

 **Article REVIEW**

Dominic Tierney. “Pearl Harbor in Reverse’: Moral Analogies in the Cuban Missile Crisis.” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 9.3 (Summer 2007): 49-77. doi: 10.1162/jcws.2007.9.3.49. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2007.9.3.49> .

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As someone who has spent a great deal of time both studying the Cuban missile crisis and fruitlessly trying to persuade my colleagues in Political Science to take moral psychology seriously, I am predisposed to smile broadly upon Dominic Tierney’s “Pearl Harbor in Reverse.” And smile I do. It is refreshing to read a lucid, well-researched study of national security decision making that takes moral arguments seriously when so many others ignore them or blithely explain them away. Tierney does not merely take moral arguments seriously: he actually makes them the focus of his attention.

This is an important piece that makes a major contribution to the literature. Unalloyed praise makes for dull reading, however, so in the space I have allotted myself I will concentrate primarily on points of disagreement. I will presume that readers are familiar with the broad outlines of the Cuban missile crisis.

Tierney begins by noting that “a number of U.S. policymakers argued against a surprise U.S. air strike against Soviet missile sites in Cuba because it would be morally analogous to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.” He claims that the analogy “contributed significantly to President John F. Kennedy’s decision not to launch immediate air strikes against Cuba and to proceed instead with a naval blockade of the island”; he suggests that the Pearl Harbor analogy was a “sufficient condition” for Kennedy to reject the option of launching an air strike without prior warning; and he argues that by “eliminating” the surprise attack option, the analogy effectively “pushed the administration toward choosing the blockade” (p. 50). Tierney suggests that this is all remarkable (a) because the Pearl Harbor analogy challenged the Munich analogy, which would have licensed the kind of bold response to “aggression” that a surprise attack represented; (b) “because a strong international norm against surprise attacks did not yet exist”; (c) because the Kennedy administration had displayed precious little sensitivity to moral considerations in its Cuba policy to that point; and (d) “because the proposed U.S. attack was not, in fact, morally analogous to Pearl Harbor” (p. 50). These are bold and interesting claims, and I would like to challenge them all. Let me take each in turn.

Did the Pearl Harbor analogy “contribute significantly” to President Kennedy’s decision not to launch an “immediate” air strike against Cuba? As Tierney notes, the analogy did not surface in the first day’s deliberations (on October 16) of the group that would eventually become known as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or ExComm.¹ On this day there was no immediate decision to launch an air strike, so the analogy could not have contributed, and did not contribute, to this (non-) decision. The analogy surfaced the next day and rather quickly gained some traction. It certainly weighed, insofar as it weighed at all, against launching a surprise air strike. If what we mean by the phrase “immediate air strike” is an air strike launched without warning, rather than one launched right after the discovery of the Soviet deployment, we can at the very least describe the Pearl Harbor analogy as a factor in the ExComm’s deliberations. But there never was a decision *not* to launch an air strike, merely a decision to try a blockade first. The air strike option never officially came off the table. What we might call the *strategic-surprise* air strike option came off the table on October 18, on which more below; but a *tactical-surprise* air strike might still have been possible at a later date. The most we can say, therefore, is that the Pearl Harbor analogy was among the considerations that inclined the ExComm to pass over the surprise air strike as an opening move. (I have become convinced over the years that President Kennedy gradually made up his mind not launch military action against Cuba *at all*, primarily because he was unwilling to risk escalation to strategic nuclear war, of which he, like Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, had a genuine visceral horror. To some extent this was a *moral* horror, but not in a way accounted for by the Pearl Harbor analogy; the ExComm tapes clearly show that JFK was satisfied that an air strike with prior warning would not have been a Pearl Harbor in reverse [p. 65]).

Did the Pearl Harbor analogy provide a “sufficient condition” to take a surprise air strike off the table completely? Tierney suggests that it did by noting that shortly after a discussion of the analogy on October 18 the ExComm narrowed its options to two: an air strike with prior warning, or a blockade (p. 66). But we should be cautious about how we interpret this. Among those with whom the analogy resonated, it did so for a combination of reasons that are tricky to parse out because the available record gives us only snippets of their thought processes. No doubt some believed that launching a surprise attack was inherently immoral. Robert Kennedy apparently eventually came to feel this way, if he is correctly reported to have said, “For 175 years we had not been that kind of country” (p. 67). But others--and perhaps even those who did come to believe, with RFK, that a surprise attack was inherently immoral--were also worried by its optics, by the effect that it would have on the allies, and by what the Soviets would do in a

¹ For convenience, I will simply use the term ExComm to denote this group even though it was not formally designated as such until October 22 (in NSAM 196).

retributive rage. Moreover, not even the most enthusiastic hawk claimed that a surprise attack carried a high enough probability of destroying all of the missiles to make the option appear attractive to JFK. So a number of considerations weighed against surprise attack. While they were clearly jointly sufficient to push the option off the table on October 18, it is hard to know which, if any, were individually sufficient. Of course, to the extent that a surprise attack appeared unattractive because of its optics, its effect on the allies, or its effect on the Soviets, I would strongly argue that the moral psychology of the relevant audiences would have been a major part of the reason why.

By “eliminating” the surprise attack option, did the Pearl Harbor analogy effectively “[push] the administration toward choosing the blockade”? Yes, if a surprise attack, somehow magically stripped of its perceived moral liabilities, would have won in a three-way runoff against the other two options; no otherwise. Another reading of the record suggests that as the shock and anger of the initial discovery of the Soviet missiles faded, the attractiveness of *any* air strike option began to fade as well.² The blockade had four crucial advantages that eventually carried the day: (1) it was flexible; (2) it was revocable; (3) it bought time to work out a peaceful settlement; and (4) it carried the lowest risk of escalation.

Did the Pearl Harbor analogy “challenge” the Munich analogy? Tierney notes that the Munich analogy did not get much airplay during the missile crisis, but suggests that the Kennedy administration “had internalized the ‘lesson’ that concessions to aggressive dictators would merely invite further aggression” (p. 60). If the Pearl Harbor analogy was effective in the Kennedy’s administration’s decision making, and if the blockade counted as standing up to aggressive dictators, then clearly the Pearl Harbor analogy did not challenge the Munich analogy. Passing over one violent option, it seems to me, does not constitute a concession to dictators. The secret missile trade on the basis of which Kennedy and Khrushchev ultimately resolved the crisis *did*, of course, represent a concession not radically different from one Adlai Stevenson proposed during the crisis for which the president’s inner circle later hung him out to dry with the claim that “Adlai wanted a Munich.”³ But if JFK did indulge in a little Munich of his own, either he must not have internalized the “lessons” of Munich to the extent that Tierney believes, or he must have felt that other considerations trumped them. Was the Pearl Harbor analogy one of those considerations? I would argue that fear of nuclear war was vastly more important.

² This point is made particularly effectively in James G. Blight, *The Shattered Crystal Ball: Fear and Learning in the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990).

³ Stewart Alsop and Charles Bartlett, “In Time of Crisis,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 8 December 1962: 16-20.

Were the Kennedy administrations moral qualms puzzling because “a strong international norm against surprise attacks did not yet exist” in 1962? Norms are notoriously difficult to identify, and few if any enjoy perfect compliance. In view of the fact that the norm of declaring war prior to commencing hostilities died an apparently final death at the end of World War II, we might be tempted to suggest that a strong international norm against surprise attacks *no longer* existed in 1962. But perhaps it would be more accurate to conclude that there was, and still is, a provisional norm against surprise attack to which various escape clauses attach. The British reaction to the Russian attack on Sinope in 1853 was remarkably similar to the American reaction to Pearl Harbor.⁴ Japan more or less got a free pass for its attack on Port Arthur in 1904, as did Israel in 1967 (except in the Arab world, of course). Israel was publicly condemned and privately congratulated for its attack on Iraq’s Osirak reactor in 1981; Argentina was roundly criticized for its bloodless conquest of the Falkland Islands the following year. It seems that whether a surprise attack brings down brickbats depends heavily upon who is attacking whom and why. I do not say this by way of arguing against the significance of the Pearl Harbor analogy in the Kennedy administration’s decision making, but instead to suggest that it is difficult to know whether its significance is puzzling in this particular respect.

Does the Kennedy administration’s skittishness about a surprise attack contrast sharply with the apparent amorality--or perhaps immorality--of its Cuba policy as a whole? From a moral perfectionist perspective, of course, it is difficult to square JFK’s willingness to authorize sabotage, assassination, economic strangulation, and an exile invasion with his moral qualms about launching a surprise air strike. But there is no evidence that anyone in the ExComm embraced moral perfectionism. Several were fervent anti-communist true believers who genuinely felt that ridding Cuba of Castro was a righteous goal. A few, perhaps, were slightly queasy about some of the means employed, but both moral psychology and everyday experience tell us that most people believe that the ends sometimes justify the means.

Finally, was the proposed U.S. surprise attack in fact disanalogous to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor? In some respects, but not in all. This is typical in any comparison, as the classic parable of the blind men and the elephant reminds us. Certainly some members of the ExComm felt there were enough similarities to render the two cases analogous while others disagreed. Among the perceived similarities were the fact that both plans involved targeting capital military assets without giving defenders enough warning to take effective countermeasures;⁵ the

⁴ On this point see, e.g., Harold Temperley, *England and the Near East: The Crimea* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1964): 371.

⁵ While it is correct, as Tierney notes, that Japan planned to break off relations with Washington thirty minutes before the attack on Pearl Harbor began (p. 58), this would not have

fact that both plans gave military effectiveness priority over other considerations; and, perhaps most simply, the fact that both were species of the genus “surprise attack.” Those who dismissed the analogy felt that while Pearl Harbor was unprovoked and offensive, a surprise attack on the missile sites in Cuba would have been a perfectly justifiable defensive response to an act of aggression (and a deceptive one at that).⁶ What are more impressive here, the similarities or the differences? This is quite simply the wrong question to ask. Drawing analogies is a cognitive psychological process informed heavily and unavoidably by personality, culture, and ideology. The question is not whether the analogy was apt in the abstract--always an impossible question to answer--but whether it was salient for specific decision makers.

Where does this leave us? Not, I would like to stress, with the conclusion that the Pearl Harbor analogy was unimportant in the Cuban missile crisis, much less with a broader conclusion that we should be skeptical of moral analogies in general. Tierney is quite correct--I cannot stress this enough--that senior American policy makers cared about whether the actions they took in the Cuban missile crisis could be justified morally. Many, and perhaps most, felt genuine moral angst during the crisis, even those who were skeptical of the Pearl Harbor analogy. But moral considerations rubbed shoulders with political, strategic, diplomatic, and even personal ones. Finding a way safely through the missile crisis minefield was difficult precisely because it was a multidimensional problem.

We should be grateful to Tierney not only for bringing the Pearl Harbor analogy to the fore in a way that allows us to reflect on the role of moral reasoning in international crises, and for documenting so clearly who approached it how (correcting, I should add, a number of popular misconceptions deliberately cultivated by the Camelot crowd), but also for locating the subject in relevant debates about analogical reasoning in general and moral analogies in particular. There are various lines of inquiry that Tierney might have pursued further than he did: for example, is it relevant that JFK, RFK, and McCone--three figures who came to take the analogy very seriously--were practicing Catholics? Is the distinction between strategic surprise and tactical surprise relevant? (Pearl Harbor was certainly a tactical surprise, but many Americans anticipated a Japanese attack somewhere sometime soon.) But this is not to diminish his achievement.

“Pearl Harbor in Reverse” is a bold and welcome step in the direction of an important and productive research program. While I believe that Tierney has

been tantamount to giving specific warning of the attack, nor would it have allowed enough time for the United States to react.

⁶ Visitors to the military museum at Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo will know that conservative nationalists in Japan understood Pearl Harbor as a justified defensive response to a hostile American policy.

overstated his specific claims, I sincerely hope that he has inspired others to follow his lead.

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