7. Table 16 provides a description of only the Supporters and Critics, the two groups at the ends of our scale. The hypothesis would further hold that the views of the other five groups would be arrayed in between the Supporters and Critics.

8. This discussion should not be read as an endorsement for the view that the correlation between consensus and the quality of foreign policy approaches 1.00. We are merely speculating on some implications of the findings, not trying to define the proper balance between the needs for consensus and for persistent questioning of fundamental premises.

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Chapter 10

WHY NEW FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES MIGHT NOT BE MET: CONSTRAINTS ON DETECTING PROBLEMS AND SETTING AGENDAS

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This chapter treats the United States government as an entity designed to solve problems. From this perspective the initial task of foreign policy agenda setting concerns the factors that influence whether and when a potential problem comes to the attention of officials with the authority to deal with it. Those agencies of government whose missions include foreign and national security issues attempt to cope with problems that pertain to the relationship between all or part of the nation and the world beyond America's political boundaries.

The beginning of all governmental action occurs with the establishment of a problem on the agenda of authoritative policy makers. How do foreign problems get the attention of such individuals? Why do some problems appear to be quickly addressed whereas others are ignored, receive consideration after much delay, or are recognized in a seemingly distorted manner?

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Part of the answer to these questions lies in the characteristics of the problems and the nature of the entities that monitor the environment searching for potential problems. The major portion of this essay will offer a general examination of the possible effects of situations and organizations. In the concluding section these general features will be applied to the circumstances that pose special difficulties for the United States in the 1980s. There is reason to believe that the types of problems America will increasingly face in the future are different in kind from those that have characterized much of the period since World War II. Our ability to monitor and make timely response to problems that do not fit into our familiar framework poses a major challenge for the 1980s.

For any problem-solving entity—whether it be an individual, a nation, a civilization, or any animal species—the failure to address a major problem in time can mean severe deprivation and even destruction. In the early post-World War II years a number of the members of the United States government believed that the Soviet Union posed a deadly military threat to our European and Asian allies and ultimately to America. They feared that the American democracy, lacking a strong tradition of a large and expensive peacetime military establishment, would fail to take adequate precautions and to respond to the problem in time. The governmental debates over the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine, and NCS-68 reflected this profound concern on the part of these individuals and their efforts to mobilize the government and society.[1] More recently other individuals have described a series of interdependent problems resulting from the nature and rate of growth of homosapiens. They assert that unless the problems are recognized and effective corrections initiated soon, catastrophic events will ensue (Mesarovic and Pestel, 1974:69):

> Unless this lesson is learned in time, there will be a thousand desperadoes terrorizing those who are now "rich," and eventually nuclear blackmail and terror will paralyze further orderly development. Now is the time to draw up a master plan for organic sustainable growth and world development based on global allocation of all finite resources and a new global economic system. Ten or twenty years from today it will probably be too late.

In both examples, the individuals and groups who believed they had detected dangers feared that the government would fail to confront the problems—would fail to put the matters on their agenda in time. The groups believed that inadequate recognition would have dire consequences. These illustrations dramatize the need for understanding the foreign policy monitoring system and its relationship to the agenda-setting process. Of course, the

foreign policy problems competing for the attention of the United States government vary greatly in the magnitude of their potential consequences.

The severity of the potential effects, however, do not necessarily determine whether a problem will be recognized and addressed. Among the factors that influence attention to a problem are the nature of the situation created by the problem and the organizations designed to deal with problem solving. After offering several basic definitions, this chapter will examine these features and discuss their implications for American foreign policy in the 1980s.

PROBLEMS, PROBLEM RECOGNITION, AND PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

Problem

Three basic terms need clarification. They are "problem," "problem recognition," and "problem identification." A problem exists when there is a recognized discrepancy or imbalance between a preferred state of affairs and the present or possible future state of affairs. A number of implications follow from this definition. First, a problem requires that the actor be aware of one or more goals. If a government's foreign policy goals are poorly defined, then so are any problems that might pertain to them. Most governments share certain basic goals such as national physical survival, protection of citizens and their property abroad, continuation of the government in office, and so on. Beyond such basic national goals, however, governments differ in the degree to which goals pertaining to foreign policy are defined. To illustrate this point one might compare the Fourth and Fifth Republics of France. It can be argued that the Fourth Republic minimized goal definition and redefinition because to review and clarify national goals endangered the support of diverse political parties that formed the coalition essential to maintain politically unstable governments. Under Charles de Gaulle, however, with the increased powers of the President in the Fifth Republic, foreign policy goals became more clearly articulated. The fear was substantially less than in the Fourth Republic that explicit characterization of foreign policy goals would significantly reduce political support.

It should be noted that goals may be identified and refined in an interactive process with the emergence of potential problem-type events. A small child may not attach much value to a toy until another child shows interest in playing with it. Suddenly maintaining possession of the toy becomes an important goal and the interest displayed by another person in that object becomes a problem. After asserting ownership over the object, the child may lose interest in it entirely and even forget its whereabouts. In a more complex

fashion, the analogy can reveal something about the behaviors of collective entities such as governments. Conditions or objects need not be continuously valued or valued at the same level of importance, but may emerge more or less suddenly in response to developing circumstances.

A second result of stipulating that the concept of problem depends on goals is that problems are relative. Whenever individuals or organizations have different goals or have assigned significantly different priorities to the same goal, then the possibility exists that a problem for one will not be a problem for another. It is apparent that different countries may have very different problems. (For example, the size of the Turkish or Mexican poppy crop may not be a problem for the United States unless it has the goal of controlling the heroin produced from these crops. Moreover, if the Turkish government does not share the American goal, then it may not be a problem for them.) Somewhat less frequently acknowledged is the idea that different departments, agencies, or bureaus within one government may have different–even competing–goals and, hence, different problems. The United States Commerce and Defense Departments may have goals that are advanced by the sale of sophisticated arms to an ally, but the same action creates a problem for the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and the Department of State if they have a goal that involves restricting the distribution of certain armaments and maintaining an equilibrium in regional arms supplies. Thus, one of the first tasks in agenda setting may be convincing other governmental agencies of the importance of a particular goal.

A third consequence of the proposed definition of a problem is that the government must have some knowledge of present conditions and possible trends. In other words, for a problem-solver to identify a discrepancy, he must be aware not only of his goals but also of the existing or emerging conditions that seem likely to affect those goals. This intelligence about the environment and the interpretation of what effect it may have on the government's goals need not be accurate. The foreign policy literature as well as literature concerned with other kinds of problem-solving are filled with cases of misperception and erroneous estimates of cause and effect.[2] Of course, accuracy in the interpretation of the environment and its changes is essential for effective responses.

A fourth implication of the meaning assigned to the term problem involves the concept of discrepancy. Often we think of negative discrepancies that result from punishment or threats of punishment. Thus the deployment of MIRV warheads, which makes more difficult the goal of a verifiable arms agreement on strategic weapons, is a discrepancy between that goal and the existing state of affairs. Potential opportunities can also produce a discrepancy and, hence, a problem. Suppose the presence of an American

military base has always obstructed the goal of improving diplomatic relations with another government. If changing world conditions and military technology are discovered by American officials to have substantially reduced the importance of the base to the United States, the opportunity exists for moving toward a goal of the United States. Unless a given development will transpire automatically without any government action, it remains only a potential opportunity. Recognizing a potential opportunity and the need for action to bring about its realization creates for the observer a discrepancy and a problem. Moreover, failure to realize the opportunity becomes a deprivation.

A final consequence, drawn from the manner in which a problem is defined, concerns attention. From the point of view of government action a problem does not exist until it is recognized by problem-solvers. Or, to state the matter more precisely, a problem does not exist as an occasion for decision until the discrepancy is identified by the governmental officials with the authority to act. An individual may have cancer and ultimately die from it if not successfully treated. Until the individual's condition is detected, however, it is not a problem in the sense that the undetected cancer is not an occasion for mobilization of resources for treatment. No discrepancy between the individual's preferred state of health and existing health has been recognized. In summary, the test of recognition becomes creating a state of awareness of those able to authorize attempts to reduce the discrepancy.

Problem Recognition

The requirement that an actor be aware of a discrepancy introduces another basic concept in need of definition–problem recognition. The human phenomena of selective attention and perception is well established (e.g., Tajfel, 1969; Tagiuri, 1969). Both individuals and organizations normally operate in environments so rich in stimuli that they cannot possibly attend to all of them, so they systematically screen out many signals–perhaps most–and select only a few to which they give conscious attention. Such recognition becomes the first analytic step necessary for coping with the problem.

For complex organizations, problem recognition is more demanding than for the individual. In the individual the same organism contains both problem recognition and problem coping capabilities (however, the latter may be inadequate under some circumstances). By contrast, the specialization and division of labor in any large complex organization or set of organizations, such as those that normally deal with foreign affairs, separate the function of recognition from the function of decision. It is at the lower "working level" of the State and Defense Departments, A.I.D., C.I.A., and so on that most of an organization's interaction with and monitoring of its environment occurs.

It is the political officer in an embassy, the military assistance officer in the field, the intelligence analyst, the arms control agency negotiator that often are the first members of the government to become aware of a problem. In most cases, however, such an official will not have the authority to resolve the problem and must confine his role to reporting to his organizational superiors. The studies of foreign policy are full of problems identified at the periphery of an organization only to be lost, discounted, or simply set aside until later by higher levels of the organization.[3] Nowhere has this organizational difficulty been more clearly highlighted than in the classic by Ogburn (1961) who relates the hypothetical case of the overthrow of a Western-oriented government in the Middle East. The coup is postulated to have occurred weeks after United States embassy personnel and the responsible desk officer had observed the government was in trouble and had recommended supportive measures. Their proposals simply were not attended to by the decision-making level, plagued by a myriad of seemingly more urgent problems, until too late.

The conclusion is clear. From the perspective of problem solving, organizational problem recognition occurs only when awareness of the problem reaches those within the organization with sufficient authority to decide whether any action is appropriate and, if so, to initiate the determined action. Studies of organizational problem recognition must include examination of those factors within government that can cause problem-identifying information to be mislaid.

Problem Definition

Analytically it is useful to distinguish problem recognition from problem definition. By problem definition is meant the meaning or interpretation that problem solvers attach to a problem. Snyder, Bruck and Sapin (1962) have referred to this as the "definition of the situation." In the practical world, it seems clear that an interpretation must be at least tentatively assigned to a problem when it is recognized. Thus, the question might arise as to why definition should be analytically separated from recognition. At least two reasons can be offered. Because meaning is subjective, the same problem may be defined quite differently for different observers. Furthermore, the definition of the problem is dynamic and can change dramatically across a period of months, weeks, days, or even hours.

We know that the same problem stimuli are defined differently by different individuals, organizations, and nations. The matter of definition of a problem is particularly acute in foreign affairs when cross-cultural differences, governmental motivations for keeping signals ambiguous or deceptive, and conflicting messages (e.g., Jervis, 1976) sent from different parts of a government or from nongovernmental sectors all make a discovered foreign policy problem subject to alternative definitions. For example, what meaning should the United States attach to the discovery that the Soviet Union is modifying its ICBM silos? Is it a long standing need to always improve defensive capabilities—in this case by hardening the sites of their retaliatory forces? Or, is it a provocative attempt to create a first-strike capability by deploying larger missiles? Or, to put the shoe on the other foot, what interpretation should the Soviets have attached to the Joint Resolution reached in SALT I concerning the interim agreement on ballistic missile launchers? Was it a domestic political ploy to maximize support for the agreement or was it a serious attempt to undermine the understandings reached between the two countries?

Not only must one contend with multiple interpretations by different individuals, agencies, and governments, but the same group's definition of the problem may vary through time. Paige (1968) illustrates the rapidity with which the problem can undergo change in his study of the Truman decision to enter the Korean War. At first, the President and his advisors believed the South Koreans could stop the invasion by themselves, but the American officials expected possible military probes elsewhere by other Communist nations to follow quickly. Within less than a week, their interpretation of the Korean situation had changed substantially and American ground forces were committed. In contrast to the Korean example, sometimes problems are redefined out of existence.

Considerable attention has been devoted here to definitions. This essay contends that the function of monitoring for potential problems in foreign affairs, as in other governmental problem solving, requires careful attention to the tasks revealed by these concepts. The implications that already have been drawn from these concepts should make the reader suspicious of simple proposals for improving the agenda-setting function of foreign policy machinery for the 1980s. For example, it should now be possible to recognize as inadequate such recommendations as: "Give me more diplomats, military officers, and intelligence analysts skilled in political observation and reporting and who know the national interests, and I will provide you with an improved foreign policy monitoring and agenda-setting capability." If the proposal had the primary effect of overloading those policy makers with decision-making authority, by producing more problems for them to cope with, the system could very well reduce the effectiveness of the agenda-setting function. Further insights into the requirements for improving this capability can be acquired by examining both characteristics of situations and organizational properties.

SITUATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The environment that the foreign policy agencies of the American government monitor for potential problems might be viewed as an endless strip of motion picture film composed of an infinite number of individual frames. Each frame freezes actors in time and space. The photographic frames are analogous to the analytical concept of situation in which the continuous interactions of international actors can be momentarily stopped (hypothetically) to reveal at a particular time the actions they are addressing to one another and their physical surroundings as well as their dispositions toward actors and their environment. Situations—or the configuration of actors, their actions, and their dispositions in a particular context—can be viewed as having various properties. Situational properties affect the likelihood of a problem being detected and the manner in which it will be interpreted. In this section we will consider the effect on detection of five situational properties—threat, opportunity, complexity, awareness, and time.

Threat

Individuals and organizations are more likely to recognize situations containing a problem stimulus if it poses a threat to some valued goal of the entity. Threats consist of future damage or obstruction to the desired object, activity, or state of affairs. Persons and organizations have a concern for the survival of their valued goals; therefore, the more a situation appears to threaten such a goal, the more likely it is to be recognized. In foreign policy and national security organizations, such as the Departments of State and Defense, threats are more likely to be channeled quickly to higher levels in the department and, thus, are ensured of being brought to the attention of people with the authorization to initiate action. Once recognized, the threat will mobilize the resources of the organization. The more widely shared the goal(s) that is threatened and the greater the magnitude of the threat, the less likely are major differences in problem definition to occur among bureaus within the organization and between bureaucratic organizations.

Threatening situations, however, can create difficulties in the accurate perception of changes in the definition of a problem. Any career officers or other persons highly dedicated to the mission of their organization or to one of its programs may transform the threat to organizational goals to a direct threat to themselves as individuals. The danger then becomes highly personalized and can lead to disruptive stress in the individual. Under such circumstances the individual's ability to discern changes in the environment pertaining to the threat may be seriously impaired. Personnel of large foreign policy organizations gain experience in handling threatening situations and the

organization often has multiple individuals monitoring a situation. However, there remains a possibility that agenda setting will be affected if the threat is internalized by an individual who serves in a critical gatekeeping role. The potential adverse effects of stress may be offset by the information monitoring resources of the organization once a problem has been initially defined. Individuals and various resources that had been assigned to other tasks may be alerted or completely reassigned to follow the evolving situation.

Opportunity

Often the opposite of threat is opportunity or, more specifically the chance to move toward some goal. In the realm of foreign policy, opportunities to move on foreign policy goals usually involve occasions to exercise influence over or to direct change in some foreign nation, external entity, or part of the natural environment. For individuals, situations containing opportunities or visible means of exercising influence increase the chance of problem recognition. For organizations, such as the Departments of State and Defense, however, the opportunity to exercise influence may increase the likelihood of recognition only slightly, unless there is slack in the organization. If the policy makers with sufficient authority to seize the opportunity already are overloaded and no direct connection can be made between the new opportunity and the problems they currently are dealing with, then the chance may be lost even though subordinates within the department have perceived the significance of the situation.

Whereas threats frequently increase organizational consensus on the definition of the problem, opportunities may have the reverse effect. Given the existence of multiple agencies in the foreign policy sector with somewhat different missions (with occasional overlaps) and/or in control of different resources, the recognition of a situation offering an opportunity to exercise influence may invoke interagency competition. If the problem suggests activities central to the mission of more than one agency, each will tend to define the problem so as to increase the likelihood that their agency will be designated as the "action" agency. For example, given the sudden rise to power of a foreign government known to be favorably inclined toward the United States, the Navy may view the situation as a chance to establish a needed submarine base whereas the Department of State may view the very same situation as an opportunity to press for some substantial revision of the poor record in human rights demonstrated by the former regime. Each agency may regard the other's proposed initiative with the new government as reducing the likelihood of realizing the opportunity it sees.

Complexity

We will treat complexity as a situational characteristic, although one might argue that complexity is an interaction of a situation and the abilities of those that face the situation. (For the present purposes we will assume abilities are a constant.) For the individual, the more complex the situational characteristics, the less likely is the problem to be fully recognized. Although there may be some greater difficulty for an organization in recognizing a complex stimuli, it should not be as severe for an agency, such as State, Defense, U.S.I.A., A.I.D. and so on, as for the individual. An organization–particularly one continuously dealing with an extremely complex environment–will develop routines for dealing with complexity including specialists for this purpose. It will create some redundancy and integrative capability to cope more effectively with such potential situations. Discovering a complex problem, however, does not ensure its interpretation. For recognized problems with inherent complexity, a substantial lag may occur between the discovery of the problem and its accepted definition. It will be talked about and debated; more likely than not, divisions will emerge within the Executive Branch and among the Executive, Congress, and various nongovernmental groups over the most accurate interpretation. Because foreign situations are notorious for containing great uncertainty and incomplete information, these qualities will add to the complexity and make more difficult the elimination of one or more alternative definitions. Thus, complex problems increase the difficulty of problem recognition, but less so for a large organization than for isolated individuals. Complexity, though, can be expected to make problem definition more demanding for organizations.

Awareness

Situations also vary in the degree of foreknowledge or prior awareness available to agencies that monitor foreign affairs. Some situations are expected by policy makers before they occur; whereas others occur as a complete surprise. The general character of a situation may be anticipated, but not the specific details and, thus, a situation may present a greater or lesser degree of awareness. For both individuals and organizations, problems that are anticipated have an improved chance of being detected when they occur. Conversely, unexpected events are less likely to be detected unless they also have some other quality such as threat that encourages recognition. Foreknowledge or expectancy may be promoted by various factors. Regularity of occurrence, for example, offers a strong base for awareness. So also does a trend or sequence of ordered events. If it is known that representatives of country X have approached several of your nation's allies about aircraft purchases, it might not be difficult to anticipate that your government will

also be approached. A sharp break or shift in the rate of change in a trend can be quite surprising, particularly if elaborate planning and sets of expectations were built on the stability of the trend. The sudden move by President Sadat of Egypt to visit Jerusalem in 1977 may constitute such a surprise break in a trend or pattern.

Problems that are anticipated are also likely to be interpreted a priori as well. Problem occurrence and problem definition are usually simultaneous. Internal debate over the meaning of an anticipated problem is minimal. This simultaneity of recognition and definition may create a serious problem in policy-making if the present situation in fact differs in some important way from what was expected. In other words, having once predicted the occurrence of some situation, an organization has a tendency to interpret a stimuli that does occur as the expected development as long as it has some of the anticipated qualities. Features of the actual problem situation that do not conform to the forecast may be ignored or misinterpreted.

Time

The time a situation allows for decision represents a fifth situational characteristic affecting problem recognition and discovery. Some situations appear open-ended. They contain no visible indications that the configuration of actors and objects that comprise the situation are likely to change in the foreseeable future in a manner unfavorable to the perceiving governmental representatives. By contrast, other situations contain identifiable characteristics that suggest the present situation is likely to change rapidly. Any situation involving a deadline or an ultimatum falls in the latter category as did the invasion of South Korea (American policy makers soon discovered that if the United States did not move quickly, the North Koreans would occupy the entire peninsula) or the 1962 emplacement of Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba (once the missiles became operational, their removal would be more difficult).

Short decision time reduces the individual's probability of recognizing a problem. Again, foreign policy organizations live in an environment in which important problems often have short fuses and, therefore, they attempt to build some capability to offset the tendency that such problems will be missed. The problem of recognition then depends in part on the degree of organizational slack. If the policy makers who can authorize action are involved with several critical problems at the same time, then a new problem with short decision time probably will not be noted until it already has been transformed.

ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS

The previous section did not attempt to apply an objective or observer perspective in delineating situational characteristics. Instead it dealt with the characteristics as they affected the perceiver of the situation (i.e., the foreign policy representatives of the government). As a consequence, the discussion of situational characteristics was relational in that the nature of a characteristic depended on the nature of the monitoring facility as well as the configuration of other actors and objects. For this reason, the previous section anticipated some of the observations in this section concerning the affects on monitoring problems and setting agendas of bureaucratic organizations. In general the theme of this section is that such organizations are potentially better able to recognize problem situations than individuals or small groups, but may encounter more difficulties in problem definition. Moreover, as we shall see in the last section even existing organizational capabilities may be inadequate for some possible types of foreign policy problems.

Organizational Restructuring

Problems can emerge from perceived changes in the foreign environment or from internal restructuring within the foreign policy machinery of the government. By restructuring, we mean the assembly, review, and/or new interpretation of information that the government already has acquired or the shift of organizational personnel so that people who hold different interpretations of existing information have new power to enable them to shape government action. An example of the former kind of restructuring is a National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) such as that early in 1969 that involved a review of United States activities in Vietnam. As part of that exercise each agency of the government was required to respond to detailed questionnaires that sent officials throughout the government back to their files and discussion sessions. Information thus gathered was reviewed by an interdepartmental group, the National Security Council staff, and ultimately the NSC itself. The reexamination led to some new policy problems (recognition) and new interpretations of old ones (definition).

The reassignment of personnel offers another form of restructuring. A military officer who has been a field commander may have recognized a foreign policy problem, but been unable to get support from those in a position to address the issue. Suppose his next assignment is on one of the specialized staffs of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and he finds the new position gives him the authority to mobilize those policy makers able to deal with the problem he had identified previously. Assuming that the authority required

to make most nonroutine choices resides at the middle and political levels of government, then the appointment of new individuals at these levels is apt to trigger new problem recognition through restructuring. With internal restructuring, changes in the foreign environment are not necessary to generate new problems for the policy agenda. The general conclusion is that the more foreign policy organizations reassign personnel—particularly across hierarchical levels of authority or recruit new personnel into the organization—the more likely are new problems to be recognized or old ones to be redefined.

Selective and Differential Search

The alternative means by which policy problems emerge is by changes in the organization's external environment. Foreign policy organizations must establish search routines to monitor any such possible environmental changes. Organizations by their nature involve specialization and role differentiation. Thus, specialists develop who search for a particular kind of problem or monitor a certain source of information. These specialists establish routines or standard operating procedures by which they search or monitor their assigned domains. For example, in the Department of State, as in most other foreign policy agencies, specialization involves a mix of geographical and functional categories for limiting and developing search capabilities. Facilities can be developed for monitoring special types of situations (e.g., the Crisis Communication Center, the Berlin Task Force) and procedures for transmitting information can be made systematic (e.g., under specified conditions cables of only a certain priority are to be transmitted; or instructions are given the watch officer to awake key individuals during the night if certain occurrences transpire).

The difficulty arises because search routines, decision rules, and standard operating procedures by definition focus the search for potential foreign policy problems toward some cues or particular kind of signals. The unavoidable question becomes: What about critical problems that do not have the characteristic established by the specialized search routines? Searching for the unexpected will always pose major challenges to foreign policy organizations, but they can at least avoid certain kinds of common biases. Pool and Kessler (1969:669-670) provide a convenient list of selective attention patterns that are applicable to bureaucratic specialists as well as isolated individuals:

1) People pay more attention to information that deals with them.
2) People pay less attention to facts that contradict their views.
3) People pay more attention to information from trusted, liked sources.

4) People pay more attention to information that they will have to act on or discuss because of the attention by others.
5) People will pay more attention to information bearing on actions they have already taken, i.e., action creates commitment.[4]

Internal Communication

Another consequence of organizational role specialization and task differentiation concerns the separation of the individuals and units engaged in the intelligence activities mentioned above from those able to make a decision as to whether action should be taken on detected problems. As has been noted previously, this is the reason that organizational problem recognition cannot be usefully defined as the perception of a problem stimuli by at least one member of the organization. The problem must be recognized by those individuals whose role specialization and level of authority enables them to mobilize the organization for action. Given the specialization of tasks, it is almost certain that the individual who first discovers a problem will not be the individual with authority to approve action. If the internal communication system between the initial perceiver of a problem and the occupant of the necessary authority role fails for any reason, then the organization's behavior will not reflect the discovery. In a meaningful sense the organization can be said not to have recognized the problem at all.

Problem Load

Not only weaknesses in the internal communication system of foreign policy organizations, but also the decision load on the middle and political levels of the organization can lead to failure of problem recognition. Study after study (e.g., Kissinger, 1966; Hoffman, 1968) has noted the decision overload on these policy makers in the making of American foreign policy. Given the broad scope of global activities that are assumed to pertain to American interests, many problems are stillborn because they fail to get out of the inbasket of the necessary policy maker. It is reasonable to speculate that the flatter the organization's authority structure and the greater the delegation of authority, the more likely are external problems to be recognized provided internal communication is well maintained.

A word of caution is required about the consequences of overloaded policy makers on the agenda-setting process. To capture a position on the overcrowded agenda of senior policy makers, earnest subordinates may attempt to mobilize support from other parts of the government, the media, the public, and foreign nations. In the process of gaining mass support, the characterization of the problem may become distorted and, frequently, the consequences of neglect will be exaggerated.

Organizational Goals

At the beginning of this chapter, a problem was stipulated as involving goals or preferred conditions. Goals, both formal and informal, bring us to a final organizational characteristic. The literature on bureaucratic organizations has made the point repeatedly that different organizations and different bureaus within an organization have different missions and different goals. To the extent that individuals identify with their particular bureau and organization and see their professional promotion and career dependent on excelling in that bureau and organization, then it will be natural for those persons to promote the goals of that agency. The result is that individuals in different locations will have a built-in diposition to interpret the same reported stimuli in terms of their organizational interests–its mission and goals.

Because various foreign policy organizations have different goals, individuals in these alternative organizations will tend to define problems differently. Moreover, those individuals who see their careers in terms of their own organization will have a strong incentive to advocate in a vigorous fashion the adoption of a definition of the problem consistent with their agency's mission and goals. Not only is this process at the heart of bureaucratic politics, it makes the task of reaching consensus on problem definition within the government difficult unless other factors intervene to minimize this process. Furthermore, once consensus on the definition of a problem has been reached, inertia sets in and works against the revision of that definition and the necessary task of mobilizing support in various units for a new interpretation. The evolution of a problem definition will tend to be more gradual for bureaucratic organizations than for individuals unless the top of an organization changes suddenly, a new administration comes to power, or the coalition, whose interpretation of the problem had prevailed, collapses.

IMPLICATIONS OF A SHIFT IN THE ARRAY OF PROBLEMS

In this final section we wish to examine how the characteristics of situations and properties of American governmental organizations could prove to be constraints in recognizing and defining the foreign policy problems of the 1980s. Basic to the discussion is the contention that the types of major foreign affairs problems in need of attention are undergoing a profound change.

Post-Cold War Problems

For much of the period since the end of World War II, most American foreign policy organizations concerned with foreign affairs have been greatly influenced in their monitoring of possible problem producing activities by the

Cold War. The protracted and intense antagonism between the United States and its associates on the one hand and the Soviet Union and its associates on the other have shaped what problems were recognized and how they were defined. Every person who was an adult before 1950 or became one in that decade or the next is familiar with the episodes, the issues, the policies that reflect this overriding concern–economic stagnation and political uncertainty in Western Europe after the war, the threat of Soviet military expansion into Europe, the aggression in South Korea, the fear of domestic infiltration of Communist sympathizers, the potential or actual emergence of Russian- or Chinese-oriented governments or ruling groups in Third World countries, the qualitative and quantitative buildup in strategic armaments, and so on. Even issues that in other periods might have been interpreted very differently were defined as Cold War problems–such as the end of colonialism, the emergence of nationalistic forces, the efforts at economic development, and the innovations in science and technology. Of course, not every problem became an adjunct of the Cold War (e.g., GATT) nor did every agency of the Federal government having some foreign affairs mission define its role primarily in Cold War terms (e.g., Agriculture Department treatment of surplus food). The budgets of major agencies, the time allocations of Presidents and other political level officials, and the foreign policy debates in Congress and the public, however, all suggest the prominence of the Cold War framework in foreign policy problem recognition and definition.

As the Vietnam experience recedes into history, more individuals inside and outside the American foreign policy community are identifying and debating problems that cannot be understood by reference to the Cold War antagonism. Of course, the politico-military problems stemming from the conflict between the Communist and Western powers have not disappeared as a set of problems for American foreign policy. These problems may even become more acute in the future. Difficulties could result from continued Soviet military buildup in some areas relative to the military strength of the United States and its Western allies. There could be an accelerated tendency on the part of the U.S.S.R. to engage in conflicts remote from its borders as its newer capabilities give it the ability to do so. Even if the loss of clear Western military superiority in certain areas in which we have been accustomed to being dominant does not create problems, and the Soviets exercise constraint, the coalitions that developed as a result of the Cold War may continue to underscore hypothetical problems that conform to their needs and experiences, regardless of their grounding in reality.

Having noted this continuing legacy, we must return to our observation that other types of foreign policy challenges seem to be altering the overall configuration of problems facing American policy makers. Even if Cold War

problems continue, they may not be expected to dominate the foreign policy agenda as they have in the past. A study done for the Commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy ("the Murphy Commission") identified eight global problem areas that could have major adverse effects on the United States–and the rest of the world–after the year 2000 if not effectively handled before then. These problems, which were drawn exclusively from the area of global environmental and resource independence, included ocean pollution, atmospheric pollution, weather modification, resource satellites, communication satellites, nuclear reactors, food, and population (Koehane and Nye, 1975). Given the area this list canvassed for issues, it is understandable that energy did not surface as a more general problem than in its nuclear reactor form and that the entire range of economic problems was excluded. However, economic problems–ranging from trade deficits and widespread inflation to the calls for a new international economic order and the difficulties confronting various international economic institutions–illustrate the emergence of acute foreign policy problems with little or no direct relationship to the Cold War.

Only time will tell whether the Koehane and Nye (1975) list of emerging problems or some other enumeration (e.g., Platt, 1969) will accurately forecast the most demanding foreign policy problems of the future. Because we are interested in the recognition and definition of new international challenges, the particular itemization found on any given list is less important than the apparent shift from the predominant appearance of Cold War type problems. If there are likely to be significantly different types of problems threatening the well-being of the United States in the 1980s, how will situational characteristics and organizational properties influence their successful recognition and definition?

Situational and Organizational Effects

Let us first consider the situational properties discussed previously. With respect to threats, they may be directed not only at physical survival through possible war, but to a variety of social, political, and economic institutions and to ecological systems as well. As in the Cold War, threats may involve painful tradeoffs between several highly valued objects or states (e.g., individual freedom versus public order). Both threats and opportunities may well emerge from sources other than those to which we have grown accustomed to dealing. Not only may they involve states different from our familiar antagonists, but they also may originate from nonstate actors–such as terrorists, multinational corporations, nonterritorial states.

We noted earlier that complexity could be interpreted as an interaction between requirements of the problem and the capabilities of the problem

solvers. The problem side of the equation might be expected to become more complex in several respects. First, the growth in interdependence between social and economic systems may complicate attempts at resolution by requiring coordination of more units inside and outside the United States. These units may not be particularly susceptible to American governmental influences. Interdependence may increase the likelihood that "solutions" to problems have more unanticipated secondary and tertiary effects which trigger new problems or confound the treatment of the original one. What may confuse detection of such problems is a breakdown in any clear idea of cause and effect. A second source of added complexity may result from an increased tendency for multiple, large, demanding problems to arise simultaneously. Platt (1969:1116) refers to this difficulty when he notes: "What finally makes all of our crises still more dangerous is that they are now coming on top of each other." The occurrence of one may mask the presence of others.

Awareness can be regarded as affecting the other side of the complexity equation—the ability of foreign policy agencies to cope with problems. For example, as dangerous as the repeated crises over West Berlin were, the United States in time gained familiarity with some recurrent features of the problem and of the adversary. This general awareness might not have prevented tactical surprise from developing in any particular crisis, but it made it easier for American policy makers to recognize the problem and define it within the context of the Cold War when critical situations suddenly arose. One of the difficulties of an emerging new array of foreign policy problems would be the absence of familiarity with them and with their associated indicators and danger signs.

Many of the problems of the Cold War emerged as crises in which decision time was extremely short such as in the Cuban missile crisis or the invasion of South Korea. Although one can conjecture about some future nuclear confrontation in which decision time is reduced to something less than the 30 minutes required for ICBMs to reach their targets, the Cold War problems of the past may have established benchmarks for acutely short decision time that are unlikely to be surpassed in the vast majority of new challenges. In fact, the emerging problems could be just the reverse in that they have long lead times before they become a major danger as in the case of ocean pollution. However, the time required for actions necessary to avert or correct these problems before they become irreversible may also be extremely protracted. Keohane and Nye (1975) discuss problems that they believe need prompt attention now if their major adverse effects are to be avoided when they materialize sometime between 2001 and 2020.

The previous paragraphs have tried to illustrate what might be the nature of situational characteristics for problems that would be different from those which have dominated American attention during the Cold War. Assuming that such different types of problems become more important for American foreign policy, how would the identified organizational characteristics affect recognition and identification of these new problems?

Perhaps the most critical organizational feature concerns the selective and differential search processes. We have suggested that governmental organizations, just as individuals, must be selective in their monitoring and in the domains they search. The Cold War provided a framework that for more than 25 years served as a structure for foreign policy organizations of the United States government. The framework or structure indicated what situations to monitor and what meaning to attach to problems that arose. These highly established search routines and interpretative processes may now become increasingly dysfunctional by not directing monitoring activities to situations that could pose new kinds of dangers or opportunities or by imposing a Cold War definition on a detected problem that may be inappropriate for effective response.

The organizational restructuring that regularly marks foreign policy agencies as new people assume key positions could aid in the more rapid erosion of the Cold War framework. The arrival at top posts of individuals who have not had firsthand experience in policy-making during the most extreme period of the Cold War could facilitate new patterns for monitoring international affairs. A darker side, however, also must be considered. If more of the foreign policy problems of the future demand extremely long lead times to avoid severe adverse effects, no leadership may find it desirable or politically feasible to attend to problems the outcomes of which may not be experienced until long after they have left office. The turnover of political leadership also may make it more difficult to construct coalitions with a shared definition of the problem. Just as agreement on the nature of the problem might seem to be within grasp, the chairman of a key Congressional Committee would be defeated or a needed deputy undersecretary would resign or the entire executive administration would be replaced.

Many agencies of the United States government participate in foreign policy decisions, but the Cold War gave certain agencies dominance—including the State and Defense Departments, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the C.I.A., A.I.D. and its precursors, and, increasingly, the National Security Council staff. Established channels of communication, clearance processes, and interagency working groups have gradually evolved. Faced with different types of problems these internal channels of communication may not be the most

salient ones, nor may these agencies be the most appropriate. Indeed, no agency may be charged with monitoring for a given set of problems. If they do engage in such monitoring, it may be unclear who has responsibility for communicating to whom about whether the problem merits attention on the agency's agenda. In other words, who should be alerted if a new problem is detected? Internal communications may need major revision.

What about problem overload? Any available organizational slack could be more than consumed in one of several ways. If problems are unfamiliar or seemingly more complex, it may take longer to agree on their definition and devise an acceptable response, thus other problems will have to be placed "on hold." Furthermore, if Platt (1969) is correct, the emerging challenge is not simply different kinds of problems, but more of them occurring concurrently.

Coping with a certain type of problem in foreign affairs has become part of the mission or goals of particular foreign policy organizations. The very names of some units indicate much about their assigned problems–for example, the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, the Agency for International Development, or the former United States Information Agency. The difficulty arises when no agency regards coping with a particular class of problems as one of its primary goals. Until recently that was precisely the issue with respect to energy questions. If several organizations regard themselves as having only secondary responsibility for a given type of problem, it may be that none are devoting many resources to monitoring for particular outbreaks of it or its potential ramifications. The real possibility exists that the present array of organizational goals for American foreign policy bureaucracies excludes attention to potential problems of the future.

CONCLUSIONS

It can be argued that the picture sketched in this essay exaggerates the constraints and difficulties. The author hopes so, but perhaps more than hope is in order to make certain that the interaction of new situations and old organizational routines does not obstruct the recognition and definition of problems that need to get on the American national agenda and on the agenda of other parts of the world as well. The avoidance of these pitfalls partially entails modifying organization capabilities to meet the requirements of foreign policy in the 1980s and beyond.

Some might be tempted initially to regard substitution or replacement as the approach. The government, it could be argued, should shift from an East-West framework to one focused on North-South conflicts; from agencies concerned with military capability to economic capability; from crisis management to long-range planning. All indications are that such redistribution responses would be most inadequate and inappropriate. Few careful observers would claim that the older type of problems have been resolved or have faded away. The United States government must still attend to them. Even though various sources seek to dramatize presently emerging issues, relatively few responsible individuals or groups claim to have a clear and certain vision of what the total array of future foreign policy problems will be. Thus a greater sensitivity to the unusual in international affairs and its environment appears to be a watchword for monitoring rather than locking in on a given alternative domain of new problems.

Going beyond the heightened attention to various forms of activity, those persons responsible for foreign policy–and the government generally–may need to invest more in the exploration of new forms of social organization for collective problem recognition and management. McNeill (1963) argues that civilizations began to emerge when humankind developed primitive administrative and bureaucratic skills. Perhaps if we are to avert unpleasant future deprivations not only to our society but also to our civilization, we should devote significantly more resources and energy to the design of, and experimentation with, new forms of collective problem recognition and management.

NOTES

1. The task of mobilizing support is well documented in the case of the Marshall Plan by Jones (1955), for the Truman Doctrine by Gaddis (1972), and for NSC-68 by Hammond (1962).

2. For a social psychological study of the mistaken belief in events and their anticipated effect, see Festinger, Riecken and Schachter (1956). In organizational theory, Thompson (1967) has made activities done on the basis of collective beliefs about cause and effect relationships an organization's core technology–regardless of whether the beliefs are correct or not. Misperception in international politics has been a major concern of Jervis (1976).

3. This difficulty in problem recognition is illustrated by the "loss" in the system of cues that might have alerted U.S. policy makers to the Pearl Harbor attack (see Wohlstetter, 1962) and by the failure to consider intelligence about the location of German Panzer Divisions prior to the beginning of Operation Market-Garden in 1944 (see Ryan, 1974).

4. It is possible to construct some plausible organizational parallels to the Pool and Kessler (1969) statements about selective perception of individuals. Consider these examples:

(a) An organization pays more attention to information pertaining to itself or its mission.
(b) An organization pays less attention or seeks to deny or to alter information that contradicts its objectives and that challenges its prior behavior.

(c) An organization pays more attention to information from its own members or from those to whom it is responsible.
(d) An organization pays more attention to information on which it will have to act.
(e) An organization pays more attention to information bearing on actions it has already taken or which appears to require action of the type the organization is ready to provide.

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PART IV.

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