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The "Madman" Rhetoric of Richard Nixon:  
An Alternative Means to Establish Geopolitical Ethos.

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## Abstract

In a geopolitical context, the means of establishing deterrence is premised on the military capability of a country and the perceived willingness of a leader to use force as a means to achieve policy goals. A key function of rhetoric is to establish the personal ethos of a leader regarding their willingness to use force. During the Cold War the rhetorical context of geopolitical discourse was premised on a rational choice model of decision-making based on a strategic calculation of the relative strength of each country. This paper argues that rhetorical strategies need to change relative to the strategic situation facing each leader. Further, the rhetorical burden of building and maintaining strategic credibility inversely increases relative to a country's military power. This paper explores Richard Nixon's innovative rhetorical strategy of cultivating irrationality and uncertainty as a means to maintain and enhance "deterrent credibility" during a period of national decline.

## Introduction

Aristotle identified "ethos" or speaker credibility as a key component of successful rhetoric. One particular context of ethos can be referred to as "geopolitical credibility." Geopolitical credibility concerns the reputation of countries and leaders in relation to one another. In this context, credibility can be defined as a form of power and deterrence. In a series of lectures and writings, Harvard Professor Daniel Ellsberg (1959b) helped define the parameters and expectations regarding this form of credibility. Ellsberg points out that a leader's choice must "make a difference" (p. 5) to others, that a leader's action must affect the relevant outcomes.

Rhetoric plays an important role in this process. It supposes an effective channel of communication exists between leaders and that rhetoric or other forms of communication can set or change expectations of what a leader would (or might) do.

The formula for geopolitical credibility is bound to a particular context. First, rhetorical strategies need to change relative to the strategic situation facing each leader. The rhetorical burden of building and maintaining strategic credibility inversely increases relative to a country's military power in relation to other countries. Second, a leader's own personal reputation or character is a key factor in setting the expectations of others. What kind of personality does a leader project? What does their personal history indicate? Lastly, what are the political or national constraints placed on a leader? Do these factors enhance or undercut the image of a leader?

This paper will explore Richard Nixon's innovative rhetorical strategy of cultivating irrationality and uncertainty as a means to maintain and enhance "deterrent credibility" during a period of national decline. First this paper will describe the evolving geopolitical context in the

years preceding the Nixon presidency. Second, it will examine the specific rhetorical dilemma and context facing Nixon. Lastly, the paper will examine the specific rhetorical and communicative tactics used by Nixon in his attempt to establish geopolitical credibility.

#### *Credibility and the Evolving Geopolitical Context: 1945-1969*

In terms of leadership, geopolitical credibility can be seen as an equation:

Geopolitical Credibility ( $GC$ ) = Force capability ( $FC$ ) x Perceived willingness to use force ( $PW$ ).

This equation is essentially a communicative function. "Force capability," as a form of deterrence, is based on the visibility of the destructive power of military weapons. For example, throughout the 1950s and early 1960s much of the nuclear weapon tests conducted by the United States and the Soviet Union were not premised on the scientific need to "test" the weapon, but a need to display the "potential" of their weapons to one another. The other key variable, "perceived willingness to use force," rests upon creating expectations of what a leader would do when facing specific scenarios. Many times this expectation rests upon an "image" projected by a leader regarding their "toughness" or resolve. In addition, may leaders promulgate various "doctrines" of national intent. Metaphorically this draws a "line in the sand" that communicates military intent in advance. For example, President Jimmy Carter delineated the "Carter Doctrine" that communicated the United States willingness to use force to protect its energy interests in the Middle East.

Many times policy action itself can be seen in purely rhetorical terms (see Scott 2003; Zarefsky, 1983). In these cases, the primary intent of a policy action is to communicate a "message" as opposed to the self-contained value of the action itself. In related cases, the justification of a policy can *evolve* to a purely communicative function. Thus, evaluation of policy includes assessments of what kind of message would be sent if a policy is changed or

discontinued (e.g., showing weakness or lack of resolve). In extreme cases, this can serve as a sole justification to continue policies where the original goals have proven to be unachievable.

In other cases, policy actions are justified as a "test case." In theory, the importance of a test case framed in isolation may not be vital to a country's security. Thus, the primary intent of a test case is to communicate to the willingness to use force and advertise the destructive power of military weapons. Inversely, failure to take action, could communicate a lack of willingness to use military force. It could be argued that the message context surrounding a "test case" might undermine the credibility of a leader to take future action, which *could* prove to be vital to a nation's security. Once an incident is rhetorically framed as a test case<sup>1</sup>, a leader is communicatively trapped. Regardless whether action is taken or not, a larger message will be sent.

Typically these two variables (*PW, FC*) tend to operate in conjunction with one another. For example, a country with a weak military capability would be viewed as less likely to initiate military action. However, history has shown cases of a clear delineation between the two variables. For instance, Germany's re-occupation of the Rhineland in 1936 was done from a position of military weakness and inferiority in relation to France and Great Britain. However, Hitler perceived British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and French Premier Flandin were not willing to militarily oppose his action (see Churchill, pp. 178-9). In addition, this equation typically operates within a rational context; e.g., a militarily weak country would not initiate military action if it were believed that a country (or countries) with a stronger military capability would intervene.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the "framing" of a test case could come from sources apart from a leader. In many domestic political contexts, political opponents, as a form of criticism, may frame events as a test case of a leader's resolve.

From 1945 to 1969, the United States went from a position of unparalleled military superiority to military parity or even inferiority. At the close of World War II, President Truman enjoyed high geopolitical credibility. The United States had a monopoly of atomic weapons (*FC*) and President Truman had demonstrated his willingness (*PW*) to use them. During the period of the US atomic monopoly, it was possible to rely on nuclear weapons "to deter all forms of aggression" because the US could inflict punishment without fear of retaliation (Kissinger, 1957, p. 15). By 1948 the Soviet Union had tested its first atomic weapon and the geopolitical equation began to change. Throughout the 1950s the leaders of the Soviet Union increasingly highlighted their military capabilities. In response, Eisenhower's Secretary of State John Foster Dulles authored the doctrine of "brinkmanship" (Mosley, 1978). Dulles had a deliberate strategy of resolving issues by threatening to go to "going to brink" of war (Hoopes, 1973, p. 310). In theory brinkmanship would bring into sharper relief the overall U.S. military superiority and the resolve (*PW*) of American leaders to go to war if necessary. Schell (1975) noted that Dulles's rhetorical strategy of threatening "nuclear retaliation" (p. 347) was used to achieve limited objectives that ground troops had been used for in the past. The rhetorical pattern of brinkmanship served to establish a strong militaristic context for decision-making. However, this rhetorical approach would work only if one enjoyed clear military superiority and opponents were bound by a rational worldview.

By 1957 Harvard Professor Henry Kissinger observed that the growing number of nuclear weapons had produced a strategic paradox. In his book, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, Kissinger pointed out that the unprecedented destructive force (*FC*) of nuclear weapons rendered their actual use as irrational or even suicidal. As Kissinger noted, "The more powerful the weapons, however, the greater becomes the reluctance to use them" (p. 1). Thus, the equation

of geopolitical credibility had been irrevocably altered. There was an increased recognition that atomic war was "no longer a conceivable instrument of policy" (p. 4). The use of nuclear-based militaristic threats was increasingly limited based on the ultimate test of rationality: survival. Ironically, due to the suicidal nature of atomic warfare, the threat to use nuclear weapons in a minor crisis lacked "credibility" (Schell, 1975, p. 347). The perceived willingness of leaders to actually use nuclear weapons (*PW*) to achieve discretionary policy goals had been rendered obsolete.

The perceived reliance on nuclear weapons spurred defense strategists to develop new strategies to maintain geopolitical credibility. Kissinger and others recommended a strategy of "flexible response" or "limited war" doctrine. This strategy sought to remove the "nuclear paralysis" that had undermined US credibility. The basic thrust of "limited war" doctrine was a build up in the number and sophistication of conventional (i.e., non nuclear) military forces and weapons. Schell (1975) noted that this policy "opened the way to a crucial shift in the mission of US nuclear forces" (p. 350). The policy of brinkmanship had sought to use the threat of nuclear war" to resolve small crises around the world, but if conventional military options could take over this function, nuclear weapons could be retired into a passive role of purely deterring nuclear attack. Schell argued that by the early 1960s many US defense strategists were looking for a "case-study" to demonstrate US military strength at levels below the brink of nuclear war (p. 356).

In this context the strategic objective of the Vietnam War was to establish US geopolitical credibility. Thus the strategic justification of limited war was purely communicative. A limited war would fulfill the geopolitical equation. Both the perceived willingness to use military force (*PW*) and actual force capability (*FC*) would be communicated to a world

audience. In this sense the Vietnam War was "a theorists' war par excellence" (p. 356). The premise of this theory was graduated escalation. In this scenario, the United States would continue to apply a series of escalating conventional military moves until the enemy retreated or desisted in their action. As a result American prestige became fully engaged in Vietnam (Brandon, 1973, p. 7).

However, Vietnam demonstrated the flaws in limited war theory. An unprecedented display of conventional weapons failed to achieve the stated objectives of US policy. More importantly, the widespread domestic dissent and protest undercut the underlying communicative function of the war. As Schell noted: "the demonstrations at home struck at the very foundation of the larger aims for which the war was being fought. They struck a crippling blow at the credibility on which the whole strategy was based" (p. 369). It was clear that US public support for limited war was not sustainable for long durations.

### *The Rhetorical Dilemma Facing Nixon*

Nixon entered the presidency in 1969 acutely aware of the diminished geopolitical credibility of the United States. Nixon had seen the evolution of maintaining geopolitical credibility from 1945 to 1969. He felt that brinkmanship was a viable policy when the United States had enormous nuclear advantage (Kimball, 2004, p. 57). However, by 1969 the power equation had changed dramatically. As Brandon (1973) noted, "Where once the United States enjoyed nuclear superiority, the Soviet Union had achieved nuclear parity" (p. xi). Cumulatively, Nixon was faced with a situation where a nuclear deterrent was considered unthinkable as a means to resolve lower-level conflict and the conventional option of graduated limited conflict was not sustainable. Further, the domestic trauma of the Vietnam War led to an increased anti-militaristic attitude within the US national/political culture. It was during this

period that Nixon expressed his greatest fear that the United States would become a "pitiful, helpless giant" (Ambrose, 1989, p. 345).

### *Bounded by Rationality?*

Throughout the Cold War the prevailing model of strategic thinking was premised on the "rational choice model" of decision-making. The rational choice model offered a high degree of predictability in the interplay of different actor's strategic choices. This is a philosophy similar to that of established "scenario planning approaches" (Bennett & Khalifa, 2000). Decision-making is a rational response to choices made by others. Decisions are rational on the basis of definable preferences for outcomes, to recognize that interdependent consequences exist. The rational choice model is restrictive in the sense that geopolitical actors will not choose options that produce outcomes comparatively detrimental to a country's security interests. Thus in 1969, under a rational choice model, both nuclear threats and graduated limited war were not fully credible instruments because they were either considered suicidal or ineffectual and unsustainable.

In contrast, Ellsberg (1959b) pointed to the possibility of breaking the boundaries of conventional rationality as an alternative means to establish geopolitical credibility. Ellsberg observed that rationality restricts possible options to a leader that could restore credibility. Under a rational choice model, a crisis scenario would assume that since the involved parties are "normal" or rational it would logically follow that their perception and assessments of outcomes would also be very similar. This leads to a very predictable perception of what an opponent's next "move" would be. Thus, the heart of deterrence is based on negative consequences that could potentially be inflicted on others from their strategic "move." In a rational sense the

threshold of perceived willingness to use force (*PW*) is limited by a leader's actual force capability (*FC*) in relation to their adversaries.

However, Ellsberg identified a strategy of fostering an image of unpredictability that would add an aura of uncertainty in regard to expectations. "Building a reputation for erratic, senseless, schizoid behavior" (p. 5) can be a useful asset. Adding irrational "fuzziness" to the decision-making matrix, could restore a degree of geopolitical credibility. A leader could project deterrence by convincing others that he/she might be oblivious or incapable of choosing the most rational choice based on an interaction of moves. Thus, a leader with an image of a "hot temper" and lapses in rational thought is one who could actually enjoy a higher degree of geopolitical credibility. Ellsberg noted that the resulting deterrent effect of others would be: "I didn't know what he might do . . . He could have done anything" (p. 5). Thus, a rhetorical strategy emphasizing willingness to use force (*PW*) regardless of the consequences or risks can offset a diminished force capability (*FC*). It is interesting to note that Nixon's National Security Advisor, Dr. Henry Kissinger had attended Ellsberg's lectures on this subject while both were faculty members at Harvard (Kimball, 1998, p. 79).

#### *Nixon Adopts a "Madman" Approach*

Nixon's Chief of Staff, H.R. Haldeman observed that as early as 1968 Nixon intended to foster a "madman image" as a means of ending the Vietnam War.

We were walking along a foggy beach after a long day of speechwriting. He said, "I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that, 'for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communism. We can't restrain him when

he's angry-and he has his hand on the nuclear button'-and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace." (Haldeman, 1978, p. 83)

There is clear evidence that Nixon's musings were codified as national security policy. A 1969 National Security top-secret memorandum<sup>2</sup> entitled, "Another Vietnam option," contained elements of Nixon's madman approach. The memo observed that the North Vietnamese "will continue to bide its time until we change the ground rules" (p. 3). The memo argued that the US should:

Offer Hanoi terms almost as favorable as what they rationally calculate they'll get by waiting, and convey in the process that we really care so deeply about a humiliation that we would first act irrationally toward the Soviets as well as North Vietnam. (p. 3)

The memo further argued that the "madman approach" should also be directed toward the Soviet Union.

To Moscow as to Hanoi, we are playing our minimum card. We are cornered. We are therefore dangerous. The Russians should see this as an authentic last grasp at a political solution, with the product of rejection a U.S. humiliation carrying incalculable risks. (p. 5)

In 1981 Nixon himself wrote that if your "adversary feels that you are unpredictable, even rash, he will be deterred from pressing you too far" (p. 277).

#### *Constrained by the Presidential Image*

Nixon's adoption of a madman approach to establish geopolitical credibility had its own unique rhetorical constraints. Fostering an image of an irrational out of control president who might use nuclear weapons would be antithetical to the American public's expectation of

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<sup>2</sup> The memorandum was authored by two members of Henry Kissinger's National Security staff, Roger Morris and Tony Lake.

presidential leadership. Interestingly the 1964 Republican presidential nominee, Barry Goldwater, had unwittingly projected a madman image during the 1964 campaign. His campaign rhetoric concerning the use of nuclear weapons as a jungle defoliant in Vietnam and his jocular reference to "lobbing one (nuclear missile) in Kremlin's men's room" (see White, 1965) had earned him a "madman reputation" with disastrous electoral results. Thus to carry out his madman strategy, Nixon had to walk a rhetorical tightrope. He needed to communicate an image of irrationality and unpredictability to his geopolitical adversaries while maintaining an image of rational cool leadership to his domestic political audience. Crossing the tightrope would involve several rhetorical strategies including careful use of communication channels, semantical ambiguity and symbolic action.

#### Rhetorical Tactics of a Madman

##### *Interpersonal Channels of Irrationality*

Within months of assuming the presidency Nixon and Kissinger began a purposeful strategy of "leaking" to possible adversaries Nixon's unstable mindset. Typically this took the form of key Nixon associates informally imparting the "madman image" to relevant audiences. This approach allowed Nixon to separate his audiences, domestic and foreign, and project dissimilar images to each. One example of this approach took place in July 1969. Nixon advisor Leonard Garment was scheduled to visit the Soviet Union to represent the United States at the Moscow film festival. Since Garment was a close personal friend and advisor to Nixon, it was felt that the Soviets would seek him out to gather information. Before Garment departed, Kissinger asked Garment to "convey the impression that Nixon is somewhat crazy-- immensely intelligent, well organized, and experienced, to be sure, but at moments of stress or personal challenge unpredictable and capable of the bloodiest brutality" (Garment, 1997, p. 174).

Garment, in his memoirs, recounted the image he projected while visiting with Georgy Arbatov, a senior advisor to General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev:

I said things about the president of the United States that would have turned every hair on every head in our Foreign Service white with fright. Nixon is, I observed with clinical cheer, a dramatically disjointed personality, capable of barbaric cruelty to those who engage him in tests of strength. He is also, I threw in, more than a little paranoid because of years of bashing at the hands of political and media enemies. At his core, I said, he is predictably unpredictable, a man full of complex contradictions, a strategic visionary but, when necessary, a coldhearted butcher. (pp. 176-7)

What kind of impression the Soviets formed of Nixon on the basis of these kinds of descriptions is open to speculation. However, Kissinger (1979) related an incident that occurred during the 1972 summit meeting in Moscow that might provide some insight into the Russian perception of Nixon (or perhaps their own peculiar brand of humor):

The Soviets; like the Chinese, had insisted that Nixon use one of their planes for internal travel, from Moscow to Kiev. . . . we boarded the Soviet VIP plane, which was somewhat larger and considerably more ostentatious than *Air Force One*. In full view of the world press, and to the considerable chagrin of our Soviet hosts, its engines refused to start.

While a back up plane was being readied Kosygin stormed on the plane and said: "Tell us what you want to do with our Minister of Aviation. If you want him shot on the tarmac we will do so. (p. 1215)

### *Predictably Unpredictable*

One aspect of predicting behavior is guiding philosophies that would tend to govern an individual's behavior in a specific setting. For example, political ideologies would serve to make

an individual more predictable when facing specific issues or situations. Despite Nixon's self-identification as an anti-communist conservative, he displayed a high degree of pragmatism while in office. Nixon once commented to Senator Robert Dole: "I just get up every morning to confound my enemies" (Reeves, 2001, p. 18). Nixon biographer Stephen E. Ambrose (1989) described his national security policy as:

Soft words and tough deeds, keeping the enemy guessing, reinforcing the madman image—all this appealed to Nixon's sense of the dramatic and satisfied his need to feel that *something*<sup>3</sup> was happening. He also rather liked the idea of sending out mixed signals. . . . Nixon the mad bomber. Nixon the builder of an ABM system. Nixon the arms-control advocate. Nixon the first President to cut the DOD budget in eight years. Which was the real Nixon? (p. 258-9)

Even on the domestic issues Nixon was wildly unpredictable. Nixon speechwriter William Safire (1975) observed that people perceived Nixon as a "zigzagger and flipflopper, the constantly moving target" (p. 599). Another Nixon speechwriter, Pat Buchanan observed in a 1971 memorandum:

We suffer from the widely held belief that the President has no Grand Vision that inspires him, no deeply held political philosophy that girds, guides and explains his words, decisions and deeds. The President is viewed as the quintessential political pragmatist, standing before an ideological buffet, picking some from this tray and some from that. On both sides he is seen as the text book political transient, here today, gone tomorrow, shuttling back and forth, as weather permits, between liberal programs and conservative rhetoric. As someone put, "the bubble in the carpenter's level." (p. 544).

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<sup>3</sup> Italics in original.

This ambiguity was reflected in several areas. Nixon proposed a far-reaching "Family Assistance Plan" (FAP) that would have revolutionized the welfare system by expanding assistance to the unemployed and working poor. Nixon carried out desegregation much more rapidly than had Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson. He imposed wage and price controls in 1971. He aggressively sought to clean up the environment and established the Environmental Protection Agency. All of these domestic policy directions were not anticipated when Nixon was elected in 1968. Nixon himself defended his pragmatic approach as a "necessary means to achieve a greater goal" (Nixon, 1990, p. 288) and was sometimes necessary to avoid worse options. Although, Nixon's "pragmatism" could have hurt him domestically (the 1972 election argues against it), it projected an image that made it very hard for potential adversaries to predict Nixon's next move.

#### *Action without Explanation*

Nixon in 1982 wrote, "The leader must learn not only how to talk, but also when--and equally important, when to stop talking. . . . silence can be a powerful instrument for a leader" (p. 335). This is particularly true when presidential actions are taken without explanation. A good example of this approach was the 1972 "Christmas bombing" of North Vietnam. In the months preceding the Christmas bombing, hopes were raised that a peace settlement was near. In October 1972, in a televised press conference, Nixon's National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, had announced, "We believe that peace is at hand . . . We believe that an agreement is within sight" (Karnow, 1983, p. 651). However, negotiations with the North Vietnamese stalled and Nixon decided to break the deadlock with a major escalation of the war. Nixon ordered the military to conduct massive air attacks from December 18-29 over a heavily populated section of North Vietnam. What was unprecedented was Nixon's refusal to make a

public statement to explain the escalation of the war. In terms of presidential history, this was very unusual. It is interesting to note that Kissinger had strongly advised Nixon to make a televised national speech to explain to the American public the need to escalate the war. In a December 4, 1972 memo, Kissinger argued to Nixon:

I therefore believe this situation will require your addressing the American people directly. We will have to step up the bombing again, while at the same time we will probably want to lay out a positive negotiating position for the future so as to give our policy a defined objective and give the American people hope. I believe that you can make a stirring convincing case to the American people and that you will be able to rally them as you have so often in the past with your direct appeals. (Kissinger, 1972b)

The next day, Nixon, through his Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman, replied, "that it would be totally wrong for the President to go on T.V. and explain the details of why the talks have failed" (Haldeman, 1972). Kissinger responded,

. . . in the event of a stalemate we only have two choices: to yield or to rally American support for one more effort which I do not believe the North Vietnamese can withstand. If we are to attempt to rally the American people only the President can adequately do that eventuality. (Kissinger, 1972a)

However, Nixon foresaw a third option, which was to escalate the war without public explanation. Any public statement by Nixon explaining the bombing would have established the upper parameters of the action itself. It is unlikely Nixon could have given a speech where he announces the bombing and states that he is not sure what he might do tomorrow to further escalate the war. Nixon's silence in relation to his policy action *could* create this perception. Nixon observed in 1990:

I made no announcement in advance and declined to answer press inquiries on the operation. There was enormous pressure from the media for me to make a public statement about why we had resumed the bombing and what terms I would accept to discontinue it. . . . It was not an easy time. But the tactics worked. Strong action combined with absolute silence brought the Communists back to the negotiating table . . . (p. 293)

Nixon believed that if he had gone public he would have not achieved the same result. He also felt his action communicated a larger message to other potential adversaries that was consistent with the madman image he sought to convey. At a dinner party on December 18, 1972, Nixon was described as:

He did not care if the whole world thought he was crazy in resuming the bombing and mining. If it did, so much the better; the Russians and Chinese might think they were dealing with a madman and so had better force North Vietnam into a settlement before the world was consumed in a larger war. (Wilson, 1974, p. A10)

By not providing a rhetorical context to his action, Nixon created a high degree of uncertainty as to what his next move (if any) might be. Nixon's silence also created an interpretive dichotomy that he had no rational justification for the bombing itself. Despite the press criticism, Karnow (1983) argues that Nixon was able to mitigate the negative damage to his domestic image because almost all of the American troops from Vietnam had been withdrawn by December 1972. In addition, congressional criticism was slight due to Congress being adjourned for the holidays. Thus the overall public response (apart from the press) was relatively muted (p. 653).

*Communicative Ambiguity*

Lack of precision or ambiguity in communication can also add uncertainty in a decision matrix. The veiled or unspecified threat does not allow a potential adversary to plan their "counter-moves" in a clear scenario. Nixon and Kissinger, on a number of occasions, would use the veiled unspecified threat as a means of influence or coercion. In theory, the greater the implied negative consequences, the higher the projected influence over others might be. Cumulatively, the image of an impulsive, rash and unpredictable president would expand and amplify the range of possible "threat possibilities" left open to interpretation.

In early 1969, Nixon adopted a policy of "linkage" as a means to influence the Soviet Union to diminish their support of North Vietnam. In essence the Nixon/Kissinger policy was one of blackmail toward the intimidation of others. An April 15, 1969, conversation between Henry Kissinger and Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin provides a classic example of this strategy:

I then said that the President had wished me to convey his thoughts on Vietnam to Moscow. . . The President had therefore decided to make one more direct approach on the highest level before drawing the conclusion that the war could only be ended by unilateral means. The President's personal word should be a guarantee of sincerity. After showing Dobrynin the talking points and the President's initials, I read them to him. He took copious notes . . . (Kissinger, 1969, p. 1)

This passage in a nutshell reflects Nixon's rhetorical approach: First, the ambiguous nature of the threat: "ending the war by unilateral means;" is followed by stressing the sincerity of threat itself. Later in the conversation Dobrynin sought to clarify Nixon's implied threat.

. . . Dobrynin asked whether I was saying that unless the Vietnam War was settled, we would not continue our discussions on the Middle East and not enter the talks on strategic

arms. I replied that we were prepared to continue talking but we would take measures which might create a complicated situation. . . . He then asked whether these new measures might involve Soviet ships. I replied that many measures were under intensive study. In dealing with the President, it was well to remember that he always did more than he threatened and that he never threatened idly. (p. 1-2).

Thus, Kissinger resisted Dobrynin's attempt to clarify Nixon's intentions. In response he makes another unspecified threat (the creation of a "complicated situation") and tries to create a new level of uncertainty by observing that Nixon is always likely to do "more" than what his ambiguous threats might have implied earlier. It is also interesting to note that Kissinger here clearly labels Nixon's intentions as a "threat."

In a July 11, 1969, meeting, Kissinger warned Dobrynin that Nixon might turn to "other alternatives" (Dobrynin, 1993, p. 66) unless progress was made to end the war. It is interesting to note that the Soviets clearly interpreted these references as "blackmail." Dobrynin described the meeting to Moscow:

. . . this sufficiently firm sounding theme of "other alternatives" in talks with both Nixon and Kissinger cannot but be noted. Although at the current stage these comments carry, evidently, more the character of attempts to blackmail the Vietnamese and in part the USSR with hints that upon expiration of a certain period of time Nixon might renew the bombing of the DRV or take other military measures, it is not possible to entirely exclude the possibility of such actions by the current administration if the situation, in Nixon's opinion, will justify it. (p. 66)

Dobrynin's comments clearly reflect a degree of success for Nixon's madman approach. The Soviets clearly recognized the implied threat, but could not predict with any certainty what the

threat might entail. More importantly, Dobrynin believed that Nixon personally was capable of carrying out the threat.

More interestingly, the use of ambiguous threats could create a "rhetorical filter" that influences the perception of ensuing policy actions. Thus, actions taken subsequent to the threats are interpretatively linked to the threat itself. This interpretive linkage may have occurred in the fall of 1970, Nixon when ordered a commando raid designed to free American POWs at Son Tay prison in North Vietnam. The mission took place on November 20, 1970 and the prison camp was discovered to be empty. However, at a nearby installation (believed to be a military training school), a firefight broke out with over 100 enemy soldiers killed (Glines, 1995, p. 69). The causalities *were not* Vietnamese and today it is believed they were either Chinese or Russian military advisors providing technical assistance to North Vietnam (Harris, 1990, p. 67). Despite the failure to rescue any POWs, all the US commandoes returned home safely.

Looking through the rhetorical lens of a madman provides an interesting interpretation of this incident. Even in the immediate aftermath, there was widespread speculation of a "message being sent." Falk<sup>4</sup> (1971) argued that the Son Tay raid was intended partly as a gesture and partly as a message to contradictory audiences (p. 18). On November 18, an intelligence report indicated that Son Tay was no longer an active POW camp and no POWs were currently imprisoned there. Some scholars have speculated that Nixon had been informed about the new intelligence (see Glines, 1995, p. 67; Mitchell, 1997). However, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird denied telling Nixon about the report (see Mitchell, 1997, p. 18). As Falk observed, "If the officials who gave the go-ahead order knew (or suspected) that Son Tay was abandoned, then the

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<sup>4</sup> Richard A. Falk, Milbank Professor of International Law at Princeton University.

whole undertaking was a *pure gesture*<sup>5</sup> that rested on callous deception and dishonesty" (p. 19).

Nixon's linkage policy attempted to hold both China and the Soviet Union accountable for their support of North Vietnam. Thus, we see a pattern of increasing frustration over the Vietnam War and a series of vague escalating threats that culminated in deaths of over a 100 foreign military advisors. Mitchell<sup>6</sup> (1997) clearly identified this interpretive possibility:

Did Nixon or some other high ranking government official order the attack knowing full well who or what unit was located at the school, thereby sending a secondary international message? In the opinion of this researcher, the previous question is "highly loaded" with significant political ramifications and may never be answered. (p. 41)

More importantly Nixon's actual intent behind the raid is secondary to the interpretive option that the raid's real purpose was to "hit" the foreign military advisors. This interpretation would be entirely consistent with the pattern of rhetoric preceding the incident. Mitchell notes that, Hanoi, China, and the Soviet Union "were shaken by the raid" (p. 16). It may have also helped underscore Kissinger's promise that Nixon "always did more than he threatened and that he never threatened idly."

#### *Visions of Brutality and Ruthlessness*

One way to amplify the madman effect would be to elevate the perceptual limit of what the "madman" is capable of doing. Preceding the 1968 election, Nixon reportedly told speechwriter Richard J. Whalen:

"Well, if I were in there," he said, "*I would* use nuclear weapons." He explained at once that he did *not* mean that he would use them in Vietnam, only that he would be as willing

<sup>5</sup> Italics in original

<sup>6</sup> Major John Mitchell, United States Marine Corps, University Command and Staff College.

as John Kennedy to threaten their use in appropriate circumstances.<sup>7</sup> (Whalen, 1972, p. 27)

Nixon, by communicating a vision of extreme brutality and ruthlessness in conjunction with the perception of someone who is "crazy" enough to carrying it out, sought to maximize his geopolitical credibility. By late 1969 Nixon military aides had devised plans to deliver a "savage blow" to North Vietnam (see Szulc, 1978, pp. 151-155). The plan was labeled, *Duck Hook* and during preliminary discussions, the use of tactical nuclear weapons may have been contemplated (Ambrose, 1989, p. 282). More importantly, Kissinger aide Winston Lord suggested that a significant aspect of the madman strategy was to create the fear that nuclear weapons might be used (Kimball, 1998, p. 163). Apart from the use of nuclear weapons, *Duck Hook* was to be a major escalation of the war that would dramatically increase Vietnamese causalities.

As a communicative strategy, Nixon had to make sure the North Vietnamese received his "ruthless vision." Reeves (2001) noted that Nixon "wanted leaders in Hanoi to fear him as a madman capable of reducing their country to ashes rather than be seen as a loser" (p. 136). Toward this end, on September 30, 1969, Nixon purposely leaked the *Duck Hook* plan with nine Republican Senators (Ambrose, 1989, p. 301). A few days' later details of the *Duck Hook* were published in several newspapers. To further reinforce the credibility of his threat, Nixon activated the preliminary stages of *Duck Hook* in mid-October, ordering a strategic air command nuclear alert with the hope that Soviet spies around the world alert and frighten the North Vietnamese (Reeves, 2001, p. 136). However, in this case, the Vietnamese either did not get the message or did not see the threat as credible.

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<sup>7</sup> Both italics appeared in the original.

*Man Shrouded in Mystery*

One's personal character traits, interests or even hobbies can help reveal individual's predispositions. For example, one might speculate that a dedicated chess player might take the "lessons of chess" to their life decisions. However, a reclusive individual who reveals little to no personal interests would be harder "to read" or predict. Nixon was a great believer in maintaining personal "mystery" (Nixon, 1981). Many who work worked with Nixon described this tendency. Nixon's advisor and chief press aide, Herb Klein described Nixon as keeping "thoughts, feelings, and problems to himself" (Klein, 1980, p. 132). David Packard, Deputy Secretary of Defense felt that "he was a very hard person to really get acquainted with. . . I never really knew what he was thinking about" (Strober & Strober, 1994, p. 32).

Nixon consciously patterned himself after Charles de Gaulle. He felt that surrounding power with mystery would make him a more effective leader (Safire, 1975, p. 691). In March 1971, Nixon mused, "people crave a leader" that he would "maintain mystery. RN is not going to be [an] exhibitionist--his acts . . . his strengths must be played up" (Reeves, 2001, p. 24). In his book about leaders, Nixon quoted de Gaulle: "there can be no prestige without mystery" (p. 53). A leader must always have something which others cannot altogether fathom, which puzzles them . . ." In this sense, Nixon's strategy also dovetailed with his personal preferences of avoiding interpersonal contact and maintaining privacy. Nixon ordered White House staff to restrict access to himself and he kept much of his interpersonal contact formal and impersonal.

This personal aloofness made it harder for potential adversaries to "read Nixon." The Soviets found Nixon personally inscrutable. Soviet diplomat Arkady N. Shevchenko (1985) observed that, "Brezhnev and other Soviet leaders, however, never really felt at ease with Richard Nixon, and they did not understand him well" (p. 214). In one comical episode

Shevchenko describes the Soviet's difficulty in deciding upon appropriate gift to give Nixon at the 1972 Moscow summit meeting.

In one of our pre-summit meetings in Gromyko's office, as we were unsuccessfully trying to think of a suitable gift to present to Nixon, Gromyko remarked, "Almost all Americans have some kind of hobby. Does anyone know what Nixon's is? He asked, looking around at us. . . . All of us perceived Nixon's personality as so impenetrable that we had no idea what would please him. Ministry experts finally decided to give him a hydrofoil, for no other reason than that Brezhnev had one and liked it. (p. 215)

In terms of geopolitical deterrence, Nixon may have been successful. Shevchenko concluded that the Soviets approved of the way in which he exercised his presidential power and that Nixon was successful in projecting an image that he "was more powerful than he really was" (p. 215).

### Conclusions

Nixon came to power during a time when American geopolitical strength was under great stress. The Soviets had achieved parity in nuclear weapons. The country was burdened with an unsuccessful war in Vietnam. The evolution of strategic thought had left Nixon with few options. Nuclear weapons were only seen as a tool of passive deterrence. The Vietnam War undercut the "limit war" or "graduated escalation" conventional war option. Thus, in order to influence the behavior of other nations and provide deterrent credibility, Nixon tried to change the rules of the game. His strategy of projecting an image of a leader who was capable of irrational action and unpredictable behavior, while maintaining a domestic "presidential image" was an innovative attempt to restore US geopolitical credibility.

Many scholars have argued the Nixon was unsuccessful in his attempt to influence the behavior of other nations through his madman approach (see Kimball, 1998). It is true that Nixon

was not able to “win” the war in Vietnam. However, he was able to establish a truce that lasted until April 1975. The fact that the North Vietnamese waited until Nixon was out of office to launch their final offensive lends some credence to his madman rhetorical strategy. In turn, Nixon was able to improve relations with both the Soviet Union and Communist China. Absent of Watergate, Nixon’s approach may have discouraged the adventurism of the Soviets in the mid to late 1970s. Ultimately Nixon might have maintained the delicate balance necessary to the pursuit of détente and arms limitation.

The presidents following Nixon eschewed the madman strategy. In many respects, this approach would require a personal history, personality profile and a philosophical outlook that many leaders do not share or would find hard to duplicate. Many of Nixon’s behaviors noted in this paper were not purposeful to the madman strategy yet still contributed to the madman effect. On a global level, it can be argued that leaders ranging from Nikita Khrushchev to Saddam Hussein have practiced madman variants. Further study of the madman strategy of geopolitical credibility can help identify additional stratagems and provide insight as to how this rhetorical approach can be successfully applied.

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