H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David R. Gibson. *Talk at the Brink: Deliberation and Decision during the Cuban Missile Crisis.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. xiv + 218 pages. ISBN 978-0-691-15131-1.

Reviewed by Richard Ned Lebow (King's College London)

Published on H-Diplo (March, 2013)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach

Talk About Talk: Analyzing Excomm Discourse

David Gibson has produced an original and valuable book about what is arguably the most intensively studied foreign policy event of the postwar era. His research was made possible by the recordings president John Kennedy made of the deliberations of the ExComm, his informal group of advisors during the Cuban missile crisis. Gibson starts from the assumption that talk matters and documents effectively his contention that the ExComm's deliberations were significant in shaping American responses to the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba, management of the blockade, and the resolution of the crisis. These deliberations set the limits of what was acceptable to the degree that the president wanted to act with broad internal support. They helped him work through his choices and to mobilize support for them.

The most novel part of the book is the use of conversational analysis to probe the structure of ExComm discussions. Conversational analysis involves the careful study of individual sentences and comparisons across them, and also the patterns of speech. To what extent do people listen to or interrupt other speakers? To what degree do they carry on a dialogue as opposed to talking past one another? Do interlocutors advance arguments or make short observations or reactions to what others say? How are their comments structured and how does this structure evolve, and in response to what kinds of developments?

Conversation analysis reveals that options were taken more seriously when their proponents could concoct a plausible story line leading from them to the removal of the missiles. Opponents countered with story lines that led to escalation, war, or nonwithdrawal. To a great degree, debate revolved these alternate futures. These scenarios were refined and updated on the basis of objections and new information. The discussions nevertheless reveal that dialogue was restricted by interruptions or the presentation at the same time of opposing story lines.

One of the biggest puzzles is the acceptance of the blockade, which never produced a successful story line before it was adopted. Gibson tells us that nobody could invent a scenario by which it led to the withdrawal of the missiles. Kennedy appears to have chosen the blockade for different reasons, and ExComm members, aware of his choice, or impending choice, reframed the debate to remain relevant. We know from other sources and interviews with presidential advisors that Kennedy opted for the blockade because it was nonviolent at the outset, and perhaps involved only minimal violence if a ship were to be stopped en route to Cuba.[1]

The blockade decision indicates that the ExComm, while important, was only part of the story. It appears more peripheral to the resolution of the crisis, as the decision to send the president's brother, attorney general Robert Kennedy, to meet with Soviet ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin on Saturday night with an offer to withdraw the American missiles in Turkey, was made by the president and several of his closest advisors in an Oval Office meeting about which other members of the ExComm were not informed.[2] We still await a comprehensive treatment of the ExComm that will assess its role in the overall decisionmaking process. This is not the purpose of Gibson's book, but as he does focus on the ExComm's role in three critical decisions, it would have

been useful to have a follow-on chapter, or at least an argument, that addressed this question.

The taped conversations are revealing in other ways that Gibson does not address. For me, the most striking aspect of the discussions is President Kennedy's inability on the first day to finish a simple declarative sentence. He interrupts himself, pauses, makes use of more fillers like "uh" than usual, and has difficulty expressing his thoughts on topic. He is emotional in tone and appears committed to an air strike. At one point he tells ExComm participants: "I don't think we got much time on these missiles. They may be … So it may be that we just have to, we can't wait two weeks while we're getting ready to, to roll. Maybe just have to take them out, and continue our other preparations if we decide to do that. That may be where we end up. I think we ought to, beginning right now, be preparing to … Because that's what we're going to do anyway."[3]

Members of the ExComm I interviewed were unanimous that if he had been compelled to make a policy decision that day it almost certainly would have been the air strike.[4] By the time he made the decision for the blockade, three to four days later, the president was his old self. Overcoming the initial shock of the missile discovery, his anger, and sense of entrapment was critical to good decisionmaking. This was arguably true for at least some ExComm members as well.

The president's sangfroid held him in good stead on Saturday, October 27, by all accounts the most anxious day of the crisis for the American side. Kennedy is articulate, thoughtful, and in full control of his emotions. The president later acknowledged how he had been affected by stress and lack of sleep during the first week of the crisis. Former ExComm members were convinced that had they been compelled to make a decision early in the crisis it would have been the wrong one.[5]

There are psychological tests for cognitive complexity designed to be applied to texts and it would be interesting to measure that of the ExComm members and the ExComm as a whole over time. Interesting too, would be comparisons to other groups on various dimensions. The ExComm is admittedly unique as very few policymaking bodies meet over the course of a long, war-threatening crisis, and fewer still are secretly recorded. Comparisons to other kind of groups for which we have such a record might still be theoretically revealing and substantively useful. They would help determine what is unique about the ExComm deliberations and what they share in common with those of other decisionmaking groups. Gibson reasonably limits his attention to the ExComm, and I hope his example inspires others to extend conversation analysis to other forms.

Group psychology has much to tell us about the ways in which groups function. Irving Janis, a leading exemplar of this tradition, used the ExComm as one of his cases in a comparative study of "groupthink." I was never persuaded by his argument, and it would be interesting to know if Gibson's method could be used to assess the groupthink hypothesis.

In many conversations, what is *not* said can be just as important as what is said. Gibson focuses almost entirely on what is said. I believe we could read between the lines–perhaps more accurately, listen between the words–to detect several kinds of non-articulation. The first we might call *ça va sans dire* because it refers to shared assumptions that do not need to be described, justified, or explained. The ExComm discussions suggest, among other assumptions, the belief that Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev is offensively, not defensively, motivated. The ExComm assumed that the missiles were sent to Cuba because Khrushchev doubted Kennedy's resolve, and that it was accordingly essential that the United States avoid doing anything that might convey a sense of weakness. Gibson seems to subscribe to some of these assumptions–most notably the need to display resolve–and such a commitment is both questionable and unnecessary for his analysis.

Silence is also motivated by unshared assumptions. Group members may feel that articulating them will produce more overt conflict, minimize the chance of compromise and agreement, and direct attention away from policy to useless theoretical debates. There was certainly an element of this in the ExComm. It is most apparent in the ways participants occasionally backed off from discussing assumptions that proved highly controversial and around which there could be no consensus or agreement. Perhaps most importantly, nobody attempted to revisit issues on which it appeared the president had made a decision. Once it became apparent that he had decided in favor of a blockade, nobody really challenged this option, although many, perhaps a majority, had rejected it previously. Participants now sought to advance their objectives within the framework of the blockade. Analysis of what was not said, when it was not said, and why it was not said would be equally revealing to analysis of what is on the spoken record. I hope that Gibson, or someone else, will take up this task.

I have no real bones to pick with Gibson and his book.

My concerns are for what he has not done, rather than what he has done, and it would be unfair to criticize him for not addressing questions of interest to me. When I evaluate what he has done, my only real quibble concerns his method. It would have been helpful and instructive to foreign policy and international relations scholars to have been presented with a fuller discussion of conversation analysis and how it fits into the broader field of discourse analysis.

Notes

[1]. Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), ch. 6.

[2]. Ibid.

[3]. Off the Record Meeting on Cuba, October 16, 1962, 11:50 am to 12:57 pm, Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings, Collection JFK-POF: Papers of John F. Kennedy: President's Office Files, 01/20/1961 - 11/22/1963, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, MA.

[4]. Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, 334, citing interview with Roswell Gilpatric.

[5]. Ibid., 508 for cites.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo

Citation: Richard Ned Lebow. Review of Gibson, David R., *Talk at the Brink: Deliberation and Decision during the Cuban Missile Crisis.* H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37740

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.