

President Obama talks with President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea in Treaty Room Office in Residence of White House, November 23, 2010, after North Korea conducted artillery attack against South Korean island of Yeonpyeong (White House/Pete Souza)



# The Danger of False Peril

## Avoiding Threat Inflation

By Andrew Stigler

As his advisors deliberated during the Cuban Missile Crisis, President John F. Kennedy believed that the chance of war with the Soviet Union was “between one in three and even.” Even if the President’s estimation was overly pessimistic, the fact that a leader would choose to initiate a crisis while believing there was such a high risk of a nuclear exchange is a most sobering thought. Some estimated that the number of dead resulting from a nuclear exchange between the

superpowers could have exceeded 200 million people.<sup>1</sup>

But how serious was the threat that Kennedy was responding to? The Soviet Union sought to impose some small measure of vulnerability on the United States, just a fraction of the nuclear striking capability that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization possessed. Though most Americans feared Soviet advances in nuclear strike capability—even Kennedy wondered if inaction would lead to his own impeachment—the later

history of the superpower confrontation strongly suggests that the United States could have tolerated Soviet offensive missiles in Cuba. Over the course of the Cold War, the Soviet nuclear arsenal grew over tenfold. In 1986, the Soviet Union possessed approximately 45,000 warheads, up from 3,322 at the time of the Cuba crisis.<sup>2</sup> During these later Cold War years, the Soviets had an ability to engage in a nuclear attack on the United States that vastly exceeded the capability they planned to place in Cuba in 1962. Yet we made it through, strongly suggesting Kennedy’s alarmism was misplaced.

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Secretary of State John Kerry speaks with Hossein Fereydoun, brother of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif before announcing historic nuclear agreement to reporters in Vienna, Austria (State Department)

The Cuban Missile Crisis is often heralded as a successful combination of brinkmanship and negotiation. But the later history of the Cold War calls into serious question whether President Kennedy (and other leading politicians) exaggerated the threat posed by Soviet weapons in Cuba. If Kennedy unnecessarily courted a nuclear exchange with the Soviets, then the crisis potentially represents the single greatest unnecessary risk in American history.

This example highlights, in the starkest terms, how the task of designing national security policy is heavily weighted toward the end of detecting threats as early as possible. Nations aim to either neutralize threats, or at least to prepare as best as possible for a future confrontation. When wars occur, we ask ourselves if earlier action would have avoided the conflict, or at least reduced its cost. But phrasing policy choices in such terms can lead to avoidable violence. President Lyndon Johnson referenced the specter of Adolf Hitler to convince the Nation

that America needed to commit itself to the Vietnam conflict in order to avoid the spread of communism in the region.<sup>3</sup> Yet when South Vietnam fell in 1975, in spite of years of American effort and sacrifice to avoid such an outcome, the regional dominoes did fall as Johnson had feared.

The task of avoiding unnecessary confrontations is a critical aspect of sound policymaking that receives too little attention. When a nation avoids the trap of threat exaggeration, this leads to a “quiet success.” Such successes, however, do not lead to banner headlines or celebrations in Times Square. Conflict is avoided, and historians and pundits move on, writing their essays on the disasters that did occur rather than a potential catastrophe that was avoided.

As military officers advance in their careers, it becomes increasingly likely that they will be assigned tours of duty that will involve broader responsibilities, including threat assessment. This is one of the reasons why promotable O-4s and O-5s are required to have been assigned

to a certain number of joint billets. Yet officers being prepared for advancement receive little of the methodological training that would best equip them to address this complicated task.

This article attempts to offer a structured approach to this underappreciated aspect of national security threat assessment. Given that a majority of what is written on national security seeks to advocate confrontational approaches to nascent threats, this article deliberately addresses the issue with a countervailing bias. It explores potential reasons to be dubious of threats and examines approaches and perspectives that could potentially reveal inadvertent threat exaggeration.

What follows are a series of questions that could be employed to engage in something similar to a systematic effort to turn a skeptical eye on alarmist assessments. The term *opposing state* is used to refer to the *state of concern*—a nation whose actions, history, character, or leadership have led some in the United States to conclude that it poses a future

national security threat. While imperfect to be sure, this approach could help bring to the fore underappreciated or ignored reasons to downplay a threat and offer an opportunity for calmer heads to prevail.

### **Will the Opposing State Actually Take Aggressive Action?**

Gauging the possibility that an opposing state will avoid offensive action is half the threat equation. Threat assessments tend to focus on national leaders' provocative statements that suggest a belligerent attitude—and, to an extent, rightly so. But reflecting on such statements in and of themselves is not the same as threat assessment. North Korea has been pilloried for decades as among the most dangerous and untrustworthy nations in the world. But despite the dire predictions of American security experts over many decades, the peninsula has been free of large-scale conflict since 1953.

Even substate groups can show state-like restraint. At the conclusion of its 2006 conflict with Israel, for instance, Hizballah demonstrated that its missile stocks had survived the month-long war. The day before the ceasefire took effect, Hizballah launched 246 rockets into Israel—the largest number that it had fired during the course of combat. Yet Hizballah ceased offensive operations on the same day the Israelis did, and has largely refrained from aggressive actions since August 2006. Hizballah's restraint does not make it a neighborly organization, but it does suggest an example of how even groups labeled as terrorist organizations are not all reflexively hyper-aggressive.

As a mental exercise, we might put ourselves in the position of “making the case” that the opposing state does not harbor genuine aggressive intentions. What evidence would we cite? Using Iran as an example, we could point to the fact that Tehran has not initiated any wars since the 1979 revolution. In addition, Iran has been restrained in the face of provocation in the recent past, and it is important to assess the actions that have *not* been taken as well.

### **Does the Opposing State Have Other Concerns?**

Even if a plausible case could be made that the threatening state has malign intent, there may be mitigating factors that could reduce the level of concern. An opposing state that is dealing with dangers and concerns of its own might be less of a threat. Economic difficulties, social unrest, or political instability are factors that could keep the state in question from taking the initiative on a revisionist foreign policy agenda. At the same time, this consideration could cut both ways; any of the factors listed could lead the opposing state to be more conflict prone in hopes of alleviating domestic concerns or the like.

Consider China, a country that is engaging in a military modernization of considerable scope. Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Frank Kendall argued in 2014 that America's military edge is being “challenged in ways that I have not seen for decades.”<sup>4</sup> For China, however, as for most countries, fostering economic growth is a priority. A conflict of any scope between China and the United States would be certain to cause tremendous turmoil in international markets. As of this writing, China's currency devaluations signal significant concerns among party elites that unusual measures are necessary to sustain the trajectory of China's economy.

### **Does the Opposing State Have Reason to Fear the United States?**

In 1978, Robert Jervis argued that states in the international system face what could be called a “security dilemma.”<sup>5</sup> Increases in military spending that are intended for defensive purposes may be perceived by others as a dangerous and threatening offensive arms buildup. The second state then enhances its own defenses, which is seen by the first state as a threat and evidence of the malign intent of the second state. Few weapons systems are purely defensive in nature. Even President Ronald Reagan's “Star Wars” missile defense system, a purely

defensive system, was feared by Mikhail Gorbachev out of a concern that it would allow the United States to engage in an offensive strike on the Soviet Union. Since most arms buildups enhance both offensive and defensive capabilities, states that seek only to protect themselves can be caught in a cycle of unnecessary military preparations.

The fact that an opposing state sees the United States as the aggressive party should not, in and of itself, be cause for revising our assessment of the right course of action. A state motivated to attack America for misguided reasons could still pose a threat, and preemptive action could still be warranted. The main reason to be alert to the possibility that the opposing state perceives the United States as the aggressive party is to potentially identify opportunities to reduce the environment of mutual fear. If a state's fears could be reduced via diplomatic signals or some other credible communication of neutral intent, this is usually preferable to a conflict.

### **Are There Political Pressures on the Opposing State to Make Threatening Statements?**

Even powerful states that sense no imminent threat and harbor no intention of taking action sometimes make threatening statements for political or strategic reasons. America is no exception. Despite the fact that the United States enjoys a geostrategic position that is the envy of the world, American leaders are often influenced by political incentives to play the tough guy. Phrases such as “all options are on the table” have become rhetorical boilerplate in the United States to the point where it is easy to forget such statements could be perceived as threats to strike militarily. In the early 1980s, President Reagan's anti-Soviet rhetoric about the “evil empire” and exercises such as Able Archer led Soviet leaders to genuinely fear American aggression, even a possible nuclear surprise attack.<sup>6</sup>

Other countries, given reason to be nervous of the United States or other regional powers, could compel their leaders to engage in “tough guy” posturing. When Soviet General Secretary



President Obama delivers first major speech stating commitment to seek peace and security of world without nuclear weapons in front of thousands in Prague, Czech Republic, April 5, 2009 (White House/Pete Souza)

Nikita Khrushchev warned Western diplomats in 1956 when he said, “We will bury you,” his audience may have been the Soviet Politburo, and not American policymakers.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, posturing could lead to a sense of commitment that could promote actual aggression. But threats should not be reflexively taken as indications of true malign intent, since other, less threatening explanations are possible as well.

### Even if Conflict Occurs, How Likely Are Worst-Case Outcomes?

While dire scenarios must be considered in national security deliberations, it is also essential to coldly assess the probability of such scenarios before determining a course of action. A likely current example of casual worst-case scenario thinking is America’s concern over nuclear proliferation. Since 1945, pessimists have predicted the inexorable

swelling of the ranks of nuclear weapons states. President Kennedy predicted there could be “ten, fifteen, twenty” nuclear states by 1964.<sup>8</sup> Such predictions have not come to pass, even half a century after Kennedy’s prediction.

Even the mere repetition of a threat could increase the public’s assumptions about the capabilities of an adversary. Prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the George W. Bush administration suggested the possibility that Saddam Hussein was generating a program to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Yet by the time of the invasion, a majority of Americans believed that Iraq actually possessed WMD.<sup>9</sup> Images of mushroom clouds are easily summoned yet hard to dispel.

While nation-states can be deterred, terrorist groups are understandably viewed as far less susceptible to deterrent threats. But how likely is it that such a group would acquire even one of the

world’s most dangerous weapons? We can all but rule out the possibility that even a state-supported terrorist organization could independently develop even a crude nuclear weapon. John Mueller examines the 20 steps required to produce a nuclear weapon *de novo*, and failure or detection at even 1 of these 20 stages defeats the entire enterprise.<sup>10</sup>

Recent research suggests that states with nuclear weapons are extremely unlikely to hand those weapons over to terrorist groups. Why would states undertake very expensive nuclear weapons programs, endure the political and economic costs of defying the international community, and then hand one of their limited stock of weapons to a stateless organization? From this perspective, it is an odd notion. Kier Lieber and Daryl Press argue that states will not undertake the “mind-bogglingly dangerous” approach of handing it to an unaffiliated group.<sup>11</sup> They also point out that the vast majority of state-sponsored

terrorism has been eventually attributed to the sponsor, raising the near certainty that the originating state would be subjected to cataclysmic retaliation.

### How Imminent Is the Need to Respond to the Threat?

A wait-and-see approach could be a rational course of action. Does the situation offer latitude to respond when the threat becomes more concrete, or even after the threat has been realized? For example, in the early stages of the Cold War there was some talk of engaging in preemptive action before the Soviet Union and China developed nuclear weapons. Major General Orvil Anderson, USAF, stated, “Give me the order to do it, and I can break up Russia’s five A-bomb nests in a week.”<sup>12</sup> President Kennedy considered preemptive strikes on China, perhaps using “anonymous planes.”<sup>13</sup> But history’s verdict is clearly in favor of those who resisted calls for dramatic action against these emerging nuclear powers. We might prefer a world with fewer nuclear weapons today, but most people sleep soundly today in spite of the Russian and Chinese nuclear arsenals.

Adopting a wait-and-see approach is a politically awkward topic. No commander in chief relishes the idea of explaining after an attack why advance indication was available but action was not taken. At the same time, from a strategic standpoint, it is a perspective that must be considered, particularly for a country with the vast security resources that the United States possesses. And flashpoints could endure for long periods of time without leading to violence. As David Kang points out, many security analysts have claimed to identify powder kegs in Asia—the Korean Peninsula in particular—while those kegs have failed to ignite a conflict over the course of years, sometimes decades.<sup>14</sup>

### Could Preemptive Action Against the Opposing State Make a Bad Situation Worse?

We should also consider if a confrontation, instead of delaying or obviating a perceived threat, might create a more dangerous environment. This

consideration was prominently voiced during the 2015 debate over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear agreement with Iran. President Barack Obama has stated that a military strike against Iran would only delay its program, while driving it “deeper underground” and “destroy[ing] the international unity [behind efforts to forestall Iran’s nuclear program] that we’ve spent so many years building.”<sup>15</sup>

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) offers a similar confirming example of how preemptive action can lead to the rise of greater threats. The United States invaded Iraq in 2003 to eliminate the danger posed by Saddam’s regime. Yet it was this preemptive action that was the primary cause in the rise of a number of terrorist groups in the region, including ISIL.<sup>16</sup> The tyranny of unintended consequences has been the undoing of countless national security initiatives. Efforts to address short-term concerns can lead to long-term repercussions.

What follows is an attempt to address the spectrum of factors that could be applicable when skeptically assessing the threat posed by an opposing state. They are presented in sequence: gauging intent, assessing the opposing state’s ability to act aggressively, evaluating the spectrum of possible responses after any attack by the opposing state, and exploring the possible repercussions of unnecessary action. No answer to any of these questions should reflexively trigger a downgrade of the threat. They are, instead, considerations that should influence a threat assessment but that are, at times, overlooked. To reiterate, the *opposing state* refers to the state that may or may not pose a threat, while the *target* is the state that might have cause to fear an attack of some kind from the opposing state.

## Threat Assessment

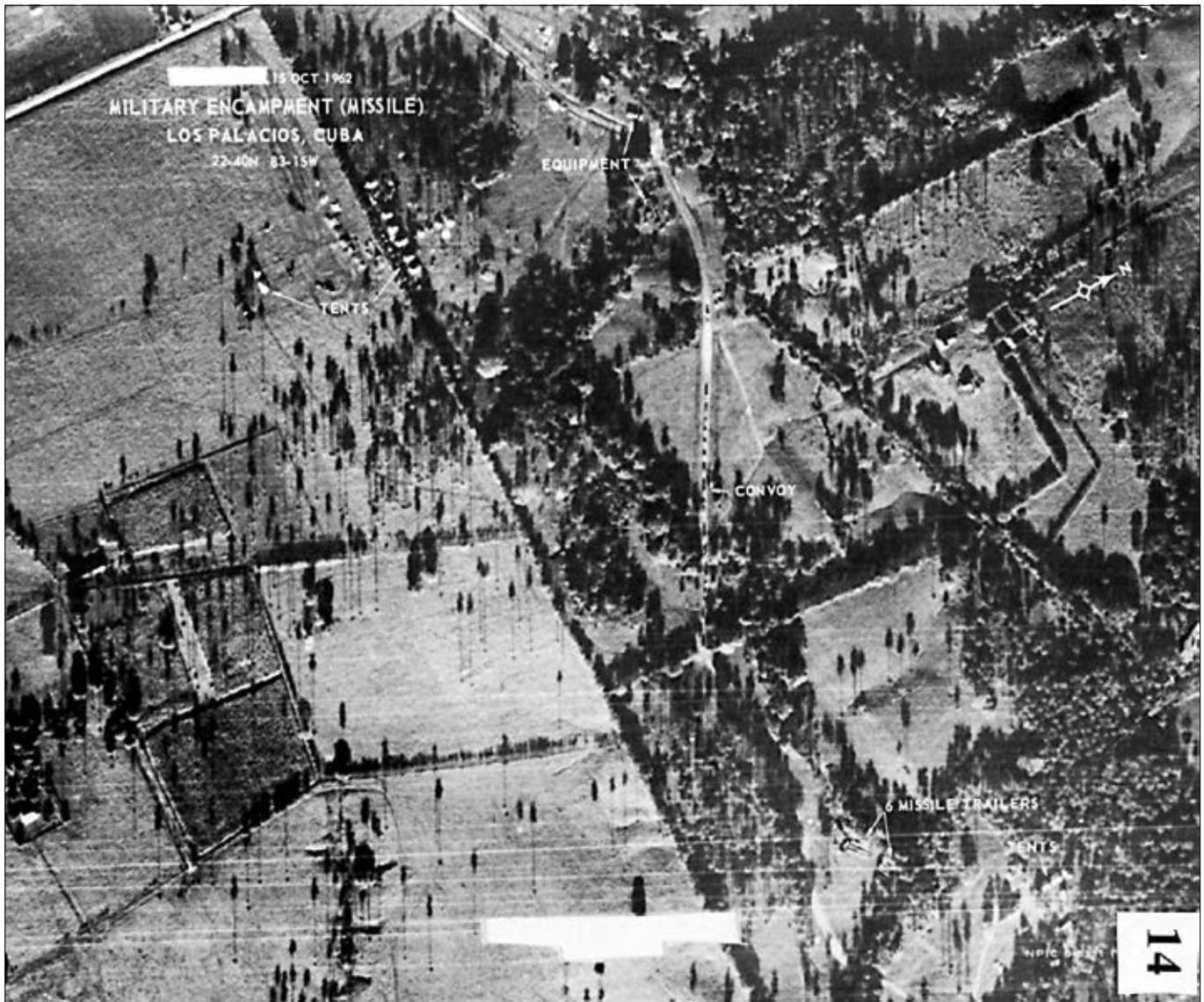
### I. Gauging Opposing State’s Intent

- A. Indications of Aggressive Intent
  - 1. Result of confused signals?
  - 2. Opposing state posturing
    - a. for domestic audience
    - b. for international audience

- 3. Observer’s bias overemphasizing malign signals?
- 4. Fractured government authority in opposing state dilutes importance of statements?
  - a. divided leadership
  - b. military veto/civilian veto over any action
- 5. Translation issues? Signal context?
- B. Cause of Aggressive Intent
  - 1. Fear of the United States?
  - 2. Domestic political pressure?
  - 3. Political competition leading to increased nationalism?
  - 4. Recent political setback?
  - 5. Alliance dynamics?
  - 6. Economic difficulties?
- C. Depth of Aggressive Intent
  - 1. Opposing state has marginal or limited willingness to bear costs?
  - 2. Future political events (such as elections) on the horizon?
  - 3. Opposing state recognizes its vulnerability to retaliation?
  - 4. Opposing state recognizes/fears potential for attack to fail?

### II. Gauging Opposing State’s Ability to Act

- A. Means to Act
  - 1. Limited military means? Uncertain means?
  - 2. Untested strategy/tactics?
  - 3. Lack of opportunity for surprise?
  - 4. Limited opportunity to act/close window of opportunity?
- B. Obstacles to Action
  - 1. Dependent on allies?
    - a. U.S. leverage on allies *ex ante*?
    - b. U.S. ability to punish allies *ex post*?
  - 2. Fractured system of government?
  - 3. Long mobilization time/unavoidable warning of preparations for attack?
- C. Likely Impact of Action
  - 1. Are anticipated attacks likely to be limited?
  - 2. Could target easily absorb likely attacks?



This image, taken by Major Richard "Steve" Heyser in U.S. Air Force U-2, shows Soviet truck convoy deploying missiles near San Cristobal, Cuba, proving Russian missiles were being emplaced in Cuba, October 14, 1962 (U.S. Air Force)

3. Consequences of attack compared to costs of preemption?

### III. *Target's Ability to Preempt or Deter*

- A. What are the costs associated with preempting the threat?
- B. Repercussions of preemption for target state:
  - 1. What are repercussions of preemptive action over short/medium/long term?
  - 2. Would preemptive action increase likelihood of worst-case scenarios?
  - 3. Is there a risk that preemptive action would distract the target from other threats?

4. Would preemptive action damage the target's reputation?

- 5. Are there domestic political costs of preemptive action?
- 6. Would other states see opportunities following preemptive action by the target?

C. Are there opportunities to deter the opposing state, via political/military/economic actions or threatened actions?

### IV. *Target's Ability to Respond*

- A. Ability to Limit Damage
- B. Ability to Retaliate

### **Conclusion: Primum Non Nocere**

"First, do no harm." This is the mantra instilled in aspiring doctors during medical school, the concept that we must not make an unfortunate situation worse by resorting to avoidable actions. National security policy should take the same caveat to heart. Just as a patient complaining of excruciating pain could still be best served by a wait-and-see approach, the best option in any given national security scenario might be to take no action at all. A calm and even-handed assessment of the true scope of a perceived threat could be essential to avoiding an unwanted conflict.

Unsurprisingly, military officers could serve as a critical bulwark against unnecessary military actions. According to one account, there was pressure from the White House in early 2008 to undertake a preemptive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities in the waning days of the Bush administration. But senior military officers, including at least two combatant commanders, were opposed. Admiral William Fallon, commander of U.S. Central Command, is reported to have stated that the operations against Iran proposed by civilian leaders were, in his opinion, "very stupid" and that bombing should be avoided unless the Iranians did something considerably more reckless than they had up to that point.<sup>17</sup> Fallon's sober assessment of the threat may have prevented an unnecessary war.

It is essential not to give lip service to the notion of exhausting all other options before resorting to organized violence. With the likelihood of lives lost and destruction imposed in any preemptive military action, it is incumbent on those in power to assess all threats with a full measure of skepticism before taking action. JFQ

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Both President John F. Kennedy's assessment and the casualty estimate are from Graham Allison, "The Cuban Missile Crisis at 50: Lessons for U.S. Policy Today," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 4 (July/August 2012), 11–16.

<sup>2</sup> Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen, "Global Nuclear Stockpiles, 1945–2006," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* 62, no. 4 (July/August 2006), 66.

<sup>3</sup> Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> David Alexander, "China Challenging U.S. Military Technological Edge—Pentagon Official," Reuters, January 29, 2014, available at <<http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/01/29/usa-defense-china-idINDEEA0S00B20140129>>.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978), 167–214. The term *security dilemma* was most likely coined by John H. Herz in 1951.

<sup>6</sup> See David E. Hoffman, "In 1983 'War Scare,' Soviet Leadership Feared Nuclear Sur-

prise Attack by U.S.," *Washington Post*, October 24, 2015, available at <[www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-1983-war-scare-soviet-leadership-feared-nuclear-surprise-attack-by-us/2015/10/24/15a289b4-7904-11e5-a958-d889fa561dc\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-1983-war-scare-soviet-leadership-feared-nuclear-surprise-attack-by-us/2015/10/24/15a289b4-7904-11e5-a958-d889fa561dc_story.html)>.

<sup>7</sup> Author's conversation with Sergei Khrushchev, August 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Sidney Kraus, ed., *The Great Debates: Kennedy vs. Nixon, 1960* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1962), 394.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas C. Foyle, "Leading the Public to War? The Influence of American Public Opinion on the Bush Administration's Decision to Go to War in Iraq," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 2004), 288.

<sup>10</sup> For a brief summary, see John Mueller, *The Atomic Terrorist? The Cato Institute's Nuclear Proliferation Update* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, January 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Kier A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "Why States Won't Give Nuclear Weapons to Terrorists," *International Security* 38, no. 1 (Summer 2013), 104.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas M. Nichols, *Eve of Destruction: The Coming Age of Preventive War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>13</sup> William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson, "Whether to 'Strangle the Baby in the Cradle': The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program, 1960–64," *International Security* 23, no. 3 (Winter 2000–2001), 54.

<sup>14</sup> David C. Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks," *International Security* 27, no. 4 (Spring 2003), 61–66.

<sup>15</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Iran Nuclear Deal," American University, Washington, DC, August 5, 2015, available at <[www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/08/05/remarks-president-iran-nuclear-deal](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/08/05/remarks-president-iran-nuclear-deal)>.

<sup>16</sup> Though the causal chain in the genesis of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is a complicated one, and other factors (such as the Arab Spring and revolts in Syria and elsewhere) play a role, the Iraqi insurgency offered social impetus and opportunity. Many ISIL leaders became radicalized while in American detention centers following the invasion and established relationships that later aided ISIL's development.

<sup>17</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, "Preparing the Battlefield: The Bush Administration Steps Up Its Secret Moves Against Iran," *The New Yorker*, July 7, 2008, 61–63. Fallon stated that bombing "would happen only if the Iranians did something stupid," suggesting that he believed Iranian actions up to that point were tolerable.

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