

enlightening and thought-provoking study. Indeed, *Why Adjudicate?* is an invaluable resource that addresses a real gap in the existing literature on international trade law. Moreover, it makes a major contribution to several fields, including international relations, law, and political economy. It is an excellent study and one that should be highly recommended to colleagues and students.

Talk at the Brink: Deliberation and Decision during the Cuban Missile Crisis. By David R. Gibson. Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 2012. 256p. \$35.00.

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— Frank Harvey, *Dalhousie University*

Very few international crises have spawned a larger volume of scholarship than the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis (CMC), and so staking a claim to originality is no small task. David Gibson embraces the challenge by brushing aside conventional, rationalist accounts of John F. Kennedy's key decisions in favor of a "new" interpretation of events. "A decade after the crisis," Gibson claims, "the world learned that history's most dangerous moment left behind some of its best data" (p. 8). Whether or not the tape recordings of the National Security Council's Executive Committee (Excomm) meetings constitute some of the "best data" is debatable, for reasons I will outline, but Gibson's microsociological methodology certainly provides a novel approach for analyzing the recordings, as well as some fascinating insights into the case evidence.

The subfield of microsociology is grounded in a belief that face-to-face interactions and the conversations they stimulate are foundational: They encompass causal mechanisms that determine perceptions, preferences, and outcomes. As the author explains, "if history is contingent on what people say, what people say is contingent on the operation of a conversational machinery that, from moment to moment, allows some ideas to be expressed and developed while others are prevented from surfacing" (p. 3). The problem with written transcripts of the Excomm meetings, according to Gibson, is that transcribed speech filters out "intrusive static" and subtle "disfluencies" (such as repetitions of "uh") that could affect the conversation's flow, alter choices, and occasionally change the course of history.

Gibson begins by establishing a high standard for measuring the value of his contribution: "[W]hile the book will be successful, in part, if I can demonstrate how crisis-related talk is anchored in, and shaped by, the machinery of conversation, I have a more ambitious goal in mind, to wit, to show how such details mattered for the decisions that came out of the Excomm deliberations" (p. 10). I believe that he succeeds in making a strong case for the importance of conversational analysis, but I am not convinced that the evidence he offers is sufficient to mount a

compelling challenge to widely accepted accounts of US behavior in this case.

I focus my brief review on what is arguably the book's central thesis, specifically, the role of *suppression* in the process of arriving at the blockade decision: "[W]hen it comes to making a decision," Gibson argues, "what is *not* said can be just as important as what *is* said. This will require a sort of *counterfactual conversational history*, speculating about what *might* have happened had talk unfolded differently at critical junctures" (p. 19; emphasis added).

According to Gibson's account, the blockade emerged as the more acceptable option, but only after specific objections initially voiced by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara were suppressed. McNamara's clearest objections to the blockade focused on the risks associated with giving the Soviets additional time to deploy some of the missiles, which would then require US attacks against operational missiles and increase the probability of nuclear retaliation (authorized or not) from Cuba. Far from emerging out of a rational assessment of the costs and benefits of various alternatives, Gibson concludes, "the crucial mechanism behind the ultimate selection of the blockade option was suppression, and especially suppression of the dangers (initially voiced by McNamara) of having to subsequently bomb operational missiles. . . . The apparent willingness to see earlier objection suppressed is a striking finding" (p. 102). But how suppressed were these objections, and was this level of suppression "striking" or entirely reasonable under the circumstances?

Gibson never really establishes a strong case for systemic suppression of the serious risks tied to the blockade. Nor does he demonstrate that McNamara had very strong reservations that were *never* expressed in the Excomm meetings. Now, if all reasonable objections to the blockade were repeatedly ignored and/or suppressed in every Excomm meeting, that would constitute strong support for the author's point, and a far more serious blow to standard rationalist accounts of decision making. But that did not happen in this case, as *Talk at the Brink* documents, because serious reservations *were* repeatedly expressed, although these objections became less pertinent in subsequent meetings as pressure mounted to make a decision.

Obviously, effective crisis decision-making requires careful analysis of the comparative costs and risks of available strategies, and any premature closure of inquiry is dangerous. However, given the time constraints common to any international crisis, a final decision has to be made, and endless repetition of the same objections, with the same level of intensity, is not always constructive or rational. In fact, at least some measure of suppression is typical for any decision to unfold, and, in this case, it occurred after an exhaustive (as distinct from endless) review of alternatives. Gibson obviously believes that the suppression of McNamara's objections privileged the blockade, but it is just as

likely that the Excomm's evolving preferences for the blockade rendered some of McNamara's objections less relevant, especially when compared with the more worrisome objections related to less appealing alternatives, like air strikes. In other words, suppression was a reasonable by-product (*effect*) of a rationally derived blockade consensus, not a *cause* of that consensus.

As a side note, it seems a little odd that "suppression" (what is *not* said) emerges as the key variable in a study that spends so much time highlighting the importance of applying specific microsociology techniques for interpreting the mechanics of what *is* said and how. Presumably, written transcripts would be more than sufficient to identify what was not said, so why do we need the tapes?

In any case, perhaps the most significant problem with Gibson's analysis is his failure to actually engage the "what if" counterfactual analysis he claimed was necessary for defending his argument. Simply posing a what-if question is never sufficient to establish the case for contingency. What Gibson should have provided is a carefully constructed counterfactual analysis of the following question: Had McNamara's objections not been suppressed later in the crisis (by him or others), would the blockade have been rejected in favor of some other strategy? The comparative strengths of at least two mutually exclusive counterfactual outcomes should have been evaluated: a) Kennedy would have selected a different strategy, thereby changing the course of history, or b) the blockade would still have emerged as the preferred strategy, regardless of the presence of McNamara's persistent objections.

Based on the evidence presented in the book (and in most other literature on the crisis), the blockade still emerges as the most reasonable option when compared with the potential risks and costs of other choices. The ability to control escalation was always the most appealing feature of the blockade. In fact, Gibson himself provides a perfectly reasonable interpretation concerning why McNamara ultimately came to accept the blockade strategy, despite his reservations; he "supported the version of the blockade that did not carry with it the threat of subsequent military action, and eventually decided to defend it against that very critique" (p. 102). In other words, McNamara came to understand that the United States would not necessarily have to attack operational missiles, even if the blockade failed, and Kennedy would still retain at least some measure of control by pushing the responsibility for military escalation over to Nikita Khrushchev. With respect to Gibson's assertion, therefore—that "the Cuban missile crisis has contingency written all over it insofar as there are so many ways in which it could have gone differently" (p. 4)—the evidence presented in the book does not, in my opinion, support this view. Gibson does not provide a clear account of the relationship between the conversational mechanics he identifies (e.g., suppression) and the choices made,

and he offers no clear reason why another round of identical objections by McNamara would have changed the blockade's appeal, let alone the course of history. "Speculation" and "counterfactual analysis" are not the same things.

Moreover, I am not sure that the evidence from meticulously crafted portrayals of tape recordings of Excomm conversations constitutes the "best data" for understanding the evolution of individual or group preferences in this case. The assumption here is that Excomm conversations were central to the decision-making process, a perfectly reasonable position shared by many scholars writing on the crisis. But it is not unreasonable to believe that there were dozens (perhaps hundreds) of other conversations that could conceivably have influenced judgments and preferences. I can imagine many one-on-one conversations between John and Robert Kennedy, or between the president and secretary of defense, outside the Excomm meetings, that would have shaped, changed, and solidified preferences. It would not be at all surprising to me that McNamara decided against repeating his objections to the blockade, with the same level of intensity, as a result of these exchanges.

The "new" information compiled in *Talk at the Brink* certainly provides a more vivid and colorful depiction of Excomm conversations, but these data do not come close to seriously challenging conventional accounts. In fact, as I worked my way through the mechanics of these conversations, I found that the findings essentially reconfirmed that existing literature did not miss anything significant, and the blockade option was the most sensible choice that emerged from an essentially rational process.

Achieving Nuclear Ambitions: Scientists, Politicians, and Proliferation. By Jacques E. C. Hymans. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 328p. \$95.00 cloth, \$32.99 paper.

Sanctions, Statecraft, and Nuclear Proliferation. Edited by Etel Solingen. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 402p. \$99.00 cloth, \$32.99 paper.
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— Matthew Kroenig, *Georgetown University*

Why do countries build nuclear weapons? What, if anything, can the international community do to stop them? As Iran pushes dangerously close to achieving a nuclear weapons capability in the face of intense international resistance, few questions are more important for the maintenance of international peace and security. Fortunately, two recent books by established scholars astutely address these critical questions.

In *Sanctions, Statecraft, and Nuclear Proliferation*, Etel Solingen and a stable of experts examine the role of economic sanctions in dissuading states from pursuing nuclear weapons. Solingen's earlier work on the relationship between domestic political coalitions and nuclear