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SOME THOUGHTS ON
GRADUATED ESCALATION

A. L. George

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PREFACE

The present Memorandum is an edited, somewhat expanded version of a briefing given to the Project RAND Air Force Advisory Group and the RAND Board of Trustees at their joint meeting in Washington, D.C., on November 12, 1965.

Evaluation of U.S. escalation policy in Vietnam since February 1965 will be difficult even for the future historian; in the present instance the difficulty is compounded by lack of access to high-level deliberations of U.S. policy-makers. In consequence, only some general and tentative observations are offered in order to place the graduated escalation strategy employed in Vietnam within a meaningful analytical perspective and to compare the Vietnam experience with previous limited war crises.

This brief treatment draws on work in progress for Air Force Project RAND on problems in the use of force as an instrument of policy in limited conflicts. A longer, more fully documented study is being prepared.
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I. TOWARD AN ANALYTICAL COMPARISON

It is now almost five years since the Kennedy Administration adopted the new doctrine of "flexible response" and simultaneously placed greater emphasis on strengthening general purpose forces. We now have substantial conventional as well as nuclear capabilities for deterring and dealing with limited conflicts.

Despite the improvement of our limited war capabilities in the past five years, however, we continue to be perplexed and at times deeply frustrated over the problem of employing force as an instrument of foreign policy in the nuclear era and in a world that has become more complex than the old bipolar one.

In recent months many people have been troubled, for different reasons, about our escalation policy in Vietnam. One of the questions that is frequently raised concerns the appropriateness and effectiveness of the air operations against North Vietnam begun in February 1965. Many feel that these operations have had disappointing results. Some conclude that what has happened disproves the theory or hope that we could coerce the North Vietnam regime into ceasing to assist the Viet Cong or into entering into serious negotiations. Against this it can be argued that the possibility of coercing Hanoi by air power alone has not been really tested, since we have observed so many important targeting restraints.

Still others argue that all the escalation steps we have progressively taken since February -- the commitment of ground forces as well as the expansion of air operations
in South and North Vietnam -- have had disappointing results. They attribute this to the possibility that the enemy has regarded our piecemeal, slow, step-by-step escalation as a sign of weakness rather than of strength.

Certainly it would have been possible, at least in principle, for the Administration to have employed additional military capabilities or a stronger form of coercive escalation strategy in Vietnam than it has done thus far. (Whether even this would have succeeded in coercing Hanoi to accept our demands is another matter.) A relevant question, therefore, is why a stronger type of escalation has not been employed. That question raises the broader problem, encountered in previous crises as well, of understanding the gamut of complex considerations that affect the employment and threat of force in limited conflicts.

It may shed some light on this broader problem, and on the related question of why the United States has dealt more effectively with some crises than with others, if we attempt a general analytical comparison of our policy in Vietnam since February with the way in which U.S. leaders employed force to deal with three earlier cases of aggression: The North Korean attack on South Korea on June 25, 1950; the Communist Chinese artillery action against Quemoy in August-September, 1958; and the Cuban missile crises in October, 1962. The political-military context, of course, differed from case to case; yet the same kinds of problems arose in deciding how to employ force as an instrument of U.S. policy. Before proceeding with this historical-analytical comparison, however, some basic distinctions and general observations need to be made.
II. DISTINCTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

Graduated escalation has strategic connotations that differentiate it from the older more familiar range of limited military actions that can appropriately be labelled the "quick, decisive" option. When a provocation or limited aggression occurs, the "quick, decisive" option calls for ample military force to be applied promptly to snuff out the fire before it spreads. This type of military reaction to a perceived aggression lacks the bargaining, negotiating, and strategic conceptualization implicit in graduated escalation. There is much to be said for the "quick, decisive" option; but there have been many occasions on which our leaders were reluctant, unwilling, or unable to resort to it, and this is likely to be true in many future situations. We have no choice, therefore, but to examine more closely what has been called graduated or measured response, and to try to improve our ability to make more effective use of this strategy.

It is not easy to define the term "graduated escalation," since it can have many different applications in practice. In the past it was sometimes called "graduated deterrence," and General McConnell recently referred to it as "strategic persuasion," in discussing air operations against North Vietnam.1 Essentially the term refers to the exemplary or "demonstrative" use of force in discrete and controlled doses, so as to induce or coerce the opponent to call off or curtail his provocation.

1In an address given on September 16, 1965, in Dallas, entitled: "The Role of Airpower in Viet-Nam."
In other words, graduated escalation is essentially a political strategy that uses military means. It differs, therefore, from the use of escalation as a purely military, war-winning strategy.

Whatever type of escalation is chosen -- whether it is the introduction of new weapons, the extension of the classes of targets attacked, or the expansion of the geographical limits of combat operations, etc. -- the important objective of a graduated escalation strategy is to signify to the opponent one's strong determination to apply as much force as necessary to achieve one's objectives in the conflict.

Two different targeting strategies may be employed in applying graduated escalation to coerce the opponent. One approach to coercion is to employ exemplary attacks against the opponent's military forces as a means of demonstrating willingness to apply increasingly effective military means, if necessary, to prevent his forces from achieving their objectives or to make their achievement prohibitively costly. Alternatively, exemplary attacks against the opponent's valued resources, e.g. industries, may be used to convey willingness to inflict as much punitive damage as necessary to coerce him into ceasing his hostile behavior.

Whether the targeting strategy is primarily countermilitary or counter-value, or a mixture of the two, as in the air escalation against North Vietnam, force and the threat of additional force are employed in an exemplary, graduated manner to induce the opponent to alter his behavior in the desired direction. Moreover, the
successful application of either of these targeting approaches requires that there be no appreciable doubt in the opponent's mind that effective military capabilities are available to carry out the threat of continued escalation. In the absence of such a belief on his part, it may be necessary to demonstrate capability as well as resolve to engage in graduated escalation.
III. REQUIREMENTS FOR OPTIMAL COERCION

The preceding general observations, familiar in themselves, provide a basis for identifying and discussing other requirements for optimally coercive exemplary attacks and graduated escalation.

It is important to recognize that the coercive impact on the opponent of a particular escalatory action is likely to vary according to circumstances. Much depends on whether that action stands by itself or is part of a credible threat (a) to escalate the conflict further, if necessary, and (b) to do so within a short period of time. Now, even without this additional threat, a limited escalatory step may be psychologically effective in some cases. But against a determined opponent or one who feels himself on the verge of a major success (e.g., the Russians in the Cuban missile crisis; Hanoi and the Viet Cong in the present war in Vietnam), it may be necessary to convey a strong, credible threat of additional imminent escalation when we undertake our first moves. This point is of such major importance to the theory and practice of graduated escalation and coercive warfare that some further elaboration of it here is desirable.

Weaker and stronger forms of the strategy of graduated escalation can be usefully differentiated. Let us oversimplify, for the sake of contrast, by distinguishing between two basic variants of this strategy: (1) the "try-and-see" approach, which is the weak type of graduated escalation; and (2) the "tacit-ultimatum," which is the strong variant. These are really two end points of a continuum, as we shall see later.
Now, as the phrase itself suggests, in the "try-and-see" approach the decision-maker takes only one military step at a time. He deliberately postpones the decision whether to undertake or to threaten additional escalation until it becomes clear whether the step he has already taken will have a sufficient coercive impact on the opponent. By contrast, in the "tacit-ultimatum" approach, at the same time one takes the initial escalation step one also clearly communicates to the opponent that this is only the first step in an upward series of escalatory moves that will be resorted to in short order if he does not comply with the demand to call off or curtail his aggression.

I call this the "tacit-ultimatum" type of coercion for obvious reasons: it utilizes all three elements of a classical ultimatum: (1) a specific demand on the opponent; (2) a time limit (explicit or implicit) for compliance; and (3) a sufficiently strong and credible threat of punishment if he does not comply.

Now, to the extent that one or more of these three elements of an ultimatum are not conveyed by what we say and do, the coercive impact of our escalation strategy on the opponent is weakened. Accordingly, there are intermediate forms of coercive escalation, and it is for this reason that the "try-and-see" and the "tacit-ultimatum" variants may be regarded as the two end points of a continuum. Thus, force is sometimes threatened or used in an exemplary fashion to convey determination without being coupled with an explicit, clear-cut demand on the opponent. In other cases, an explicit demand on the
opponent is made, but without the clear indication of a
time limit, or any sense that compliance is urgent. In
a third variation, the demand on the opponent may not be
backed by a credible threat of sufficiently strong
punishment if he does not comply.

What is threatened by way of punishment if the oppo-
nent does not comply with the demand need not be spelled
out explicitly in every case; but whatever form the
threat takes it should be reinforced by appropriate
military deployments and alerts.

It is important to note, with respect to the "tacit-
ultimatum" variant of this strategy, that even a relatively
small increment of force in the initial escalation action
can have a disproportionately large coercive impact on the
opponent, precisely because it is linked with a credible
threat of additional, imminent escalation. For this
reason, the "tacit-ultimatum" approach to graduated
escalation can succeed even with a relatively modest,
restrained initial use of force. In contrast, the
coercive signal conveyed to the opponent by a "try-and-see"
approach to escalation is limited largely to the potential
military effect or punitive damage of the type of action
actually undertaken. Accordingly, generally speaking, the
"try-and-see" approach is likely to require a much stronger
initial use of force than the "tacit-ultimatum" variant if
it is to succeed in coercing the opponent.
IV. AN ANALYSIS OF PAST EXPERIENCE

With these distinctions in mind, we turn now to the four historical cases. In the Cuban missile crisis, the United States used a strong form of graduated escalation, resembling and approximating the "tacit-ultimatum." The blockade of Soviet ships carrying "offensive" weapons (officially referred to as a "quarantine" for various political reasons) was chosen as the initial escalatory step. By itself the blockade would have been a weak and ineffectual response to the provocation it was designed to remove. This was recognized by U.S. policy-makers early in their planning of a response to the deployment of the Soviet missiles. Theodore Sorenson tells us:

At first, there had been very little support of a blockade.... It appeared almost irrelevant to the problem of missiles.... The greatest single drawback to the blockade, in comparison with the air strike, was time. Instead of presenting Khrushchev and the world with a fait accompli, it offered a prolonged and agonizing approach, uncertain in its effect, indefinite in its duration, enabling the missiles to become operational, subjecting us to counter-threats from Khrushchev...and in all these ways making more difficult a subsequent air strike if the missiles remained.\(^{2}\)

But President Kennedy and his advisors eventually chose the blockade because the two stronger, more relevant military options under consideration (an air strike against the missile sites, and invasion of Cuba) were

rejected on other grounds. Here is the interesting point: precisely because they had recognized the weakness of the blockade for purposes of coercing Khrushchev into removing the missiles, President Kennedy and his advisors saw the need to intensify the coercive impact of the blockade by coupling it with threats that additional, more severe escalatory steps would be taken within a short period should Khrushchev delay compliance with our demand.

It is evident, therefore, that not only did President Kennedy back into the blockade option but, recognizing its weakness, he then improvised around it what is here defined as the "tacit-ultimatum" strategy of graduated escalation.

In contrast, the U.S. responses to the North Korean attack during the initial week of the war and to the Chinese artillery shelling of Quemoy can both be regarded, in retrospect, as examples of the weaker "try-and-see" variant of escalation.

The North Korean attack was unexpected. It was designed to secure a military fait accompli. Within the context of escalation strategy, a fait accompli is particularly difficult to reverse quickly except by a strong variant of coercive escalation.

In the twelve or eighteen months preceding the invasion of South Korea, U.S. defense planners had carefully considered the importance to American security of various areas in the Far East. They had concluded that from a "strategic" standpoint South Korea was not of sufficient importance to U.S. security to be included within the American "defense perimeter" in the Far East.
Once South Korea was invaded, however, U.S. leaders immediately recognized that the political and international considerations raised by the naked, brutal military aggression against that country required direct U.S. military participation in its defense. Accordingly, our government reacted almost immediately with limited force. President Truman increased the level and scope of U.S. military operations several times in the first week of the war. But both militarily and politically these escalations had inconsequential effects on the powerful North Korean forces that were overrunning South Korea.

Indeed, the escalation of U.S. military operations during the first week of the war proceeded on a cautious, piecemeal basis. During that first week, our policymakers hoped, but did not demand, that the North Koreans would call off or halt their aggression once they encountered token U.S. combat forces. We did not place the aggressor under immediate, urgent pressure to call off his action or to limit its objectives. We did not signal anything approximating the "tacit-ultimatum" strategy either to the North Koreans or to the Soviets. In fact, a full-fledged U.S. commitment to defend South Korea developed only gradually during the first week of the war, and in part it developed slowly because U.S. leaders were initially concerned over the risk of Soviet involvement and the possibility of provoking the Soviets.  

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In the Quemoy crisis, the United States was confronted with a different type of provocation: a limited military probe rather than an attempt at a fait accompli. The Chinese artillery fire was shrewdly designed to clarify U.S. intentions in the first instance rather than to test Chinese Nationalist and U.S. capabilities for defending the offshore islands. U.S. leaders were not confronted with the immediate necessity to provide a high confidence defense of Quemoy. The major task, rather, was to signal U.S. intentions clearly and convincingly, and early enough in the crisis to forestall a Chinese Communist miscalculation that might lead to an expansion of the conflict. This, in fact, the Administration did do.

But while the U.S. response disappointed any hopes the Chinese Communists may have had that we would be willing to see Quemoy fall or would urge Chiang to give it up in the interests of peace, our response may well have inadvertently conveyed to the Chinese Communists the impression that our commitment was going to be quite limited, i.e., that we were inclined to give the Chinese Nationalists only indirect military assistance to ensure resupply of Quemoy, and that we wished to avoid the political-military costs associated with a stronger response. Certainly, the United States brought no significant pressure to bear for an immediate cessation of the artillery shelling. In fact, this objective was eschewed. In these circumstances -- in the absence of anything like the "tacit-ultimatum" variant of escalation strategy -- the Chinese Communists apparently decided
that it was not necessary to call off their artillery shelling of Quemoy immediately. They could well afford to wait and see whether the Nationalist Navy, with limited U.S. assistance, would be able to resupply Quemoy.

Thus, what began as a Chinese Communist probe of U.S. intentions developed into a low-scale test of Chinese Nationalist and U.S. capabilities to resupply the island. The aggressor had been allowed to establish a relatively favorable set of ground rules for a "test of capabilities," a test that he thought he might win, since it was not yet clear whether the United States would escalate additionally later on, if need be, to ensure resupply of Quemoy. Moreover, such a "test of capabilities" over the question of resupply of Quemoy gave the Communists an attractive opportunity to exacerbate political difficulties between the Chinese Nationalists and their U.S. ally and to mobilize world political pressures on behalf of their cause in the dispute. This the Chinese Communists proceeded to do for several weeks -- and they came close to succeeding -- before finally curtailing and then calling off the artillery shelling.4

Turning now to Vietnam, we have to recognize that the political-military context in this case differs appreciably from that of the three earlier crises. The fact remains, however, that force has been used in a

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graduated manner since February, particularly in an effort to coerce the Hanoi government. Therefore, while comments on this case are necessarily highly tentative, even a preliminary analysis of it may add to an understanding of the prerequisites for successful employment of the graduated escalation strategy. It may also illuminate some of the special problems encountered in adapting this strategy to a counterinsurgency situation in which a neighboring "sanctuary" has played an important role.

The type of coercive escalation employed against the Hanoi regime appears to fall somewhere between the "try-and-see" and "tacit-ultimatum" variants that have been discussed. That the Administration has not adopted the "tacit-ultimatum" approach in this instance can hardly be attributed to an inability to grasp the basic distinction discussed here between weaker and stronger forms of the graduated escalation strategy. As a matter of fact, in February and March, the Administration seems for a while to have tried to give Hanoi the impression that our initial air operations would be gradually expanded to new targets as part of a strong "tacit-ultimatum" application of graduated escalation. Whether Hanoi perceived the extension of air operations in these terms is, of course, critical; but the answer to this question is by no means clear. The implied U.S. threat that successively greater, more damaging options would be employed in the air

operations against North Vietnam was perhaps not sufficiently credible to Hanoi or, if at first believed, it was not sufficiently coercive to persuade them to curtail their help to the Viet Cong or enter into serious negotiations. In effect, therefore, the U.S. "bluff" about continuing the escalation was called, and thus far the United States has not stepped up air operations against the additional, more lucrative targets in North Vietnam. The question naturally arises: why not?
V. SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE VIETNAM CASE

A comparison of Vietnam with the earlier historical cases mentioned above may throw some light on why the Administration has not adopted a stronger variant of graduated escalation against Hanoi, as it did in the Cuban missile crisis, and why the escalatory steps taken have not been more effective.

It is probably only seldom -- i.e., only under a special set of conditions -- that the strongest coercive strategy, referred to here as the "tacit-ultimatum," becomes a feasible course of action for U.S. decision-makers and one that may be successfully implemented. Eight such special conditions emerge from a historical-analytical comparison of past crises in which the U.S. has employed forces and/or the threat of force to achieve limited objectives. These are briefly characterized in the following chart:

CHART I

Eight Conditions That Favor Adoption
And Successful Implementation of Strong
"Tacit-Ultimatum" Type of Coercive Escalation

1. Strong U.S. motivation
2. Asymmetry in motivation favoring the U.S.
3. Sense of urgency to achieve U.S. objectives
4. Clarity of U.S. objectives
5. Clarity regarding acceptable outcomes, specific demands, and terms of compliance
6. Adequate political support
7. Usable military options for controlled escalation
8. Arousal of opponent's fear of escalation
The meaning and importance of most of these "conditions" are self-evident; but several of them require more detailed discussion than is possible here. Nevertheless a few comments will be offered on each:

1. The first condition -- strong U.S. motivation -- is almost a truism. The United States has to be sufficiently motivated by what is at stake to act at all or to deal effectively with a provocation.

2. The second condition -- asymmetry in motivation favoring the U.S. -- is listed in order to highlight the fact that motivation is a two-sided matter. To deal with aggression effectively, it helps if the United States is more strongly motivated to defend something than the aggressor is to acquire it.

3. The third condition -- a sense of urgency to achieve our objective -- is particularly important if U.S. leaders are even to consider using the "tacit-ultimatum" strategy.

4. The fourth -- clarity of U.S. objectives -- is listed here as a reminder that it is always going to be difficult for our leaders to decide how much and what kind of force to use in opposing a provocation unless they can decide pretty quickly just what their objective is. Clarity as to the objective is usually necessary if limited force is to be applied effectively in order to coerce the opponent. For example, in planning what they would do in the Cuban missile crisis, President Kennedy and his advisors found it difficult to choose among the various military options under consideration until they
had decided whether the objective was to be merely the removal of the offensive missiles or the removal of all Soviet forces and personnel; or whether the objective was to destroy the Castro regime. Still other objectives were considered and discarded.\textsuperscript{6}

5. The fifth condition -- \textit{clarity regarding acceptable outcomes, specific demands, and terms of compliance} -- is related to the fourth but goes beyond it. To coerce a determined and shrewd opponent, one who has had a lot of experience squirming out of tough spots, it may be necessary to have a clear notion of what we will settle for and, particularly, what it will take to satisfy us before we call off our pressure. Clarity regarding our general objective is not enough. To employ graduated force to coerce the opponent we have to formulate \textit{specific} demands and decide what \textit{terms of compliance} the opponent must agree to in order to ensure that we actually get what we want -- and what he may promise us and try to weasel out of later.

6. Turning to the sixth condition: \textit{adequate political support}, particularly domestic support, is needed for whatever objectives and coercive measures our leaders choose in a crisis. In fact, inadequate political support may force our leaders to pursue only minimal objectives and may severely constrain them in their choice of the military means to achieve those objectives. If our leaders do not have sufficient political support at the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{6}Sorenson, \textit{op. cit.}
\end{footnotesize}
beginning of a crisis, they have to find ways of developing and preserving it -- as President Johnson has done in Vietnam. A slow, step-by-step escalation of military operations may be required in some crises because public support for a stronger and swifter application of force is lacking; in this fashion support may be created for a military policy that would be rejected by public opinion if it were introduced all at once.

7. The seventh condition -- usable options for escalation -- highlights the importance of military capabilities, but in a special way. We have to keep in mind the difference between "gross capabilities" to take out targets -- capabilities that we may possess in ample quantities -- and "usable military options," i.e., capabilities that the President is willing to use in a crisis only if they do the job in the way he thinks appropriate or necessary. Capabilities are only the ingredients from which usable options are formed. The criteria for usable military options in graduated, controlled escalation are stringent and often difficult to satisfy in practice. This difficulty stems from the need to mesh political and military considerations in employing force in a manner consonant with the requirements of what has come to be known as "crisis management." 7

7 One general statement of the political-military criteria for "usable" options in graduated, coercive warfare is offered here: (1) Go-no-go" control of successive military options at the highest national level (or acceptable delegation); (2) options that constitute clear and appropriate demonstrations of resolution
8. The eighth condition -- arousal of the opponent's fear of escalation -- is a reminder that it helps to coerce an opponent if our initial escalatory moves begin to arouse his concern about the possibility that the conflict might eventually escalate to a large-scale nuclear or general war. It is particularly important to deter the opponent from engaging in controlled escalatory moves of his own in response to the efforts made to coerce him to comply with the demands made on him. (On this point see below, p. 27.)

To achieve the specific objectives chosen by U.S. leaders; (3) options that can be coupled with political communications and proposals in the desired manner; (4) options that are expected to achieve the necessary level of military effectiveness with relatively small forces; (5) options that will not confront the opponent himself with an urgent political and/or military requirement to escalate immediately; (6) controlled, discrete options that will provide a pause in the momentum of the conflict, and thus give the opponent time to receive and reflect upon the "message," without too much "noise" from other actions; (7) options that are not interpretable by the opponent as the start of all-out local war, or theater nuclear war, or general war.
VI. THE QUESTION OF VARYING U.S. SUCCESS
IN DEALING WITH DIFFERENT CRISSES

These eight "conditions" will now be used as a checklist for comparing the four historical cases. It is not always easy to decide whether one of these "conditions" was present in a crisis. Definitive historical analyses of the four cases from this standpoint have not yet been made. The purpose of the comparison is to suggest answers to the question why the United States has done better in dealing with some crises than with others. (See Chart II, Pg. 22.)

It is noteworthy that all eight of these conditions were present in the Cuban missile crisis. In the author's judgment, this fact made it possible -- and in a sense obliged President Kennedy -- to adopt a strong "tacit-ultimatum" form of graduated escalation.

This is not to say that all eight conditions must always be present before U.S. leaders can find an effective way of dealing with aggression. That would be too pessimistic a conclusion to draw from the analysis. Some of these conditions are more important than others. And some kinds of provocations are easier to reverse than others.

On the other hand, one cannot fail to be struck by the fact that at least several of these conditions were definitely not present in the Quemoy crisis. The absence particularly of Number 3 (sense of urgency) and Number 6 (adequate political support) severely constrained both the choice and effectiveness of the U.S. response to the artillery action against Quemoy.
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<th>STRONG U.S. MOTIVATION</th>
<th>KOREA</th>
<th>QUEMOY</th>
<th>CUBA</th>
<th>VIETNAM</th>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>SENSE OF URGENCY...</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>CLARITY OF U.S. OBJECTIVES</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>CLARITY RE ACCEPTABLE OUTCOMES AND DEMANDS</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>OPPONENT'S FEAR OF UNCONTROLLED ESCALATION</td>
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Chart 2—A summary check-list of the presence or absence of conditions affecting U.S. choice of strong graduated escalation strategy in four crises.
Much the same thing can be said about the first case, the initial U.S. response to the North Korean attack.

As for the Vietnam case, perhaps the critical conditions missing, or present in too weak a form, have been Numbers 2, 3, and possibly also 4 and 6. (A few of these judgments might have to be changed were one privy to the high-level deliberations behind U.S. escalation policy.)

However tentative these observations may be, they call attention to the absence of some of these conditions as part of the explanation for the fact that the effort to coerce Hanoi has not been more successful and for the fact that U.S. leaders have not as yet pursued an even stronger escalation policy.

This is not to say that the air escalation against North Vietnam since February has accomplished nothing. That is by no means so. A balanced assessment would have to include the following favorable results: (1) the air escalation against North Vietnam gave South Vietnamese morale a badly needed boost and perhaps gained time; (2) it showed increased U.S. commitment to prevent a Viet Cong victory; (3) it created some bargaining leverage for possible negotiations and for influencing the future course of the war; (4) it gave notice that enemy sanctuaries will not necessarily remain inviolate, which gives particular credibility to U.S. warnings designed to deter Communist China from any substantial intervention and Hanoi from increasing its own military involvement in South Vietnam.
VII. THE FOUR COMMunist ACTORS IN THE VIETNAM CRISIS

Any explanation for the fact that graduated escalation has not been implemented to the hilt against North Vietnam ought to include another factor, and one that distinguishes this case from the three earlier crises that have been discussed. The war in Vietnam has offered U.S. policy-makers a problem that in several respects is even more complicated and difficult than the cold war crises of the earlier bipolar world. Our immediate opponent is no longer a monolithic Communist movement, dominated by the Soviet Union acting through proxies like North Korea, or in coordination with allies such as Communist China was at the time of the Quemoy crisis. In Vietnam there are three or four independent Communist actors -- the Viet Cong, Hanoi, China, Russia -- who simultaneously, but in different ways, are the targets of our military pressure and diplomatic moves. The interests of these four separate Communist actors in this case both overlap and diverge in intricate ways that are not easily predictable. They are certainly not easily manipulated by what we do.

In order to balance responsibly the possible gains and risks of graduated escalation, U.S. policy-makers have found it necessary to take a very close, continuous reading of the impact of each major U.S. move upon the attitudes and interrelationships of these four Communist actors. The effectiveness of graduated escalation in Vietnam and -- what must not be overlooked -- its consequences for the broader and longer-range interests of U.S. foreign policy,
very much depends upon the complex interplay among the four Communist actors. Under these circumstances it has been necessary for U.S. leaders to avoid committing themselves rigidly to any pre-programmed concept of escalation. Rather, they have had to apply graduated escalation in a controlled, flexible manner. Both the choice and the timing of the next escalatory step have had to be decided after evaluating the individual and composite effects of previous moves on the four members of the opposing lineup.

A RAND colleague has expressed this point very well. He pointed out that U.S. military policy and diplomacy in the Vietnamese crisis would have to be carefully orchestrated and conducted with great skill and flexibility "so as to enable the President to apply just enough pressure at one point without pressing too hard in another; to induce one Communist opponent [the Soviet Union] to urge moderation on others; to punish still another opponent [North Vietnam] severely enough to make 'sitting it out' an unrewarding strategy, yet not to damage it so precipitately that it places itself completely in the hands of its powerful big neighbor [China]. This is an extremely delicate set of balances to achieve and it will require of the United States great skill of a high political and diplomatic as well as military order." This observation serves to remind us, as noted earlier, that "graduated

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8 Arnold Horelick, in an internal document of April 1965. This point has also been discussed in newspaper accounts; see, for example, articles by Max Frankel, New York Times, March 5 and 7, 1965.
"escalation" is not a military, war-winning course of action but rather a political strategy that employs military and other means.
VIII. THE QUESTION OF HOW MUCH TIME
ONE CAN AFFORD TO ALLOW THE OPPONENT

It is not always possible to adopt the strongest form of graduated escalation strategy -- the "tacit-ultimatum" approach to coercing an opponent. The reasons for this sobering fact are complex; they cannot be reduced to the simple proposition that it is merely a matter of exercising our national "resolution" to threaten and use, if need be, the ample capabilities at our disposal. Conditions and circumstances of the kind identified in this paper, which "favor" adoption and successful implementation of the "tacit-ultimatum" variant of coercion, will not be present in every crisis. When a weaker form of coercion strategy is chosen, as in Vietnam, it has to be expected that it may take a longer period of time and a greater military effort to have the desired impact on the opponent.

There are always likely to be important disadvantages and risks in responding to a provocation without a sense of the urgent need to achieve our objectives fairly quickly. In the Cuban missile crisis, as the quotation from Theodore Sorenson's account indicates, the disadvantages of the blockade option from the standpoint of giving Khrushchev too much time were self-evident and were compensated for in the over-all response the Administration developed. In our escalatory pressure against North Vietnam, on the other hand, the disadvantages of giving Hanoi too much time are more uncertain and difficult to weigh. The possible disadvantages of time in this case may be put in the form of several questions:
1. By escalating air operations against North Vietnam in a relatively slow manner, are we giving the opponent time to introduce a relatively effective air defense system -- thereby making the military job we have to do in order to coerce him more difficult and costly?

2. Has the passage of time since the air operations began in February given Hanoi an opportunity to play off Communist China and the Soviet Union against one another in order to obtain greater indirect military assistance from both?

3. Has the gradual and limited character of the air escalation tended somewhat to discredit our military capabilities in the opponent's eyes; has it been taken as a sign of lack of determination?

4. Will the measured, cumulative effectiveness of air operations against interdiction routes in North Vietnam and Laos permit the other side to develop, or place greater reliance on, alternative routes of supply?

5. If the pace of our upward escalation of the war as a whole slows down and assumes a relatively stable pattern of self-observed limitations, will the opponent be tempted to escalate the war himself, for example by sending more regular North Vietnamese ground forces into the South? If this possibility exists, how can we deter Hanoi from doing so? Can the threat of additional air escalation be employed to this end?

Questions of this kind are relevant, though the answer to them is unclear.
IX. CONCLUSION

Comparative analysis of the coercive use of force by the United States in four historical cases has led to what appears at first glance a surprising paradox. It is precisely those crises (like the Cuban one) in which conditions for a strong U.S. political-military response are clearly present that offer an opportunity to coerce the opponent with a minimal use of force. Conversely, those crises in which many of the same conditions are absent and in which the United States is less strongly motivated by what is at stake, seem to require a much greater military effort to achieve our objectives.

To take note of this general paradox is not equivalent, however, to regarding the problem of employing force as an instrument of policy in a deterministic vein. How well the United States does in this respect depends not only on the presence of favorable conditions in a crisis but also on skill in recognizing, developing and utilizing the political-military factors that "favor" a relatively strong and appropriate response. To this end, policy planning that benefits from a detailed appreciation of the "lessons" of past crises, and from recognition of stronger and weaker variants of coercive escalation strategy under different conditions, is bound to be useful.

9The Cuban crisis is by no means unique in this respect; conditions favoring a strong "tacit-ultimatum" strategy may be present in some future crises as well -- for example, in the NATO area.