

Allison, G. T. (1971). Essence of decision; explaining the Cuban missile crisis. Boston, Little Brown. Ch3-4.

Chapters three and four of Allison's book describe his second model of the Cuban missile crisis, "organizational process."

Governmental behavior is understood the not as deliberate choices of individuals but rather as outputs of large organizations. Allison draws upon organizational theory to build a model of governmental behavior based on multiple actors operating under constraints of bounded rationality and incomplete information, then applies it to explain particular events in the CMC. (I suggest that you all read Graham T. Allison, Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis, APSR 7/69, where he is MUCH clearer and more parsimonious)

CHAPTER 3: MODEL II: ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESS

Organizational Theory and Economics

Here he follows March and Simon's 1958 book, "Organizations." Allison lists five "characteristic deviations from comprehensive rationality" (p. 71): 1) problems are factored into different parts which are dealt with non-simultaneously; 2) decisionmakers satisfice rather than optimize; 3) organizations search using standard processes which limit choices; 4) organizations deal with uncertainty by making decisions, then making small corrections, like a thermostat, rather than considering alternatives and making a single binding decision; 5) repertoires of programs are developed that limit effective choice.

Allison combines this with Cyert and March's process-oriented model of organizational choice, which has four concepts which link together goals, expectations, and choice (p. 76): 1) quasi-resolution of conflict, or how conflicting goals are managed by achieving them sequentially; 2) uncertainty avoidance, or how firms focus on short-term, pressing problems and negotiate with the environment; 3) problemistic search, or how firms search for solutions to problems based on simple minded rules; 4) organizational learning, or how goals, attention rules, and search procedures are altered. Note that these are somewhat redundant with March and Simon's conception.

Organizational Process Paradigm

He then goes into a long, tortured outline of this "paradigm," which I attempt to reproduce in much-abbreviated form below.

I. Basic Unit of Analysis: Policy as Organizational Output.

Occurrences are organizational outputs.

Existing organizational routines limit options.

Organizational outputs structure decision between options.

II. Organizing Concepts

A. Organizational Actors: Organizations are fundamental unit.

B. Factored Problems and Fractionated Power: Different aspects of a problem are sent to different organizations; along with the responsibility for a problem comes power. Thus, both are divided.

C. Parochial Priorities, Perceptions, and Issues: Organizations, by their nature, are parochial and tend to develop set propensities regarding priorities, perceptions, and issues.

D. Action as Organizational Output

1. Goals: Constraints Defining Acceptable Performance (including organizational health and survival)

2. Sequential Attention to Goals

3. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

4. Programs and Repertoires: conglomerated SOPs.

5. Uncertainty Avoidance: Orgs minimize uncertainty, develop standard scenarios.

6. Problem-Directed Search: New problems are solved in terms of old problems.

7. Organizational Learning and Change: It's slow. Dramatic changes happen during budgetary feasts and famines, and "dramatic performance failures."

E. Central Coordination and Control: Action requires decentralization; coordination requires centralization. Organizations are jello-like structures which can't be controlled.

F. Decisions of Government Leaders: Important in that leaders decide which organizations will deal with a problem.

III. Dominant Inference Pattern: Past is best predictor of present; present is best predictor of future; organizations change slowly.

IV. General Propositions

A. Organizational Implementation: Actions are determined by routines, SOPs, repertoires, etc: orgs will react to standard threats using standard options.

B. Organizational Options: Alternatives are best when in line with existing org goals, don't require coordination of several orgs, and don't fall between the cracks between org goals.

C. Limited Flexibility and Incremental Change: Orgs change incrementally. Org budgets change incrementally. Orgs don't understand sunk costs.

D. Long-range planning: institutionalized, then ignored.

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E. Goals and tradeoffs: Tradeoffs are neglected; constraints are attended to sequentially, satisfying one while neglecting another.

F. Imperialism: Orgs are concerned with their own health and growth.

G. Options and Organization: Subunits are created to increase options; but those subunits then generate info to make the exercise of the option more likely.

H. Administrative Feasibility: Organizations are blunt instruments which give a limited set of options, communicate information badly, and resist missions counter to goals.

V. Specific Propositions

A. Deterrence: Nuclear attack is not a function of balance or stability, but rather what kind of orgs handle a nuclear attack. Probability of attack is a function of programs, SOPs of orgs, and is limited by choices offered to leaders (limited nuclear attack not possible)

B. Soviet Force Posture: A function of military branches, as well as R&D lab goals. Missiles controlled by Sov Ground Forces. SS-9s due to R&D labs, not due to choices by leaders ahead

VI. Evidence

We need more research on this in order to increase 1) differentiation between different organizations, 2) identification of factors that support behavioral tendencies, and 3) causes of dramatic change.

Organizational Process Paradigm Applied

Allison applies this organizational process paradigm briefly in order to explain why the Soviet Union and simultaneously pursue state-owned and an ABM system. The ABM system is being purchased by the air defense command, which is a large and powerful part of the Soviet military, which can afford to spend resources and time on long-term products like ABMs. At the same time, the leadership and the scientific community pursue détente; this is not contradictory because they are different organizations.

He also uses this to point out that if we except the organizational process paradigm, it would lead us to ask different questions about nuclear strategy. First, rather than wondering about the stability of the balance between the U.S. and Soviet Union, we would ask about the control system of each country, and be concerned that an unauthorized launch would occur. Second, if the standard operating procedures for bringing strategic capabilities to alert status are sloppy, an accident may occur. Third, limited choices may lead to accidental war. Fourth, routine organizational procedures may define the situation in crisis. Fifth, organizational processes may produce accidental firings. (Sound familiar? I'm sure it does to Sagan...)

CHAPTER 4: CUBA II: A SECOND CUT

Allison uses the previous chapter's theoretical standpoint to explain particular aspects of the three central events of the Cuban missile crisis: 1) the construction of Soviet offensive missiles in Cuba, 2) the imposition of a U.S. blockade of Cuba, and 3) the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba.

The deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba demonstrated several anomalies that are only accounted for by organizational theory: first, the Soviet insensitivity to the possibility of U-2 observance of the operation; second, inconsistencies in the operation, which sometimes operated under high secrecy, and other times none at all; third, why the missiles were even being put there are all; fourth, the behavior of Soviet military personnel (e.g. lining up planes wing to wing); fifth, why they attempted someday complication operation simultaneously. These are explained using organizational implementation and options, as theorized above: organizations followed standard operating procedures even when inappropriate, and had limited options for a buildup which resulted in a massive buildup.

Likewise, the imposition of a U.S. blockade of Cuba also exhibited several anomalies. For instance, the failure of intelligence gathering organizations can be explained by reference to organizational options and implementation again. For example, the 90 percent figure given for a so-called surgical strike was based on standard operating procedures, which assumed that the targets were mobile, and assumed that a general strike was optimal.

Finally, the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba likewise is explained through organizational theory. The confusion in the Soviet Union over the American discovery of the missiles seems strange for a rational actor perspective, but logical for organizational perspective; similarly, problems on the U.S. side over keeping control over forces, like Navy anti-submarine warfare practices and the straying of a U-2 bomber over Soviet airspace (Sagan pops up again!), are explained well by an organizational perspective. He ends with a note about how Kennedy had ordered the removal of the Turkish missiles long before the crisis, but was unable to insure its implementation, due to organizational reasons.