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BLACK SWANS/ WHITE HOUSE: WHY JFK MATTERS A HALF CENTURY AFTER DALLAS

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Cover and page design by Steve Cross.

Cover art by Wesley Blondin. JFK's preparation for what later became the signature feature of his decision making — staying as far as possible from the abyss of war — should be understood as a tale of two backbones, one physical and one metaphorical. JFK used his multitude of physical illnesses, near death experiences (receiving last rites at least four times) and lifelong horrific back pain as a form of jiu-jitsu, by which he transformed his physical weaknesses and defects into the psychological steeliness he demonstrated as a presidential decision maker.

Author art by Andrew Whyte.



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For more information about the authors' transmedia projects, see:

- armageddonletters.com
- JFKsBackbone.com
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Black Swan logic makes what you don't know far more relevant than what you know.

— Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan*

The...[hawks]...always give you their bullshit about their instant reaction and their split-second timing, but it never works out. No wonder it's so hard to win a war.

— John F. Kennedy¹

There's always some son of a bitch who doesn't get the word.

— John F. Kennedy²

ALAS, JFK = ELVIS: FROM KENNEDY KITSCH TO A DEEPER PITCH, A HALF CENTURY AFTER DALLAS

On November 22, 2013, the world observes the fiftieth anniversary of JFK's assassination. As Peter Baker (2013) writes, a "quick Amazon browse" yields a staggering 140 new JFK-related book titles published in English this year alone. JFK is regularly ranked by the American public as the most popular president of the post-World War II period. But even this does not seem to adequately explain the Kennedy media blitz in 2013. The media coverage of the anniversary will surely prove in spades that, alas, people still find the circumstances of JFK's death far more interesting than the achievements of his presidency. Dallas is Graceland; JFK might as well have been Elvis. For the first quarter century or so after JFK's murder, insensitive cynics sometimes remarked that having been assassinated was a great posthumous career move. They were wrong. The bizarre and still incompletely solved assassination has focussed succeeding generations on the JFK "fluff" factor — all the hearsay and gossip involved in establishing the Kennedys as America's unofficial "royal family." To most, Dallas was tragic because JFK and his wife and children were so beautiful, young and cool. *Vanity Fair*, perhaps the paradigmatic Kennedy-worshipping outlet, has recently issued a commemorative volume of nearly 200 pages, with remarkably few advertisements, of nothing but Kennedy stories. The cover delivers on its promises of "dynasty,

1 See Reeves (1993, 363).

2 Here, John F. Kennedy (JFK) is referring to a US spy plane's untimely overflight of the western Soviet Union during the most dangerous phase of the Cuban missile crisis. JFK knew the Soviets would interpret this as a provocation, but the reality was that the pilot was lost while on an air sampling mission. Assistant Secretary of State Roger Hilsman delivered the message to JFK and his executive committee on the afternoon of Saturday October 27, 1962, eliciting this remark (Reeves 1993, 416).

glamour, power and tragedy,” cementing JFK’s role as America’s martyred monarch.

JFK deserves better. He was far from perfect as a president, husband and father; yet, as we now know from both oral testimony and declassified documents, the Cold War produced no greater hero. This conclusion has nothing to do with Camelot fantasies and everything to do with the relevant historical facts. But to grasp the nature and significance of his heroism, we need to go deeper into what he actually *did*, and perhaps more importantly, what he did *not* do. Standing firm against the many advisers who tried to push him to use the massive US military force, JFK prevented several disastrous wars. Were it not for his skepticism of hawkish advice and his steely determination to prevail over the hawks, any one of a half-dozen crises could have escalated to a nuclear catastrophe involving the United States and the Soviet Union.

We also deserve better, a half century after Dallas, as we confront a violent world that seems, at times, to be coming apart at the seams. We need to appreciate what we like to call JFK’s *heroic non-action* in the face of excruciating pressure from hawks, and we need to learn how to apply its principles to the world of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

YOU DON’T KNOW JACK: A NEW JFK BIOGRAPHY (IN LESS THAN 500 WORDS)

The JFK we have come to know retrospectively is not your grandparents’ JFK. In the past quarter century, our image of JFK has been transformed in fundamental ways:

- Formerly thought of as a cold warrior and hawk, he was actually cautious and had a spine of steel in resisting his hawks, who, on at least six occasions, tried to talk him into taking the nation and world to war.
- Once believed to be the paragon of “vigah,” health and vitality, he was in reality one of the sickest, most physically compromised presidents in US history. He was given last rites by a priest at least four times, and possibly a fifth — the latter while he was president, in June 1961.
- We also know from the archives in Moscow, Havana and Hanoi that Kennedy was right to resist his hawks. If war came, initiated by the United States, most of Kennedy’s advisers told him the Soviets would not respond, due to the US’s overwhelming nuclear superiority at the time. We now know from interviews and archives that the responses would have been devastating, probably uncontrollable, and possibly apocalyptic.

- JFK’s near-death experiences, horrible back pain and barely controlled Addison’s disease provided the crucial “body boot camp” which taught him to never trust experts — whether doctors or generals — and made him a lifelong skeptic regarding the advice he was given. His diseases and unpredictable chronic pain also taught him to distrust predictions made by analysts — whether medical or military.³

Søren Kierkegaard wrote that “He who is educated by dread is educated by possibility” (1980, 156), and indeed, JFK was a president educated by dread and by possibility from his earliest years.⁴ Experience taught him that anything could happen, and that he’d better be ready to roll with the punch of the totally unexpected. Of course, we would not wish that much pain and suffering on anyone. But can we honestly say we are sorry that he suffered — that he faced death up close and very personal on nearly a half-dozen occasions? Are we sorry that he spent so much time in a hospital bed, reading Winston Churchill and others, from whom he learned that wars are easily begun, but often cannot be ended until they have wreaked death and destruction out of all proportion to the alleged purposes for which the war was begun? And do we regret his horrendous experience in the South Pacific — including the wreck of PT-109, when he nearly died? No. “That which does not destroy me,” Nietzsche famously wrote, “makes me stronger” — JFK, it turns out, is his poster boy. We are grateful that JFK knew the threat of imminent death, dread and disaster first-hand.⁵

3 Scholarship on JFK’s health issues was, for many years, thin and misinformed, due to the JFK Library’s decision to withhold his medical records. Distinguished historian Robert Dallek finally obtained permission to examine the records in 2001, with the stipulation that he must be accompanied by a physician. Soon after reviewing the records with Dr. Jeffrey Kelman, Dallek published two landmark works in Kennedy scholarship (see Dallek 2002; 2003); all subsequent scholarship on Kennedy’s health derives from Dallek’s pioneering work. More recently, psychiatrist Nassir Ghaemi (2011) has suggested that, during late June 1961 (Kennedy’s first year as president), he may have nearly died of complications from his treatment for Addison’s disease. The records that Ghaemi expected to find from a roughly two-week period are uncharacteristically absent, which he interprets as the result of a cover-up. But records of JFK’s drug intake, along with a nurse’s notes, suggest that he may have briefly gone into a coma. See Ghaemi (2011), chapters 11 and 12, which are devoted to JFK.

4 See Blight (1990) for the application of Kierkegaard’s psychology to the actions of JFK and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev during the Cuban missile crisis.

5 Malcolm Gladwell (2013a; 2013b) has written fascinatingly on this issue of how adversity can provide advantages, as well as disadvantages. See also Adelman’s (2013) marvellous biography of Albert Hirschman, especially pp. 449–454, on Hirschman’s attempt to square the views of Kierkegaard and Harvard’s Thomas C. Schelling.

JFK'S BLACK SWAN LOGIC

1963

We invite you to step into a time machine. (Mind the gap!) It is the summer of 1963. You are a documentary filmmaker who has been given exclusive and extensive access to JFK in the White House. (Caveat: You do not have access to JFK's serial womanizing. That is off limits.) Your film is to be the definitive video representation of JFK as a national security decision maker. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you plausibly infer? And how does everything you uncover fit with your historical research about JFK *before* you were allowed into his inner circle?

Within days of your arrival at the White House, you become perplexed and fascinated by what seems like a cosmic contradiction in the man in the Oval Office. In shorthand, you decide to call the seeming contradiction "a tale of two backbones." This is a president who is frail, sick and often in great pain from his deficient physical backbone; yet this is also a president with a metaphorical backbone of steel who faces down his hawkish advisers — a very tough bunch, to say the least — both civilian and military.

A TALE OF TWO BACKBONES

JFK's Physical Backbone

You can hardly believe what you observe daily. JFK is often visibly sick with infections and other illnesses connected with his Addison's disease, or in great pain due his back injuries and botched 1950s back surgeries. You are almost overwhelmed by all the accoutrements of a seriously ill person: he is given many injections each day; he takes an enormous number of pills on a carefully monitored schedule; often, he cannot bend over to tie his own shoes; he wears various braces for his back, each of which leaves him unable to bend at the waist and is cinched so tight that you wonder how he can even breathe. You become aware that, on many days, the only time the president walks without crutches is when he is in public, although he occasionally uses them even then, when his pain is otherwise unmanageable. And perhaps most surreal of all, you witness, on many occasions, JFK being loaded onto a specially equipped forklift at Andrews Air Force Base so that he can literally be lifted, like a piece of cargo, onto Air Force One. You also witness this procedure in reverse, when the presidential plane flies into Andrews: the same device retrieves the president before it deposits him on the tarmac. As soon as he hits the ground, JFK hobbles on his crutches as fast as he can manage into a waiting limousine for the ride to the White House (Dallek 2002; 2003).⁶

6 See also the Dr. Zebra website (2013), which examines the health problems of US presidents. An image of JFK on crutches, disembarking by forklift at Andrews Air Force Base is available at: www.historynyc.com/proddetail.asp?prod=4790.

JFK's Metaphorical Backbone

But wait! You gradually begin to realize that JFK, while physically frail and in pain, still has the fortitude to drive his hawkish advisers up the wall. He resists them, he confounds them; sometimes he deceives them. He pretends to listen carefully to them, he asks the kinds of questions that might be interpreted as coming from someone sympathetic to the hawkish point of view. What he does not do, however, is what they demand, on a daily basis, which is to take the nation to war over one or more of the crises brewing all over a world deeply mired in the dangerous Cold War.



From his early years until his death, JFK wore a tight-fitting brace to try to lessen his near-constant back pain. (Art by Wesley Blondin.)

You begin to wonder whether JFK is practising some kind of "jiu-jitsu," transforming his physical weakness and suffering into strength of character — that steely metaphorical backbone. You are also aware that JFK himself doesn't pretend to grasp whatever alchemy links his "two backbones." During your 1963 summer in residence, in fact, JFK admits as much in a foreword to *Decision-making in the White House*, a new book by his aide

and speechwriter, Ted Sorensen. “The essence of ultimate decision,” Kennedy writes, “remains impenetrable to the observer — often indeed, to the decider himself... There will always be the dark and tangled stretches in the decision-making process — mysterious even to those who may be most intimately involved” (Kennedy 1963a).

2013

Welcome back. (Mind the gap, again!) At last, a half century after your residence as figurative filmmaker, we can reconstruct what you saw behind the scenes in the Kennedy White House. The disadvantage of hindsight, of course, is that the flesh and blood of real-time suffering and confrontation with war-threatening crises is largely drained out of our data. Unlike your time and space-travelling self, from the perspective of 2013, we know how everything turned out. Much of the thrill and adventure, but also the anxiety, of leaping into the unknown are gone.⁷

A further advantage that we have over the observer of 1963 is that we now have some conceptual tools to understand what JFK was up to, instinctively and intuitively. We can now see that what seemed so maddeningly illogical to most of JFK’s advisers on national security has, in fact, a profound logic of its own: *black swan logic*. The aptness of the term “black swan” derives from the belief that, since all previously encountered swans are white, one becomes convinced, perhaps unconsciously, that *all* swans are white, and thus is shocked when confronted by a black swan — which are metaphorical everywhere outside western Australia, where they actually exist. The idea has been around since at least the time of Aristotle; in the twentieth century, its foremost advocate was Sir Karl Popper. Recently, it has been embraced and greatly enhanced by Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2004; 2010; 2012) in three landmark books.⁸ As Taleb explains it, “A Black Swan is an event with the following three attributes. First, it is an *outlier*, as it lies outside the realm of regular expectations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility. Second, it carries an extreme impact. Third, in spite of its outlier status, human nature makes us concoct explanations for its occurrence *after* the fact, making it explainable and predictable” (2010, xxii, emphasis in original).

The fundamental proposition, according to Taleb, is this: “Black Swan logic makes *what you don’t know* far more

relevant than what you know” (2010, xiii, emphasis in original). In a vivid metaphor, Taleb says that black swan logic helps insulate its user against “the great turkey problem” (2012, 92–3). With each passing day, the turkey becomes more confident that butchers love turkeys. In fact, the turkey is *most* confident on the day before Thanksgiving, at the very moment the butcher brings the cleaver down on its neck. Oops. The narrative of the turkey-friendly butcher was convincing, but alas untrue.

Time and again, JFK the decision maker proved to be far more interested in what he knew he *didn’t* know, than what his hawkish advisers claimed they did. He was also concerned more with what *might* conceivably happen, than with what his advisers told him probably *would*. JFK was thus a thoroughgoing practitioner of black swan logic. His world was filled with improbable but potentially ferocious black swans, which lay in wait for inattentive decision makers, who, like Taleb’s proverbial turkey, “confuse absence of evidence for evidence of absence” (ibid., 93).

REALITY ROULETTE

In Russian roulette, you put one bullet in a pistol; you spin the cylinder, put the barrel to your head and pull the trigger. It was made famous by British novelist Graham Greene (1999), who wrote that he played the game as a young man. If the game is played with a revolver containing six chambers, the player thus has a one in six chance of putting a bullet in his own head.

Taleb uses the image of Russian roulette in a way that illustrates why the vast majority of people become enamoured by the probabilistic predictions of experts, and also why only a few, like JFK, tend to focus on possibilities rather than some inevitably fallible estimate of probabilities:

Reality is far more vicious than Russian roulette. It delivers the fatal bullet rather infrequently, like a revolver that would have hundreds, even thousands, of chambers instead of six. After a few dozen tries, one forgets about the existence of a bullet, under a numbing false sense of security...Unlike a well-defined, precise game like Russian roulette, where the risks are visible to anyone capable of multiplying and dividing by six, one does not observe the barrel of reality. (Taleb 2004, 26)

JFK as president was unusually resistant to this lulling effect. In his forty-six-and-a-half years, there would be no let-up in either his personal or political black swan events. Merely to survive, as a human being and as the president, he felt he did not have the luxury of being lulled into thinking that he, or anybody else, really understood what

7 Our research method, *critical oral history*, attempts to take this into account by combining, in conference settings, officials who played roles in the events under scrutiny, declassified documents connected with the events, and top scholars who are intimately familiar with the chronology of events and with the relevant documentary record. On the assumptions and logic of critical oral history, see Blight and Lang (2005, 3–25).

8 Of the trilogy, *The Black Swan* is Taleb’s masterpiece, full of applicability far beyond the world of Wall Street, where he once made his living as a bond trader and “quant” investor.

was going on or what would happen next. From an early age, JFK knew more profoundly than most that he was destined to be on the receiving end of a shock-and-awe campaign waged by reality itself. The surprises just kept on coming.

STEELY JACK: BLACK SWAN LOGIC IN ACTION IN THE KENNEDY WHITE HOUSE

Much less appreciated than the circumstances of JFK's assassination is the well-documented record of his decisions on matters of war and peace. It is as astonishing as it is unambiguous. We now know that no president was ever pressured more intensely or more often than JFK to take the United States to war. His advisers lobbied him, attempted to intimidate him and schemed mightily throughout the 1,036 days of his presidency to force him to authorize direct US military interventions. The pressure was most intense over Cuba (twice, in April 1961 and October 1962); Laos (spring 1961); the Berlin Wall (summer and fall 1961); and in South Vietnam (twice, November 1961 and October 1963). In each case, JFK successfully resisted their pressure to intervene with US combat troops even though, on each occasion, intervening would have been politically popular — at least initially. The declassified documents and oral testimony that have become available over the past quarter century (a good deal of it unearthed by our colleagues and ourselves in our critical oral history research projects) are unequivocal: JFK was regularly out in front of his advisers, articulating what might go wrong if military force was used as an early option rather than, as he believed, an option of last resort, and how such action, if taken, could escalate into a disaster.

JFK's foreign policy "education" was, of course, continuous over the roughly thousand days of his presidency. Yet, in those darkest days of the Cold War, the bulk of his education in foreign policy occurred, we believe, in relatively short, explosive bursts. These crises seemed to occur suddenly, sometimes without warning, and they appeared to JFK (though often not to many of his advisers) to be very dangerous. In response to these crises, his top aides provided him with advice that was usually hawkish in the extreme, seemingly heedless of US military vulnerability to the threat of Soviet nuclear forces, but also oblivious to the international political fallout that would, in JFK's view, be a likely consequence of the introduction of US combat forces into conflicts in the developing world. Here are some of the principal lessons we believe JFK learned from the six most dangerous Cold War crises he faced during his presidency.⁹

APRIL 1961: THE BAY OF PIGS DEBACLE

Just before taking office, JFK is told that he has inherited a CIA scheme for regime change in Cuba from his predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower. Using 1,200 Cuban exiles as an invasion force will, according to the CIA, incite a popular uprising against the Castro government. JFK is told, before the invasion begins, that the operation will almost certainly succeed. Then, as it is failing miserably, he is told that it can *still* succeed if he agrees to use US air power and to send in the US Marines who are positioned almost within sight of the Bay of Pigs. JFK's advisers at the CIA and at the Joint Chiefs of Staff are almost apoplectic with disbelief when he refuses their request to bomb and invade Cuba.

JFK's lessons: Do not trust your intelligence bureaucracy to come clean on the costs and risks of the invasion of another country. Do not trust the rosy estimates of the military brass on important aspects of a foreign military adventure.¹⁰

WINTER–SPRING 1961: THE LAOS CRISIS

JFK is told that the Soviet resupply of communist insurgents in Laos must be forcibly stopped using US regular forces, but also by possibly using tactical nuclear weapons. He is told that if he fails to "Americanize" the conflict, the communists will overrun Laos and threaten all of Southeast Asia. Kennedy neither orders US troops into Laos nor authorizes the use of US air power against Soviet assets in Laos. He is appalled at the thought of using nuclear weapons in Laos, or anywhere. Instead, he works with Khrushchev to resolve the crisis via a political compromise: a neutralist government for Laos.¹¹

JFK's lessons: Do not be intimidated by military brass, not even your predecessor and military hero, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who tells you to do "whatever is necessary" to save Laos from the communists. Do not believe advisers who tell you that just because the communists appear to make gains, the sky is about to fall or, in any event, that a military intervention against Soviet forces can be undertaken anywhere at acceptable cost and risk.

10 See Blight and Kornbluh, eds. (1998) and the more recent Jones (2008), which integrates much new information from previously classified US documents. Jones concludes cautiously that the invasion, together with the various clandestine US operations against Cuba may have been connected with "the events in Dallas."

11 On Laos and its possible connection to avoiding the US war in Vietnam, see McNamara et al. (1999, 99–150). The key issue is whether the neutral solution in Laos, reached in 1961, could have served as a model for South Vietnam. Washington thought the answer was "no" at the time, but evidence from Hanoi suggests otherwise.

9 This section has been reworked from chapter 1 of Blight, Lang and Welch (2009) and from its accompanying documentary feature, directed by Koji Masutani (*Virtual JFK* 2008).

AUGUST–OCTOBER 1961: THE BERLIN WALL CRISIS

JFK is told, as the Wall goes up in Berlin, that he must threaten the Soviets with both conventional and nuclear weapons until they capitulate, tear down the Wall and refrain from harassing US personnel in East Germany, en route to and from Berlin. JFK refuses to intervene or risk a military engagement between US and Soviet forces in Berlin, encountering, as a result, stiff public criticism and bitter internal dissension from his hawkish advisers. Nevertheless, JFK tells his representative in Berlin, former General Lucius D. Clay, to back off, and Khrushchev reciprocates. The Berlin Wall goes up and stays up, tragically closing off the principal route for East Germans to escape to the West, but a war in the heart of Europe is avoided.¹²

JFK's lessons: Retain strict civilian control of military operations in any direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. Never forget what many military and civilian advisers seem not yet to have grasped — that nuclear weapons are not usable weapons, but rather, are little more than doomsday devices.

NOVEMBER 1961: THE INTERNAL SHOWDOWN OVER VIETNAM

JFK is told by all his foreign policy advisers that US ally South Vietnam is collapsing under pressure from the communist insurgency, and that the US-backed government can only be preserved through the introduction of US combat troops. JFK refuses to send any combat troops, sending more US advisers and equipment instead. All of JFK's military advisers and most of his civilian advisers are unhappy with this decision, because they believe South Vietnam's viability is at risk, and that if it fails, the "dominoes will fall" in Southeast Asia, endangering friendly governments from Indonesia to Japan. In fact, however, 1962 becomes a relatively good year for the Saigon government, during

which the communist insurgency grows at a slower rate than it did in 1961.¹³

JFK's lessons: The war in Vietnam is unavoidably unconventional, an insurgency that cannot be defeated with even the large US Army, which must eventually leave, since the United States has no traditional imperial ambitions. If the Vietnamese anti-communists in Saigon cannot win that war, the United States cannot win it for them.

OCTOBER 1962: THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

Civilian and military advisers tell JFK point blank that the United States must bomb Soviet missile sites in Cuba and invade the island as soon as possible, to ensure that Soviet military capability on the island is destroyed, and the Castro government removed. JFK personally restrains his military advisers, who are aghast at what they take to be his timidity and cowardly reluctance to use the deployment of Soviet missiles as a pretext to destroy the Cuban Revolution. But JFK works out a compromise with Khrushchev and, we now know, is ready to absorb enormous political heat, rather than risk war with the Soviet Union.¹⁴

JFK's lessons: Escalation to an all-out nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union is possible, and in this crisis may even have been likely, even though none of the involved leaders wished for it. Thus, do everything possible to avoid a direct confrontation with the Soviets and begin to seek a new basis for relations between East

12 Not everyone agrees that JFK was right to accept the Berlin Wall as the price to be paid for avoiding war in Europe. See, for example, Kempe (2011, xxii), who asks rhetorically: "Should history consider the Berlin Wall's construction the positive outcome of Kennedy's unflappable leadership — a successful means of avoiding war — or was the Wall instead the unhappy result of his missing backbone...when another course of action might have spared tens of millions of Eastern Europeans from another generation of Soviet occupation and oppression?" Kempe's parents were East German refugees who knew first-hand the crushing Soviet occupation of East Germany after the war. He writes with passion about what he sees as missed opportunities to avoid not only war, but also the Wall itself. JFK did not see it that way. We don't either. The situation was too volatile and too many factors were not well understood in the West, for example: was Khrushchev willing to go to war over Berlin, or not?

13 To get a sense of just how far apart JFK was from his advisers on Vietnam in November 1961, two declassified documents from that moment should be read in tandem: a memo to JFK on the morning of November 15 from National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy and another memo from Colonel Howard Burris, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson's (LBJ's) military attaché, later the same day. Bundy tells JFK that all of his senior advisers recommend sending combat troops to South Vietnam. The Burris memo is the only available record of what happened in the meeting between JFK and his senior advisers on the morning of November 15, where he stonewalls them. He says "yes" to trainers and equipment, but "no" to combat troops. Copies of the documents are in Blight, Lang and Welch (2009, 279–283).

14 For the past quarter century, the Cuban missile crisis has seemed more dangerous with each passing year. See Blight and Welch (1989); Blight, Allyn and Welch (1993); and Blight and Lang (2012). *The Armageddon Letters* anchors a transmedia website, designed and managed by Koji Masutani, which contains original short films, podcasts, graphic art and blogs. See www.armageddonletters.com.

and West because, as the missile crisis proves, the Cold War confrontation is too dangerous to be sustainable.¹⁵

OCTOBER 1963: THE MCNAMARA-TAYLOR MISSION AND PREPARATIONS FOR THE WITHDRAWAL FROM SOUTH VIETNAM

From May through early autumn 1963, South Vietnam is in turmoil and the government of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem looks doomed. The insurgency has once again made substantial gains, and many Americans in both Saigon and Washington fear an imminent communist takeover. The Diem government has repeatedly embarrassed its US sponsors with its brutal treatment of dissidents, rampant corruption and general incompetence. JFK makes two decisions: one of his worst, and one of his best, as we now know with the benefit of hindsight.

First, in August 1963, he authorizes, and his advisers set in motion, a coup by South Vietnamese officers that removes the elected government. Diem and his brother, internal security chief Ngo Dinh Nhu, are murdered on November 1, at the order of the junta that overthrew them, ushering in not stability, as JFK had hoped, but chaos. Second, JFK begins finalizing a plan to withdraw US forces from Vietnam. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell Taylor return from South Vietnam in early October with a report calling for the US training units to begin withdrawing from Vietnam, stating that their training mission has been fulfilled. A public announcement confirms the plan: 1,000 US personnel are to be back home in time for Christmas.¹⁶

JFK's lessons: Do whatever is necessary — for example, order a complete pullout of US personnel — to *avoid* a US war in Vietnam. In 1963, neo-colonialism is on the wrong side of history. Go slowly at first, however, because 1964 is a presidential election year. But be clear that the objective is to remove all US personnel from South Vietnam by 1965. By making yourself vulnerable to attacks from the hawks, be prepared to explain, again and again, that US interests

are not served by trying to defeat indigenous insurgents half a world away.

In every major crisis of his presidency involving national security, JFK refused to abandon his black swan logic — a logic focussed on *possibilities* rather than probabilities. JFK knew that the future seldom mimicked the past, that human understanding is fallible and thin, and that what human beings believe is true is often delusional — self-serving, short-sighted and plain wrong.

THE BLACK SWANS WERE REAL! THE SCHOLARLY VINDICATION OF KENNEDY'S BLACK SWAN LOGIC

A half century after Dallas, we know more than the details of the pressure brought to bear on JFK, and more than the previously hidden story of the strategies he used for resisting his hawkish advisers. With the advantage of hindsight, we now know that JFK was *right*, and that those counselling the use of force were *wrong*. This is because, during the past 25 years, we have gained access to a treasure trove of important documents and oral testimony from former Cold War adversaries: from Russia, Cuba, Vietnam, East Germany and elsewhere. We now have the data necessary to calculate with much greater confidence than ever before the likely outcome if JFK had: ordered the demolition of the Berlin Wall after August 13, 1961, when its construction by the East Germans and Soviets began; ordered an invasion of Cuba in October 1962; or escalated the conflict in Vietnam to a US war by ordering US combat personnel to South Vietnam any time between his inauguration and his murder in Dallas.

Had JFK caved in to his hawkish advisers on any of these occasions, the probable result would have been a disastrous war that would have been much bloodier and much more costly than his advisers estimated. We now know a great deal about what Soviet leaders were thinking during both the Berlin Wall and the Cuban missile crises, and what they were prepared to do in the event of US military intervention. Many of JFK's advisers argued that the Soviet Union, woefully inferior to the United States in deliverable nuclear weapons, would act "rationally" by not acting at all, rather than challenging the United States with a counterattack. But we now know that JFK's advisers were wrong. Aggressive US military action over Berlin or Cuba would have led to war between US and Soviet forces, perhaps initially limited, but carrying a very high risk of escalation to a nuclear catastrophe.

Regarding Vietnam, we can be even more confident that JFK's cautious approach was wise. His successor, LBJ, retained virtually the entire team of national security advisers JFK had assembled, who gave him the same hawkish advice. They urged him to intervene, to save the Saigon government from collapse and maintain

15 The Cubans and Russians did not understand that JFK restrained his hawks, all of whom were keen to invade. Instead, Havana and Moscow saw the Bay of Pigs invasion as a violation of Cuban sovereignty, and they believed that JFK would ultimately authorize an invasion of Cuba in order to save his presidency. This was only exacerbated by JFK's willingness to endorse Operation Mongoose, a covert program organized by Robert F. Kennedy (RFK), which caused considerable damage in Cuba. Khrushchev also failed to grasp the Cuban perspective in important ways, seeing Castro and the Cubans as something like children — impetuous, ignorant of the way the world worked, too easy to take offence and unwilling to listen to the reason of their elders. See Blight and Lang (2012) for the difficulties the superpowers and Cuba had in understanding one another.

16 See Blight, Lang and Welch (2009, 96–141; 288–304).

US credibility with its allies, no matter how corrupt or incompetent the South Vietnamese government had become. The United States, they told LBJ (as they had told JFK earlier), can save the day at little cost and risk. Unlike JFK, LBJ caved into his inherited hawks again and again as he Americanized the conflict in Vietnam. The result was a humanitarian catastrophe in Southeast Asia, a humiliating defeat for the United States and a foreshortened presidency for LBJ, who lacked altogether JFK's cautionary impulse and steely determination to stand up to misplaced hawkish advice.¹⁷

THE HISTORY THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

To get a sense of how much difference a president can make in matters of war and peace, consider for a moment a little *virtual history*: the history that might have been, if JFK had not successfully resisted his hawks.¹⁸ For each of the six most dangerous crises of his presidency, we list JFK's (virtual) decision to take the advice of his hawks and opt for a military resolution to the crisis, and the likely reaction of the various US adversaries, based on what we now know from oral testimony from their former leaders and declassified documents from Russian, Cuban, German and Vietnamese archives. Each of these is followed by our conclusions, based on JFK's actual historical actions — or non-actions, as the case may be.

APRIL 1961: "A VIETNAM WAR" IN THE CARIBBEAN, ANYONE? THE BAY OF PIGS

In historical fiction, JFK orders US Marines to land and secure the beach at the Bay of Pigs. Fidel Castro's militia, 200,000 strong, digs in as the war escalates, with heavy US bombing of Cuban positions. The Cubans, who pledged to fight to the death, do just that, resulting in a stalemate and the outbreak of guerrilla war throughout the island. The United States thus is engaged in a war such as actually

came later: the virtual history of the war in Cuba bears an uncanny resemblance to the actual war in Vietnam.¹⁹

Conclusion: In fact, JFK avoided a protracted war in Cuba.

SPRING 1961: NUCLEAR WAR...IN LAOS?

In historical fiction, JFK orders US forces to cross the Thai border into Laos, a country that not one American in a thousand would be able to find on a map. The North Vietnamese massively escalate their support for the Pathet Lao insurgents. Unable to stem the tide of the North Vietnamese advance, JFK finally accedes to the urging of his advisers and orders tactical nuclear weapons to destroy the communist forces and to deter further Soviet involvement. The net result is a military crisis and a political disaster, both domestically and internationally. Tensions between Moscow and Washington are greatly heightened. Both superpowers invoke a heightened state of military alert as the risk of a nuclear war between them escalates uncontrollably.²⁰

Conclusion: In fact, JFK avoided disaster, and a subsequent quagmire, in Laos.

SUMMER AND FALL 1961: THE RUSSKIES WON'T DARE CHALLENGE US: BERLIN

Tension over the Berlin Wall, which began construction on August 13, 1961, becomes unbearable by late October. Domestic pressure in the United States escalates; a dramatic military move is demanded to show Western displeasure and resolve. On October 27, urged on by his special representative in Berlin, General Lucius Clay, JFK orders US tanks to fire on Soviet tanks, which have appeared at the border crossing between East and West Berlin. Soviet tanks return fire. The conflict escalates almost instantaneously, with the Soviets moving hundreds of thousands of troops it has pre-positioned in East Germany toward West Berlin. US commanders, with only about 12,000 troops in West Berlin, respond by counterattacking with tactical nuclear

17 Alas LBJ never "got it" regarding the Cuban missile crisis. He seems to have bought the myth that in a confrontation of nuclear superpowers, the Soviets backed down, or "blinked," as Dean Rusk is supposed to have put it. Further, he may have even supposed that North Vietnam would also, at some point, "blink," in the face of the relentless bombing carried out in both North and South Vietnam. JFK drew no such conclusion from the missile crisis. "Never again," might be the best summary of what he (and Khrushchev) took away from that crisis. In any event, for JFK, it was unconnected to Vietnam. See Blight, Lang and Welch (2009), especially pages 10–15, on the incommensurability of the outlooks of JFK and LBJ on the Cuban missile crisis.

18 The do's and don'ts of virtual history are discussed throughout Blight, Lang and Welch (2009) and the accompanying film directed by Masutani (Virtual JFK 2008). For a recent exercise in the virtual history of JFK's foreign policy in a hypothetical second term as president, see Blight and Lang (2013a) and the accompanying piece on JFK's health challenges (Blight and Lang 2013b).

19 In his remarks at a March 2001 conference in Havana marking the fortieth anniversary of the Bay of Pigs invasion, Cuban Army General Ulises Rosales del Toro provided detailed maps and statistics from the Cuban archives, outlining Cuba's planned resistance to the US invasion they fully expected. He mentioned that, when the leadership discovered the invasion was occurring at the Bay of Pigs, they were greatly relieved. The area surrounding the Bay of Pigs is some of the most difficult terrain on the island — thick with jungle undergrowth and very swampy. The Cuban government, he said, was very familiar with the locale, while invading US troops would have found themselves in "a quagmire in both senses" — physical and strategic.

20 These preparations first came to light in two conferences we organized in Hanoi, Vietnam: in June 1997 and February 1998; see McNamara et al. (1999, 184–189). The North Vietnamese began making such preparations as early as the aftermath of the Tonkin Gulf incident in August 1964. Had Washington been aware of them, McNamara might have been more successful in persuading LBJ that no amount of bombing would bring Hanoi to the negotiating table.

weapons, even though JFK has not been consulted in the matter. Berlin (and much of Germany) is functionally destroyed in a matter of hours. The conflict cannot be contained. The extent of the devastation will depend on whether cooler heads prevail after witnessing the catastrophe. In any case, central Europe is destroyed.²¹

Conclusion: In fact, JFK avoided a catastrophic World War III, which would have begun in Europe.

NOVEMBER 1961: PROPPING UP OUR PUPPET IN SAIGON, PART I: VIETNAM

After intense, months-long lobbying by his senior advisers, JFK finally agrees to begin the deployment of 205,000 US combat troops in South Vietnam to prevent the collapse of the Saigon government. The North Vietnamese respond by sending tens of thousands of regular North Vietnamese troops to support the insurgents of the National Liberation Front, who prepare for all-out war with the Americans. In the north, women and children are sent to the countryside to build and move into underground shelters, because Hanoi believes that the Americans will eventually use nuclear weapons against them. The underground settlements will, they believe, help to ensure the survival of the government and some portion of its people in a post-nuclear war environment. The United States quickly takes over the war effort against the Vietnamese communists, which takes more or less the same course, and has the same result, as the war that JFK's successor, LBJ, began in 1965. The US objective is to force the communists to capitulate — an eventuality that President Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues never considered.²²

Conclusion: In fact, JFK avoided a protracted, catastrophic war in Southeast Asia.

21 Clay, who was appointed by JFK as his special representative in Berlin, was a popular figure to West Berliners, who remembered his defiant stand against Stalin's Berlin Blockade of 1948. But Clay was a very loose cannon. He made plans, without consulting JFK, to begin knocking down the Wall in late October 1961. Demolition crews were to be "covered" by US tanks at "Checkpoint Charlie," the principal crossing point between the two Berlins. Sergei Khrushchev (2000, 463–467), Nikita Khrushchev's son and biographer, describes the near panic in Moscow when their intelligence passed word to Khrushchev of what was about to happen. War plans were reviewed. All was in readiness for what Khrushchev called "the big test" of Soviet power and will. There should be no doubt, writes Sergei Khrushchev, that if JFK had not stopped Clay in time, war would have broken out, beginning with tanks firing on one another at Checkpoint Charlie. What happened after that is anyone's guess, but a likely outcome would have been a nuclear war, beginning in Germany, but escalating rapidly into a catastrophe.

22 See, in this regard, McNamara et al. (1999, 252–253). These passages also draw on the important work of Hoopes (1969).

AUTUMN 1962: OMG, A BLACK SWAN HORROR SHOW: THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

In one of the many horrifying scenes in Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 film *The Birds*, hordes of black crows inexplicably attack the inhabitants of a small California town. Exchange the actual black crows for imminent black swans. The feeling one gets from the film — of horror, revulsion and deep perplexity — is more or less how it felt in the White House during the Cuban missile crisis. The black swans came at them fast and furiously, each one signalling a possible route to nuclear holocaust. If JFK had, for example, ordered the bombing of Soviet missile sites in Cuba, we now know that the odds were high that the Soviets would have tried to launch their medium-range ballistic missiles at southeastern US cities. If JFK had ordered the invasion of Cuba by US Marines, we now know the forces would have met nuclear fire on Cuban beaches, which would have led to a US nuclear attack on Cuba less than two hours later. This, in turn, would likely have been only the beginning of what would convulse to a nuclear exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union. In addition, early in any US invasion, the Soviets would have destroyed the US naval base at Guantánamo Bay, killing the thousands of US military personnel massed there in preparation for the attack on Soviet and Cuban forces. These and many other black swans were veritably buzzing around the White House in 1962, driving most of JFK's advisers toward a pre-emptive attack.²³

Conclusion: We now know that had Kennedy been less cautious, nuclear war could have erupted along many different paths. In fact, exhibiting just enough caution, just barely in time, JFK (and Khrushchev and Castro) barely avoided a global Armageddon.

AUTUMN 1963: PROPPING UP OUR PUPPET IN SAIGON, PART II: VIETNAM

By mid-1963, the hawks are shriller than ever about Vietnam. Everything is in place: a corrupt, incompetent and murderous US ally in Saigon; a South Vietnamese army of roughly 200,000 that cannot subdue an insurgent force of less than 10,000; a rising chorus of alarm from JFK's hawks that not only is Saigon about to fall to communism, but that the fall of the Saigon regime will signal the beginning of end of the free world, with Japan and Indonesia at immediate risk; and a strong belief in the US public that America must fight to keep South Vietnam from "going communist." JFK faces a perfect storm of

23 See Blight and Lang (2012), and the short films available at www.armageddonletters.com for vivid immersion in the crisis of October 1962. In retrospect, it seems almost miraculous that the world escaped a nuclear war. Indeed, research over the past quarter century shows that "escape" seems to be the right verb for what happened in the crisis. See also Mikoyan (2012), which gives the hidden history of the Soviet and Cuban perspectives.

hawkishness, and, despite his misgivings, orders combat troops to Vietnam.

Conclusion: Identical to the conclusion in “Propping Up Our Puppet in Saigon, Part I,” above: that is, in fact, JFK avoided a protracted, catastrophic war in Southeast Asia.

HEROIC INACTION

It may be asked: if it is so obvious that JFK repeatedly saved the world from catastrophe in the ways that we have described, why don’t all conscientious politicians and military leaders adopt black swan logic as their *modus operandi*? Why isn’t war prevention the rule, rather than the exception? Taleb (2012, 121) is incisive on this point: “The true hero in the Black Swan world is someone who prevents a calamity and, naturally, because the calamity did not take place, does not get recognition for it.” In fact, we lack a proper term or phrase in English for “heroic inaction.”

But a close examination of JFK’s decision making demonstrates that it often requires considerable courage to refuse to act, rather than to act. Taleb (2010, xxiii) asks: “Who is more valuable, the politician who avoids a war or the one who starts one (and is lucky enough to win)?” Should we admire Ronald Reagan more than JFK because he ordered the successful invasion of the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada in 1983? Is Margaret Thatcher to be regarded as more heroic than JFK because her forces conquered the isolated, strategically useless Falklands/Malvinas Islands in 1982? Of course not. Yet, while Reagan and Thatcher greatly enhanced their political careers through these senseless little wars, it has taken a half century and the work of hundreds of scholars all over the world to put us finally in a position to connect the words, “heroic” and “inaction” when appraising JFK’s foreign policy decisions. As Taleb (2012, 121) notes wryly, “I’ve looked in history for heroes who became heroes for what they did not do, but it is hard to observe *non-action*; I could not easily find any.” The point seems to be one that politicians the world over recognize as an imperative of leadership: don’t just sit there, *do* something! The moral of the story is this: if leaders have black swan intimations and they refuse to escalate a crisis because a disaster seems waiting to happen, they had better be confident of their power to persuade, explain and parry the inevitable criticism that they lacked guts and leadership ability, or that they pre-emptively and unnecessarily capitulated, thus humiliating the nation.

Parenthetically, leaders looking for some empirically based encouragement to act on their black swan intuitions might note what happened to JFK’s approval rating in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs. In a speech given just after the operation collapsed, and in a subsequent press conference, JFK assumed responsibility for the disaster, saying, “I am the responsible officer of government.”

He explained on several occasions that invading a small country is contrary to US traditions, and thus any such invasion, of Cuba or elsewhere, is simply out of the question. Immediately, according to the Gallup Poll, his approval rating skyrocketed to an astonishing 83 percent, a number seldom approached by any US president. Yet, it is impossible to miss JFK’s discomfort in the video of these public statements. He is sometimes uncharacteristically tongue-tied. He fidgets. He squirms and tugs at his collar. The usually elegant and composed JFK, it seems, found the defence of his non-action at the Bay of Pigs to be difficult. But the point is: he did it. He defended his non-action. And he didn’t lose his political shirt in the process. On the contrary, he became more popular than ever.²⁴

THE OUTLIER: HOW JFK RESISTED HIS HAWKS

How did he do it? Facing relentless, intense advice to take the nation to war, how did JFK manoeuvre to avoid the black swans — including the blackest of them all: all-out nuclear war with the Soviet Union?

All too often, pasting a social science framework onto an account of real world events results in obscure, jargon-ridden, irrelevant analyses. But every so often, a little social science is useful. One candidate for helping us make sense of JFK’s principles of decision making with war and peace on the line is an intellectual first cousin of Taleb’s black swan logic — a branch of cognitive psychology called behavioural decision theory. It was first developed by the late Stanford psychologist Amos Tversky and Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman, a psychologist and economist now at Princeton.²⁵

Viewing JFK’s decisions through behavioural decision theory provides significant assistance in dealing with the difficulties arising from the remarkable peculiarities of his outlook. JFK as a foreign policy decision maker is what Gladwell (2008) has famously called an outlier. The record of Kennedy’s decisions deviates markedly from most other members of the sample — that is, the national security decision makers — when war and peace seem to be on the line. To a remarkable degree, JFK doesn’t follow the same playbook as other US presidents or other national security

24 JFK’s difficulty in coming to grips with his own failure is vividly on display in Masutani’s documentary (*Virtual JFK* 2008).

25 For an excellent introduction to the pioneering work of Kahneman and Tversky, see Welch (2002), especially pages 135–169. Welch illuminates the ways and degree to which, according to Kahneman and Tversky, human decision making is best understood as *psychologically* real to the decision maker, rather than based in logic. See also Kahneman’s marvellous magnum opus (2011). In his terms, JFK was unusually adept at checking his “fast,” intuitive, hard-wired tendencies toward the heuristics, electing, rather, to slow down, analyze, and regarding his participation in the situation almost as if he was watching someone else make the decision, while he merely advised.

decision makers. Behavioural decision theory allows us to see just how far outside the box JFK's approach to decision making actually was — how different he was from his advisers, Congress, the American public and most of his predecessors and successors.

HUMAN HARDWARE: INSTINCTUAL HAWKISHNESS

In a revelatory paper, Kahneman and Harvard political psychologist Jonathan Renshon (2007) documented a number of biases, or “heuristics,” in political decision making that raise the odds of hawks triumphing over doves — of going to war rather than keeping the peace.²⁶ They identify five instinctually hawkish heuristics typical of leaders when they believe that their national security is on the line. These are: the fundamental attribution error, the illusion of control; excessive optimism; reactive devaluation; and an aversion to cutting losses.

- **The fundamental attribution error.** The powerful tendency to attribute the behaviour of adversaries to their intrinsically sinister — even evil — nature, character or motives, rather than to anything we might have done, or are doing, to provoke it. (Your hostility toward us is unprovoked. Our hostility toward you is only a necessary reaction to your hostility.)
- **The illusion of control.** People consistently exaggerate the amount of control they have over outcomes that are important to them, even when the outcomes are largely random or determined by other forces. (Entering into a war of choice makes sense because we will make sure we are in control of each successive situation. We can withdraw at any time if it seems like the thing to do.)
- **Excessive optimism.** Many people believe themselves smarter and more talented than average, and thus reliably overestimate their future success. This tendency appears to be particularly prevalent in leaders, whose successful careers have led them to positions where decisions about war and peace rest on their shoulders. (Our side is smarter, better prepared, better equipped and more highly motivated than the adversary, and thus destined to be victorious.)
- **Reactive devaluation.** A strong hawkish tendency to reject arguments by doves seeking negotiated solutions because of the feeling that the proposals of adversaries should not be taken seriously because they cannot be trusted. (Yes, we know the adversary has sued for peace, but we cannot trust them to abide by the terms of any negotiated agreement, which

means we should force them, if possible, to accept an unconditional surrender.)

- **Aversion to cutting losses.** When things are going badly in a conflict, the aversion to cutting losses, compounded by an infusion of wishful thinking, tends to dominate the calculus of the losing side. (We cannot give up now, even though we seem to be losing, because we are just about to turn the corner and go on the offensive; moreover, ending hostilities now, in a losing situation, would dishonour those who have sacrificed for our cause.)

These findings, according to Kahneman and Renshon, are consistent across the more than 40 studies they reviewed. We are, in short, hard-wired to be hawkish — a result that Kahneman (2013) has himself characterized as “worrying.” When threatened, decision makers would rather fight than take flight. To be clear, Kahneman and Renshon do not claim that decision makers are always, or even usually, *right* to adopt a hawkish stance; rather, they claim that these are the dominant heuristics of those who are primarily responsible for the security of nations, which are, whether individually or in combination, very difficult to overcome. Hawkishness is our default in matters of war and peace. This is not good news for a world in which more than 160 million people were killed in violent conflict in the twentieth century, and may well be on course to equal or exceed that number in the twenty-first century, even if conflicts do not involve the use of nuclear weapons.²⁷

JFK'S SOFTWARE: IGNORANCE + HIGH STAKES = CAUTIOUSNESS

We now know that JFK's decision-making profile on matters of war and peace deviates *spectacularly* from this rule. It is, in fact, the *inverse* of what is predicted by the meta-analysis of Kahneman, Renshon and their associates. We must assume that JFK got more or less the same endowment of instinctual hawkishness that we all have. But JFK's “software” — the sum of the intuitions, insights, concerns and expectations derived from his personal experience — worked powerfully in the opposite direction. JFK was neither hawk nor dove. He was cautiousness personified. His objective in all cases was to stay away from the brink of disaster, while protecting US interests, and keeping in mind that neither he nor anyone else knew with any exactitude where or when the black swans were lurking, or when they might strike. JFK's inverse heuristics — of caution and empathy — include a careful contemplation of the following: attribution errors are mutual; control is elusive; optimism is often delusional; trust — but verify information (particularly during crises); and be prepared to cut your losses.

²⁶ A much longer and more technical treatment of the same phenomenon is in Kahneman and Renshon (2009).

²⁷ The figure of 160 million dead comes from McNamara and Blight (2003). See especially pages 20–24 on how they arrive at this estimate.

- **Attribution errors are mutual.** Resist the powerful tendency to attribute the behaviour of adversaries to their intrinsically sinister, even evil, nature. Instead, search for clues in your own actions that may have provoked an adversary. (What have we done to provoke the adversary? What can be done to be less provocative while acting in ways consistent with our interests?)
- **Control is elusive.** Do not exaggerate the degree of control you have over outcomes that are important to you. Many outcomes are determined by seemingly random, often unknown, forces. (Wars of choice are seldom justified because leaders often rapidly lose control over events, once the shooting starts. It is infinitely easier to start a war in the first place than to try and end one.)
- **Beware — optimism is often delusional.** Do not be deluded into believing that you are smarter or more talented than average. Get your advice from a diverse group of subordinates who are not afraid to criticize you. Do not underestimate the intelligence, preparedness or patriotism of adversaries. (Our side is not necessarily smarter, better prepared, better equipped, or more highly motivated than the adversary, and thus we should never assume we are destined to be victorious.)
- **Trust, but verify (especially in crises).** Listen to people who seem to take the adversary seriously and who seem capable of empathizing with the adversary. Avoid the tendency to reject arguments by doves seeking negotiated solutions on the assumption that the proposals of adversaries should never be taken seriously because they cannot be trusted. (If an adversary says it wants peace, examine fully the seriousness of the proposal, even if it provokes the hawks to accusations of appeasement. Never assume an adversary is determined to go to war. Hitlers do exist, but they are few and far between.)²⁸
- **Be prepared to cut losses.** When things are going badly in a crisis or conflict, consider cutting your losses and finding an exit ramp as soon as possible. Avoid the wishful thinking that tends to dominate the calculus of the side that believes it is losing. (You *can*

give up, even when you seem to be losing, if you can successfully frame the issue as the lesser of two evils. Do not succumb to hopeful advice from subordinates that you are just about to turn the corner and go on the offensive. Hawks will cry “foul” that you have dishonoured those already dead and wounded. You must persuade your constituents that your actions are saving lives and are in the best interests of the country.)

These five elements of JFK’s software sum to this: the deployment of *empathy* — the capacity to articulate the narrative of adversaries, the story the adversaries are telling themselves about our side’s motives, capabilities, plans and intentions — is critical.²⁹

JFK repeatedly resisted his hawks, often at considerable political risk, and he did so by turning the five hawkish heuristics on their heads. He was no pacifist, having fought and nearly died in World War II, and of course he is well-known as the president who vowed in his inaugural address to “pay any price, bear any burden” to fight communism around the world. But the gap between some of JFK’s soaring, anti-communist rhetoric and his behind-the-scenes decision making is often immense. Viewed through the prism of behavioural decision theory, JFK is distinguished by his refusal to go on a mental holiday and by the degree to which he shunned heuristics (cognitive shortcuts) when war and peace were on the line.

THE SKEPTIC: WHY JFK RESISTED HIS HAWKS

Where did JFK’s approach to war and peace come from? What allowed him to sense more clearly than most of his advisers, most of the time, where the danger was, what the catastrophic scenarios actually were, and how to stay away from the brink of disaster? Where, in effect, did JFK get his decision-making tool kit? He was a thoroughgoing skeptic, suspicious of slogans, yes-men, easy answers, rosy forecasts and overblown estimates. What were the sources of his skepticism?

A skeptic is less sure than most that the linkage between cause and effect can be understood with precision. The skeptic’s world is one of constant surprise, predictions gone awry, and unintended consequences and screw-ups in which our theories are proved wrong again and again.

²⁸ Even if Hitlers are few and far between, as we claim, they are obviously not unheard of. How do we take the high road of non-violence with the likes of Osama bin Laden or Mullah Omar? The Islamic jihadis of our era have in common with Hitler, or Tojo (or Castro in his prime) an ideologically driven resistance to the very idea of accommodation or negotiation; they would rather “fight to the death.” That seems to be a principal reason that the Mohammed Morsi-led Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt was so short and disastrous. They rejected the very idea of political compromise with secular Egyptians. Hundreds of thousands of Germans and Japanese died at the end of the war in part because their leaders saw any sort of deal in apocalyptic terms. (We thank Mark Garrison for helping us see the importance of this point.)

²⁹ The significance of empathy in international relations is insufficiently appreciated. On occasion, in an effort to point to the importance of empathy, we have claimed that everything that leads either to peace or war among nations can be explained by the relative presence of empathy (usually, the peaceful trajectory) or its absence (usually the war trajectory). Even more astonishing to some of our colleagues, we actually believe this — to adapt an image from the ethnologist Clifford Geertz, if you want to understand why nations do or do not go to war, it’s empathy all the way down. See Blight and Lang (2005, 26–57) and (2010, 29–74; 75–110).

It is a world that seems more than a little out of control, and less penetrable by the scientific method and rational thought than other people generally believe. In many ways, the skeptic's world is frightening, because one never knows — and one *knows* that one never knows — whether the future will resemble the past or not.

To a considerable extent, JFK's skepticism seems to have derived from the peculiarities of his genes and his youthful experience. His brother, Robert F. Kennedy (1964, ix–x), once remarked that his brother was so ill that if a mosquito bit him, the poor mosquito would surely die! RFK also said, as noted earlier in this paper, that JFK spent at least part of every day of his adult life in intense pain due to the back disorder that was exacerbated during his service in World War II, and also by failed back surgeries in the mid-1950s, from which he nearly died. JFK was given last rites at least four times, and possibly five. Although he pulled through time and again, his body was riddled with disease, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, throughout his abbreviated life. His body broke down on so many occasions, in so many different ways, that he simply stopped listening to doctors who offered him versions of “you’ll be fine, if you only...”³⁰ JFK was hospitalized almost three dozen times during his life, often for extended periods of time, with very serious, sometimes mysterious afflictions. He spent, in fact, the equivalent of roughly three of his 46 years in hospital.³¹

JFK's skepticism — initially stemming from his daily confrontations with what seemed to be a randomly malfunctioning body — was reinforced by his wartime experience as a junior officer in the Pacific. To the young PT-boat commander, it seemed that virtually nothing ever went as planned by the military brass. He regarded

many of the top brass as pompous idiots, out of touch with the battlefield. To JFK, “the good war,” as World War II came to be nostalgically called by many, had little to do with ideals or heroism. It was mostly and intensely about survival. He believed the principal objective of most of his Navy comrades was identical to his own: to get home alive. Alas, many did not, including two members of his crew, killed when his PT-109 was inadvertently rammed and sunk in dense fog by a Japanese destroyer.

As president, JFK refused to believe the (usually) rosy estimates and predictions of his hawkish advisers. The hawks came to regard their young president as basically *irrational* — a president who mysteriously and reliably refused to give their carefully constructed scenarios the go-ahead. To them, the dialogue seemed repeatedly to take the following canonical form:

Adviser: Mr. President, if we [insert: threaten/bomb/attack/invoke] our adversary, the result will probably be highly beneficial to US interests.

JFK: How probable?

Adviser: Very nearly 1.0, Mr. President. We are virtually certain, in fact, that the adversary will not respond at all, or, if he does, we have the means to quickly destroy his ability to retaliate. He knows that, too, which is why he won't retaliate. He doesn't dare.

JFK: But what if you're wrong, and the adversary does retaliate? What then?

Adviser: But he won't, Mr. President, as we've said. It will be in his interest not to respond at all. He's not irrational.

JFK: But if he does, then we're in a helluva mess, aren't we? I mean, it could lead to disaster, couldn't it?

Adviser: [Turns red-faced, and chokes with frustration and anger.]

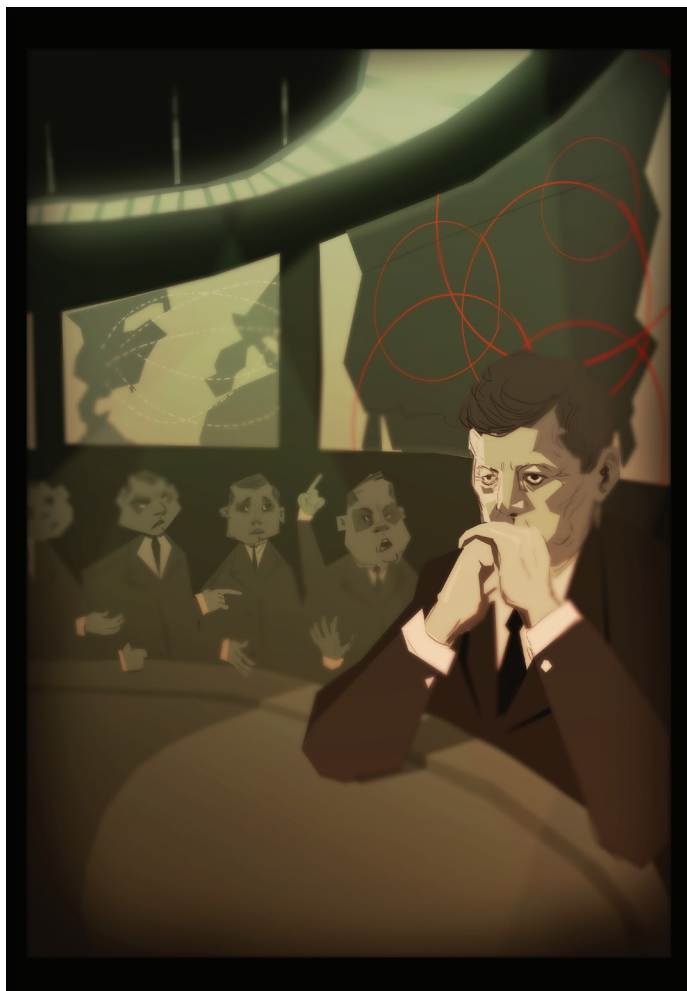
JFK: Thanks for your views. That will be all for now.

If JFK had taken the advice of his hawkish advisers, he would have been saved the considerable effort required to work around them, to stonewall them, occasionally deceive them, often confuse them, and ultimately to try to convince at least some of them that the hawkish option might well lead to disaster. In these and other situations, few of his advisers were amenable to a president who seemed never to stop asking, “okay, but *then* what happens?” Meetings were often tense; advisers frequently left meetings with

30 Some have argued that Dr. Janet Travell, JFK's principal physician after the mid-1950s, is a partial exception to this rule — that JFK did trust her, unlike other physicians. It seems more likely to us, however, that Travell's longevity as JFK's doctor was due, in large part, to fear that if she were dismissed, she might go public with what she knew about his precarious health. A sort of medical coup occurred in late 1961, when physician Hans Kraus began to push Travell to the sidelines. It was Kraus who insisted that JFK undertake a rigorous exercise program — common enough advice today, but highly unusual a half century ago. See Dallek (2002).

31 During the more than 1,000 days that JFK spent in the hospital and recuperating over his lifetime, he read voraciously, focussing heavily on diplomatic history. It is notable that his three favourite authors were those whose work he first encountered in the 1930s, during some especially long illnesses. JFK knew World War I very well, from two of these books, thanks to Churchill (1959) and Buchan (1940). JFK would also come know the horror of World War II from personal experience in the South Pacific, which reinforced what he had derived from his reading: distrust of military brass; hatred of systems in which old men, living out their fantasies of conquest in offices, send brave young people to their miserable deaths; and disbelief in heroic war narratives, regarding them as self-justifying, sentimental and unconnected to reality. The third of JFK's favourite books was David Cecil's (1939) biography of Queen Victoria's first Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne, a psychologically acute study of leadership in a democratic society — something which JFK would eventually aspire to, and achieve.

JFK convinced that he was too young, too inexperienced, too weak, and possibly even too cowardly to do what had to be done to defeat the communists, wherever they happened to be. In hundreds of such conversations, JFK drove his hawkish advisers *absolutely crazy!* They felt their president was — not to put too fine a point on it — ignorant, naive and cowardly, and obstinately immune from the advice and counsel they have given him.



We know that JFK was right to resist the hawkish advice he received from his generals. (Art by Wesley Blondin.)

The exchange between JFK and Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis LeMay during the Cuban missile crisis is representative of these exchanges. LeMay argues that the only option is “direct military action.” JFK listens, then goes off to another meeting, but he leaves the tape recorder running. We listen in as the chiefs vent their anger at their president, unaware that the conversation is being taped. The chiefs want to attack before the Cuban missiles become operational. If they wait too long, they believe, the Russians may fire at US cities, or blackmail the United States. While JFK knows their argument is not irrational, he believes they don’t take into account the possibility that an attack will lead to uncontrollable escalation and a nuclear Armageddon. The chiefs have learned to hate

their president’s queries about escalation, which seems to follow any military operation they recommend. General David Shoup, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, whose troops would lead the Cuban invasion says:

[JFK] finally got around to the word “escalation.” I heard him say escalation. That’s the only goddamn thing that’s in the whole trick. It’s been there in Laos; it’s been in every goddamn one [of these crises]. When he says escalation, that’s it. [Pause.] If somebody could keep them from doing the goddamn thing piecemeal. That’s our problem. You go in there friggin’ around with the missiles. You’re screwed. You go in and frig around with anything else, you’re screwed. (quoted in Blight and Lang 2005, 66-67)

JFK’S DREAM TEAM: HOW KENNEDY WAS ABLE TO GO SIX FOR SIX (CRISES WITHOUT A WAR, THAT IS)

Throughout JFK’s 1,036 days as president, his national security decision making followed this script: his advisers told him that Chicken Little didn’t know the half of it and the sky really was falling. The communists did this and that, and were preparing to do something even more threatening. US credibility was on the line all over the world; allies and adversaries were beginning to believe the United States was not serious about defending the interests of the West against the aggressive actions of the Russian-led East, and so on. For all these reasons, his advisers told him over and over to commit the United States to “direct military action” — a euphemism of that historical moment for going to war and/or challenging the Soviet Union to fight or back down. In each case, JFK listened to what they had to say, he stalled for time, he made stirring patriotic speeches, and in some cases, he took some steps which, for another president, might have been the prelude to war — although in his case, these moves were meant principally as palliation for his hawks, and as a warning to the Russians that they ought not push him further.

With all this pressure to take the nation (and possibly the world) to war, what accounts for JFK’s success in resisting? Many explanations have been put forward. Some emphasize, for example, that the Democrats ruled all three branches of government. Yet, many of the most powerful Democrats in both houses of Congress were hawks from the Deep South who disagreed with JFK’s cautiousness in the face of perceived communist threats.

In retrospect, it is now possible to see JFK’s black swan successes in the context of the “dream team” he assembled (which included himself).

- **JFK: The Great Explainer.** JFK himself was the Great Explainer of his era. Instead of appealing to the chauvinistic instincts of his constituents, he appealed to what Abraham Lincoln, in his first inaugural address, called “the better angels of our nature.” JFK’s rhetoric soared.³² He challenged his constituents to learn more about the world as it was emerging from its colonial straitjacket, not to fear it, but to embrace a kind of US leadership that emphasized what today would be called “soft power” — focussing on the dynamism, prosperity and cultural appeal of the United States throughout the world.³³ The Peace Corps was all about soft power. So was the Alliance for Progress — JFK’s effort to counter the appeal of Cuban communism in Latin American countries by helping their post-colonial economies grow, thus reducing the vulnerability of their disaffected citizens to communist propaganda and organizations.
- **Ted Sorensen: The Great Articulator.** JFK had this gifted scribe at his side — probably the greatest presidential speechwriter in US history. We will never know for sure how much of the soaring JFK rhetoric was his own, and how much it was Sorensen’s. But it doesn’t matter. Together, they crafted some of the most memorable public utterances in the history of the US presidency. The metre is often poetic; the historical sophistication is impressive; the delivery is taut and controlled, yet burning with the seriousness of the topic at hand — war and peace; and, last but far from least, JFK’s theatre of the absurd sense of humour is never missing. Indeed, the deeply serious, Eeyore-like Sorensen (2008, 342–344) admitted late in life that one of his most difficult tasks was to remind his boss not to tell too many jokes in his public appearances, lest his constituents begin to doubt his seriousness.
- **Robert McNamara: The Great Implementer.** Defense Secretary McNamara was JFK’s firewall at the Pentagon. McNamara came to Washington, DC lacking strong political or ideological views. He had never served in government. He was usually the first of JFK’s advisers to grasp what the president wanted,

and he was relentless in his pursuit of his boss’s objectives. When the hawks concluded, as they often did, that the president couldn’t possibly be serious about excluding the military option, McNamara knew he was serious, and this ferocious, domineering, autocratic can-do adviser became indispensable to JFK. McNamara kept the unruly military chiefs in line, virtually all of whom came to hate him at least as much as they distrusted JFK.

- **RFK: The Great Intimidator.** The attorney general’s devotion to his brother was boundless. So determined was he that his brother’s will be done, that for all of JFK’s days in office, officials all over Washington cringed when they were told that the attorney general wanted to see them. One of the brothers’ standard operating procedures was the “bad Bobby” routine. Instructed by his brother, RFK would burst into a congressman’s office, for example, shout at him, threaten him and otherwise abuse him for some perceived slight to the JFK agenda. Then, the victim of the “bad Bobby” treatment would call the president, who would turn on the speakerphone, sometimes with RFK present, and explain calmly to his interlocutor that he needed to be patient, that Bobby was young, and that he would speak to him about it. Then JFK would hang up as he and RFK shared a laugh. But the message had been delivered, and it had been received: do not cross JFK, if you value your career! To adapt a line attributed to Franklin Roosevelt about the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza, RFK was a son of a bitch, but he was JFK’s son of a bitch — reliably, relentlessly, often crudely, but very effectively practicing hardball politics on his brother’s behalf.

TAKEAWAYS: A JFK BLACK SWAN BOOT CAMP FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

We are left with a disturbing paradox. Are crises, conflicts and wars likely to continue? Of course. Might they even escalate throughout the twenty-first century? Yes. Will weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, be used? Who would want to bet that they will not be used, so long as they exist in large quantities throughout the globe? Is another leader of the US superpower, or any big power, likely to emerge with JFK’s skeptical outlook and steely backbone, shaped by severe physical illness, several near-death experiences and being on the front lines of a brutal war? No. JFK was an outlier.

But can life trajectories other than that traced by JFK also lead to Kennedy-esque skepticism regarding hawkish advice to go to war? Undoubtedly. We must learn to identify these trajectories. We must learn to cultivate their development. We must make it a priority to elect leaders

³² JFK’s speeches are engaging to read, but to experience their full force they should be heard and, if possible, watched as well. In his foreign policy speeches, a Churchillian cadence is discernable, and the references to diplomatic history are frequent and learned. Yet he doesn’t come across to his audiences as professorial. He is not instructing them so much as he is challenging them to rid themselves of their ideological blinders and encounter the world of the early 1960s more directly, with fewer clichés, and with an intensity that will be required, in his view, to ensure that America has a place in the world order to come. For our money, three of his greatest speeches on foreign affairs are also among his most challenging. See John F. Kennedy (1961; 1962; 1963b).

³³ See Nye (2004), one of the most widely discussed books on international politics since World War II. Nye, who coined the term “soft power” in the 1990s, defines the term as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (2004, x).

who seem, for whatever reason, to be steeped in skepticism about the predictability and controllability of modern warfare. We must look closely at the records of aspiring leaders to determine which are more (and less) likely to possess a backbone sufficiently stiff to resist inevitable and often relentless pressure from hawks to go to war. We must learn to extract the lessons of JFK's great escapes of the early 1960s *then*, and apply them to the strife-filled world that is emerging *now*. Leaders trying to wage peace in a dangerous world are going to need role models. We believe that JFK is as good as we are likely to get.

We need to look for clues as to how to navigate in a black swan universe, even though the typical life history may bear little or no similarity to JFK's. Think of it this way: there are natural athletes who excel primarily on the basis of their inherited hand-eye coordination and related abilities, while others are self-made athletes who excel by dint of their work ethic, along with sport-related strategic and tactical thinking. Likewise, there must be ways to teach and learn the attitudes, skills and fortitude that fostered JFK's black swan logic. That is the hypothesis. In what follows, we offer our thoughts on some of the requirements of a black swan "boot camp."

THE MOTHER OF ALL TAKEAWAYS: ASSUME NOTHING

Anything can happen at any time. History doesn't just accumulate in regularized intervals; it only seems to do so because your narrative conveniently leaves out the black swans — the unanticipated leaps, bounds and fractures as you move forward in time and space. Take nothing on faith. Do not accept what the experts tell you, even if you think they happen to believe it. Don't be afraid to cross the street. But be very afraid to cross the street blindfolded (Taleb 2010, 49).

WHAT IS AT STAKE? MAYBE EVERYTHING!

Book epigraphs are usually allusive, sometimes poetic and are meant to convey some larger meaning that the authors believe is connected to their work. So it is a shock to turn to the epigraph page at the front of Chris Matthews' (2011) fine biography of JFK to find the following:

At the peak of the Cold War, an American president saved his country and the world from a nuclear war. How did Jack Kennedy gain the cold detachment to navigate this perilous moment in history? What prepared him to be the hero we needed? This is my attempt to explain [that].

Twenty-five years ago, the details of JFK's decision making were enshrouded in the mythologies of Camelot (and anti-

Camelot). At that time, a statement such as Matthews' would have been greeted with derision by most scholars. They would have pointed out that Matthews is an East Coast Irish Catholic with liberal proclivities. Moreover, they would have asked rhetorically: "what else do you expect from a guy who once served as chief of staff to JFK's successor in his congressional district, Thomas P. ('Tip') O'Neill?" And so on.

But from the perspective of 2013, Chris Matthews' remark strikes the informed reader more as a statement of fact than of fantasy derived from some combination of geographical, ethnic, religious and political bias. It is now possible to state with conviction that, based on the available evidence, JFK did indeed make many crucial and difficult decisions that helped "save the country and the world from a nuclear war." It is a matter of record that happens to matter very much. In part due to that record, we are here writing this piece, and you are reading it.

HOW TO THINK: DO'S AND DON'TS OF BLACK SWAN LOGIC

Here are some rules of the road that help us stick to black swan logic, to prevent us from drifting instinctually back into our shell of wishful thinking and selective blindness to the randomness all around us.³⁴

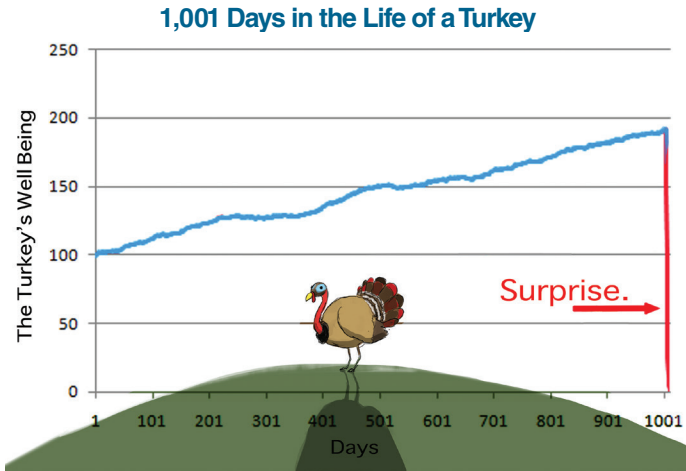
- **Confirmation, shmonconfirmation.** Nothing is ever confirmed absolutely. Let your assumptions hang very loosely around your proclivities to act. Do your best to refute your arguments and interpretations. Be very tough epistemologically on yourself and others.
- **Don't surrender to the narrative fallacy.** Don't accept uncritically any stories that purport to explain events. Be especially critical of your own stories. Reduce the tendency to ignore black swans by confronting yourself and others with rigorous documentation concerning the chronology of events in question. We need our stories in order to make sense of our experience. But we also need to resist becoming attached to them.
- **Exit the antechamber of hope.** Surround yourself with critics who are committed to a team solution. Use such a team to expand your understanding of the range of possible events. Don't be a turkey. You will still be surprised. But you will have a better chance at surviving your surprise in one piece.
- **What you see is all there is (WSIATI)?**³⁵ *No, a thousand times no.* Do not cave in to the fallacy of believing this. History hides its black swans. Beware of silent

³⁴ These rules are adapted from Taleb (2010, 50).

³⁵ WYSIATI is derived from Kahneman (2011, 85–88).

but relevant information. Do not mistake absence of evidence for evidence of absence.

- **Do not succumb to the temptation of tunnelling.** Dig yourself out from the tunnel of the comfortable and familiar. Don't assume that black swans will come from familiar sources of uncertainty. They can come from anywhere. Resist the tendency to prepare to fight the last war all over again. Black swans can easily bypass whatever Maginot Line³⁶ you may construct in an effort to make their advance more predictable.



There is a deadly but unseen black swan waiting for the turkey.
(Art by Wesley Blondin.)

GRAPPLING WITH HAWKS: COUNTERING HAWKISH “HARDWARE” WITH JFK’S BLACK SWAN “SOFTWARE”³⁷

- **Attribution errors are mutual.** Resist the powerful tendency to attribute the behaviour of adversaries to an intrinsically sinister, even evil, nature. Instead, search for clues in your own actions that may have provoked an adversary.
- **Control is elusive.** Do not exaggerate the degree of control you have over outcomes that are important to you.
- **Beware — optimism is often delusional.** Do not be deluded into believing that you are smarter or more talented than average. Get your advice from a diverse group of subordinates who are not afraid to criticize you. Do not underestimate the intelligence, preparedness or patriotism of adversaries.

³⁶ The system of fortifications built by the French after World War I to prevent another German war. It failed, as Hitler's forces simply went around it.

³⁷ These takeaways are excerpted from “The Outlier: How JFK Resisted His Hawks” section above.

- **Trust, but verify (especially in crises).** Avoid the tendency to reject arguments by doves seeking negotiated solutions on the assumption that the proposals of adversaries should never be taken seriously because they cannot be trusted.
- **Be prepared to cut your losses.** When things are going badly in a crisis or conflict, consider cutting your losses and finding an exit ramp as soon as possible.

DO THE PRE-MORTEM! INSTRUCTIONS FROM THE SPECIAL ASSISTANT FOR BLACK SWAN DETECTION

Imagine, now, that you are the special assistant to the head of state for black swan detection. The following are your instructions for your boss, whenever war and peace is on the line.

Chief, be relentless in doing pre-mortems.³⁸ That's right, **pre-mortems!** You are the leader and your advisers recommend the use of military force in dealing with an adversary. Everyone agrees that, all things considered, the chosen approach is the best one. But you have not yet given the authorization to implement it. Now tell everyone in the room to imagine it is a year from now. Imagine that the plan was implemented. Imagine that the outcome was a black swan — an unmitigated disaster. Tell everyone to take a half hour and sketch out a brief history of the disaster, addressing such questions as: What caused it? What was overlooked or misunderstood? How could the black swan have been avoided? What are the lessons of the smack-down by this particularly nasty black swan? When everyone has finished, repeat the question to your advisers: how many are now in favour of the original decision? How many are anxious to move ahead with the original proposal to use military force?

Make sure your dream team is composed of unlike-minded associates. But also make sure all are committed to team solutions. You are going to need such a team. Badly. And prepare to call on all your collective virtuosity in explaining to your constituents why, in case after

³⁸ We owe the use of the term “pre-mortem” to Gary Klein, as channelled by Kahneman (2011, 264-265).

case, less is more, more is dangerous, and that cautiousness is in the interests of all. Make your points by bringing your constituents, to the degree possible, into a **post-mortem** of your group's **pre-mortem**. Rub their noses in the various black swans that were detected in your group's pre-mortem. Remind them that you are not trying to scare them. You are informing them of some of the possible outcomes of anticipated military action, as imagined by your team.

Now ask them again if they are still anxious to move ahead. Repeat as often as it takes to make them understand, intellectually and viscerally, the vastness of the chasm between the ease of starting a conflict and the difficulty of ending it before it escalates out of all proportion to its alleged purpose. Some constituents will still resist your black swan logic. Listen carefully to them. Acknowledge that you may be wrong and they may be right. But then ask yourself, as Winston Churchill put it: in which direction do I want to make the error — to jaw-jaw when I should have ordered war-war?³⁹ Or the other way around?

Good luck!

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³⁹ This is a slightly re-worked variant of Churchill's remarks at a White House luncheon, as reported in *The New York Times* on June 27, 1954.

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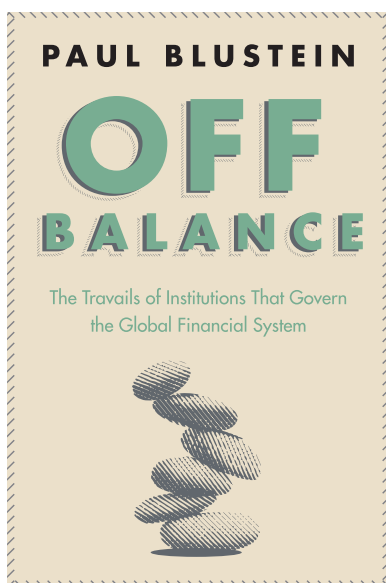
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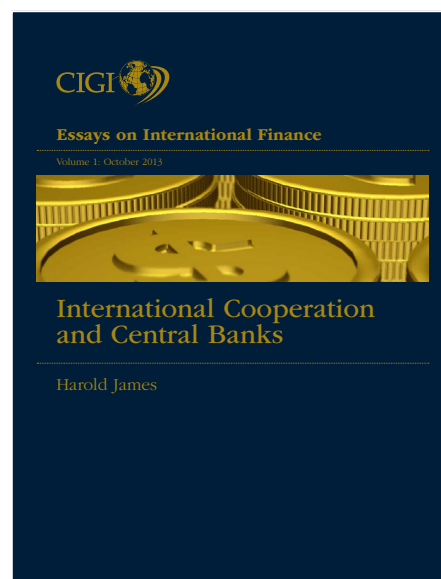


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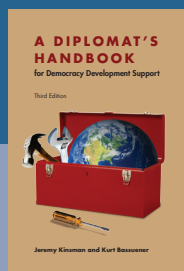
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This third edition of the *Handbook* presents a wide variety of specific experiences of diplomats on the ground, identifying creative, human and material resources. More broadly, it is about the policy-making experience in capitals, as democratic states

try to align national interests and democratic values. The *Handbook* also documents the increasingly prominent role of civil society as the essential building block for successful democratic transitions, with each case study examining specific national experiences in the aspiration for democratic and pluralistic governance, and lessons learned on all sides — for better or for worse.



The Sovereign Debt Forum: Expanding Our Tool Kit for Handling Sovereign Crises

CIGI Policy Brief No. 28

Richard Gitlin and Brett House

This policy brief proposes the creation of a sovereign debt forum (SDF) to address the lack of a simple and effective mechanism for dealing with sovereign debt crises by laying out the following: a small set of principles that ought to

inform any efforts to enhance the international financial architecture's capacity to handle sovereign crises; the contours of a possible SDF; some processes by which an SDF could operate; a broad sketch of incentives for stakeholders to participate in the SDF's operations; and recommendations on possible next steps.



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