

# Simulation/Game

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## THE CRISIS GAME

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### Basic Data:

*Objective:* To illustrate the impact of crises on decision making.

*Target audience:* Any group studying or preparing for decisions under crisis conditions. Such groups include students in courses on foreign or public policy, business executives or management trainees, or individuals working on community preparedness issues.

*Playing time:* 30 minutes to 1 hour.

*Debriefing time:* 15 minutes to 1 hour.

*Number of players:* 5-60.

*Materials required:* Briefing package compiled by game director.

*Equipment/room setup required:* Movable chairs or desks.

THE CRISIS GAME is a simple and brief simulation exercise designed to allow players to experience the dynamics of decision making under conditions of crisis. The game serves as an alternative to more extensive simulation exercises lasting several hours or days. In addition, THE CRISIS GAME can serve as an ideal supplement to case study methods which explore how others have responded to conditions of crisis.

A crisis situation requires a rapid response and is distinguished by the following characteristics: surprise, threat to vital interests, and incomplete information. These conditions offer a broad framework within which the game director can select the actual crisis to be used in THE CRISIS GAME. The game director can, therefore, tailor THE CRISIS GAME to the specific concerns of an organization, business, or college course.

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## Steps of Play

The mechanics of THE CRISIS GAME are simple. In the middle of a meeting, lecture, or discussion, the game director abruptly announces that a condition of crisis has emerged. Depending on the group's size, the game director divides the players into groups of between 5 and 10 participants. The game director informs the players that each group comprises a special, top advisory panel created to respond to the crisis. To structure group dynamics, the game director may also assign specific roles to players within each of the groups. Such roles can include group leaders and assistants, experts and generalists, and friendly or hostile outsiders.

As the game director announces the crisis, each group receives a detailed briefing package of background material. Materials in hand, the groups are informed that a primary policy recommendation and two ranked alternatives are needed within a specific time frame (15-30 minutes).

As in most crises, the initial reaction will be one of shock. Once the players realize that the game director is indeed serious, group dynamics will begin to take off. From this point on, the second stage of the game begins. Over the next 5 to 15 minutes, the game director interrupts the groups at odd intervals — ranging from 1 to 5 minutes — with announcements of additional information. The new information should consist of statements that clearly affect the crisis at hand as well as statements that may or may not be relevant. Because the purpose here is to simulate decision making under conditions of imperfect information as well as information overload, the more creative the game director, the more intense THE CRISIS GAME will become.

The third step in THE CRISIS GAME is for the game director to alter the player's assumptions on the time frame for the decision-making process. With 10 to 20 minutes left in the original time frame announced at the beginning of the game, the game director announces that due to intense public pressure on top officials, an emergency press conference (board meeting, committee hearing) has been scheduled to take place in 5 minutes. During the next 5 minutes, the game director announces the remaining time at 30-second intervals and urges the groups to finish their recommendations.

After 5 minutes, the game director asks each group to send its spokesperson to the front to the room to present and defend the group's policy recommendations. The game director instructs the remaining players to act as a critical audience exploring the strengths and weaknesses of the recommendations.

## **Rules of Play**

Aside from the instructions announced by the game director, THE CRISIS GAME has few rules. If the game director assigns roles to group members, these members are to act in character. If no roles are assigned, group members are to organize their decision-making procedures as they see fit. The groups are not to interact with each other until the end of the game, although informal eavesdropping can partially simulate the impact of rumors on the decision-making process.

In its basic form, THE CRISIS GAME has no scoring component. The game director, however, has the option of using the originality and viability of the array of policy recommendations that emerge from the different groups as a means of ranking the group performance. The game ends with the presentation and defense of the policy recommendations. Once all the representatives have spoken, the game director turns to the debriefing.

## **Debriefing**

In addition to exploring the strengths and weaknesses of actual policy recommendations, the utility of THE CRISIS GAME lies in its simulation of the dynamics of decision making under conditions of crisis. The range of discussion points is extensive.

First, the game director can encourage players to identify and discuss how the specific characteristics of a crisis, such as time and information constraints, affect the decision-making process. Second, the players can discuss the interaction of personalities, prior information, and roles (formal or informal) on the decision-making process. Third, the players can discuss the effectiveness of existing or new decision-making procedures to facilitate decisions under conditions of crisis. Fourth, the game director can turn to past decisions by specific players or other individuals and reinterpret them from the standpoint of the dynamics of decision making highlighted by THE CRISIS GAME.

## **Notes for Game Director**

I developed THE CRISIS GAME to solve a crisis I perceived to exist in the teaching of international relations to undergraduates. Although decision

making under conditions of crisis is an integral part of international relations, most introductory textbooks limit their discussions to the models of Graham Allison, the Cuban missile crisis, and updated examples discussed in five pages or less. In supplementing such texts, instructors of international relations at the introductory level find themselves caught between extensive simulation exercises and an array of detailed historical case studies all vying for attention as the necessary cases for relating to the student experience.

Over the past three years, I have sought to resolve this dilemma with an international version of THE CRISIS GAME. In developing crises, I have relied on current events as a starting point. Past crises have included the reported shipments of advanced Soviet fighter plans to Nicaragua, the "loss" by the United States of a shipment of Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, and General Manuel Noriega's challenge to the United States in Panama. Sample materials for THE CRISIS GAME appear below.

The demands on class time from THE CRISIS GAME have been minimal. Instructor preparation merely requires a scan of reference materials and some creativity. The results in terms of student interaction, awakening the shy student, and promoting learning instead of regurgitation of simple facts have all been extremely positive for classes as small as 25 students and as large as 65 students. I have found that students come away from THE CRISIS GAME with a clearer concept of the impact of time, information, surprise, role and group dynamics, and idiosyncratic factors on decision making. At a low cost, the simulation has provided considerable benefits.

## **Sample Materials**

The following is a sample of THE CRISIS GAME based on an international relations incident: the Panamanian situation in early 1988. The sample consists of a Background Briefing Package and Game Director Packet.

### **Briefing Package: Panama Fact Sheet: March 4, 1988**

#### **I. Key Individuals and Groups**

- A. General Manuel Noriega: Chief of Panamanian military since 1983 and de facto ruler of the country. Noriega has strong support of Panamanian Defense Forces also known as the National Guard (est. at 10,000 strong).

- B. Eric Delvalle: President of Panama (also from large sugar-holding family), had been a Noriega man or at least considered a Noriega puppet. Delvalle took a more defiant stance after recent U.S. indictments (in Florida courts) of Noriega on drug trafficking. He attempted to persuade Noriega to step down, but Noriega refused. Delvalle responded by attempting to remove Noriega and appoint the second in command of the military as a successor. The latter refused and pledged loyalty to Noriega. The National Assembly (under Noriega's control) voted to remove Delvalle from office. Delvalle is currently hiding in Panama.
- C. General Omar Torrijos: Assumed command of Panama in 1968 coup against traditional power base in Panama (roughly 20 families equivalent to 1% of the population who controlled much of the country). For support, Torrijos initially turned to popular reforms: aid to agricultural cooperatives, organized labor, and urban poor. His policies relied heavily on invoking nationalism. He also maintained friendly relations with Cuba. By late 1970s/early 1980s, Torrijos was turning back to the business community, moving away from a popular base, and acquiring a reputation as a corrupt dictator. Torrijos was killed in a 1981 plane crash. CIA involvement in the crash is suspected.
- D. Opposition to Noriega: The Civic Crusade is an organization of civic and business groups. The crusade has played a major role in recent strikes that paralyzed the country. Ricardo Aria Calderon is the leader of the Christian Democratic Party and the leader of the opposition coalition (that includes the old Revolutionary Democratic Party of Torrijos which has increasingly shifted to the right as old members of the 1970s ruling oligarchy have joined). Calderon believes that the key to change in Panama is to challenge the role of the military and push for democracy. His recent statements, however, suggest that while he opposes Noriega, he is not for Delvalle.
- E. United States: The United States, unhappy with Noriega, has thrown its support behind Delvalle. The U.S. Southern Military Command (which is responsible for coordinating U.S. military operations in Central and South America) is located just outside Panama City. U.S. forces in Panama are estimated at 10,000 servicemen and 7,000 dependents. All water, sewage facilities, and electricity for the base are under control of Panamanian authorities. The Panamanian National Guard has said that U.S. forces will not be threatened; however, tensions are high between the two groups. Possible reinforcements for the U.S. include 600 paratroopers from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, who can reach Panama in 18 hours. The next step would be to mobilize the 82nd Airborne. The 82nd Airborne is currently not on a high state of alert.
- F. Other: President Carter and Torrijos signed a treaty in 1977 to turn over the canal to Panama in 1999. Revocation of this treaty could play into Noriega's attempts at evoking nationalism. Congress has already suspended most military and economic aid to Panama. The World Bank has also canceled a portion of planned loans to the country. Part of the shortfall, however, has been made up by Japan and other lenders. Panama exports 60% of its goods to the United States. Panama does not have its own currency. Instead, it relies on the U.S. dollar.

## II. Brief Summary of Recent Events

- A. Noriega indicted in Florida courts on drug trafficking.
- B. U.S. has called for banks to withhold funds to Panama. U.S. is acting on a request from Delvalle for a freeze on Panamanian assets.
- C. Delvalle has called on Panamanian embassies abroad to withhold payment of shipping fees back to Panama. The embassies collect fees from foreign countries flying Panamanian “flags of convenience” on their merchant ships. (Worldwide: 11,000 ships are so registered.)
- D. During the past week, strikes have been occurring in Panama against Noriega and have been 80% to 90% effective.
- E. The U.S. holds 5/9 of the seats on the Panama Canal Commission (the agency that runs the canal). The U.S. is currently considering withholding canal revenues from Noriega.
- F. Efforts by the Organization of American States (OAS) to take steps against Noriega have been limited. The OAS is not happy with Noriega but is not willing to engage in intervention.
- G. Opposition press and radio stations in Panama have been shut down.
- H. Fidel Castro of Cuba has made several speeches, some of which were carried by Panamanian television, expressing support for Noriega against the U.S.

End of Briefing

## Game Director Packet

### I. Start:

“You are members of a special advisory group to the President of the United States. The President is awaiting your recommendations on how to resolve the Panamanian crisis.”

### II. Announce at 1 to 5 Minute Intervals:

- A. Fidel Castro and President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua have made a joint announcement that Cuba and Nicaragua are willing to offer Noriega “whatever assistance is necessary” to protect Panama from U.S. imperialism.
- B. Satellite photos reveal a Soviet submarine surfacing near the Panama canal.
- C. Noriega has just announced on Panamanian television that as long as the United States continues its belligerent behavior, he cannot guarantee the safety of American ships passing through the canal.
- D. Gorbachev has just announced that he will be unable to meet with American businessmen and government officials during the next several days. He cites unrest by Armenian nationalists in the southern republics.

- E. Noriega has just announced that two American newsmen have been arrested on charges of spying for the CIA.
- F. Satellite photos reveal that the Soviet Pacific Ocean Fleet has begun maneuvers. Satellite photos also reveal that East German troops are preparing for their annual spring maneuvers.
- G. Noriega has just announced that he may be forced to cut off and surround the U.S. military base unless the U.S. ceases its financial embargo.
- H. Due to public concern over the events in Panama, the President has scheduled an immediate press conference. He requires your policy recommendations in 5 minutes.

### **III. Group Representatives Appear Before the Class to Present and Defend Their Policy Recommendations**

### **IV. Debriefing**

NOTE: This sample as well as portions of the description of THE CRISIS GAME are reprinted from Friman (1989). Copyright © 1989 by the American Political Science Association. Reprinted by permission.

## **Reference**

Friman, H. R. (1989). The crisis of teaching crisis decision making. *The Political Science Teacher*, 2, 14-16.

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