

# THE GREAT DANGER: WAR BY MISCALCULATION

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*Marine Corps Gazette* (pre-1994); Aug 1959; 43, 8;

*Marine Corps Gazette & Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines*

pg. 10

## THE GREAT DANGER:



☛ ONE SUNDAY MORNING IN JUNE 1914 the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian throne, was riding down a street in Sarajevo. He was in the process of making a routine official visit such as royalty for centuries have paid to parts of their territories in order to tighten the bonds of loyalty between sovereign and subjects. The Archduke's chauffeur started to make a wrong turn and put on the brakes in order to back up. Suddenly a young Serbian nationalist stepped forward and fired two shots point-blank. Both the Archduke and his wife who was sitting beside him died within minutes.

Historical research discloses that Gavrilo Princip, the assassin, was suffering from a psychopathic condition which manifested itself in a strong hatred for Austria. Although certain high officials in the Serbian Government were undoubtedly aware of the plan to kill the Archduke, no person in authority in any of the major countries was deliberately plotting to bring about a general war. Yet this incident set off a rapid train of events which quickly plunged Europe over the brink and into WWI.

Why did such a relatively minor incident spiral into a major conflict? If we analyze the course of events in the summer of 1914 the answer seems inescapable—it was war by miscalculation. The major powers permitted themselves to be carried away by the course of events with no clear and well-defined reasons for the actions they took. World events are often cumulative and in this case an initial error in judgment on the part of Austria in serving an ultimatum on Serbia led to a whole series of blunders on the part of the other major powers.

In recent years many people have been obsessed with the thought that

*Marine Corps Gazette* • August 1959

# WAR BY MISCALCULATION

by Dr. Maurice H. Hellner

if another general war breaks out it will start with a deliberately launched Soviet surprise attack on the US, and that this attack will be initiated at a time when we are at peace. Military history teaches us, however, that whenever the major powers are in a state of unstable equilibrium, general war can break out through the spiraling of freak incidents, through irresponsible actions on the part of persons in small countries, and through limited engagements at a time when none of the major powers is actively planning to initiate large-scale hostilities. This is a sobering thought because it means that even if our capacity for massive retaliation deters Soviet leaders from deliberately planning and launching a surprise attack on the US, general war could still break out through miscalculation. In fact, given the awesome destructiveness of the weapons now in the hands of both the Soviet Union and the US, the likelihood of a premeditated surprise attack in peacetime is not nearly as great as that of a general war by error.

It is of vital importance that special attention be given the problem of war by miscalculation because the fear of this possibility has colored so much of our thinking on world events during the past decade and a half. Each time there is a crisis we instinctively wonder whether the situation will get out of control and spiral into thermonuclear war. We live in constant fear that world events might reach a "critical mass" and set off a chain reaction where violence becomes self-supporting and the dreaded holocaust becomes inevitable. If we examine world events since the end of WWII it is readily apparent that this fear has been the single most important factor which has limited our courses of action in time of crisis.

It is not that our leaders and our people are unwilling to respond effectively in the face of a major challenge. The thing that causes so much apprehension is the thought that in one of these recurring crises the major powers may misjudge the actions and intent of each other and start a train of events that will lead to a general war which no one desired or planned.

The danger of war by miscalculation, of course, has always been present in the world. The nature of the current international situation, however, is such as to greatly increase this danger. The present extensive system of interlocking alliances on both sides of the Iron Curtain virtually insures that a "local" incident will have world-wide repercussions. The US now has commitments to over 40 foreign countries. Many of these, in turn, have commitments to other countries or areas. For example, the United Kingdom has obligations toward her dominions, colonies and trust territories around the world, including such critical places as Hong Kong and Singapore. The same can be said of France and Portugal. Thus, the world is now like a string of firecrackers. If the fuze is lit at any place along the line, it takes fancy footwork indeed to seal off the initial explosion.

Added to this is the fact that the present rivalry between the Communist Bloc and the Free Nations of the world is an all-out one, extending into every phase of human life. In a very real sense, it is a life-and-death struggle between two alien systems. This results in a situation where every disturbance or issue becomes one of principle, and hence exceedingly difficult to resolve. This also results in a situation where events which are not in any way initiated by either of the two

super-powers are immediately judged as if they were.

Closely allied to this is the peculiar role in world affairs currently being played by the weaker nations. In the present international situation the second and third-rate powers have very little capacity to solve world problems, but they have a tremendous capability to aggravate them. One of the strange paradoxes of the nuclear age is that as the gap between the two super-powers and the rest of the nations has widened, the role of the weak and irresponsible countries has increased. Many of the new nations consider that playing both sides in the East-West struggle is one of the hallmarks of independence. Time and again we have witnessed the strange phenomenon of states with meager resources and virtually no military power projecting themselves onto the center of the world stage by threatening to follow a completely irrational course of action in the hope of obtaining special favors from one or both of the super-powers.

Then there is the strong emotional factor in current world conditions. Throughout the course of history this has probably been the most potent force tending to expand local situations into large-scale hostilities. The Religious Wars of the seventeenth century, the Napoleonic Wars, WWI and WWII all demonstrate the extreme difficulty of limiting hostilities when strong popular emotions are aroused. In the present world characterized by strong ideological cleavages the emotional factor in world events may be greater than ever before.

Worst of all, when we project certain of the current trends into the future we are driven to the conclusion that the danger of a general war through miscalculation will increase considerably in the years to

come. Before we can hope to take effective countermeasures against this danger we must understand the nature of these trends.

The first trend is the increasing propensity of the communist nations to stir up crises as they grow in military, scientific and economic power. The history of Russia is one long series of attempts at expansion by piecemeal aggression. She has sought to expand all along her periphery wherever she has found weakness. That this is a good formula for success is readily apparent when it is recalled that it was by a process of gradual conquest that most of the empires of history were established.

In recent years, throughout the world there has been a gradual accumulation of highly inflammable material such as extreme nationalism, racialism, exploding populations and rising economic aspirations. The communists are like "fire-

Heretofore, Moscow and Peking have been content to foment one crisis at a time with an interlude of several months in between. During the past year there is ample evidence that they are stepping up the pace. In the future we may very well be faced with two or more crises occurring simultaneously. We may find ourselves confronted with a revolution in the Far East, a political probing action in Europe, a coup d'état in the Middle East, and a large-scale arms shipment to Africa all at the same time. Such a situation would not only seriously tax our military resources but would increase tremendously the danger of a major conflagration through miscalculation. Thus, on 6 June 1959 Gen Norstad told the representatives to a 15-nation conference concerned with strengthening NATO that the greatest danger of war lay in the possibility that one of these

the attack is consummated. The two super-powers are being placed in the position of having to make decisions on the basis of preliminary and sketchy early warning data with no opportunity to test the accuracy of that information within any meaningful time limits. Thus, faulty information or misinterpreted data may become the basis for an order to launch nuclear striking forces.

As the striking forces of the two super-powers become composed of missiles rather than manned bombers this dilemma will be increased in another way. Unlike bombers, missiles cannot be recalled once launched. Hence, once the order is given to launch one's retaliatory forces that order will become irrevocable. There will be no "fail safe" line or other opportunity for countermanding an order which has been made on the basis of erroneous information.

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bugs" who go about seeking to ignite this material. In such a situation there is great danger that one of these crises may get out of control and set off a major conflagration.

Americans have learned many hard lessons in the trying years since the end of WWII. Perhaps the greatest of these is that we are in for a long series of crises. In the years to come the only kind of "peace" we are likely to know is the peace of power politics, always to be won again and never wholly safe.

The Kremlin is like a snake; if it is blocked in one place it will rear and strike again somewhere else. There is no such thing as a dramatic over-all settlement with the communists. There is no such thing as satisfying communist ambitions by acquiescing in a limited aggression. There is no such thing as blocking the Soviets in one area and settling that problem once and for all. If the communists are stopped in Quemoy they will stir up trouble in Berlin. If they are blocked in Berlin, they will try to take over Iraq. In each crisis we face we can be sure of one thing—whether we give in or stand firm, there will be another crisis in a few months or a year.

enemy probing operations would get out of hand as a result of a miscalculation.

The second trend which is increasing the danger of war by miscalculation is the collapse of the time element in modern warfare. This is due to the progress which is being made in the missile field.

As long as the manned bomber was the only method of delivering a thermonuclear attack, both the Soviet Union and the US could entertain the hope that their detection systems could provide several hours of warning of an impending attack. During this period of time retaliatory bombers could be launched while the initial early warning reports were being checked for accuracy and verified by subsequent information. If the information proved to be erroneous the bombers could be recalled before they reached enemy territory.

The rapid progress which is being made in the missile field changes all this considerably. As we move into the missile age the warning time any nation can expect to receive concerning a surprise attack is becoming so short as to make it virtually impossible to verify pertinent intelligence information before

The third trend which is increasing the danger of general war by miscalculation is the progressive introduction of small-yield tactical nuclear weapons into the armies of the major powers. At present, it is US national policy to employ such weapons when there is a clear advantage to be gained in doing so. Presumably the Soviets have a similar policy, although, unlike ours, it is unannounced.

Opinions of military experts are sharply divided on the degree of danger involved in the use of tactical nuclear weapons in limited war. Some feel that once such weapons are employed the fighting automatically passes the crucial "point of no return" beyond which each side will resort to weapons of ever greater explosive power until all-out war is reached. Others feel that tactical nuclear weapons can be used without precipitating general war provided both sides sincerely desire to keep the war limited. All agree, however, that the introduction of tactical nuclear weapons into a limited war greatly increases the danger of a general war by miscalculation.

The reason for this is that there are no sharp dividing lines between "tactical" weapons and targets on

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the one hand, and "strategic" weapons and targets on the other. Moreover, human nature being what it is, there is a virtual certainty that each nuclear explosion will be reported by the troops of the opposing side as being greater than is actually the case (e.g. a one-kiloton blast will be reported as a three-kiloton blast). Thus, there is likely to be a built-in escalator effect in any limited war in which tactical nuclear weapons are used.

It goes without saying that a limited war must have limits, and these limits must be clearly recognizable and tacitly agreed upon by both sides. The fact that the dividing line between "tactical" and "strategic" weapons and targets is so ambiguous greatly enhances the danger that one side may misjudge the intent of the other and thereby be tempted to launch a preemptive blow.

The fourth trend which will increase the danger of war by miscalculation in the future is the imminent acquisition of nuclear weapons and missiles by "fourth countries." Within the next five years it is likely that countries other than the US, Great Britain, and the USSR will acquire nuclear weapons and missiles. This could come about either through indigenous efforts on the part of the countries concerned or through military assistance from the present nuclear powers.

The wider the family of nuclear countries the greater the likelihood that these weapons will fall into irresponsible hands. The US, Great Britain and the USSR exercise extremely tight control over their nuclear weapons and missiles. When one surveys the type of leadership which is found in some of the second and third-rate powers of the world, it is not difficult to appreciate the danger that one of them might adopt a reckless attitude toward these weapons.

In view of all these trends which are converging to increase the danger of a general war by miscalculation, what measures can be taken to alleviate the situation? Admittedly, there is no fool-proof solution

to a problem of this nature. In general, however, the answer lies in developing the capability to secure a break in the chain of events in any given crisis. During this break aggressors will have time to weigh the terrible consequences of expanding their operations, and diplomacy will have an opportunity to bring the dispute under control.

The problem of preventing a general war by miscalculation is essentially one of stopping a chain reaction. It is one of preventing a limited situation from spiraling into a major conflagration. As such, it is different in many respects from the problem of deterring the launching of a carefully planned surprise attack on the order of Pearl Harbor.

The situation we are trying to avert in the case of general war by miscalculation is one in which political pressures and military operations get out of control and build up a momentum all their own. It is one in which the direction of events is determined by chance rather than by design. It is one in which decisions are made in rash moments when emotions are running high and tempers are short.

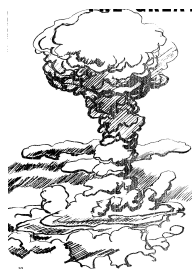
It is apparent that in circumstances of this sort the time element assumes paramount importance. Hours count for more than days, and days for more than weeks. The chances of stopping the chain reaction are infinitely greater at the beginning of the cycle than later on. A course of action which would be adequate to deal with the crisis in its infancy would almost certainly be inadequate if implementation is delayed.

In today's world, the timing of

US reactions to communist probings is of tremendous importance. We must possess the forces to react promptly to aggressive situations and we must not be timid. If our reaction is delayed, the magnitude of our effort will almost certainly have to be increased, and the risk of general war will be greatly enhanced. In time of revolution or limited aggression, the most dangerous course of action we can follow is to delay our response until the aggressor has solidified his position or until the aggression has spread.

For example, there is much less likelihood that a local situation will spiral into general war if we block an attempted communist coup than if we try to dislodge a communist regime that has already established itself. If our action is prompt, there will still be friendly indigenous troops and leaders with which to work. If, on the other hand, we permit the communists to gain control of a government they then attain an air of legitimacy and we look like the aggressors. The longer the communists stay in power within a given country the more difficult it becomes to dislodge them without running the risk of general war. This is the reason the problem of liberating the European satellites involves such grave risks.

Closely allied to the need for responding quickly is the requirement for tailoring our response to the nature of the challenge. If the best we can do in time of crisis is to hint that we shall employ thermonuclear weapons on Moscow or Peiping in order to protect Teheran or Saigon, we are faced with a difficult dilemma indeed. For such a threat to be



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## **“. . . Marines play a decisive role in deterring general war.”**

effective it must be credible. Yet, to the extent that it is really credible, we run the risk of inviting a preemptive blow.

If we are to reduce the danger of general war by miscalculation we must ensure that our actions, particularly the movements of our nuclear striking forces, never inadvertently suggest to our opponents that the US is actually about to launch a thermonuclear attack on them. In the modern world, there is no room for “saber-rattling” with thermonuclear forces. Such a procedure might get us into the “wrong war at the wrong time.”

This does not mean that the US can afford to reduce its capabilities for delivering a devastating thermonuclear attack. It does not even mean that the US must never strike the first blow. The distinction we must make is one between capabilities and intentions. We must always maintain, and, in fact, advertise our capabilities. We must never, on the other hand, give our opponents reason to believe that we actually intend to launch an attack at a specific time. To do so is to invite a preemptive blow.

From the foregoing it is apparent that the solution to the problem of averting a general war by miscalcu-

lation has two basic elements. First, we must be able to respond to local situations immediately. Second, we must be able to respond in a manner which will contain the situation, not spread it.

With these two basic elements in mind, it is evident that the Marines play a decisive role in deterring general war by miscalculation. Can anyone doubt that the Lebanese crisis in the summer of 1958 would have spread to other areas if the Marines had not landed on such short notice? Can anyone challenge the thesis that the risk of general war would have been infinitely greater if the rebels had been able to seize control of the Lebanese Government and the US had then landed troops and overthrown them?

The American public does not generally think of the Marine Corps as playing a role in the deterrence of thermonuclear war. Yet, when we consider the problem of general war by miscalculation, it is readily apparent that the Marines have a unique role to play in preventing limited situations from spiraling. With an opponent who insists on starting brush fires all over the world, there is a critical need for the type of forces which can act in a matter of hours to put out the fire.

The time to stop aggression, whether it be direct or indirect, is in its infancy.

There is every indication that in the years to come the US will face a whole series of crises any one of which might spiral into thermonuclear war. Some of these crises will be deliberately fomented by the communists. Others will be the result of impassioned fanatics in the smaller countries who fail to consider the wider ramifications of their actions. Still others will arise from sheer misfortune.

Under circumstances such as these, it is of paramount importance that the US possess the type of military forces which can quickly secure a break in the sequence of events. During the ensuing pause, Moscow and Peking will have time to weigh the grave consequences of spreading the conflict, and diplomacy will have an opportunity to bring the situation to the conference table.

Too often in the past the history of mankind has been determined by the sheer momentum of events rather than by the conscious objectives of statesmen. We must not allow this to happen in the nuclear age for the continued existence of civilization itself is now at stake.

US MC



### ***Just Warming Up***

☛ ONE UNIT IN THE SHIP-TO-SHORE movement during the Inchon landing came in to land over the wrong seawall. They quickly discovered their mistake after climbing the wall and seeing more water instead of land in front of them. Undaunted, they climbed back into their LCVPs, quickly located the correct seawall and effected their landing in a few minutes.

When things had settled down the next day, the commander of the unit was being kidded about landing in the wrong spot. “We didn’t do anything of the sort,” he replied. “The book says every amphibious landing should have a rehearsal. We were just holding our rehearsal five minutes before the real thing.”

Maj W. F. Koehnlein

### ***Economy Except with Words***

☛ OUR ARTILLERY BATTALION WAS ONE of several assigned to support a Corps which was to land on Leyte during WWII. Loading out at Hilo, Hawaii, the long voyage was to be made in an insufficient number of ships. In order to use the available cargo space as efficiently as possible, the Corps administrative order prescribed some rather specific instructions. We blinked our eyes at one, which read, “In order to achieve maximum utilization of cargo space, large items to be boxed will be put in large boxes and small items will be put in small boxes.”

Col R. M. Wood