

Nixon's Nuclear Specter

William Burr and Jeffrey P. Kimball

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'Credibility' is a peculiar concept, of interest mainly to those who fear they lack it. In our daily lives we deal with people on simpler and more profound bases like reliability and trustworthiness. 'Credibility' is the concern of an individual, or an institution, which has already demonstrated unreliability and untrustworthiness, yet seeks to retain influence, and exercise power.

Nixon's Nuclear Specter, by William Burr and Jeffrey P. Kimball, deals with President Nixon's attempts to bring the war in Vietnam to a satisfactory conclusion. According to the authors of this detailed and thoroughly footnoted book, both Nixon and his foreign affairs adviser, Henry Kissinger, had concluded by late 1967 that the war was unwinnable. Nixon had been elected on a promise to bring the war to a quick conclusion. Yet the war dragged on for six more years: the United States expanded it to Laos and Cambodia, and even engaged in a mock nuclear force alert in an attempt to intimidate North Vietnam's Russian allies. Why? According to Burr and Kimball, 'credibility' was the key.

One of Nixon's desires was that the President of South Vietnam, Thieu, remain in office for a 'decent interval' after the last US forces withdrew. Nixon and Kissinger knew that Thieu's regime would collapse: their initial concern was that US 'credibility' in foreign affairs would suffer if a US client were speedily dispatched. The North Vietnamese negotiators at the Paris peace talks were not concerned about US credibility; their goal was to see Thieu gone, and their country reunited. Nixon continued to withdraw US troops, but in discussions with his advisers often flirted with his 'madman' theory, in which Nixon thought he might overcome powerful adversaries by scaring them that he was capable of an insane act – such as resorting to the first use of nuclear weapons.

At some point early in his presidency, Nixon began to conflate himself and the nation, and to consider the 'credibility'

issue as personal, rather than related to matters of state. Kissinger played Nixon's confusion to his own political advantage. Believing, like his boss, in 'threat diplomacy', Kissinger encouraged the president to adopt increasingly drastic measures: 'Be prepared to take tough escalatory steps(mining Haiphong, bombing Cambodia, etc.).... to fail to do so would be to risk your credibility.' (p. 118)

Kissinger told Russian ambassador Dobrynin that the US would not accept a loss of prestige in the peace settlement. Dobrynin promised to pass the message on to the North Vietnamese, but also advised Kissinger not to escalate a war the US wanted to end. Burr and Kimball write:

'Believing their threat-making credibility was on the line and putting their faith in the coercive power of military force, Nixon and his adviser began to consider....tougher escalatory steps...' (p. 137)

One of the options advocated by Kissinger was the use of nuclear weapons against North Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs provided Kissinger and Nixon with two sets of nuclear options: 'clean nuclear interdiction of three NVN-Laos passes' and 'nuclear interdiction of two NVN-CPR railroads'. The authors speculate that a 'clean' nuclear weapon might have been 'an airburst of a low-yield tactical nuclear weapon, so as to minimize fallout effects but kill soldiers, truck drivers, and other logistics personnel in the area through immediate radiation effects.' (p. 233) Fortunately, Nixon did not initiate a nuclear war, but he did put in motion a nuclear alert designed to support his 'madman' theory and pressure the Russians to influence the North Vietnamese.

Nixon claimed to be a poker ace, who had won \$10,000 playing poker while in the US Navy. Yet in a meeting with Dobrynin prior to the 1969 nuclear alert, Nixon threw his cards face-up on the table, constantly dragged the conversation back to the Vietnam war, and asserted aloud 'that the Soviet leadership is apparently trying to "break him".' Dobrynin concluded that Nixon was not mad, but 'lacking emotional self-control'. (p. 291)

The 1969 alert rang no Russian alarm bells, since it was

not accompanied by DEFCON military status. The war in Vietnam continued. In 1973 – with Nixon incapacitated by paranoia and alcohol – Secretary of State Kissinger initiated another, much more provocative nuclear alert, with DEFCON 3 status, to demonstrate US resolve over the Arab-Israeli war.

The authors conclude:

'The most extreme threats – nuclear threats – are unlikely to succeed when the side threatened possesses its own nuclear weapons, when a non-nuclear state.....is presumably under the protection of a nuclear state.....or when the threat is disproportionate because it is aimed at a small country.' (p. 333)

Given those three categories, there are no states anywhere where nuclear threats might have any success at all. Certainly the threats described here made no practical difference to Vietnamese or Russian policy. Russian foreign minister Gromyko remarked that 'the Americans put forces on alert so often that it is hard to know what it meant.' Le Duc Tho told Kissinger in 1972:

'We sometimes think that you would also use atomic weapons, because during the resistance against the French, Vice President Nixon proposed the use of atomic weapons....But....no matter what destruction is brought to our country, we will continue the struggle.' (p. 256)

President Nixon was not the only world leader to threaten the use of nuclear weapons. President Eisenhower threatened to use them in Korea, and offered them to the French in Vietnam. President Kennedy practised nuclear brinkmanship twice: the authors discuss the Cuban missile crisis, but not the equally serious crisis over NATO access to Berlin, for which the Pentagon offered a slate of nuclear options. Lyndon Johnson differentiated himself from his Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater, over the nuclear issue and issued no nuclear threats during his presidency. President Carter raised the possibility of a nuclear attack on Iran during the hostage crisis. President Reagan presided over a massive nuclear build-up

which came close to accidental thermonuclear war during the misinterpreted Able Archer alert. President Clinton discussed using B61-11 tactical nuclear weapons against Libya. The second Bush administration threatened the use of the same nuclear weapons during the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; the Obama administration contemplated their use during the 2011 NATO bombings of Libya; Sen. Hilary Clinton has told MSNBC that she would support a nuclear attack on Iran, in defence of Israel.

Based on Burr and Kimball's conclusions, none of these threats had any impact on their recipients in terms of altering their behaviour – not even the alarms triggered by the Able Archer exercise, which a lone Russian intelligence officer decided to ignore.¹

Often these nuclear threats and alerts have been described as essential to US credibility. That magic word was also used in 2008, when five NATO commanders drew up a manifesto urging that the West adopt a policy of pre-emptive nuclear attacks against potential enemies who might possess WMD. 'NATO's credibility is at stake', observed General Henk van den Breemen, the former Dutch chief of staff. But credibility and survival are two different things. A nuclear war, started by accident during a period of high-alert tension, initiated to preserve an individual's or a state's 'credibility', no matter how applauded by the media, is something it would be in our interests to avoid.

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most recent book, on the Kennedy assassination,*

¹ There is one possible *caveat* here. It has been reported that during the Falklands/Malvinas war Mrs Thatcher threatened to use nuclear weapons against Argentina unless the French state gave the British the codes to disable the electronics of the French-manufactured Exocet missiles which were damaging British ships. French president Mitterand, it is said, complied. The source for this story is a psychoanalyst reporting things Mitterand told him. See <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/nov/22/books.france>>.

The President and the Provocateur,
was reviewed in Lobster 68.