Robert Jervis

War and Misperception

War has so many causes—in part because there are so many kinds of wars—and misperception has so many effects—again in part because there are so many kinds of misperceptions—that it is not possible to draw any definitive conclusions about the impact of misperception on war.[1] But we can address some conceptual and methodological problems, note several patterns, and try to see how misperceptions might lead to World War III. In this article, I use the term misperception broadly, to include inaccurate inferences, miscalculations of consequences, and misjudgments about how others will react to one's policies.

Although war can occur even when both sides see each other accurately, misperception often plays a large role. Particularly interesting are judgments and misjudgments of another state's intentions. Both overestimates and underestimates of hostility have led to war in the past, and much of the current debate about policy toward the Soviet Union revolves around different judgments about how that country would respond to American policies that were either firm or conciliatory. Since statesmen know that a war between the United States and the Soviet Union would be incredibly destructive, however, it is hard to see how errors of judgment, even errors like those that have led to past wars, could have the same effect today. But perceptual dynamics could cause statesmen to see policies as safe when they actually were very dangerous or, in the final stages of deep conflict, to see war as inevitable and therefore to see striking first as the only way to limit destruction.

POSSIBLE AREAS OF MISPERCEPTION

Although this article will concentrate on misperceptions of intentions of potential adversar-

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1 For a good typology of wars caused by misperception, see George H. Quester, "Six Causes of War," *Jerusalem Journal of International Relations*, VI (1982), 1–23.

ies, many other objects can be misperceived as well. Capabilities of course can be misperceived; indeed, as Blainey stresses, excessive military optimism is frequently associated with the outbreak of war.[2] Military optimism is especially dangerous when coupled with political and diplomatic pessimism. A country is especially likely to strike if it feels that, although it can win a war immediately, the chances of a favorable diplomatic settlement are slight and the military situation is likely to deteriorate. Furthermore, these estimates, which are logically independent, may be psychologically linked. Pessimism about current diplomatic and long-run military prospects may lead statesmen to exaggerate the possibility of current military victory as a way of convincing themselves that there is, in fact, a solution to what otherwise would be an intolerable dilemma.

Less remarked on is the fact that the anticipated consequences of events may also be incorrect. For example, America's avowed motive for fighting in Vietnam was not the direct goal of saving that country, but rather the need to forestall the expected repercussions of defeat. What it feared was a "domino effect" leading to a great increase in Communist influence in Southeast Asia and the perception that the United States lacked the resolve to protect its interests elsewhere in the world. In retrospect, it seems clear that neither of these possibilities materialized. This case is not unique; states are prone to fight when they believe that "bandwagoning" rather than "balancing" dynamics are at work—that is, when they believe that relatively small losses or gains will set off a self-perpetuating cycle. In fact, such beliefs are often incorrect. Although countries will sometimes side with a state which is gaining power, especially if they are small and can do little to counteract such a menace, the strength and resilience of balancing incentives are often underestimated by the leading powers. Statesmen are rarely fatalistic; they usually resist the growth of dominant powers.[3] A striking feature of the Cold War is how little

2 For a discussion of the concept of intentions in international politics, see Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, 1976), 48–57. For a discussion of the meaning of that concept in general, see Gertrude E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Ithaca, 1969); Ernest May, "Conclusions: Capabilities and Proclivities," in *idem* (ed.), *Knowing One's Enemies* (Princeton, 1984), 503. A. Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York, 1973).

3 See Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore, 1962), 122–24; Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass., 1979); Stephen Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security*, IX (1985), 3–43; *idem*, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, 1987).

each side has suffered when it has had to make what it perceived as costly and dangerous retreats.

At times we may need to distinguish between misperceptions of a state's predispositions—that is, its motives and goals—and misperceptions of the realities faced by the state. Either can lead to incorrect predictions, and, after the fact, it is often difficult to determine which kind of error was made. When the unexpected behavior is undesired, decision-makers usually think that they have misread the other state's motives, not the situation it faced.[4] Likewise, scholars generally focus on misjudgments of intentions rather than misjudgments of situations. We, too, shall follow this pattern, although it would be very useful to explore the proposition that incorrect explanations and predictions concerning other states' behaviors are caused more often by misperceptions concerning their situations than by misperceptions about their predispositions.

WAR WITHOUT MISPERCEPTION It has often been argued that, by definition, the proposition is true that every war involves at least one serious misperception. If every war has a loser, it would seem to stand to reason that the defeated state made serious miscalculations when it decided to fight. But, whereas empirical investigations reveal that decisions to go to war are riddled with misperceptions, it is not correct that such a proposition follows by definition.

A country could rationally go to war even though it was certain it would lose. First, the country could value fighting itself, either as an ultimate goal or as a means for improving man and society. Second, faced with the choice of giving up territory to a stronger rival or losing it through a war, the state might choose war because of considerations of honor, domestic politics, or international reputation. Honor is self-explanatory, although, like the extreme form of Social Darwinism alluded to earlier, it sounds strange to modern ears. Domestic politics, however, are likely to remain with us and may have been responsible for at least some

4 For a good review, see Edward Jones, "How Do People Perceive the Causes of Behavior?" *American Scientist*, LXIV (1976), 300–305. For an analysis of related phenomena in international politics, see Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 343–354.

modern wars. It is a commonplace that leaders may seek "a quick and victorious war" in order to unify the country (this sentiment is supposed to have been voiced by Vyacheslav Plehve, the Russian minister of the interior on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War), but statesmen might also think that a short, unsuccessful war might serve the same function.

Although examples seem rare, international considerations could also lead a statesman to fight a war he knows he will lose. The object would be to impress third countries. Such a decision might appear particularly perverse because a loss would seem to show that the country is weak. But more important than the display of its lack of military capability could be the display of its resolve, if not foolhardiness. Other nations which had quarrels with the state might infer that it is willing to fight even when its position is weak, and such an inference might strengthen the state's bargaining position.[5]

Only rarely can statesmen be certain of a war's outcome, and once we take the probabilistic nature of judgments into consideration, it is even more clear that one can have wars without misperception. A state may believe that the chances of victory are small and yet rationally decide to fight if the gains of victory are large and the costs of losing are not much greater than those of making the concessions necessary to avoid war.

Although a state could start a war that it had little prospect of winning solely because of the attractions of victory, psychology and politics both conspire to make it much more likely that states go to war because of their gloomy prognostications of what will happen if they do not fight. Psychologically, losses hurt more than gains gratify. Both domestic and international politics produce a similar effect. Public opinion and partisan opposition is more easily turned against a government which seems to be sacrificing existing values than one which is not expanding the country's influence rapidly enough. Analyses of international politics reinforce these pressures. Statesmen are generally slower to believe that the domino effect will work for them than against them. They realize that other states will often respond to their gains by attempting to block further advances; by contrast, they also believe that any loss of their influence will lead to a further erosion of their power.

5 This concept is similar to the economist's notion of the "chain store paradox." It applies in cases in which the state can prevail in the conflict, but only at a cost which exceeds the immediate gains. The reason for fighting in this case is again to impress other potential challengers, and the analogy is the behavior of a large chain store toward small stores which challenge it by cutting prices. The chain store can respond by cutting prices even more, thus losing money but succeeding in driving the competitor out of business. The point of taking such action is to discourage other challengers, but the paradox is that in each particular case the chain store loses money and the tactic will be effective only if others believe it will be repeated. See Reinhard Selten, "The Chain Store Paradox," *Theory and Decision*, IX (1978), 127–159.

Because a state which finds the status quo intolerable or thinks it can be preserved only by fighting can be driven to act despite an unfavorable assessment of the balance of forces, it is neither surprising nor evidence of misperception that those who start wars often lose them. For example, Austria and Germany attacked in 1914 largely because they believed that the status quo was unstable and that the tide of events was moving against them. As Sagan shows, the Japanese made a similar calculation in 1941.[6] Although they overestimated the chance of victory because they incorrectly believed that the United States would be willing to fight—and lose—a limited war, the expectation of victory was not a necessary condition for their decision to strike. According to their values, giving up domination of China—which would have been required in order to avoid war—was tantamount to sacrificing their national survival. Victory, furthermore, would have placed them in the first rank of nations and preserved their domestic values. The incentives were somewhat similar in 1904, when they attacked Russia even though "the Emperor's most trusted advisers expressed no confidence as to the outcome of the war. . . . The army calculated that Japan had a fifty-fifty chance to win a war. The Navy expected that half its forces would be lost, but it hoped the enemy's naval forces would be annihilated with the remaining half."[7] Fighting was justified in light of Japan's deteriorating military position combined with the possibility of increasing its influence over its neighbors.

METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS The most obvious way to determine the influence of misperception on war would be to employ

6 Scott D. Sagan, "The Origins of the Pacific War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XVIII (1988), 893–922.

7 Shumpei Okamoto, *The Japanese Oligarchy and the Russo-Japanese War* (New York, 1970), 101.

the comparative method and contrast the effects of accurate and inaccurate perceptions. But several methodological problems stand in the way. First is the question of whether perceptions should be judged in terms of outcomes or processes—that is, whether we should compare them to what was later revealed to have been reality or whether we should ask how reasonable were the statesmen's inferences, given the information available at the time. The two criteria call for different kinds of evidence and often yield different conclusions.[8] People are often right for the wrong reasons and, conversely, good analyses may produce answers which later will be shown to have been incorrect. Shortly after Adolf Hitler took power, Robert Vansittart, the permanent undersecretary of the British Foreign Office, concluded that the Germans would increase their military power as rapidly as possible in order to overturn the status quo. In criticizing military officials, who generally disagreed with him, he said: "Prophecy is largely a matter of insight. I do not think the Service Departments have enough. On the other hand they might say I have too much. The answer is that I knew the Germans better."[9] His image of Hitler was quite accurate, but it is not clear that he reached it by better reasoning or supported it with more evidence than did those who held a different view.

A second difficulty is that historians and political scientists are drawn to the study of conflict more often than to the analysis of peaceful interactions. As a result, we know little about the degree to which harmonious relationships are characterized by accurate perceptions. I suspect, however, that they are the product of routinized and highly constrained patterns of interaction more often than the result of accurate perceptions.

A third problem lies in determining whether perceptions were accurate, which involves two subproblems. First, it is often difficult to determine what a statesman's—let alone a country's—perceptions are. We usually have to tease the person's views out of confused and conflicting evidence and try to separate his true beliefs from those he merely wants others to believe he holds.

8 Processes which seem highly rational may yield less accurate perceptions than those which are more intuitive. See Kenneth Hammond, "A Theoretically Based Review of Theory and Research in Judgment and Decision Making," unpub. ms. (Boulder, 1986).

9 Quoted in Donald Watt, "British Intelligence and the Coming of the Second World War in Europe," in May (ed.), *Knowing One's Enemies*, 268.

Indeed, in some cases the person initially may not have well-defined perceptions but may develop them to conform to the actions he has taken.[10] Second, even greater difficulties arise when the perceptions are compared with "reality." The true state of the military balance can be determined only by war; states' intentions may be impossible to determine, even after the fact and with all the relevant records open for inspection.

Our ability to determine whether statesmen's assessments are accurate is further reduced by the probabilistic nature of these assessments. Statesmen often believe that a given image is the one most likely to be correct or that a given outcome is the one most likely to occur. But the validity of such judgments is extremely hard to determine unless we have a large number of cases. If someone thinks that something will happen nine out of ten times, the fact that it does not happen once does not mean that the judgment was wrong. Thus if a statesman thinks that another country probably is aggressive and we later can establish that it was not, we cannot be sure that his probabilistic judgment was incorrect.[11]

MISPERCEPTIONS AND THE ORIGINS OF WORLD WARS I AND II Tracing the impact of beliefs and perceptions in any given case might seem easy compared to the problems just presented. But it is not, although even a brief list of the misperceptions preceding the major conflicts of this century is impressive. Before World War I, all of the participants thought that the war would be short. They also seem to have been optimistic about its outcome, but there is conflicting evidence. (For example, both Edward Grey and Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg made well-known gloomy predictions, but it is unclear whether these statements accurately reflected their considered judgments. In addition, quantitative analysis of the available internal memoranda indicates pessimism,

10 Daryl Bem, "Self-Perception Theory," in Leonard Berkowitz (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (New York, 1972), VI, 1–62. For an application to foreign policy, see Deborah Larson, *The Origins of Containment* (Princeton, 1985).

11 In politics, not only are situations rarely repeated, but the meaning of probabilistic judgments is not entirely clear. Are these statements merely indications of the degree to which the person feels he lacks important facts or an understanding of significant relationships? Or do they reflect the belief that politics is inherently uncertain and that, if somehow the same situation was repeated in all its details, behavior might be different on different occasions?

although there are problems concerning the methodology employed.[12])

May argues that the analyses of the intentions of the adversaries during this period were more accurate than the analyses of their capabilities, but even the former were questionable.[13] Some of the judgments of July 1914 were proven incorrect—for example, the German expectation that Britain would remain neutral and Germany's grander hopes of keeping France and even Russia out of the war. Furthermore, the broader assumptions underlying the diplomacy of the period may also have been in error. Most important on the German side was not an image of a particular country as the enemy, but its basic belief that the ensuing events would lead to either "world power or decline." For the members of the Triple Entente, and particularly Great Britain, the central question was German intentions, so brilliantly debated in Eyre Crowe's memorandum and Thomas Sanderson's rebuttal to it. We still cannot be sure whether the answer which guided British policy was correct.[14]

The list of misperceptions preceding World War II is also impressive. Capabilities again were misjudged, although not as badly as in the previous era.[15] Few people expected the blitzkrieg to bring France down; the power of strategic bombardment was greatly overestimated; the British exaggerated the vulnerability of the German economy, partly because they thought that it was stretched taut at the start of the war. Judgments of intention were even less accurate. The appeasers completely misread Hitler; the anti-appeasers failed to see that he could not be stopped without a war. For his part, Hitler underestimated his adversaries' determination. During the summer of 1939 he doubted whether Britain would fight and, in the spring of 1940, expected her to make peace.[16]

12 See Ole Holsti, Robert North, and Richard Brody, "Perception and Action in the 1914 Crisis," in J. David Singer (ed.), *Quantitative International Politics* (New York, 1968), 123–158.

13 May, "Conclusions," 504. For a more detailed discussion of May's argument, see Jervis, "Intelligence and Foreign Policy," *International Security*, XI (1986/87), 141–61.

14 This continuing debate also underlies the difficulty of determining when perceptions are misperceptions. Indeed, when we contemplate the task of avoiding World War III, it is disheartening to note that we cannot even be sure how the participants could have avoided World War I.

15 See May (ed.), *Knowing One's Enemies*, 237–301, 504–519.

16 This belief may not have been as foolish as it appears in retrospect. While France was falling, the British Cabinet spent two days debating whether to open talks with Germany. See Philip M. H. Bell, *A Certain Eventuality* (Farnborough, Eng., 1974), 31–54; Martin Gilbert, *Winston Churchill, VI: Finest Hour, 1939–1941* (London, 1983), 402–425. Given the situation Britain faced, seeking peace might have been reasonable. See David Reynolds, "Churchill and the British 'Decision' to Fight on in 1940: Right Policy, Wrong Reason," in Richard Langhorne (ed.), *Diplomacy and Intelligence during the Second World War* (Cambridge, 1985), 147–67.

It might also be noted that in both cases the combatants paid insufficient attention to and made incorrect judgments about the behavior of neutrals. To a large extent, World War I was decided by the American entry and World War II by the involvement of the Soviet Union and the United States.[17] But we cannot generalize from these two examples to say that states are prone to make optimistic estimates concerning the role of neutrals; it may be equally true that pessimistic judgments may lead states to remain at peace, and we would have no way of determining the validity of such assessments.

DID THE MISPERCEPTIONS MATTER? But did these misperceptions cause the wars? Which if any of them, had they been corrected, would have led to a peaceful outcome? In attempting to respond to such questions, we should keep in mind that they are hypothetical and so do not permit conclusive answers. As Stein has noted, not all misperceptions have significant consequences.[18]

If Britain and France had understood Hitler, they would have fought much earlier, when the balance was in their favor and victory could have been relatively quick and easy. (Managing the postwar world might have been difficult, however, especially if others—including the Germans—held a more benign image of Hitler.) If Hitler had understood his adversaries, the situation would have been much more dangerous since he might have devised tactics that would have allowed him to fight on more favorable terms. But on either of these assumptions, war still would have been inevitable; both sides preferred to fight rather than make the concessions that would have been necessary to maintain peace.[19]

17 The role of states which are not involved in the first stages of combat is stressed by Blainey, *Causes of War*, 57–67, 228–242; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *The War Trap* (New Haven, 1981).

18 Arthur Stein, "When Misperception Matters," *World Politics*, XXXIV (1982), 505–526.

19 Oddly enough, almost the only view of Hitler which indicates that he could have

The case of 1914 is not as clear. I suspect that the misperceptions of intentions in July, although fascinating, were not crucial. The Germans probably would have gone to war even if they had known that they would have had to fight all of the members of the Triple Entente. The British misjudgment of Germany—if it were a misjudgment—was more consequential, but even on this point the counterfactual question is hard to answer. Even if Germany did not seek domination, the combination of her great power, restlessness, and paranoia made her a menace. Perhaps a British policy based on a different image of Germany might have successfully appeased the Germans—to use the term in the older sense—but Britain could not have afforded to see Germany win another war in Europe, no matter what goals it sought.

Capabilities were badly misjudged, but even a correct appreciation of the power of the defense might not have changed the outcome of the July crisis. The "crisis instability" created by the belief that whoever struck first would gain a major advantage made the war hard to avoid once the crisis was severe, but may not have been either a necessary or a sufficient condition for the outbreak of the fighting. The Germans' belief that time was not on their side and that a quick victory would soon be beyond their reach was linked in part to the mistaken b[illegible]n the power of the offensive, but was not entirely driven by it. Thus, a preventive war might have occurred in the absence of the pressures for preemption.

Had the participants realized not only that the first offensive would not end the war, but also that the fighting would last for four punishing years, they might well have held back. Had they known what the war would bring, the kaiser, the emperor, and the czar presumably might have bluffed or sought a limited war, but they would have preferred making concessions to joining a general struggle. The same was probably true for the leaders of Britain and France, and certainly would have been true had they known the long-term consequences of the war. In at least one sense, then, World War I was caused by misperception.

been deterred is that of Taylor, who paints a picture of the German leader as an opportunist, inadvertently misled by the acquiescence of Western statesmen (Alan J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* [New York, 1961]).

MODELS OF CONFLICT Two possible misperceptions of an adversary are largely the opposites of each other, and each is linked to an important argument about the causes of conflict. On the one hand, wars can occur if aggressors underestimate the willingness of status quo powers to fight (the World War II model); on the other hand, wars can also result if two states exaggerate each other's hostility when their differences are in fact bridgeable (the spiral or World War I model). These models only approximate the cases that inspired them. As noted earlier, World War II would have occurred even without this perceptual error, and the judgments of intentions before 1914 may have been generally accurate and, even if they were not, may not have been necessary for the conflict to have erupted. Nevertheless, the models are useful for summarizing two important sets of dynamics.

The World War II model in large part underlies deterrence theory. The main danger which is foreseen is that of an aggressive state which underestimates the resolve of the status quo powers. The latter may inadvertently encourage this misperception by errors of their own—for example, they may underestimate the aggressor's hostility and propose compromises that are taken as evidence of weakness. In the spiral model, by contrast, the danger is that each side will incorrectly see the other as a menace to its vital interests and will inadvertently encourage this belief by relying on threats to prevent war, thereby neglecting the pursuit of agreement and conciliation.

As I have stated elsewhere, the heated argument between the proponents of the two models is not so much a dispute between two rival theories as it is a dispute about the states' intentions.[20] The nature of the difference of opinion then points up both the importance and the difficulty of determining what states' motives and goals are, what costs and risks they are willing to run in order to expand, and the likely way in which they will respond to threats and conciliation. Determining others' intentions is so difficult that states have resorted to an approach that, were it suggested by an academic, would be seen as an example of how out of touch scholars are with international realities. On several occasions, states directly ask their adversaries what it is they want.

20 Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 58–113.

The British frequently discussed directing such an inquiry to Hitler, and the United States did so to Joseph Stalin shortly after the end of World War II. Statesmen might be disabused of their misperceptions if they could listen in on their adversary's deliberations. Thus in his analysis of the Eastern crisis of 1887/88, Seton-Watson argues that Benjamin Disraeli's government greatly exaggerated the Russian ambitions, and points out that "it is difficult to believe that even the most confirmed Russophobe in the British Cabinet of those days could have failed to be reassured if it had been possible for him to [read the czar's telegrams to his ambassador in London]."[21] But of course were such access possible, it could be used for deception, and the information would therefore not be credible.

It is clear that states can either underestimate or overestimate the aggressiveness of their adversaries and that either error can lead to war. Although one issue raised by these twin dangers is not central to our discussion here, it is so important that it should at least be noted. If the uncertainty about others' intentions cannot be eliminated, states should design policies that will not fail disastrously even if they are based on incorrect assumptions. States should try to construct a policy of deterrence which will not set off spirals of hostility if existing political differences are in fact bridgeable; the policy should also be designed to conciliate without running the risk that the other side, if it is aggressive, will be emboldened to attack. Such a policy requires the state to combine firmness, threats, and an apparent willingness to fight with reassurances, promises, and a credible willingness to consider the other side's interests. But the task is difficult, and neither decision-makers nor academics have fully come to grips with it.[22]

21 Robert W. Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone, and the Eastern Question* (New York, 1972), 127, 192. It is interesting to note that during and after World War II the Soviet Union did have high-level spies who had good access to American thinking. The more recent penetrations of the American Embassy in Moscow may have duplicated this feat. The results may not have been entirely deleterious—both the United States and the Soviet Union may gain if the latter has convincing evidence that the former is driven by defensive motivations.

22 For a further discussion, see Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 109–113; *idem*, "Deterrence Theory Revisited," *World Politics*, XXXI (1979), 289–324; Richard Ned Lebow, "The Deterrence Deadlock: Is There a Way Out?" in Jervis, Lebow, and Janice Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore, 1985), 180–202; Alexander George, David Hall, and William Simons, *Coercive Diplomacy* (Boston, 1971), 100–103, 238–244; George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1974), 588–613; Glenn Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict among Nations* (Princeton, 1977), 489–493.

The existence of a spiral process does not prove the applicability of the spiral model, for increasing tension, hostility, and violence can be a reflection of the underlying conflict, not a cause of it. For example, conflict between the United States and Japan increased steadily throughout the 1930s, culminating in the American oil embargo in 1941 and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor four months later. Misperceptions were common, but the spiral model should not be used to explain these events because the escalating exchange of threats and actions largely revealed rather than created the incompatibility of goals. Japan preferred to risk defeat rather than forego dominance of China; the United States preferred to fight rather than see Japan reach its goal.

Blainey advances similar arguments in his rebuttal of Higonnet's views on the origins of the Seven Years' War. Higonnet claims that "no one wanted to fight this war. It would never have occurred if, in their sincere efforts to resolve it, the French and English governments had not inadvertently magnified its insignificant original cause into a wide conflict."[23] Hostilities escalated as Britain and France attempted to counteract (and surpass) each other's moves. They became increasingly suspicious of their adversary's motives, and felt that the stakes were higher than originally had been believed. The cycle of action and threat perception eventually led both sides to believe that they had to fight a major war in order to protect themselves. Blainey's rebuttal is simple: what was at stake from the beginning was "mastery in North America." The initial moves were at a low level of violence because each side, having underestimated the other's willingness to fight, thought it was possible to prevail quickly and cheaply.[24] Resolving such differences would require detailed research and responses to a number of hypothetical questions. But it should be kept in mind that the existence of increasing and reciprocal hostility does not always mean that the participants have come to overestimate the extent to which the other threatens its vital interests.

23 Patrice Louis-René Higonnet, "The Origins of the Seven Years' War," *Journal of Modern History*, XL (1968), 57–58. See also Smoke, *War* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), 195–236.

24 Blainey, *Causes of War*, 133–134.

Furthermore, even if the initial conflict of interest does not justify a war and it is the process of conflict itself which generates the impulse to fight, misperception may not be the crucial factor. The very fact that states contest an issue raises the stakes because influence and reputation are involved. To retreat after having expended prestige and treasure, if not blood, is psychologically more painful than retreating at the start; it is also more likely to have much stronger domestic and international repercussions.[25] The dilemmas which are created were outlined in 1953 by the American intelligence community in a paper which tried to estimate how the Russians and Chinese would react to various forms of American military pressure designed to produce an armistice in Korea:

> If prior to the onset of any UN/U.S. military course of action, the Communists recognized that they were faced with a clear choice between making the concessions necessary to reach an armistice, or accepting the likelihood that UN/U.S. military operations would endanger the security of the Manchurian and Soviet borders, destroy the Manchurian industrial complex, or destroy the Chinese Communist armed forces, the Communists would probably agree to an armistice. However, it would be extremely difficult to present them with a clear choice of alternatives before such action was begun. Moreover, once such UN/U.S. action was begun, Communist power and prestige would become further involved, thereby greatly increasing the difficulties of making the choice between agreeing to [an] armistice or continuing the war.[26]

ASSESSING HOSTILE INTENT On balance, it seems that states are more likely to overestimate the hostility of others than to underestimate it. States are prone to exaggerate the reasonableness of their own positions and the hostile intent of others; indeed, the former process feeds the latter. Statesmen, wanting to think well of themselves and their decisions, often fail to appreciate others' perspectives, and so greatly underestimate the extent to which their actions can be seen as threats.

25 One of the psychological mechanisms at work is cognitive dissonance. In order to justify the effort they are expending to reach a goal, people exaggerate its value.

26 Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–54. XV: Korea* (Washington, D.C., 1984), Pt. I, 888.

When their intentions are peaceful, statesmen think that others will understand their motives and therefore will not be threatened by the measures that they are taking in their own self-defense. Richard Perle, former assistant secretary of defense, once said that if we are in doubt about Soviet intentions, we should build up our arms. He explained that if the Russians are aggressive, the buildup will be needed, and, if they are not, the only consequence will be wasted money. Similarly, when United States troops were moving toward the Yalu River, Secretary of State Dean Acheson said that there was no danger that the Chinese would intervene in an effort to defend themselves because they understood that we were not a threat to them. Exceptions, such as the British belief in the 1930s that German hostility was based largely on fear of encirclement and the Israeli view before the 1973 war that Egypt feared attack, are rare.[27] (The British and the Israeli perceptions were partly generated by the lessons they derived from their previous wars.)

This bias also operates in retrospect, when states interpret the other side's behavior after the fact. Thus American leaders, believing that China had no reason to be alarmed by the movement of troops toward the Yalu, assumed the only explanation for Chinese intervention in the Korean War was its unremitting hostility to the United States. India, although clearly seeing the Chinese point of view in 1950, saw the Chinese attack on her in 1962 as unprovoked, and so concluded that future cooperation was impossible. Similarly, although all Westerners, even those who could empathize with the Soviet Union, understand how the invasion of Afghanistan called up a strong reaction, Soviet leaders apparently did not and instead saw the Western response as "part of a hostile design that would have led to the same actions under any circumstances."[28]

27 Daniel Yergin, "'Scoop' Jackson Goes for Broke," *Atlantic Monthly*, CCXXIII (1974), 82. Perle, then an aide to Sen. Henry Jackson, is describing the latter's views, but what he says seems to apply to his own beliefs as well. Acheson's views are presented in John Spanier, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War* (New York, 1965), 97; Allen Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu* (Stanford, 1968), 151. (Similar examples are discussed in Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 67–76.) The case of Israel in 1973 is analyzed in Janice Stein, "Calculation, Miscalculation, and Conventional Deterrence. II. The View from Jerusalem," in Jervis, Lebow, and Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence*, 60–88. See also Richard Betts, *Surprise Attack* (Washington, D.C., 1982).

28 Raymond Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation* (Washington, D.C., 1985), 1076.

This problem is compounded by a second and better known bias—states tend to infer threatening motives from actions that a disinterested observer would record as at least partly cooperative. John Foster Dulles' view of Nikita Khrushchev's arms cuts in the mid-1950s is one such example and President Ronald Reagan's view of most Soviet arms proposals may be another.[29]

These two biases often operate simultaneously, with the result that both sides are likely to believe that they are cooperating and that others are responding with hostility. For example, when Leonid Brezhnev visited President Richard Nixon in San Clemente during 1973 and argued that the status quo in the Middle East was unacceptable, and when Andrei Gromyko later said that "the fire of war [in the Mid-East] could break out onto the surface at any time," they may well have thought that they were fulfilling their obligations under the Basic Principles Agreement to consult in the event of a threat to peace. The Americans, however, felt that the Soviets were making threats in the spring and violating the spirit of detente by not giving warning in the fall.[30]

People also tend to overperceive hostility because they pay closest attention to dramatic events. Threatening acts often achieve high visibility because they consist of instances like crises, occupation of foreign territory, and the deployment of new weapons. Cooperative actions, by contrast, often call less attention to themselves because they are not dramatic and can even be viewed as nonevents. Thus Larson notes how few inferences American statesmen drew from the Soviet's willingness to sign the Austrian State Treaty of 1955.[31] Similarly, their withdrawal of troops from Finland after World War II made little impact, and over the past

29 See the classic essay by Holsti, "Cognitive Dynamics and Images of the Enemy: Dulles and Russia," in David Finlay, Holsti, and Richard Fagen, *Enemies in Politics* (Chicago, 1967), 25–96. Michael Sullivan, *International Relations: Theories and Evidence* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1976), 45–46, questions the links between Dulles' beliefs and American behavior.

30 Gromyko is quoted in Galia Golan, *Yom Kippur and After* (London, 1977), 68. The treatment of the 1973 war is a good litmus test for one's views on detente: compare, for example, the discussions in Harry Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo and the Decline of Detente* (Ithaca, 1984), 135–139, 152–156; Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*; George, *Managing U.S.-Soviet Rivalry* (Boulder, 1983), 139–154.

31 Larson, "Crisis Prevention and the Austrian State Treaty," *International Organization*, XXXXI (1987), 27–60.

few years few decision-makers or analysts have commented on the fact that the Soviets have *not* engaged in a strategic buildup.

MISPERCEPTION AND THE ORIGINS OF WORLD WAR III Misperception could prove to be an underlying cause of World War III through either the overestimation or the underestimation of hostile intent. If the Soviet Union is highly aggressive—or if its subjective security requirements can be met only by making the West insecure—then war could result through a Soviet underestimation of American resolve. If the Soviet Union is driven primarily by apprehension that could be reduced by conciliation, then war could result through a spiral of threat-induced tensions and unwarranted fears. But, although it is easy to see how either of these misperceptions could increase conflict, it is hard to see how a nuclear war could start under current technology when both sides know how costly such a clash would be. To analyze this topic, concentrating on the role of misperception, we first examine the dynamics of the game of chicken and then discuss the psychological aspects of crisis stability and preemption.

Misperception, Commitment, and Change In a situation that is similar to the game of chicken (that is, any outcome, including surrender, would be better than war), war should not occur as long as both sides are even minimally rational and maintain control over their own behavior.[32] Both sides may bluster and bluff, but it will make no sense for either of them to initiate all-out conflict. Each side will try to stand firm and so make the other back down; the most obvious danger would result from the mistaken belief that the other will retreat and that it is therefore safe to stand firm.

But if both sides maintain control, war can occur only if either or both sides become irrevocably committed to acting on their misperception. In other words, so long as either state retains its freedom of action, war can be avoided because that state can back down at the last minute. But commitment can inhibit this

32 In fact, statesmen realize that large-scale conflict can result from confrontations even if they do not desire it. They then both fear and employ what Schelling calls "threats that leave something to chance" (Thomas Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict* [Cambridge, Mass., 1960], 187–203). Under current circumstances, control may be hard to maintain in a crisis if the decision-makers delegate the authority to fire nuclear weapons to local commanders.

flexibility, and that, of course is its purpose. Standard bargaining logic shows that if one side persuades the other that it is committed to standing firm, the other will have no choice but to retreat.[33] What is of concern here is that this way of seeking to avoid war can make it more likely.

Whether a commitment—and indeed any message—is perceived as intended (or perceived at all) depends not only on its clarity and plausibility, but also on how it fits with the recipient's cognitiye predispositions. Messages which are inconsistent with a person's beliefs about international politics and other actors are not likely to be perceived the way the sender intended. For example, shortly before the Spanish-American War President William McKinley issued what he thought was a strong warning to Spain to make major concessions over Cuba or face American military intervention. But the Spanish were worried primarily not about an American declaration of war, but about American aid for the Cuban rebels, and so they scanned the president's speech with this problem in mind. They therefore focused on sections of the speech that McKinley regarded as relatively unimportant and passed quickly over the paragraphs that he thought were vital.[34]

Furthermore, the state sending the message of commitment is likely to assume that it has been received. Thus one reason the United States was taken by surprise when the Soviet Union put missiles into Cuba was that it had assumed that the Soviets understood that such action was unacceptable. Statesmen, like people in their everyday lives, find it difficult to realize that their own intentions, which seem clear to them, can be obscure to others. The problem is magnified because the belief that the message has been received and understood as it was intended will predispose the state to interpret ambiguous information as indicating that the other side does indeed understand its commitment.

Psychological Commitment and Misperception Misperception can lead to war not only through mistaken beliefs about the

33 *Ibid.*, 119–161.

34 May, *Imperial Democracy* (New York, 1961), 161. For an extended discussion of this problem, see Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 203–216; *idem*, "Deterrence Theory Revisited," 305–310. For a discussion of this problem in the context of the limited use of nuclear weapons, see Schelling, "The Role of War Games and Exercises," in Ashton Carter, John Steinbruner, and Charles Zraket (eds.), *Nuclear Operations and Command and Control* (Washington, D.C., 1987), 426–444.

impact of the state's policy of commitment on others, but also through the impact of commitment on the state. We should not forget the older definition of the term commitment, which is more psychological than tactical. People and states become committed to policies not only by staking their bargaining reputations on them, but by coming to believe that their policies are morally justified and politically necessary. For example, the process of deciding that a piece of territory warrants a major international dispute and the effort that is involved in acting on this policy can lead a person to see the territory as even more valuable than he had originally thought. Furthermore, other members of the elite and the general public may become aroused, with the result that a post-commitment retreat will not only feel more costly to the statesman; it may actually be more costly in terms of its effect on his domestic power.

Commitment can also create misperceptions. As the decision-maker comes to see his policy as necessary, he is likely to believe that the policy can succeed, even if such a conclusion requires the distortion of information about what others will do. He is likely to come to believe that his threats will be credible and effective and that his opponents will ultimately cooperate and permit him to reach his objectives. Facing sharp value trade-offs is painful; no statesman wants to acknowledge that he may have to abandon an important foreign policy goal in order to avoid war or that he may have to engage in a bloody struggle if he is to reach his foreign policy goals. Of course, he will not embark on the policy in the first place if he thinks that the other will fight. Quite often, the commitment develops incrementally, without a careful and disinterested analysis of how others are likely to react. When commitments develop in this way, decision-makers can find themselves supporting untenable policies that others can and will challenge. The result could be war because the state behaves more recklessly than the chicken context would warrant.[35]

35 The literature on these perceptual processes, which are a subcategory of what are known as "motivated biases" because of the important role played by affect, is large. The best starting place is Irving Janis and Leon Mann, *Decision Making* (New York, 1977). For applications to international politics, see Richard Cottam, *Foreign Policy Motivation* (Pittsburgh, 1977); Lebow, *Between Peace and War* (Baltimore, 1981); Jervis, "Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Recent Developments," *Political Psychology*, II (1980), 86–101; *idem*, Lebow, and Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence*. For earlier versions of the argument, see Holsti, North, and Brody, "Perception and Action," 123–158; Snyder, *Deterrence and*

The Ultimate Self-Fulfilling Prophecy Even if the processes of commitment can entrap statesmen, it is hard to see how World War III could occur unless one or both sides concluded that it was inevitable in the near future. As long as both sides expect that all-out war will result in unlimited damage, they will prefer peace to war. But if either thinks that peace cannot be maintained, the choice is not between maintaining peace—even at a significant cost in terms of other values—and going to war, but between striking first or being struck first. Even under these circumstances, attacking would make sense only if the former alternative is preferable to the latter. Since strategic weapons themselves are relatively invulnerable, scholars, until recently, have believed that there were few incentives to strike first. But they are now aware of the vulnerability of command, control, and communication (C^3) systems which could lead decision-makers to believe that striking first would be at least marginally, and perhaps significantly, better than receiving the first blow.[36] Preemption would be advantageous, thereby creating what is called crisis instability.

Crisis instability is a large topic, and here it is addressed only in terms of the potential role of misperception.[37] First, perceptions create their own reality. Determinations about the inevitability of war are not objective, but instead are based on each side's perceptions of what the other will do, which in turn is influenced by what each side thinks its adversary thinks that it is going to do. To maintain the peace, a state would have to convince the adversary that it will not start a war and that it does not believe the other will either. This interaction would take place within the context of a crisis of unprecedented severity, probably involving military alerts, if not the limited use of force.

We know very little about how states in such circumstances would think about the problem, judge the adversary's behavior, try to reassure the adversary, and decide whether these reassurances had been believed. But however these analyses are carried out, they will constitute, not just describe, reality; the question of whether war is inevitable cannot be answered apart from the participants' beliefs about it.

War itself would provide an objective answer to the question of whether there would be a significant advantage to striking first. But even here beliefs would play a role—the military doctrine adopted by a state and its beliefs about the other side's doctrine would strongly influence a decision to strike first. On the one hand, the incentives to strike first would remain slight so long as each side believed that the war would be unlimited, or, if controlled, would concentrate on attacks against cities. On the other hand, if each side believed that it was crucial to deny the other any military advantage, first-strike incentives would be greater because attacks against weapons and C^3 systems might cripple the other's ability to fight a counterforce war, even if they could not destroy the other's second-strike capability.

The uncertainties here, and in other judgments of the advantages of striking first, are enormous. Furthermore, they cannot be resolved without war. Thus statesmen's perceptions will involve both guesswork and intuition. In such circumstances, many factors could lead to an exaggeration of the benefits of taking the offensive.[38] Military organizations generally seek to take the initiative; statesmen rarely believe that allowing the other to move

Defense (Princeton, 1961), 26–27. For a rebuttal to some points, see Sagan, "Origins of the Pacific War," 893–922. John Orme, "Deterrence Failures: A Second Look," *International Security*, XI (1987), 96–124. For further discussion of the tendency to avoid trade-offs, see Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*. Quester points to the strategic value of commitment in making the other side retreat (Quester, "Crisis and the Unexpected," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XVIII [1988], 701–719.). He is correct, but such behavior can still lead to war if the other side does not gauge the situation accurately.

36 For further discussion of situations that could lead to World War III, see Warner Schilling et al., *American Arms and a Changing Europe* (New York, 1973), 172–174, and George, "Problems of Crisis Management and Crisis Avoidance in U.S.-Soviet Relations," unpub. paper (Oslo, 1985). C^3 is discussed by Desmond Ball, *Can Nuclear War Be Controlled?* (London, 1981); Paul Bracken, *The Command and Control of Nuclear Forces* (New Haven, 1983); Bruce Blair, *Strategic Command and Control* (Washington, D.C., 1985); Carter, Steinbruner, and Zraket (eds.), *Nuclear Operations*. The resulting dangers are analyzed in Graham Allison, Albert Carnesale, and Joseph Nye (eds.), *Hawks, Doves, and Owls* (New York, 1985). The fundamental argument about "the reciprocal fear of surprise attack" was developed by Schelling in *Strategy of Conflict*, 207–229.

37 For further discussion of some of the arguments being made here, see Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, 1984); Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management* (Ithaca, 1987); Jervis, "Psychological Aspects of Crisis Instability," in *idem*, *The Implications of the Nuclear Revolution* (forthcoming); *idem*, *The Symbolic Nature of Nuclear Politics* (Urbana, 1987).

38 For a discussion of the operation of such factors in previous cases, see Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive* (Ithaca, 1984); Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine* (Ithaca, 1984). See also Sagan, "1914 Revisited: Allies, Offense, and Instability," *International Security*, XI (1986), 151–176, and the exchange between Sagan and Jack Snyder, "The Origins of Offense and the Consequences of Counterforce," in *International Security*, XI (1986/87), 187–198.

first is beneficial; and the belief that war is inevitable could lead decision-makers to minimize psychological pain by concluding that striking first held out a significant chance of limiting damage.

If war is believed to be very likely but not inevitable, launching a first strike would be an incredible gamble. As noted at the start of this article, such gambles can be rational, but, even when they are not, psychological factors can lead people to take them. Although most people are risk-averse for gains, they are risk-acceptant for losses.[39] For example, given the choice between a 100 percent chance of winning $10 and a 20 percent chance of winning $55, most people will choose the former. But if the choice is between the certainty of losing $10 and a 20 percent chance of losing $55, they will gamble and opt for the latter. In order to increase the chance of avoiding any loss at all, people are willing to accept the danger of an even greater sacrifice. Such behavior is consistent with the tendency for people to be influenced by "sunk costs" which rationally should be disregarded and to continue to pursue losing ventures in the hope of recovering their initial investment when they would be better off simply cutting their losses.

This psychology of choice has several implications concerning crisis stability. First, because the status quo forms people's point of reference, they are willing to take unusual risks to recoup recent losses. Although a setback might be minor when compared to the total value of a person's holdings, he will see his new status in terms of where he was shortly before and therefore may risk an even greater loss in the hope of reestablishing his position. In a crisis, then, a decision-maker who had suffered a significant, but limited, loss might risk world war if he thought such a war held out the possibility of reversing the recent defeat. Where fully rational analysis would lead a person to cut his losses, the use of the status quo as the benchmark against which other results are measured could lead the statesman to persevere even at high risk. The danger would be especially great if both sides were to feel

39 This discussion is drawn from Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk," *Econometrica*, LVII (1979), 263–291; Tversky and Kahneman, "The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice," *Science*, CCXI (1981), 453–458; Kahneman and Tversky, "Choices, Values, and Frames," *American Psychologist*, XXXIX (1984), 341–350; Tversky and Kahneman, "Rational Choice and the Framing of Decisions," *Journal of Business*, LIX (1986), S251–S278.

that they were losing, which could easily happen because they probably would have different perspectives and use different baselines. Indeed, if the Russians consider the status quo to be constant movement in their favor, they might be prone to take high risks when the United States thought that it was maintaining the status quo. Furthermore, it could prove dangerous to follow a strategy of making gains by fait accompli.[40] Unless the state which has been victimized quickly adjusts to and accepts the new situation, it may be willing to run unusually high risks to regain its previous position. The other side, expecting the first to be "rational," will in turn be taken by surprise by this resistance, with obvious possibilities for increased conflict.

A second consequence is that if a statesman thinks that war—and therefore enormous loss—is almost certain if he does not strike and that attacking provides a small chance of escaping unscathed, he may decide to strike even though a standard probability-utility calculus would call for restraint. Focusing on the losses that will certainly occur if his state is attacked can lead a decision-maker to pursue any course of action that holds out any possibility of no casualties at all. Similar and more likely are the dynamics which could operate in less severe crises, such as the expectation of a hostile coup in an important third-world country or the limited use of force by the adversary in a disputed area. Under such circumstances, the state might take actions which entailed an irrationally high chance of escalation and destruction in order to avoid the certain loss entailed by acquiescing.[41] With his attention riveted on the deterioration which will occur unless he acts strongly to reverse a situation, a statesman may accept the risk of even greater loss, thereby making these crises more dangerous.

The response can also be influenced by how the decision is framed. Although a powerful aversion to losses could lead a decision-maker to strike when the alternatives are posed as they were in the previous example, it also could lead him to hold back. For instance, he might choose restraint if he thought that striking first, although preferable to striking second, would lead to certain

40 See George and Smoke, *Deterrence*, 536–540.

41 States may try to gain the bargaining advantages that come from seeming to be irrational, as Quester reminds us ("Crises and the Unexpected," 703–706).

retaliation whereas not striking would offer some chance—even if small—of avoiding a war, although he risked much higher casualties if the other side attacked. If a decision-maker takes as his baseline not the existing situation, but the casualties that would be suffered in a war, his choice between the same alternatives might be different. He would then judge the policies according to lives that might be saved, not lost, with the result that he would choose a course of action that he believed would certainly save some lives rather than choose another that might save more, but might not save any. The obvious danger is that a first strike which would significantly reduce the other side's strategic forces would meet the former criterion whereas restraint could not provide the certainty of saving any lives and so would not seem as attractive as standard utility maximization theory implies.

But the picture is not one of unrelieved gloom. First, situations as bleak as those we are positing are extremely rare and probably will never occur. The Cuban missile crisis was probably as close as we have come to the brink of war, and even then President John F. Kennedy rated the chance of war at no more than 50 percent, and he seems to have been referring to the chances or armed conflict, not nuclear war. So American, and presumably Soviet, officials were far from believing that war was inevitable.

Second, the propensity for people to avoid value trade-offs can help to preserve peace. To face the choice between starting World War III and running a very high risk that the other side will strike first would be terribly painful, and decision-makers might avoid it by downplaying the latter danger. Of course to say that a decision-maker will try not to perceive the need for such a sharp value trade-off does not tell us which consideration will guide him, but some evidence indicates that the dominating value may be the one which is most salient and to which the person was committed even before the possibility of conflict with another central value arose. Thus the very fact that decision-makers constantly reiterate the need to avoid war and rarely talk about the need to strike first if war becomes inevitable may contribute to restraint.

Finally, although exaggerating the danger of crisis instability would make a severe confrontation more dangerous than it would otherwise be, it also would serve the useful function of keeping states far from the brink of war. If decision-makers believed that crises could be controlled and manipulated, they would be less inhibited about creating them. The misperception may be useful: fear, even unjustified fear, may make the world a little more tranquil.

CONCLUSION The methodological problems noted earlier make it impossible to draw firm generalizations about the relationships between war and misperception, but we tentatively offer a number of propositions. First, although war can occur in the absence of misperception, in fact misperception almost always accompanies it. To say that statesmen's beliefs about both capabilities and intentions are usually badly flawed is not to say that they are foolish. Rather, errors are inevitable in light of the difficulty of assessing technological and organizational capabilities, the obstacles to inferring others' intentions correctly, the limitations on people's abilities to process information, and the need to avoid excessively painful choices.

Second, to say that misperceptions are common is not to specify their content. Statesmen can either overestimate or underestimate the other side's capabilities and its hostility. Wars are especially likely to occur when a state simultaneously underestimates an adversary's strength and exaggerates its hostility. In many cases, however, estimates of capabilities are the product of a policy, not the foundation on which it is built. Policy commitments can influence evaluations as well as be driven by them. Others' hostility can also be overestimated or underestimated and, although exceptions abound, the former error seems more common than the latter. Similarly, more often than falling into the trap of incorrectly believing that other statesmen are just like themselves, decision-makers frequently fail to empathize with the adversary. That is, they tend to pay insufficient attention to constraints and pressures faced by their opponent, including those generated by the decision-maker's own state.

Third, objective analyses of the international system which are so popular among political scientists are not likely to provide a complete explanation for the outbreak of most wars. To historians who are accustomed to explanations which rely heavily on reconstructing the world as the statesmen saw it, this reality will not come as a surprise. But I would also argue that such reconstructions can both build and utilize generalizations about how

people perceive information. Although some perceptions are random and idiosyncratic, many others are not. We know that decision-makers, like people in their everyday lives, are strongly driven by the beliefs that they hold, the lessons that they have learned from history, and the hope of being able to avoid painful choices.

Even if these generalizations are correct, any single case can be an exception. World War III, if it occurs, might not fit the dominant pattern. But, given the overwhelming destruction which both sides would expect such a war to bring, it seems hard to see how such a confict could erupt in the absence of misperception. It would be particularly dangerous if either the United States or the Soviet Union or both believed that war was inevitable and that striking first was significantly preferable to allowing the other side to strike first. Since a number of psychological processes could lead people to overestimate these factors, it is particularly important for statesmen to realize the ways in which common perceptual processes can lead to conclusions that are not only incorrect, but also extremely dangerous.

George H. Quester

Crises and the Unexpected "A war nobody wanted" goes to the heart of a pathological puzzle that energizes our analyses of crises. Where nobody's interest is served, are we not required to lament and condemn all of the decision-making and policy processes that are involved? "War serves the interests of no one" has been a staple of many a sermon and commentary in the past; it is today an even more persuasive and plausible synopsis during any crisis that forces us to contemplate what modern weapons can do.[1]

Thus, we will not treat a "crisis" simply as an enhanced likelihood of war, for this definition may be both too narrow and too broad.[2] It may be too narrow in that it excludes the analogous family tensions and other human encounters where the worst each side can inflict on the other is far less than war, but where much of the same game of mutual risk-taking is at work. It may be too broad (even though much of popular usage might include all risks of war as crises) in that it draws in cases where no contest of wills is in place, and where neither side is betting its position on estimates of the other side's resolve. For example, if India loses its patience with the Portuguese and, minimizing costs all around in the process, tells its military to seize Goa, is the enhanced likelihood of war immediately prior to the seizure really a part of what we need to analyze in this article? Where war is *not* a mutual

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1 For a book-length analysis developing such arguments about situations where war is a major setback for both sides, see Ralph K. White, *Nobody Wanted War* (Garden City, 1968).

2 Richard Ned Lebow, in *Between Peace and War* (Baltimore, 1981), identifies three distinct notions of crisis as enhanced risk of war. Two of these will concern us less here: the situation where one side (having already concluded that a decision for war is appropriate to its national interests) is simply laying the groundwork for justifying a war to world opinion or its own domestic opinion; and the situation where one side does not necessarily want war, but badly wants some political goal to which its adversary is very much opposed, and hence becomes progressively resigned to a war, as the inescapable price of its political aspirations.

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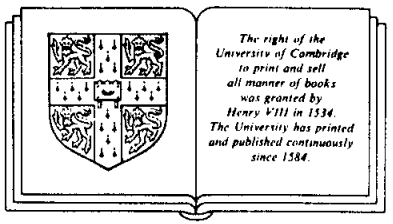

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