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Book Review

Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis

By

Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow

The Cuban missile crisis in the last weeks of October 1962 cannot be explained simply. When we teach the missile crisis, it is easy to do it in a very superficial manner: the Soviets put missiles in Cuba, we almost went to war, and we forced the Soviets to remove the missiles. In *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow use three different models to explain the event more comprehensively. They explain it in a way that makes a very complex set of events much more accessible, especially for students. There are three main questions associated with the crisis: Why did the Soviet Union place offensive missiles in Cuba? Why did the United States respond with a blockade of Soviet ships to Cuba? Why did the Soviet Union withdraw the missiles? Allison and Zelikow approach these questions using three distinct models. A combination of the three models is the best way to understand the events of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Using these explanations with students will inevitably lead to a greater depth of understanding of the events of those thirteen days.

The first model, “the Rational Actor,” is perhaps the most widely used, understood and accepted of the models. Simply put, it is “The attempt to explain international events by recounting the aims and calculations of nations or governments (p. 13).” Explaining the Crisis this way starts by looking at the decisions of the participants involved, the US, the Soviet Union and Cuba. Each participant’s actions are

analyzed in three steps that they should have gone through to reach a decision. First, we look at the participants' goals and objectives. For the US, these might have been anything from halting Soviet nuclear capabilities to avoiding nuclear war to keeping the US/Soviet balance of power in check. Second, we look at what the participants' alternatives in the situation might have been. For instance, the Soviet Union's choice to place offensive missiles in Cuba, rather than waiting until they had built up their long range nuclear capabilities, or the decision of the US to implement a blockade rather than sit back and do nothing or take military action (p. 99). Third, we look at the consequences to any actions the party might take for each possible alternative. For instance, consider whether the Soviet Union could have used their presence in Cuba as a bargaining chip for Berlin (p.100). After these steps, the participant finally makes the choice, the actual decision to move missiles into Cuba or the US decision to set up a blockade. This model is called the "rational actor" because it assumes that the participants are making rational decisions; decisions that have been arrived at clearly and carefully. In addition, these decisions follow the path to the best possible outcome with the most benefits or highest "payoff" (p. 18). For the most part, this is the easiest model to understand and the one most commonly used to explain the Crisis to students.

There is however much more depth to understanding what happened. So, Allison and Zelikow offer another model, the Organizational Behavior Model. This model is based on the assumption that the deciding body is not just the leader, but also the organization with which he is involved. In other words, governments make their decisions through organizations and groups within the structure of the government, the decisions are not left up to the leaders alone. These decisions are made, not on an

individual, rational basis, but as a result of rules and standard operating procedures already established for the particular organization, or in this case, government (p. 143). In other words, decisions are made by a “matching of rules to situations (p. 146).” This model sees the organizations as more important than the individuals involved in making the decisions. As the goal is to maximize the end result, decisions along the way might not all appear rational. But the organization does not break from its proven standard operating procedures. This way of thinking can help us to explain some of the apparent blunders on the part of the Soviets in Cuba. Their organizational structure was very rigid and tailored mainly for situations inside the Soviet Union. For instance, it was thought that once the secret delivery of missiles had been completed, it would not be a problem to conceal the missiles under the cover of forest in Cuba. This was not the case. And, even though it would have been possible to conceal the weapons otherwise, there was no procedure already set up for that. As a result, they were left with the option of meeting their deadline in preparing the missiles for use and allowing them to be vulnerable to discovery (p. 213). The Organizational Behavior Model can also serve to explain why Kennedy used a naval blockade instead of an air strike. The blockade fit with pre-existing procedures, the air strike did not (p. 381). This model is more difficult for individuals to understand, as not all decisions seem rational or logical. What seem to be the most efficient, value maximizing decisions may, in fact, not be.

The third model is the Government Politics Model. “The name of the game is politics: bargaining along regular circuits among players positioned hierarchically within the government (p. 255).” This model sees many individual actors involved in the decision making; this power is shared within the structure of the government. The leader may

have a particular opinion or perception of the matter at hand, but chances are that other individuals will differ from that opinion. These different perspectives on the situation will often help the leader to avoid making poor decisions and in fact help him arrive at the best decision. It is not just difference in opinion that will make a difference in the final decision; it is also power within the individuals involved. It matters how well individuals can persuade and bargain to get the result they would prefer (p. 299). This can be seen in the US decision to implement a blockade against Soviet shipments into Cuba. In the meeting Kennedy held to decide the course of action against the Soviet Union, there were quite a few perspectives. Some thought it would be best to take a passive role; other thought it best to engage in an active military strike on Cuba. Many of these opinions changed throughout the course of the meetings. One example of this was that toward the beginning McNamara was in favor of a blockade but toward the end of the decision making was a proponent of military action (p. 382).

There are different ways of looking at the questions surrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis. All of the models work, to a point, but none can stand on its own. Even though each of the models can be used to answer each of the three questions posed in the opening, none can give a comprehensive explanation to an event with so much complexity. As the authors point out in their conclusion, the Rational Actor Model is ideal for the “armchair strategist(p. 387)”, one that doesn’t have all of the information available to those parties intimately involved in the event. On the other hand, for those intimately involved, the Government Politics model might be the best explanation. In the end, a combination of all three models will serve to give the best explanation as to what happened during the missile crisis. The organized breakdown of information and

explanation of the three models created by Allison and Zelikow helps to simplify an extraordinarily complex set of events. For students, this is a fantastic tool; otherwise, we run the risk of oversimplifying the events of the crisis.