

MISINTERPRETATIONS OF CHICKEN

Our conclusions about Chicken have some implications for two groups of writers on the Cold War, the "mirror image" theorists such as Osgood (1962) and White (1965) and the "realists" such as Ellsberg (1959) and Schelling (1960, 1966). The mirror image theorists argue⁽¹⁾ somewhat as follows: In a mental process characteristic of paranoia, each side perceives the possible aggressive intentions of the other as probable or even certain. The adversary's intentions are mistakenly equated with his capabilities. Consequently, each side undertakes defensive measures which are misperceived by the other as aggressively motivated. Each side's image of the other becomes a "mirror image" of the other's image of itself; each sees the other as aggressive and hostile when neither is so in fact. The hostile image of the other is reinforced by a benevolent image of the self: the Americans (or the Soviets), perceiving themselves as entirely peaceful, are unable to understand why the Soviets (or Americans) are accumulating armaments, allies, bases, and the like unless it is because they are aggressive. And, conversely, the self-image depends on the enemy image: the belief that one's own country is peaceful is preserved by the thought that one's own arms are only defensive reactions to the other's threat. Thus, as Ralph K. White (1965: 248-249) puts it "the two images, peaceful self and aggressive enemy, are mutually complementary and thoroughly interdependent" (Snyder, 1971: 77-78).

The realists are concerned, among other things, with the problem of defense against real aggression. For example, the Ellsberg blackmail model seems to address itself to the problem, "how does one defend oneself against an aggressive blackmailer, one who seeks to make illicit gains for himself by threatening nuclear war unless we give him what he wants?" Schelling's work is addressed in part to the same question (1960, ch. 5, 8; 1966, ch. 2, 3.) It is not too hard to identify the players in this drama, written in the late 1950's. The

aggressive blackmailer is Khrushchev, threatening nuclear war unless he gets what he wants, and most probably bluffing; the prudent defender is the U.S. Schelling even offers advice to the prudent defender, who turns out to be the American command structure in NATO (1966: 111-116). For further discussion of these and other groups of international relations theorists, see Snyder, 1971.

The views of both the mirror image theorists and the realists can be interpreted in relation to U.S. foreign policy, even though the origin of both views predates the Cold War. The dominant U.S. position since about 1947 has been hard line with brief partial exceptions in 1961-1962. The regular misperception throughout this period has been the standard HL misperception in which "we" are in Prisoner's Dilemma and the opponent is in Chicken. The mirror image theorists have focused on the first half of this misperception while the realists have taken the second half as true. As a result the mirror image theorists have interpreted the international system as Prisoner's Dilemma and the realists have interpreted crises as Chicken. For instance, Osgood's proposal for moderating the Cold War consists formally of a stepwise progression up the main diagonal of an expanded Prisoner's Dilemma. Ellsberg's work on blackmail deals with a Chicken model, and most of Schelling's work is set in a Chicken framework.

Our conclusions suggest that each group of theorists has captured a part of the truth. The mirror image theorists are correct if they assert that the Cold War is fundamentally a Prisoner's Dilemma, as we shall argue in a later section. They are also correct in pointing to misperception and the resulting spiral of hostility as a component of all Cold War crises. This spiral is most evident in the Lebanon crisis but has appeared in all crises since 1945. They are mistaken in underestimating the real conflicting interests of the U.S. and the S.U., which are properly modeled as Chicken. The realists, conversely, are correct in their contention that the objective structure of crises since 1947 is Chicken. They are mistaken insofar as they underestimate the importance

of misperception and treat U.S. decision-makers as rational players with clear, well-calculated preference structures and a clear understanding of the opponent.

Both groups of theorists are mistaken in their treatment of their respective game models, and this mistake combined with those previously mentioned causes the practical advice of both groups to be mistaken and even pernicious. I shall discuss the mirror image theorists in a later section and take up the realists, especially Ellsberg and Schelling here.

Ellsberg and Schelling's first error is to confuse the heuristic and the mathematical aspects of Chicken. The heuristic elements that dominate their thinking are the "blackmail" and the "hot rod" interpretations of Chicken. "Blackmail" suggests that there is a blackmailer, an illegitimate and unscrupulous aggressor, on the international scene who is forcing us to play Chicken with him. It suggests that a crisis, a chicken game, begins because this aggressor arbitrarily decides to stir up trouble somewhere and that without his aggressive demands there would be no crisis. The hot-rod heuristic suggests that the game is entirely or primarily concerned with resolve, and that the way to win is to demonstrate superior resolve--to communicate one's irrevocable commitments, to burn one's bridges, to cultivate a reputation for recklessness or brinksmanship, and so on. Even the heuristic title "chicken" suggests that the game is concerned with bravery, or resolve, and cowardice. None of these heuristic concepts are present in the mathematics of the game.

Schelling's imagination is dominated by the hot-rod heuristic, and much of what he says about chicken, threats, and risk manipulation derives from the heuristics rather than from the mathematics of the game. For example, he observes "... unlike those sociable games it takes two to play, with chicken it takes two not to play. If you are publicly invited to play chicken and say you would rather not, you have just played." (1966: 118). This is true for a hot-rod game in which nothing but resolve is at stake, but is not uniquely true for those international crises with a chicken structure and is not present

in the mathematics of chicken. In a footnote on the same page he distinguishes the hot-rod version from the "real" version in which something substantive is at stake; but soon he is back with the hot-rod game again, writing of "challenge", "face", and "interdependence of commitments". Perhaps such errors could be avoided in the future if the misleading heuristic title "Chicken" were dropped entirely. Rapoport's substitute title "Exploiter" is a good antidote since it suggests that Schelling's prudent defender with irrevocable commitments is really an exploiter of the common good of avoiding DD.

Our case studies show: 1) crises with an Exploiter structure are not the result of some aggressive blackmailer stirring up trouble. They do not happen because someone decides to start a crisis by challenging his opponent to "play chicken". They result from the inherent structure of the international system -- the conflicts of actively pursued interest, the distribution of resources and weaknesses -- compounded by the images and misperceptions of the parties. Moreover, an Exploiter structure is not more forcing than any other game structure. All international structures force or constrain their component players to participate actively, and differ only in the particular pattern of pressure they exert. "It takes two not to play" is equally true of all crises.

For example, in 1904-1906 British and French diplomats were continually maneuvering to define and redefine their commitments to one another; they applied pressure, had secret low-level contacts, gave warnings, ambiguous answers, etc. Neither party could avoid playing -- "it takes two not to play"-- but the structure was Hero, not Exploiter. From 1906 on Grey was forced to dodge and parry the regular French attempts to pin him down to a definite commitment; he could not "decline the challenge" and passively accept the French definition of the situation. The two Berlin crises were both Exploiter, yet neither was started by an aggressive blackmailer, contrary to some one-sided accounts of these crises. They resulted from the gradually intensifying conflict

between U.S. and S.U. policy on Germany, and these policies were themselves responses to a larger Exploiter structure. Similarly, the two Morocco crises were part of a gradually intensifying conflict between France and Germany. Unlike the 1948 crisis, they did explode dramatically on a single day; but these explosions, the Kaiser's Tangier speech and the Panther's spring, were the manifestations of an underlying conflict rather than the arbitrary challenge of a greedy blackmailer.⁹ 2) The particular empirical characteristics which Ellsberg and Schelling associate with Exploiter have no necessary connection with that game. "Reputation for resolve" is a particular payoff element which can occur as readily in Prisoner's Dilemma as in Exploiter, and even appears in Leader; "Aggression" or "blackmail", though it appears rarely in our cases, can initiate play of any game except Hero.

For example, 1) in 1914 the Russians were much concerned with their reputation for resolve. They had backed down twice in the past few years and suspected, rightly, that Germany and Austria expected them to back down again. This does not mean that Russia, or Germany for that matter, was playing hot-rod chicken; the crucial question is whether the cost of backing down and completely losing one's reputation for resolve was greater than the cost of war. If it was, and the Russians thought it was, they were in Prisoner's Dilemma; if it was not, they were in Exploiter. In general whenever a country thinks that its reputation for resolve is essential to its continued existence and is worth fighting a war to preserve, it thinks it is in Prisoner's Dilemma.

2) In 1914 the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia could be called blackmail, and the planned Austrian invasion of Serbia could be called aggressive if we define aggression as the crossing of a frontier, but this does not automatically imply a chicken-blackmail model. If, as it happened, the Austrian leaders thought they had to crush Serbia even at the risk of general war, because if they did not do so the Austrian Empire would disintegrate, they saw themselves in Prisoner's Dilemma or Bully, not Exploiter.

The second error of the realists like Ellsberg and Schelling is in underestimating the importance of misperception, that is in assuming that U.S. decision-makers are rational players with clear preference structures and a clear understanding of the opponent.

One example, estimation of opponent's goals, will illuminate the enormity of this assumption. If a player misestimates the opponent's goals he will also misestimate payoff values and misinterpret signals so he cannot have a clear idea of what game he is playing. Our evidence shows that U.S. decision-makers consistently mis-estimated S.U. goals in all the Exploiter crises since 1947. In 1948 the U.S. thought Stalin's goal was West Berlin, but his goal was the defensive one of preventing the division of Germany. In 1957 Dulles-Eisenhower thought that Syria was about to attack Turkey and later Lebanon with S.U. support; actually the S.U. was trying to protect Syria against imaginary U.S. aggression. On Quemoy the evidence suggests that the Chinese probe was limited to clearing the harbor and was not directed against Formosa. Khrushchev's aim in 1958 was the defensive one of protecting East Germany and eventually the S.U. against NATO aggression; the U.S. thought he was after West Berlin. Actually Khrushchev thought West Berlin would eventually join East Germany peacefully, which was another of his optimistic miscalculations. On Cuba 1962 we have very little evidence of S.U. aims, but our evidence suggests the U.S. underestimated the importance of the S.U. defensive aim of protecting Cuba. This neglected aim was the basis for the eventual settlement. In 1965 the U.S. was irrevocably committing itself against an imaginary opponent, an international Communist conspiracy that was engaging in internal aggression in the Dominican Republic.

Perhaps Schelling does not recognize the problem of misperception because he himself uncritically accepts the whole hard-line mythology that has dominated the thinking of U.S. statesmen and their RAND advisers, and so does not recognize that there are any misperceptions to worry about. One could even

argue that Schelling's work is mainly a spinning out and dressing up in scientific terminology of the hard-line fantasies. The combination of these two fundamental errors leads Schelling to drastically misleading analyses of Cold War events and dangerously wrong advice. The combination works this way: Schelling's "realist" standpoint enables him to focus on, and to vastly exaggerate the problem of demonstrating resolve against an unscrupulous aggressor. This leads him, fallaciously, to think about Chicken. He then assumes, again fallaciously, that the U.S. and the S.U. are two relatively rational antagonists who are "playing Chicken," and derives from the mathematical characteristics of this game some tactics for dealing with the aggressor. The tactics include ways of committing oneself to play D, threat tactics, and ways of manipulating the risk of war (DD), all with the aim of inducing the aggressor to yield (C). He also touches on "carrot" tactics. Schelling's tactics are bad for the following reasons:

1. The rush to commit and to stay committed prevents the gathering of information that would enable one to correct misperceptions and misestimates. The worst misperception would be to perceive the wrong game; if the crisis were really Prisoner's Dilemma the use of Schelling's Exploiter tactics would be disastrous, as they were in 1914. And if the game structure were Leader, as in Iran 1946, the consequences would also be unfortunate though not immediately disastrous. This sort of misperception does occur, but since most crises have been Exploiter it is a relatively infrequent error, leading only rarely to war. More frequent misperceptions include misestimation of the opponent's goals and utilities, which has been constant for U.S. decision-makers, misinterpretation of his messages, which has occurred more often than not, misperception of the effects of one's own actions, and misperception of what action one is taking, given that those in charge of carrying out an action change it to suit their own misperceptions and preferences. On the other hand, the tendency of statesmen to persist in their errors is so strong that even an incremental information-maximizing strategy would probably not decrease misperceptions much.

2. It fails to allow sufficiently for the opponent's misinterpretation of one's actions and signals, and his misestimation of one's goals and utilities. A strategy that assumes, correctly, that the opponent is likely to misperceive everything will build enormous redundancy into messages, will be composed of small widely-spaced steps to allow time for interpretation, and will accompany actions with messages explaining them. Such a strategy might avoid hostility spirals based on misperception such as occurred in our cases.

3. The overemphasis on resolve leads the decision-maker influenced by Schelling to undervalue or neglect other substantive payoff values and to overvalue reputation for resolve. Overvaluation of reputation for resolve is one component of the U.S. HL misperception in which the U.S. is lost unless it demonstrates its resolve to stand firm on every one of its commitments (domino theory). In this misperception the value of a reputation for resolve is enormous, the U.S. is in Prisoner's Dilemma and the opponent is in Exploiter, and indefinite escalation is justified. But as Hamburger observes in his discussion of expanded Exploiter, a player will escalate into the DD area only if he has lost track of his utilities (Hamburger, 1969:128)⁹ and this is just what results from an overemphasis on resolve.

4. Schelling's rush to commit and to appear committed and resolved prevents a player from searching for alternative strategies and correcting defects in a strategy. (Schelling does discuss search, but adoption of his viewpoint would block most search.) In addition, by point 1, it prevents the collection of information that would make possible a search for improved strategies. For example, in 1914 the German commitment to a fait accompli first enabled them to misinterpret or ignore disconfirming information; then on July 30 when Bethmann-Hollweg finally realized they were heading for disaster he found he was locked in and could not reverse his previous strategy. Similarly, in 1905 Holstein found it impossible to shift effectively from firmness to conciliation.

5. A long-run cost of the overemphasis on resolve is the rigidity it imparts to a player's commitments. If reputation for resolve is really the only thing that prevents the aggressive opponent from continuous challenges, then all one's commitments are interdependent (domino theory); one must stand firm on each one to protect all the rest. But this prevents a player from abandoning commitments when he is overcommitted; like Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby he is stuck hand and foot. Thus Slater argues that U.S. belief in the interdependence of all its commitments was at the root of its troubles in the Dominican crisis (Slater, 1970: 198-201). It dared not ignore a real or imaginary challenge anywhere in the world and so was forced into its foolish, self-defeating intervention with its banners of resolve held high. To be sure, Schelling argues in one of his strikingly persuasive metaphors that the hot-rod driver should ostentatiously take off his steering wheel and throw it out of the car, thus demonstrating irrevocability of commitment, but should keep another steering wheel handy in secret. U.S. decision-makers have found that one cannot easily do this.

6. A long-run danger of the rush to commitment is the possibility of producing the "never again" phenomenon. If the Schelling-type player perceives himself as winning a crisis through his firm commitments and high reputation for resolve, he will do the same in the next crisis and the one after that. But the opponent, who perceives himself as losing through excessive caution and/or appeasement, at some point vows "Never again" and stands firm. The result is war. This happened in 1908-14 with Russia and in 1936-39 with Britain. In both cases the Germans perceived themselves as deterring bluffing opponents through firmness and their well established reputation for resolve, and failed to hear the opponent's "never again" vow.

Despite our rejection of some of Schelling's ideas, other ideas of his, particularly from the 1960 volume, have been and continue to be basic to our thinking. Also the tactics he discusses may have a limited usefulness as

ingredients in more complex strategies; and our evidence shows that his focus on Exploiter as the basic crisis model is correct.