

Crisis (*Mis-*) Management



Marines supporting Desert Fox.

U.S. Marine Corps (F.M. Katz)

By CARNES LORD

The unhappy record of efforts by the United States to contain, discipline, undermine, or otherwise cope with Saddam Hussein results from more than policy disarray or domestic political distractions. It also points to a worrisome decline in operational capabilities for crisis management. The air campaign conducted against Iraq in December 1998, Operation Desert Fox, suggests that lessons learned—and often relearned—at considerable cost both during and after the Cold War are in danger of being lost.

Crisis management is not simply a matter of technical competence. It cannot be divorced from policy planning or strategic thinking. At the same

time, it is heavily dependent on a range of operational and organizational skills. Time pressures imposed during a crisis not only increase the tempo of decisionmaking but also change its character. Virtually by definition, crisis management requires adjustments in the relationships among affected government agencies as well as the direct and sustained involvement of senior officials and their principals, not least the President. Without proper preparation, such adjustments may not occur, and high-level intervention may be wasted or counterproductive. Adequate preparation for crises cannot be assumed. It requires a measure of foresight and institutional statecraft that is problematic for democracies at all times, and especially for the United States in the current relaxed international environment.

Concept in Crisis

If crisis management is in trouble today it is because of two controlling reasons. The first is

Carnes Lord teaches in the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and has served as National Security Advisor to the Vice President.

Loading bombs,
Desert Fox.



U.S. Air Force (Kirsta M. Foeller)

conceptual and reflects the variable nature of crises and changes in the international environment following the Cold War.

Defining crises is not exclusively a theoretical problem. It is a central operational aspect of crisis management. Simply identifying a situation as a crisis is a policy determination that can have significant operational implications. A gray area exists wherein the confirmation of a crisis may be either plausible or expedient under some circumstances but not others. This is especially true as one moves away from the Cold War notion of crises as periods of international tension involving a heightened probability of the use of force between states. Today no doctrine of crisis management exists outside the military that offers even basic guidance for public officials.

Political-military crises must be more broadly conceived. Most crisis management theory is focused on avoiding superpower conflict in periods of acute tension. The more relevant challenge, at

least for the United States, is firm coordination of political and military measures through every phase of a limited regional conflict.

In addition, more systematic attention should be given to nonmilitary crises and nonmilitary dimensions of crises. The Asian financial emergency has been as regime-threatening as most wars and a major challenge to the international economic order. Moreover, it reinforced the importance of coordination between U.S. diplomacy and economic policy. It also points to the growing need to bring international institutions within the compass of national crisis management.

Another neglected aspect of crisis is public diplomacy. Operation Desert Fox, for example, was a fiasco in this regard. The contrast with media relations during the Persian Gulf War could hardly have been sharper. Moreover, domestic emergencies also require attention and pose serious crisis management challenges for many countries (such as Chechnya in the case of Russia). Even for the United States, the possibility of a domestic terrorist attack involving the use of weapons of mass destruction gives concern over



domestic security and emergency response. As the Pentagon considers forming a new unified command for homeland defense, the time has come to address the tangle of political, legal, and bureaucratic issues that influences this neglected area.

Institutional Challenge

The other controlling reason crisis management is in trouble today is institutional in nature. Over the past decade and a half we have taken several steps backward. The institutional capacity of the United States for crisis management evolved during the Cold War. Under the administration of Dwight Eisenhower crises tended to be handled informally and quietly by the White House through channels largely independent of the nascent National Security Council (NSC) system.

Crisis management emerged as a recognized mode of national security decisionmaking in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, with the Executive Committee (ExCom) of the National Security Council formed by President John Kennedy to vet options and advise on how to handle the secret deployment of Soviet nuclear weapons in Cuba. ExCom was an informal organization and had no life apart from the President and the crisis at hand.



Institutional responses were largely improvisational during the balance of the Kennedy and the Johnson years. There was a conscious effort to fight the Vietnam War as a sideshow instead of a national emergency.

institutional responses were largely improvisational during the Kennedy and the Johnson years

Lyndon Johnson's "Tuesday lunches" with his National Security Adviser and Secretaries of State and Defense were the principal mechanism of high-level coordination, but their impact was much reduced by inadequate preparation and a lack of record-keeping.

Early dissatisfaction with crisis response expertise in the Nixon administration (especially after North Korea shot down an American EC-21 aircraft in 1969) led to the first permanent high-level crisis management committee within the

U.S. Government, the Washington Special Actions Group, under the chairmanship of National Security Adviser to the President Henry Kissinger. It was reasonably effective but had minimal support. Its real significance was that it acknowledged the role of the Presidential staff in harnessing the national security bureaucracy and handling crises on the policy and operational levels. This precedent was adopted by Jimmy Carter, who assigned his National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, to chair a cabinet-level committee.

Crisis management came into its own under Ronald Reagan. His administration developed a complex apparatus that centralized crisis management in the White House more than ever before or since. A so-called Special Situations Group of cabinet principals chaired by the Vice President was created in 1981. It reported to the National Security Planning Group that was chaired by the President and was comprised of principals from the National Security Council and other officials such as the U.S. Representative to the United Nations. The group was intended to act informally as a forum for top-level consideration of sensitive policy issues. It was supported in turn by an inter-agency Crisis Pre-planning Group chaired by the Deputy National Security Adviser.

At the same time an operational entity was organized to support such activities, the Crisis Management Center. Closely linked to the NSC staff and collocated with it in the Old Executive Office Building, the center was a pioneering effort to develop a framework and procedure to handle



crises as well as a sophisticated array of supporting capabilities that for the first time exploited the potential of information technologies for senior-level decisionmaking. With a permanent staff that eventually numbered twenty analysts and computer specialists, many detailed from the defense and intelligence communities, the center oversaw a major

upgrade of electronic communications in the White House and national security agencies, developed protocols to identify and monitor crises and to provide warning to senior officials, and began work on both document formats and data bases to improve institutional memory and information retrieval. It also played an important role in linking the White House with the Continuity of Government Program launched early in the

Reagan years to protect against a decapitating nuclear attack. In several crises during its brief heyday (particularly the invasion of Grenada and shootdown of Korean Airlines Flight 007), the center was generally considered to have performed well. Particularly useful were its situation reports that authoritatively integrated intelligence, diplomatic reporting, media coverage, and operational information.

The story of the Crisis Management Center serves as an object lesson in bureaucratic politics. It floundered as an experiment in 1984 with the death of its founder, Richard Beal, and departure of his patron, National Security Adviser William Clark. Resistance to the center arose among officials who considered it a threat to access and influence in the White House. In the wake of the Iran-Contra scandal in 1986, the NSC staff came

under extreme pressure to avoid activities that could be considered operational. The center went into terminal decline and by the end of the Bush years had

virtually ceased to function. At the outset of the Clinton administration, even the manual on crisis indicators and warning was reportedly discarded, and the White House went out of the crisis management business.

PDD 56 is far from emblematic of the operating style of the current administration

Complex Emergencies

The last two presidencies have used essentially the same system to handle crises: informal and ad hoc consultation at the highest levels supported by a deputies committee for general policy development chaired by the Deputy National Security Adviser to the President with agency officials at the under secretary level. The committee is a bottleneck, overloading a few senior officials with operational information and responsibilities. At the same time, dedicated staff support is weak or nonexistent. The principals often spin their wheels or improvise and the process as a whole lacks structure and discipline. Implementation is neglected; records are not kept nor lessons learned. No one is really in charge so there is no accountability for poor performance.



Such problems have not gone unnoticed by the Clinton administration. Indeed, as a result of the mishandled Somalia intervention of 1992–94, it undertook an initiative to improve national capabilities to manage what are termed *complex emergencies*—crises involving multiple U.S. and international agencies and missions. Presidential Decision Directive (PDD) 56 created a new mechanism that markedly increases the White House operational role.

In response to particular crises the National Security Council has established an interagency ExCom (evocatively but inaccurately recalling the Kennedy-era committee) at the assistant secretary level and chaired by a senior NSC staffer with dedicated crisis management responsibilities. Two things distinguish this new arrangement from standard interagency committees. First, ExCom has an explicit set of responsibilities and fixed accountability. It is directed to develop a military-style operational plan, identify resource requirements, exercise the plan, and prepare an after-action report. ExCom members (all Presidential appointees) are also directly accountable to the President rather than their departmental heads. Crisis-related committees or task forces are usually controlled by a regional assistant secretary of state.

It is also worth noting that the official on the NSC staff in charge of the ExCom mechanism has become involved in domestic counterterrorism and security, chairing an interagency group as special assistant to the President's chief of staff. Generally counterterrorism has become one of the few success stories of interagency cooperation in recent years.

The creation of ExCom certainly is moving things in the right direction. But the extent of real systemic change should not be exaggerated. PDD 56 does not address all crisis management concerns and it is far from emblematic of the operating style of the current administration. In fact, as one former diplomat recently remarked, the Department of State is less effective today at crisis management than ever before. In August 1997, General John Shalikashvili, nearing the end of his second term as Chairman, criticized the divided leadership and lack of interagency cooperation that characterized U.S. involvement in conflicts and called for a single high-level official to coordinate political and military efforts. Critics have been especially harsh in assessing the performance of the Departments of State and Defense in Bosnia.

An effort has reportedly begun under DOD auspices to upgrade crisis-relevant computer and communications technology within the White House, though whether a genuine national vision guides this initiative is unclear. In addition, there has been a growing discussion on the creation of



DOD (Helene C. Sikket)

The President and the Chairman, 1995.

Looking Ahead

The initial step in reestablishing a strategically coherent approach to crisis management is the reconstitution of a dedicated entity within the White House for this function and related decision support functions, closely integrated with the NSC staff. The prime responsibilities of a revitalized Crisis Management Center should be technical support, information fusion, data base management, indicators and warning analysis, and development of doctrine and procedures on crises. It should have close links with appropriate operational elements of the Departments of State and Defense and the intelligence community.

The second step involves a restructuring of leadership and staff. Given the broad range of its responsibilities, especially in the post-Cold War era, the NSC staff needs more senior members and a different method of assigning functions. Instead of just one there should be four deputies. A deputy for operations would manage crises as well as make other day-to-day decisions and chair a dedicated interagency crisis management committee. Another deputy for information would be the focal point for national-level intelligence as well as information and communications matters in general and oversee a revitalized Crisis Management Center. A third deputy would be charged with policy and planning, and a fourth (dual-hatted as deputy of the National Economic Council) would be responsible for economic and resource issues. This arrangement, which reflects the structure of a military staff, would ensure a rational distribution of major functions and tasks. It recognizes the growing position of information and economics as components of national security while reducing the business of managing day-to-day and crisis decisionmaking.

A third step also borrows from the military. It involves the creation of ad hoc interagency crisis task forces headed by senior agency officials (in some cases retirees with special expertise, such as former diplomats) armed with a Presidential mandate and accountability and some measure of operational control over personnel and assets. Directors would have deputies drawn either from the NSC staff or another agency, to provide a check and balance and to permit field deployment of a director or his second in command. This last step would be the most radical, although in ways it is foreshadowed in PDD 56. (A similar notion is advanced in a recent study of the NSC system by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.) This is a sensitive issue because of the unique relationship it establishes between civilian officials and the military command structure. However, it is a change that may be long overdue. In a strategic environment in which force frequently is not the primary crisis management tool, and where

a fully integrated, worldwide interagency communications system. But such a project is likely to encounter stiff bureaucratic resistance unless it gets strong support at the top. Other capabilities are either available or on the horizon. So-called decision support technologies for senior managers of the sort currently being developed at the Naval War College are particularly promising for White House applications.

Technology, however, is not the final solution to crisis mismanagement. The most relevant lesson of the Crisis Management Center is the importance of subordinating technological assets to concepts and requirements. Without a valid concept for crisis management, technology can only accomplish so much. Indeed, it can actively hinder sound decisionmaking. The increasing use of e-mail is a case in point. At one level, e-mail has to be considered a boon for crisis management by permitting unprecedentedly rapid and direct communication among key officials on all levels. But as one Pentagon official involved in crisis management observed, by making communication easy and casual, e-mail tends to undermine staff work, encourage snap decisions, and lead to premature consensus on policy. Such effects can be all the more insidious by being invisible.

Preparing for attack,
Desert Fox.



U.S. Navy (Jacob L. Hollingsworth)

the Armed Forces operate in subordinate roles and under unfamiliar conditions, active integration of civilian and military staffs must constitute more than coordination. Such an organizational mix or chain of command is not without precedent. One well-known example was the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) organization in Vietnam, a hybrid arrangement under a civilian official who oversaw pacification and reported to the senior military commander in-country, who in turn was responsible to the chief of mission, the American ambassador. There are other cases from both Panama and the Persian Gulf. Particularly noteworthy is the Kuwait Task Force, an ad hoc organization made up mostly of civil affairs officers who in effect worked under the ambassador.

The final step is improving the ability to respond to domestic emergencies, a neglected area with complexities not found on the international horizon. Confused and controversial responses to events such as Hurricane Andrew, the FBI siege in Waco, and TWA Flight 800, not to mention the growing specter of chemical or biological terrorism, point to a continuing institutional problem

that must be addressed on the national level. Although the NSC staff is almost certainly not an appropriate home for a domestic crisis management capability, it might make sense to give a revitalized crisis management center a supporting role there, perhaps under the direction of a new office reporting to the President's chief of staff. Provisions might also be made for a White House/National Security Council committee to handle incidents which have a significant military or security component.

Crisis management must be institutionalized both to delegate decisionmaking authority and to reduce excessive burdens. That would relieve the President and senior officials of responsibility to personally monitor and respond to crises. Rather, it would allow them to attend more seriously to their responsibilities as leaders of the Nation. **JFQ**