ABSTRACT

INTERNATIONAL CRISES: A HERMENEUTIC APPROACH

Do we find any end to the need of interpreting? . . . . There is more ado to interpret interpretations than to interpret things; and more books upon books than upon any other subjects: we do nothing but comment upon one another. Every place swarms with commentaries. . . . It is not the common and final end of all studies?—Montaigne Essays

What if they gave a crisis and nobody came? One October day—it doesn’t seem that long ago—American officials discovered they had been deceived by Soviet diplomats. U-2 reconnaissance revealed the surreptitious construction of a Soviet nuclear base in Cuba, a mere ninety miles from American shores. A prominent presidential advisor warned the base was a “quantum leap” in Soviet strategic capability—in short, a crisis. The national security advisor contacted the president immediately.

I’m not talking about the unforgettable Cuban missile crisis of 1962; I just sketched the all-but-forgotten Cienfuegos Bay episode of 1970. Nuclear submarines operating out of Cienfuegos Bay posed a more formidable threat than the readily detectable, land-based missiles of 1962: Kissinger interpreted the mobile, undetectable submarines as a quantum leap in the Soviet threat—a crisis, an unexpected challenge, demanding urgent attention and resolution. Nixon didn’t. He underplayed, if not ignored, the Soviet challenge. Kissinger laments that Nixon went on vacation.

Could it be that a crisis is a concept, not a thing? I argue that a crisis is not merely a matter of interpretation. A crisis is an interpretation of an ambiguous text—facts seldom speak for themselves. If wars are too important to be left to the generals, crises are too dangerous to be left exclusively to the political scientists. Hazarding an interpretation of salient texts, I confront the following problematic:

• Why did JFK interpret the Cuban missiles—in his view, weapons that did not increase the Soviet threat—as a crisis resolved by drastically increasing the risk of nuclear war?
• Why did Nixon ignore a Soviet challenge that, by all accounts, enhanced Soviet strategic capabilities?
If wars are too important to be left to the generals, international crises are too dangerous to be left exclusively to the social scientists. To paraphrase Epictetus, it is not the world that is the source of our crises, but our interpretation of the world. The interpretive methods of the humanities are attuned to the rapidly changing context of international relations: a milieu that transforms political actors from observers of unambiguous facts to interpreters and authors of cryptic texts and symbolic performances. And those who study crises are not observers of obdurate facts; they are denizens of the archives, not the laboratories. Indeed, not unlike medieval monks, even an unreconstructed positivist pours over texts, reading interpretations into hallowed documents. Even so, social scientists seem reluctant to acknowledge that they engage in literary projects. As Clifford Geertz remarked:

Many of them [social scientists] have taken an essentially hermeneutic—or, if that word frightens, conjuring up images of biblical zealots . . . and Teutonic professors, an “interpretive”—approach to their task.¹

October surprises illustrate Epictetus’ ancient wisdom. April may be the cruelest month, but October is the month of international crises: These episodes, in effect, provide a window through which we witness (to the extent that declassified documents are available) decision-makers hazarding urgent, fateful decisions. Crises occur on the cusp between war and peace;

Accordingly, a hermeneutic approach to crises contextualizes events and seeks to understand a decision-maker’s language. An initial take on the historical background renders Nixon’s indifference truly puzzling. At first blush, it would seem that Nixon’s defining moment was at hand—the once in a lifetime opportunity to burnish his redoubtable, anticommmunist credentials, the ultimate test of his mettle and his presidency. The time had come to prove he was a better man than Kennedy. During the 1960 campaign, Kennedy charged Nixon with being soft on Cuba. (Nixon didn’t reveal Eisenhower’s secret plan for a Bay of Pigs invasion.) To understate the case, an enraged Nixon returned the favor. He never tired of chastising Kennedy for vacillation and weakness in managing JFK’s bravura crisis: Kennedy’s “weak-kneed” response to the
crisis put “The Atlantic alliance in disarray, Cuba is western Russia, and the rest of Latin America is in deadly peril.”

It was as if the Soviets invited Nixon to his defining crisis, if not the gravest crisis of the nuclear age. Nixon, much to Kissinger’s dismay, found it inconvenient to attend. According to Kissinger, the president was distracted by others matters, thought it unwise to have a crisis close to the election (his motives might be suspect), and—again according to Kissinger—Nixon had his heart set on visiting the Mediterranean to watch the Sixth Fleet fire its guns.


3 Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979); see his account of the episode pp. 633-644. This was not the first time Nixon was preoccupied with vacationing rather than issues at hand. During a decisive time during the Alger Hiss investigation, Nixon chose to vacation rather than remain in Washington. See Tom Wicker’s discussion in his *One of Us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream* (New York: Random House, 1992), 64.