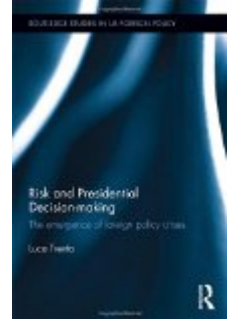


Luca Trenta. *Risk and Presidential Decision-making: The Emergence of Foreign Policy Crises.* Routledge Studies in US Foreign Policy Series. New York: Routledge, 2016. 224 pp. \$145.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-138-85424-6.



Reviewed by Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Decision-making is a topic central to the study of the American presidency. Although the bulk of presidential scholarship prefers a quantitative examination of presidential leadership of the public or Congress, presidential decision-making is still at the heart of what it is to be president and thus central to our understanding of presidents and their office. It is up to the president to decide, after all, what policies to prioritize and what speeches to make. The president, along with an institutional structure of advisers and a network of intelligence, decides whether to use military force against a nation or negotiate peace with another. Despite its importance, good qualitative studies of presidential decision-making are rare. In *Risk and Presidential Decision-making: The Emergence of Foreign Policy Crises*, Luca Trenta develops and applies a risk management framework to presidential decision-making in an attempt to add his voice to relevant presidential decision-making research.

Presidential decision-making has always been vital to studies about US foreign policy and schol-

ars have employed a variety of approaches, from rational-choice economics to psychological theories. *Risk and Presidential Decision-making* relies on theories in sociology and is about presidential decision-making framed as risk management. To begin, the author spends all of chapter 2 reviewing a variety of perspectives and definitions of risk, risk management, and crises. As he does so, we learn that risk's essential feature is uncertainty, and that risk is managed in the short term, requires balancing pressures found at home and abroad, and involves both policy and political goals. Ultimately, risk exists because of an uncertain situation in which someone—in this case the president—must make a decision.

At the heart of the author's contribution to risk in presidential decision-making are his definitions of uncertainty, risk, and risk management. To wit, uncertainty arises due to limited information and the inability to know the outcome of one's decisions or to control the consequences of one's decisions. Risk, more precisely, "is the probability of something going wrong, coupled with

the magnitude of the negative outcome” (p. 46), such that with greater possible negativity in a decision comes greater risk. Risk management is the ability to minimize a negative result that may arise from a decision and, as applied to presidential decision-making, involves a cyclical sequence of decision-making in which each decision forces the president to evaluate and manage risk that arises out of his prior decisions. A president’s primary concern, it appears, is to “guard against the probability of something going wrong” (p. 63). I disagree with the author that these are operationalized definitions, instead I see them as summative conceptual definitions. Still, they provide the foundation for the remainder of the book, applied to presidential decision-making in key foreign policy events or crises.

Indeed, it is crises involving presidential decision-making that the book examines. Trenta describes how his book differs from previous scholarship that defines crises as manageable, short-term events. Instead, he derives his conception of crisis from his definitions of uncertainty, risk, and risk management. Simply, “crises represent instances of decision-makers’ lack of control due to the mismanagement of the risks posed by foreign policy issues” (p. 62). In other words, while a foreign policy event may or may not have been significant in itself, the development of a situation into a crisis is very much a product of the president’s own decision-making surrounding that foreign policy event. The crises that the author examines include President John F. Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis (chapter 3), President Jimmy Carter and Iran (chapter 4), and President Bill Clinton and Bosnia (chapter 5). True to his definition, Trenta does not focus on the central, defining moment of a crisis, such as the thirteen-day confrontation between the United States and Soviet Union over missiles in Cuba, but rather pinpoints his analysis on how crises emerge out of a series of presidential decisions. Thus, the author

examines each of these crises and the president’s decision-making over a period of years.

The Carter administration’s relationship with Iran, including the events and cycles of decisions that led up to the hostage situation, is a particularly compelling case study that Trenta uses to apply his concepts of risk management to presidential decision-making. In chapter 4, Trenta details these events, each of which are interrelated and framed according to the decision-consequence-decision cycle crafted in chapter 2. Thus, when Carter set aside his campaign rhetoric about human rights and opposing arms sales to Iran by selling weapons to Iran and ignoring the shah’s increasing repression of the Iranian people, he was making a series of decisions with unexpected consequences. These decisions fueled the ultimate foreign policy crisis of the Carter administration: the hostage taking of American diplomats and their detainment for 444 days until the inauguration of Ronald Reagan.

The author is careful to avoid what would be an obvious critique of his approach, that better presidential decision-making could have prevented the Iranian revolution. Admitting on page 147 that his framework does not even consider many important developments internal to Iran (and very much outside of American influence) allows the author to remind the reader that the point of better risk management through decision-making is to be in a stronger position to manage future developments. In the case of Iran, the author goes so far as to claim that better decision-making, including more criticism of the shah, may have minimized blowback on the United States during the Iranian uprising, even though doing so would have invariably opened the Carter administration to the charge that his criticism of the shah led to the revolution. This is a scenario that we cannot possibly know but that serves to give the author’s counterfactual some merit.

The book is impressively researched. The author supplements each case study with docu-

ments from several presidential libraries. He conducted elite interviews to further bolster his argument. And the breadth of his secondary sources, from both scholarly and more popular outlets, is wide. These efforts result in some memorable gems, such as the shah's comments about candidate Jimmy Carter, noting that he is "no more than an ignorant peasant boy" and an "ass" (p. 118).

One limit to the book is its introductory frame and the justification for the book's importance and relevance as a scholarly inquiry. In effect, the conclusions borne out of the Ulrich Beck and Michel Foucault schools of thought, that there exists a "radical historical divide between an era of relative certainty and predictability (largely identifiable with the Cold War) and an era of radical uncertainty, risk and unpredictability (the post-Cold War environment)" (p. 1), are not particularly compelling or interesting. Although the author agrees that this claim "builds on relatively shaky foundations" (p. 2), that this consideration justifies the book's importance—and which takes up chapter 1 in its entirety—distracts for an otherwise solid examination of presidential decision-making and risk assessment in three significant foreign policy events. It is not even easily tested given that the author's case study framework explores only two Cold War crises and one post-Cold War event. Except for those who are interested in reviewing these perspectives of Beck and Foucault, I recommend that the reader begin reading the book in chapter 2. That neither school precisely defines risk simply reinforces their limited use to this volume.

Another weakness is that the book's audience is necessarily narrow. Given its relentless consideration of several definitions and perspectives on risk and their applications in a variety of ways to several different case studies, the book reads too dense and cumbersome for the impatient student. Thus, I would not recommend this book to for an undergraduate class. One's best graduate students

could navigate the book relatively well, but the book's organization requires some getting used to, and even the justifications for definitions of risk read more like a literature review than a crafted synopsis of key terms and concepts generated to produce some testable hypothesis. The author eventually delivers manageable definitions of uncertainty, risk, and risk management that he applies throughout the book, but only with a bit of perseverance to cut through the fat do we arrive at the meat of the author's presentation. More advanced scholars of foreign policy should fare better in unlocking the key points found throughout this well-documented and thoroughly qualitative manuscript. In terms of presentation, moreover, it is the application of the author's framework throughout his three case studies where the author's intended framework actually becomes clear and understandable to the reader.

In all, *Risk and Presidential Decision-making* provides three primary contributions to the literature. First, it vets thoroughly several different approaches to and definitions of risk. Chapter 2 is an especially useful primer for anyone interested in a detailed survey of some prominent perspectives of risk as it might be applied to decision-making and foreign policy. Second, the book traces the implications of the author's definitions of risk through three important case studies in presidential foreign policy. Not only do these cases studies serve the author's purposes in writing this book, they should also prove to be useful supplements to researchers interested in these specific foreign policy crises for other scholarly purposes. Third, the book's central observation, that crises develop out of risk management or, more precisely, the inability of presidents to manage risk effectively amid a sea of uncertainty, is compelling. It is for these reasons that this book is worth including in any serious discussion about presidential decision-making on foreign policy.

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