

HOW COLD WAR GAME THEORY CAN RESOLVE THE SHUTDOWN



In late October, 1969, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger ordered a squadron of B-52 Stratofortresses, fully loaded with nuclear weapons, to race toward the Soviet Union's border. For three days, they zagged along the edge of Soviet airspace, taunting Moscow. [The operation](#), which remained secret for thirty-five years, was part of a deliberate White House strategy to convince the U.S.S.R. that Nixon and Kissinger were just a little mad. In many negotiations, the prevailing side is the one most willing to take the fatal step. A union gains leverage if it's really willing to strike; management gains leverage if it might actually shut down the plant. If you're playing chicken with another driver who you know has had a lot to drink—or who has torn off his steering wheel—you'll likely swerve first. If the Soviets believed that Nixon and Kissinger were capable of unleashing Armageddon, perhaps they'd be more likely to concede in talks over, say, Berlin.

The power conferred by madness helps us understand the slightly smaller, but still very serious, game theory at work in Washington this week. Would either John Boehner or Barack Obama really let the nation go into default? Surely worldwide economic calamity is a worse outcome for everyone than compromise. But as we ap-

proach the deadline, both sides insist they won't cave. In one sense, Obama has the stronger hand: he's merely asking that Congress pay America's bills and its debts. But Boehner has Ted Cruz in the background, reciting "Green Eggs and Ham." Obama can say he's willing to let the nation default to protect his goals, but he's known for a certain sense, one that is both calm and sound, and it's hard to believe him. Boehner, meanwhile, can point to [the suicide caucus](#) and truly make the case that he has people on his side who are willing to destroy the country's credit if they don't get their way.

The second Cold War lesson comes from the Cuban missile crisis. On Saturday, October 27, 1962, as we took the last steps toward a conflagration, John F. Kennedy proposed a deal to Nikita Khrushchev. If the Soviets withdrew their missiles, America would publicly promise not to invade Cuba—and privately promise to remove Jupiter missiles from Turkey. He didn't want people to know about that latter concession: having bargained with the Communists would weaken him. Khrushchev agreed. The world survived.

Part of what made the Cuban-missile-crisis deal work is that the two sides could take advantage of an asymmetry. The Soviet leader cared about satisfying his hard-liners; the American cared about popular opinion. That's how many deals happen: a team with lots of good pitching prospects trades one to a team with two first basemen. (Later, [savvy American negotiators](#) tried to trade reductions in a missile-defense system they knew was deeply flawed for heavy reductions in Soviet offensive weapons.)

So what are the Jupiter missiles of the current negotiations? Unfortunately, there don't seem to be any obvious asymmetries. (Nor is there much of a willingness to keep quiet, to help the other side look good.) But as Ryan Lizza, Evan Osnos, and James Surowiecki discuss in the [Political Scene](#) podcast this week, finding *something* to trade must be part of the endgame. What can the Democrats give up that the Republicans want? How can Obama negotiate while still maintaining that he kept his pledge not to? Would he be willing to talk if Boehner agreed to abolish the debt ceiling permanently?

Once this is over, there's an even more important lesson in game theory to absorb from the Cold War: that of the [semi-doomsday machine](#) that the Soviets built. This system, "Dead Hand," gave Moscow the ability to take vengeance after a preemptive American nuclear attack. During the buildup to a crisis, the Soviet leadership would turn it on. It would then check to determine, through seismic readings and other

data, whether nuclear weapons had struck the country. If the data were bad, Dead Hand would try to communicate with central command. If it couldn't, it would assume that America had attacked and all the leaders had died. In that case, it would transfer launch authority down several levels, to junior officers in a command bunker, who could then launch missiles in retaliation. The U.S.S.R. would always be able to strike back.

Dead Hand was chilling. What if there were a series of accidents? What if it were hacked? There was also something odd about what should have been the ultimate deterrent against an American strike: the Soviets never told us about it. As Dr. Strangelove hollers, "The whole point of the doomsday machine is lost if you keep it a secret!"

But, actually, the whole point of a doomsday system isn't lost if you keep it secret. Dead Hand, as two former Soviet military officials [explained to me](#) several years ago, when I was working on a book about [the Cold War](#), wasn't a deterrent against the United States. It was a way to sedate Soviet hard-liners, thus buying time. If America looked like it might attack, the Soviets had a bit longer to wait. A rogue commander might also hold off just a bit longer before taking out a nuclear-armed Stratofortress. The idea was "to cool down all these hotheads and extremists," Alexander Zheleznyakov, one of the former officials, told me. "No matter what was going to happen, there still would be revenge. Those who attack us will be punished."

And so there's one last question for Washington this week: What can cool down the right-wing hotheads and extremists? Perhaps a rigid agreement that Obamacare could be defunded if an independent panel of economists agreed at some point that it had slowed economic growth by two per cent or more? Or perhaps a strengthened version of the [sequester](#) promise that Washington accepted last time (a supposed mini-doomsday machine that was detonated): if debt passes a certain level, massive cuts to Social Security and welfare benefits could go into effect.

Perhaps, in fact, there is an asymmetry that Obama can take advantage of after all. Ted Cruz and the other members of the suicide caucus say they honestly believe that the Affordable Care Act will destroy the country. So promise to give them whatever they want if it really does. If Obamacare ends up not having much of an effect, then nothing will change—we'll just have lived for a little while with a little more risk, which is something that, during the Cold War, worked out just fine.

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