these weapons with any care. For an argument that takes partial exception to the view expressed here, see Williamson Murray, "The Luftwaffe Before the Second World War: A Mission, A Strategy?" *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 4 (September 1981), pp. 261–270.

nations of decisions. But in this case the main causation runs the other way: the pessimistic assessments of German bombing were as much the product of policies as they were a cause of them.

This seems a particularly odd argument in this context because the decision-makers were conjuring up mythical threats that restricted their country's freedom of action and eventually undermined its security. Nevertheless, different sectors of the British elite had different reasons for finding the fear of bombardment congenial. The Royal Air Force (RAF), which produced and analyzed much of the intelligence on which the estimates were based, was predisposed to believe in a potent German bombing threat because its identity as a separate service rested on the efficacy of strategic bombardment. To have recognized that the German air force's main mission was ground support would have introduced the question of whether Britain's air force should not be similarly employed. (For the same reason, the RAF resisted the idea that defense against bombers might be possible and insisted that counter-bombardment was the only effective peacetime deterrent and wartime strategy. It was the civilian leaders, especially the Minister for Co-ordination of Defence, Sir Thomas Inskip, who saw that changing technology allowed fighters to destroy a sufficient proportion of bombers to make defense against prolonged bombing feasible.)

Proponents of both major foreign policy positions—appeasement and anti-appeasement—also had reasons to accept the pessimistic air estimates. For the appeasers, the estimates were useful by showing that the costs of war would be terribly high, thus indicating the need for international conciliation. The British could contemplate opposing Germany only if they were sure that their vital interests were at stake. If the issue were only the British abhorrence of the German domestic regime and its uncouth behavior or the mere possibility that German aims were unreasonable, confrontations were too costly to be justified. Furthermore, if the threat were from the air, the British response had to be in the same realm. Little money could be spared for the other services, especially the army. This fit the appeasement policy nicely because a defense posture based on air power would limit spending and facilitate a foreign policy that would remain within British control rather than requiring close cooperation with allies. Before 1914 the cabinet had become partly committed to France through joint naval planning and, when it decided for war, it found that the only war plan available subordinated the British Army to the French. In the 1930s, such cooperation would imply prewar ties which could interfere with appeasement and drag England into

a dangerous anti-German stance. This danger could be avoided by a military policy that shunned a large army.

Ironically, the anti-appeasers also had reasons to overestimate German air strength. They thought Hitler was highly aggressive and therefore expected him to build what they thought would be a maximally effective air force. Failing to see the German weaknesses and inefficiencies, they expected the air fleet would be larger than it was. Being preoccupied with their own fears—they vastly underestimated the staying power of the working class— they were sure that Germany was planning to rely on weapons of terror. A month after Hitler came to power, Robert Vansittart, the Permanent Under Secretary of the Foreign Office, argued that the Germans were "likely to rely for their military power . . . on the mechanical weapons of the future . . . and *above all* [on] military aircraft. . . . Aviation in particular offers Germany the quickest and easiest way of making their power effective."[20] "It must . . . be remembered," Churchill said in 1936, "that Germany has specialized in long-distance bombing aeroplanes."[21] This misreading also fit nicely with the attempts to mobilize the British public. The greater the German air force, the greater the British air force should be. Furthermore, the high estimates implied that Germany was aggressive, since it was building more than its defense required.

The British, then, did much of Hitler's work for him. While he did seek to deter Britain, the British perceptions cannot be completely explained by the German behavior. British fantasies, developed by different groups for different reasons, inhibited accurate analysis of the German air threat and led decision-makers to accept pessimistic views. As a result, the *fact* of deterrence far outran the German *policy* of deterrence.

Current American fears about Minuteman vulnerability and Soviet nuclear "superiority" may be similar examples of self-deterrence. Some argue that if the Soviets could destroy many of America's strategic forces by using a relatively small proportion of their missiles (an outcome made possible by MIRVs, a technology ironically pioneered by the U.S.), they might start a war either in the hope of gaining world dominance or, more likely, in a preemptive blow during a crisis in which they feared a grave political setback

20. Quoted in D.C. Watt, "British Intelligence and the Coming of the Second World War in Europe: The Assessment of the Enemy," in Ernest May, ed., *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars*, forthcoming.
21. Quoted in Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, p. 797.

or even an American first strike. A related argument is that the Soviets are gaining a "war-fighting" ability that significantly exceeds America's. The Soviet Union, some fear, could do much better than the United States in all levels of warfare; the American knowledge of this Soviet advantage places it in a situation not unlike that of England in the 1930s.

Rather than debating the validity of this position,[22] I want to raise the question of whether the analogy of the 1930s applies in the less obvious aspect I discussed earlier. While it is unlikely that statesmen are now repeating the error of overestimating the casualties from bombing, U.S. commentators are creating self-deterrence because the scenarios they are contemplating probably are mythical. The best example is a Soviet attack on Minuteman silos and other U.S. strategic forces. Although abstract American models may indicate that these forces are vulnerable, these calculations involve several simplifying assumptions—e.g., that the Soviets could fire a carefully coordinated salvo of hundreds of missiles, that the figures for accuracies derived from firings over test ranges would hold true when the missiles were fired over different parts of the earth with different gravitational anomalies, that all systems will work as expected in the wartime environment. Since we lack experience with nuclear war, the models obviously are necessary, but it is not clear how seriously the results should be taken. At the very least, decision-makers should know the assumptions they are accepting when they rely on them. They should also note the political questions which are begged. No decision-maker has ever taken an action which accepted uncertainties as portentous as those which would be involved in a first strike. Would the side that was behind in the counterforce exchange continue to spare the other's cities? Even if both sides wanted to fight a limited counterforce war—and this would not be consistent with the Soviet approach to war—would the leaders be able to retain the necessary control over their emotions and their forces?

If the alarmist models are far removed from reality, the United States may deter *itself* by paying so much attention to these calculations. It may act more hesitantly, become less confident, refuse new commitments or retract old ones, and even—although I doubt that this would occur—encourage the Soviets to believe that it is safe to undertake actions they previously shunned. A narrowed and distorted focus on implausible contingencies has led to an

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22. I have done so in "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 95, No. 4 (Winter 1979–80), pp. 617–633.

exaggeration of Soviet strength which could restrict U.S. freedom of action to a greater degree than Soviet deterrence policy does. All other things being equal,[23] those who believe that the Soviets are militarily superior to the U.S. and that this margin will give them an advantage in conflicts with the West will be more likely than those who reject these views to avoid confrontations with the Soviets. Taken to its extreme, the result would be a form of self-fulfilling prophecy in which the U.S. would act as though it were weak, thus permitting the USSR to make gains which would confirm the belief that Soviet "superiority" was a potent weapon. It is sometimes argued that while nuclear "superiority" is militarily meaningless, the Soviets believe that it matters and so will be more likely to stand firm if they believe they have this "advantage." If the Soviet leaders did think that the state of the current nuclear balance permitted them safely to embark on adventures, they would be more likely to provoke confrontations. In fact there is little evidence that this is the Soviet view,[24] but if American leaders think it is, they will give the Soviets an unnecessary bargaining advantage. Those who argue that the USSR has strategic superiority which can be used for political gains see themselves as Churchills, but they may be helping to produce the timidity that they decry. Their aim is to spur increases in U.S. arms sufficient to produce favorable results in the war-fighting calculations and therefore, they believe, to favorably influence U.S. and Soviet behavior. But if they succeed only partly and convince people that the calculations have real referents but do not convince them to build more missiles, they will have magnified, if not created, the danger that so worries them.

Limits to Rationality

Most arguments about deterrence, including those made above, assume that both sides are fairly rational. Some of the general problems raised by this

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23. Often they are not: those who think that the Soviets are militarily strong also tend to believe that they are very aggressive and so see retreating as extremely costly.
24. As George Quester notes, it is "remarkable . . . that the overwhelming bulk of the discussions . . . of growing Soviet relative power and of possible threats come from the west." "Defining Strategic Issues: How to Avoid Isometric Exercises," in Robert Harkavy and Edward Kalodziej, eds., *American Security Policy and Policy-Making* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1980), p. 204. For an evaluation of the Soviet view, see Karl Spielman, *The Political Utility of Strategic Superiority: A Preliminary Investigation Into the Soviet View* (Arlington, Va.: Institute for Defense Analysis, May 1979). For the general Soviet view of the current situation, see Seweryn Bialer, "The Harsh Decade: Soviet Policies in the 1980s," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 59, No. 5 (Summer 1981), pp. 999–1020.

claim have been treated elsewhere.[25] Here I want to focus on four barriers to accurate perception which reduce actors' sensitivity to new information and limit their ability to respond to unexpected situations. The first three barriers are cognitive; the fourth springs from emotions.

OVERCONFIDENCE

First, there is solid evidence from laboratory experiments and much weaker, but still suggestive, evidence from case studies that people overestimate their cognitive abilities. For example, people's estimates of facts usually are less accurate than they think. When asked to give a spread of figures such that they are 90 percent certain that the correct answer lies somewhere between them, most people bracket the true figure only 75 percent of the time.[26] Similarly, people generally overestimate the complexity of the way they use evidence. They think they are tapping more sources of information than they are, overestimate the degree to which they combine evidence in complex ways, and flatter themselves by thinking that they search for subtle and elusive clues to others' behavior. Acting on this misleading self-portrait, people are quick to overreach themselves by trying mental operations they cannot successfully perform. Thus, when people are given a little clinical training in judging others' psychological states, they make more errors than they did previously because they incorrectly think they can now detect all sorts of peculiar conditions.[27] Overconfidence is also exhibited in the common rejection of the well-established finding that simple computer programs are superior to experts in tasks like graduate student admission and medical diagnosis which involve the combination of kinds of information amenable to fairly objective scoring.[28] People believe that, unlike a simple computer program, they can accurately detect intricate, interactive configurations of explanatory or predictive value. In fact, their abilities to do so are very limited.

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25. See, for example, Philip Green, *Deadly Logic* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1966); Patrick Morgan, *Deterrence* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977); Robert Jervis, "Deterrence Theory Revisited," *World Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (January 1979), pp. 299–301, 310–312.

26. Baruch Fischhoff, Paul Slovic, and Sara Lichtenstein, "Knowing with Certainty: The Appropriateness of Extreme Confidence," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, Vol. 3 (1977), pp. 552–564.

27. Stuart Oskamp, "Overconfidence in Case-Study Judgments," *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, Vol. 29 (1965), pp. 261–265.

28. For a review of this literature, see Lewis Goldberg, "Simple Models or Simple Processes? Some Research on Clinical Judgments," *American Psychologist*, Vol. 23 (July 1968), pp. 483–496.

Although a full explanation of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this paper, overconfidence is probably fed by three factors. First, many of our cognitive processes are inaccessible to us. People do not know what information they use or how they use it. They think some information is crucial when it is not and report that they are not influenced at all by some data on which in fact they rely.[29] This makes it easier for them to overestimate the sophistication of their thought processes. Second, a specific aspect of this lack of awareness is that people often rely more than they realize on analogies with past events, especially recent events that they or their country have experienced first-hand. Since these events seem clear in retrospect, much of this certainty is transferred to the current situation. A third cause of over-confidence, also linked to lack of self-awareness, is that people not only assimilate incoming information to their pre-existing beliefs, a point to which we will return, but do not know they are doing so. Instead, they incorrectly attribute their interpretations of events to the events themselves; they do not realize that their beliefs and expectations play a dominant role. They therefore become too confident because they see many events as providing indepen-dent confirmation of their beliefs when, in fact, the events would be seen differently by someone who started with different ideas. Thus people see evidence as less ambiguous than it is, think that their views are steadily being confirmed, and so feel justified in holding to them ever more firmly.

Some of the consequences of overconfidence for deterrence strategies are best seen in light of the two other cognitively rooted perceptual handicaps and so the discussion of them should be postponed. But some effects can be noted here. First, statesmen are likely to treat opposing views quite cavalierly since they are often quite sure that their own beliefs are correct. Cognitive dissonance theory asserts that this intolerance arises only after the person has made a firm decision and has become committed to a policy, but our argument is that it occurs earlier, when even a tentative conclusion has been reached. Second, decision-makers tend to overestimate their ability to detect subtle clues to the other's intentions. They think it is fairly easy to determine whether the other is hostile and what sorts of threats will be effective. They are not sufficiently sensitive either to the possibility that their conclusions are based on a cruder reading of the evidence or to the likelihood that highly complex explanations are beyond their diagnostic abilities. Third, because

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29. Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson, "Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes," *Psychological Review*, Vol. 84 (1977), pp. 231–257.

decision-makers fail to realize the degree to which factors other than the specific events they are facing influence their interpretations, their consideration of the evidence will be less rational than they think it is and less rational than some deterrence strategies require. For example, while people realize that it makes no sense to believe that another country is likely to be an aggressor just because a state they recently faced was one, in fact the previous experience will greatly increase the chance that the state currently under consideration will be seen as very dangerous. Similarly, beliefs about the kinds of deterrence strategies which will be effective are also excessively affected by recent successes and failures. Extraneous considerations then influence both conclusions as to whether deterrence is necessary and decisions as to how they will be sought. Decision-makers, furthermore, do not recognize this fact (if they did, presumably they would act to reduce its impact) and so overestimate the extent to which their policies are grounded in valid analysis.

NOT SEEING VALUE TRADE-OFFS

The second important cognitive process that influences deterrence is the propensity for people to avoid seeing value trade-offs.[30] That is, people often believe that the policy they favor is better than the alternatives on several logically independent value dimensions. For example, those who favored a ban on nuclear testing believed that the health hazards from testing were high, that continued testing would yield few military benefits, and that a treaty would open the door to further arms control agreements. Opponents disagreed on all three counts. This kind of cognitive consistency is irrational because there is no reason to expect the world to be arranged so neatly and helpfully that a policy will be superior on all value dimensions. I am not arguing that people never realize that a policy which gains some important values does so at the price of others, but only that these trade-offs are not perceived as frequently and as severely as they actually occur.

This cognitive impediment has several implications for deterrence. First, it complicates the task of balancing the dangers entailed by issuing threats with the costs of making concessions. Rather than looking carefully at this trade-off, statesmen are likely to be swayed by one set of risks and then evaluate the other costs in a way that reinforces their initial inclinations. For example,

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30. For a further discussion of this, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 128–142.

a decision-maker who is preoccupied with what he and his state will sacrifice if he compromises on an issue is likely to convince himself that the danger of war if he stands firm is slight; the statesman who concludes that this danger is intolerably high is likely to come to see the costs of retreating as low. As long as the risk on which he focuses is in fact the greater one, and as long as the situation remains unchanging, this minimization of the trade-off is not likely to lead the decision-maker to choose a policy that differs from the one he would have adopted had he been more rational. But if either of these two conditions is not met, then the quality of the policy will suffer. Thus, if the decision-maker focuses first on the risks of war and finds that it looms large, he may incorrectly judge the costs of retreating as less. He could then abandon a policy of deterrence when rationality would dictate maintaining it.

In other cases, a decision-maker who has decided to stand firm may minimize the value trade-off by failing to take full account of the costs of his position. For example, he may come to believe that, while conciliatory measures would lower the short-run risk, they would increase the danger over a longer period by leading the adversary to think that it was safe to trifle with the state's interests. In this arrangement of perceptions and evaluations, standing firm appears preferable to being conciliatory on both the dimension of prevailing on the issue in dispute and the dimension of avoiding war.[31]

The failure to face trade-offs also helps explain the tendency for states to become overextended, to refuse to keep ends and means in balance, and to create more enemies than they can afford. For example, in the years preceding World War I, Germany added Russia and Britain to its list of enemies. On top of the conflict with France, this burden was too great even for a state as strong as Germany. Although both international and domestic factors were also at work, the psychological difficulty of making trade-offs must not be overlooked. When the German leaders decided to drop the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia in 1890, they perceived minimum costs because they expected that ideological conflict would prevent Russia from joining forces with Germany's prime enemy, France. Similarly, the decision to build a large navy and pursue a belligerent policy toward England was based on the

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31. Jack Snyder, "Rationality at the Brink," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (April 1978), pp. 345–365. But for the phenomenon to fit the analysis here, the value dimensions must be logically independent. This will not be true if both the perceptions of the need to stand firm and evaluations of the costs of not doing so are produced by a coherent image of the adversary.

assumption that England's conflicts with France and Russia were so deep that eventually British leaders would have to seek an understanding with the Triple Alliance. German statesmen did not see that their policy involved a greater risk of turning Russia and Britain into active enemies than was entailed by the rejected alternative policy of conciliation and compromise.

This failing was not peculiar to Germany. French policy between 1882 and 1898 sought both to rebuild a position of strength against Germany and to contest English dominance of Egypt. To pursue either objective meant risking war with one of these countries. This might have been within the bounds of French resources; war with both was not. So an effective policy required France to set its priorities and decide whether it cared more about its position in Europe or about colonial issues. For over ten years, however, French leaders refused to choose, instead thinking that the same policy could maximize the chances of gaining both goals. It took the shock of England's willingness to go to war in the Fashoda crisis for French statesmen to realize that they could not afford too many enemies and had to make a hard choice.

President Jimmy Carter's foreign policy provides a final example. To most of the goals of the preceding Ford Administration, the President added an increased concern with preventing proliferation and protecting human rights. He and his advisers did not seem to appreciate that pushing states on one front might diminish their ability to push them on others. Only when crises arose to clarify the mind did they decide to relax the more recent pressures in order to increase the chance of enlisting support for what were taken to be the more important national security goals. But by this time, a large price had been paid in terms of antagonizing others and appearing hypocritical; the overly ambitious initial policy jeopardized America's ability to achieve more limited goals.

ASSIMILATION OF NEW INFORMATION TO PREEXISTING BELIEFS
The third cognitive process I want to discuss is probably the most pervasive and significant. It is the tendency for people to assimilate new information to their preexisting beliefs, to see what they expect to be present. Ambiguous or even discrepant information is ignored, misperceived, or reinterpreted so that it does minimum damage to what the person already believes. As I have discussed at length elsewhere,[32] this tendency is not always irrational and

32. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, pp. 143–172.

does not always decrease the accuracy of perception. Our environment presents us with so many conflicting and ambiguous stimuli that we could not maintain a coherent view if we did not use our concepts and beliefs to impose some order on it. Up to a point—which cannot be specified with precision—rejecting or providing a strained interpretation of discrepant evidence is the best way to account for all the available information. It is the way scientists behave in treating their data because science would be impossible if they altered their theories to take account of each bit of discrepant information. As Michael Polanyi puts it:

The process of explaining away deviations is in fact quite indispensable to the daily routine of research. In my laboratory I find the laws of nature formally contradicted at every hour, but I explain this away by the assumption of experimental error. I know that this may cause me one day to explain away a fundamentally new phenomenon and to miss a great discovery. Such things have often happened in the history of science. Yet I shall continue to explain away my odd results, for if every anomaly observed in my laboratory were taken at its face value, research would instantly degenerate into a wild-goose chase after imaginary fundamental novelties.[33]

Similarly, statesmen who miss, misperceive, or disregard evidence are not necessarily protecting their egos, being blind to reality, or acting in a way which will lead to an ineffective policy. The evidence is almost always ambiguous and no view can do justice to all the facts. In retrospect, one can always find numerous instances in which decision-makers who were wrong overlooked or misunderstood evidence that now stands out as clear and important. But one can also note, first, that many facts supported the conclusion that turned out to be wrong and, second, those who were right treated the evidence in the same general way—i.e., they also ignored or misinterpreted information which conflicted with their views.

Even if the assimilation of incoming information to preexisting beliefs is not as pernicious as is often believed, it creates a variety of problems for deterrence strategies, especially since this cognitive process operates in conjunction with the other two just discussed. First, images of other states are difficult to alter. Perceptions are not responsive to new information about the other side; small changes are not likely to be detected. Once a statesman

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33. Michael Polanyi, "The Unaccountable Element in Science," in *Knowing and Being, Essays by Michael Polanyi,* ed. Marjorie Grene (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 114.

thinks he knows whether the other needs to be deterred and what kind of strategy is appropriate, only the most dramatic events will shake him.[34] The problem is compounded by the common belief to the contrary that, if the initial hunches about what the other side is up to are incorrect, the other's behavior will soon set the statesman straight. For example, those who see the other side as an aggressor usually argue that if this image is incorrect the other can easily demonstrate that its bad reputation is not warranted. In fact, the ambiguity of most evidence coupled with the absorptive power of most beliefs means that an inaccurate image may not be corrected at a point when the situation can still be controlled.

A second and more general consequence of the cognitive limitations we have discussed is that political perceptions are rarely completely accurate and policies rarely work as designed. Statesmen cannot then afford to develop policies which are so fragile that they will fail very badly if others do not act exactly as expected. A large margin of error must be built in. The statesman who is sure that his beliefs and calculations are correct in all their details is likely to encounter serious trouble, just as defense strategies that are based on the need to receive tactical warning of when and where the other side is planning to move are likely to fail. For example, it was not reasonable to have expected the military commanders to have anticipated an attack on Pearl Harbor or to have kept the base on constant alert. The latter procedure would have greatly disrupted the urgent training program. Instead the decision-makers should have sought a way to gain some measure of insurance against an attack with the lowest possible interference with training. The same principle applies to the construction of deterrence strategies. If they are based on an unrealistic assessment of our abilities to perceive our environment and choose among alternatives, they are likely to attempt too much and to fail badly.

Third, cognitive impediments place sharp limits on the degree to which deterrence strategies can be fine-tuned, limits that are more severe than statesmen generally realize. For example, states commonly try to develop policies that exert just the right amount of pressure on the other—that is, enough to show the other that the state is very serious, but not enough to provoke desperate behavior. Or, they try to indicate a willingness to ease tensions with an adversary without cooperating to such an extent that third

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34. Glenn Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 389–404.

parties would feel menaced. At the tactical level, intricate bargaining maneu- vers are planned and subtle messages are dispatched. For example, in the discussions within the U.S. government in early 1965 about what sort of troops to send to Vietnam, Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton dissented from the view that the initial deployment should be Marines. The problem, he argued, was that the Marines would bring with them "high profile" materiel such as tanks which would indicate to the North that the U.S. was in Vietnam to stay. It would be better to send the 173rd Airborne Brigade which lacked heavy equipment; this would signal Hanoi that the U.S. would withdraw if a political settlement could be reached.[35]

But even if the actions are carried out as the decision-maker wants them to,[36] precision is often defeated by the screen of the other side's perceptual predispositions. As a result, while subtlety and sophistication in a policy are qualities which observers usually praise and statesmen seek, these attributes may lead the policy to fail because they increase the chance that it will not be perceived as it is intended. It is hard enough to communicate straightfor- ward and gross threats; it will often be impossible to successfully apply complex bargaining tactics which involve detailed and abstruse messages. Decision-makers often underestimate these difficulties and so try to develop plans that are too intricate to get across. Furthermore, because it is very hard to tell what others have perceived, statesmen often fail to see that they have failed to communicate.

Finally, since discrepant information is likely to be misinterpreted, deter- rence strategies must be tailored to the other's preexisting beliefs and images, thus limiting the range of strategies that can succeed. Because the inferences which the other draws are largely determined by its initial beliefs, acts which will deter one decision-maker will be ignored or interpreted differently by another. If the perceiver thinks that the state is deeply concerned about the issue and has high resolve, deterrence will be relatively easy. If he has the opposite view, it will take great efforts to make a credible threat. But unless the state's leaders know what the other side thinks, they will neither know what they have to do to deter it nor be able to judge the chances of success. A frequent cause of deterrence failure is the state's misdesign of its actions

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35. *Pentagon Papers*, p. 421.
36. Most studies of policy implementation reveal that this rarely happens. For a nice analysis that combines bureaucratic and perceptual factors that complicate attempts at coercion, see Wallace Theis, *When Governments Collide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

growing out of incorrect beliefs about its adversary's perspective. For example, American leaders were taken by surprise in October 1962 because they thought it was clear to the Soviet Union that placing missiles in Cuba would not be tolerated. Since the Americans believed—correctly—that the Soviets were not likely to run high risks, they found it hard to imagine that the USSR would try to establish a missile base abroad. U.S. leaders did not think that great efforts at deterrence were necessary because they did not realize that the move would not look risky to the Soviets.[37]

Just as the best way to understand the conclusions a person draws from a "fact-finding" mission is to know his initial beliefs rather than to know what evidence he was exposed to, so one can often make better predictions about how a state will interpret others' behavior by knowing the former's predispositions than by knowing what the latter actually did. Unfortunately, statesmen rarely appreciate this and, to compound the problem, usually have a much better idea of what they think they are doing and what messages they want to convey than they do of what the others' perceptual predispositions are. The difficulty is two-fold and two-sided. The fact that perceptions are strongly influenced by predispositions means that it is very difficult to convey messages that are inconsistent with what the other already believes. And the fact that statesmen do not understand this influence reduces their ability to predict how others will react. Even if decision-makers understood the problem, prediction would be difficult because it is so hard for them to grasp the way in which others see the world. But in this case they would at least realize that many of their messages would not be received as they were sent. Since this understanding is often lacking, decision-makers' messages not only convey different meanings to each side, but each is usually unaware of the discrepancy. Statesmen are then likely to err both in their estimates of what the other side intends by its behavior and in their beliefs about how the other is reading their behavior. Severe limits are thus placed on the statesman's ability to determine whether and what kind of deterrence strategy is called for and to influence the other's perceptions in a way which will allow this strategy to succeed. A failure to understand these limitations imposed by the way people think will make it more difficult for scholars to explain state

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37. Klaus Knorr, "Failures in National Intelligence Estimates: The Case of the Cuban Missiles," *World Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (April 1964), pp. 455–467. For an alternative argument, see Richard Ned Lebow, "Soviet Risk Taking: What Are the Lessons from Cuba?" *Political Science Quarterly*, forthcoming.

behavior and will lead a statesman to attempt overly ambitious policies that are likely to bring his country to grief.

Defensive Avoidance

A final impediment to accurate perception that can complicate or defeat deterrence is affective rather than purely cognitive. In a process known as defensive avoidance, people may refuse to perceive and understand extremely threatening stimuli.[38] For example, the failure to see the value trade-offs discussed above can be motivated by the need to avoid painful choices. At this point we do not know enough about the phenomenon to determine when these errors occur and how influential they are in comparison with other factors. But it seems clear that on at least some occasions powerful needs, often arising from domestic politics, can produce badly distorted perceptions of other countries. Thus Paul Schroeder has argued that the British images of Russia in the period leading up to the Crimean War cannot be explained either by Russian behavior or by long-standing and deeply imbedded cognitive predisposition but rather were caused by shifting British needs to see Russia as threatening or accommodating.[39] Whether England tried to deter Russia or conciliate it then depended on internal factors that were neither rationally related to foreign policy goals nor susceptible to Russian influence. Similarly, states may come to think that it is relatively safe to challenge the adversary's deterrent commitments when a modicum of rational analysis would indicate that the risks far outweigh the slight chances of success if domestic or foreign needs for a challenge are very strong.

This is not only to argue that the costs of forgoing gains and accepting the adversary's deterrence can be so high as to rationally justify a challenge that the statesman knows is likely to fail; this may be unfortunate but it is not troublesome in terms of perceptions. Rather the knowledge of the high costs of accepting the status quo can lead statesmen to ignore or distort information about the costs of challenging it. Thus Lebow shows that the reason why India in 1962, the United States in the fall of 1950, and the Soviet Union

38. The fullest discussion is in Irving Janis and Leon Mann, *Decision Making* (New York: Free Press, 1977).
39. Paul Schroeder, *Austria, Great Britain, and the Crimean War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972).

before the Cuban Missile Crisis were not able to see that their adversaries would inflict painful rebukes if they persisted was that they were preoccupied with the costs they would pay if they did not.[40] To return to a case mentioned earlier, the American attempts to deter Japan failed because Japan thought that the war would be limited. This error may have been at least in part a motivated one. The feeling that acquiescing in the American demands was intolerable led the Japanese to adopt an unrealistically favorable view of the alternative—the only way they could avoid facing the need to sacrifice very deeply held values was to believe that the U.S. would fight a limited war. That their conclusion was driven by this need rather than by objective analysis is indicated by the quality of their deliberations: "Instead of examining carefully the likelihood that the war would in fact be a short, decisive one, fought under optimum conditions for Japan, contingency plans increasingly took on a strangely irrational, desperate quality, in which the central issue, 'Can we win?' was shunted aside. Rather, it was as if Japan had painted itself into a corner."[41] The result is that deterrence can be difficult if not impossible. Threats that should be credible and effective, even when the cognitive impediments discussed above are not operating, may be missed or misread. It usually will be hard for the deterrer to realize that it is facing this danger and even an understanding of the situation will not easily yield an effective policy since the other's perceptual screens are often opaque.

40. Lebow, *Between Peace and War* and "Soviet Risk Taking." Also see Richard Cottman, *Foreign Policy Motivation* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977); Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); and Jack Snyder, *Defending the Offensive: Biases in French, German, and Russian War Planning, 1870–1914* (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1981), which does a particularly fine job of separating motivated from unmotivated errors. Sharp-eyed readers will note a shift from some of my earlier views on this point. For further discussion, see Robert Jervis, "Political Decision Making: Recent Contributions," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 2 (Summer 1980), pp. 89–96.
41. Robert Scalapino, "Introduction," in James Morley, ed., *The Fateful Choice: Japan's Advance Into Southeast Asia, 1939–1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 119. Also see Gordon Prange, *At Dawn We Slept* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), pp. 16, 21.