

The "Accidental War" Question

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February 14, 2000

Note: This paper was presented at a workshop on Organizational Theory and International History, held on March 2-4, 2000, at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University. It was a response to Scott Sagan's paper "Accidental War in Theory and Practice," which was presented at the same workshop.

Can war break out between two hostile powers, even if both of those powers very much want to remain at peace with each other? Many scholars think that the answer is yes: they assume that "accidental" or "inadvertent" wars are possible. Indeed, many scholars seem to take it for granted that it might not take much to produce an armed conflict, even one that both sides very much want to avoid. But this assumption is by no means universally shared. Bernard Brodie, for example, was very skeptical of the view that "the outbreak of war between major powers" could be "as accidental" as people like his friend Thomas Schelling and many other people seemed to believe.¹

How should one go about analyzing this issue? The first step is to define what we mean by terms like "accidental" or "inadvertent" war. These terms are used in different ways by different people. Sometimes people think of an "accidental war" as one that is caused, or at least is triggered, by an accident, in the strict sense of the term. A computer goes haywire; responsible authorities conclude the nation is under attack; the "go-code" is given, the missiles are launched, and soon the whole northern hemisphere is a "smoking, radiating ruin." Sometimes what people have in mind when they use such terms is simply a war that no one wants or even expects at the beginning of a crisis. In this view, miscalculation is generally the crucial factor: the war is the result of misjudgments about how the adversary would react to measures taken in the course of the crisis. But most often people use the term in a very specific sense: an inadvertent war is one in which the *political* process—a process that would normally lead to a peaceful settlement of the dispute at hand—is overwhelmed by forces welling up from within the *military* sphere. Each of these calls for some comment.

A War Triggered "by Accident"?

Let me begin with the idea that a war can be set off by some event that was not intended to be a bellicose act, perhaps even by an accident in the literal sense of the term. In January 1963, for example, then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, in a meeting with top State and Defense Department officials, argued in effect that a full-scale nuclear war could be touched off by such an accident. He referred specifically to "crashes of US aircraft, one in North Carolina and one in Texas, where, by the slightest margin of chance, literally the failure of two wires to cross, a nuclear explosion was averted." An "accidental launch of a missile against the USSR" was possible, he said, in spite of the fact that "we were spending millions of dollars to reduce this problem to a minimum"; the Soviets were spending less, and the possibility of an accidental launch of a Soviet missile, he implied, was greater still. What this meant, he argued, was that no one, other than the president, should be authorized to order the launch of American nuclear weapons "in response to an apparent nuclear attack." His assumption was that if this authority were delegated to military commanders, even to the NATO commander himself, they might act rashly and set off a war that might otherwise be avoided.²

More generally key officials in the Kennedy administration felt that a war could happen in this way. Dean Acheson, for example, argued in his important report to the president on the Berlin Crisis in June 1961 that "nuclear war could occur from mischance," that there was in particular a real danger "of premature and unauthorized local use of nuclear weapons in Europe," and that it was important to reduce the probability of this happening by "tightening up custody and control"--and this in fact was to be a major element of U.S. NATO policy in 1961.³

This sort of assumption--that an isolated incident could easily lead to a general war--was not

limited to the Kennedy administration. President Eisenhower, for example, was worried that air reconnaissance operations, especially U-2 overflights of Soviet territory, might well trigger a war. Such operations, he told Secretary of State Dulles in 1958, "carried a danger of starting a nuclear war by miscalculation." After all, his military advisers had "pressed upon him the necessity of retaliation if there seemed to be a movement of Soviet planes toward the United States." The Soviets, he thought, "might have the same attitude and might misinterpret an overflight as being designed to start a nuclear war against which they would react."⁴

What is to be made of this kind of notion--that is, of the idea that a relatively minor action, like the violation of the adversary's air space by a single airplane, could lead to a general nuclear war? My own sense is that something like that just would not happen. The U.S. government would not have launched a full-scale attack on the USSR simply because a single Soviet spy plane had strayed into American air space, in part because everyone knows that things like this can happen by accident; for such a serious decision to be taken, the evidence at hand has to be much more compelling. The decision makers are bound to ask themselves whether things have fallen into a pattern--whether it really looks like the Soviets are getting ready to launch a full-scale attack of their own. The Soviets, for their part, would scarcely have been willing to launch an attack of their own on the United States--that is, in the strategic circumstances of the late 1950s, essentially to commit suicide--simply because of American infringements on their air space. We know, in fact, then when they detected U.S. overflights, their reaction was rather mild.

The point is more or less obvious, and one has to wonder why someone like Eisenhower would want to argue that peace was hanging by a thread, and that something relatively trivial could easily trigger a thermonuclear holocaust. Perhaps his sense was that too many people in positions of

authority within the U.S. government, and especially in the U.S. military establishment, were too cavalier about these things, and that by leaning in the opposite direction he could help counteract what he saw as a dangerous attitude on their part.

This was certainly the case with McNamara. In the meeting I just referred to, he linked the problem of accidental nuclear war with the predelegation question; his assumption here was that one could not trust the military leadership to do the right thing. Given the same evidence, the NATO commander, for example, might order a nuclear attack while the president and his civilian advisors might hold back. The real issue, in other words, was not that an accident could trigger war in a more or less mechanical way; the real problem had to do with the military authorities, with the way they thought, the way they operated, the sorts of things they were likely to do if they were given the authority to do them. In other words, someone like McNamara was not worried about "accidental war" in the strict sense of the term. The real fear had to do with the military overreacting--with things "spinning out of control" because of the sorts of things that could go on within the military sphere. The real problem, in other words, was the sort of problem that will be discussed in the third part of this paper.

There is a more basic point that needs to be made about the question of "incidents" or "accidents." Such things can obviously occur, and they may even play a certain role in the escalatory process. Indeed, that process might culminate in full-scale war. But even if it does, it might not make sense to characterize that conflict as an "accidental war."

Why is this the case? The basic point here, as Schelling pointed out long ago, is that political conflict, especially in time of crisis, and above all in a nuclear environment, might assume the form of a "competition in risk-taking."⁵ Given what is at stake, no one would make a "cool and

deliberate" decision to go to war. But one could rationally take actions that might eventually lead to war through a process one might not fully control--and, in fact, since no one would deliberately go to general war, one's inability to control that process is what allows this sort of pressure to be effective.

The effectiveness of the threat--the ability to engage in such a "competition"--thus depends on the fact that control is not absolute. The possibility that "accidents" might occur is one of the factors that makes such a policy possible (although for Schelling it was by no means the most important factor). If the political leadership deliberately chooses to pursue such a strategy--to deliberately try to "manipulate risk" as a way of prevailing in a crisis--then it might deliberately allow a situation to come into being where dangerous incidents are more likely to occur. Suppose those incidents lead to an increase in the level of tension, and perhaps even help bring on a war. Such a war could not be said to be "accidental" if the political leadership had gauged the level of risk accurately, and had deliberately embarked on a policy of creating a certain level of risk--risk that a war might come through a process that it did not fully control or even fully understand.⁶

The war, therefore, would only be called "accidental" if the level of risk generated during the crisis was not in line with what the political leadership wanted. If the political leaders thought the risks were relatively limited, but the military structure in place created a much greater level of risk in time of crisis, then one could conceivably have what, from the point of view of the political leadership, would be an "accidental war." It is the gap between reality and belief that is the key thing here; this is why notions like "miscalculation," "misunderstanding" and "misjudgment" play such an important role in the inadvertent war theory.

The distinction is important from the point of view of the scholar, but it also makes the

scholar's job a good deal more difficult. The problem is no longer just to try to estimate the "real" level of risk--the probability of incidents occurring in certain contexts, and the probability that those incidents would make the situation more dangerous. One also has to compare that with the perceived level of risk--the kind of risk the political leadership is willing to take on as part of a strategy for dealing with a crisis. In this context, it does not matter whether the political leadership understood in operational terms what exactly would be generating that level of risk. They might have just had a gut feeling that the crisis situation was going to be fairly dangerous, not knowing exactly why. But if that gut feeling was essentially accurate, then it would make little sense to talk in terms of a war coming by accident, no matter what happened.

The problem is particularly difficult because incidents do not affect the level of risk in some sort of mechanical way; the risk level is determined by the adversary's reaction. One case in point here has to do with U.S. operations against Soviet submarines during the Cuban missile crisis. The normal assumption would be that the kind of thing the U.S. Navy was doing increased the level of danger during the crisis; in reality, it helped make the Soviets see how serious the United States was in this affair.⁷ It thus helped push them toward a policy of accommodation, thus reducing the overall level of risk.

So, in short, even at this level--the level that focuses on specific accidents and incidents--the problem is not nearly as simple as it might seem at first glance.

War through "Miscalculation"

Wars can come about even though neither side sets out to engineer an armed conflict at the beginning of a crisis; actions are taken even though neither side anticipates that those actions will

lead eventually to a direct military confrontation. Thus there is a gap between expectation and outcome. It is often assumed that this means that statesmen "miscalculated" the effects of their action; "miscalculation" is then said to be a major cause of war. No one can see the future with any clarity and miscalculations of this sort are perfectly normal; this is the basis for the assumption that the risk of war through miscalculation is relatively high: states can slide into war relatively easily. And related to this is the assumption that if only we can bring ourselves to calculate more accurately, we could greatly reduce the risk of war. But how valid are these assumptions?

First, what do we mean exactly by "miscalculation"? Suppose someone gives me ten-to-one odds that if I roll a die, I won't be able to come up with a six. I take the bet and I lose. Does this mean I "miscalculated"? Of course not: the calculation was perfectly rational, but I just happened to be unlucky. Similarly, in international politics, states might assume at the beginning of a crisis that there is only a relatively small risk of war, say one in five or one in six. If war nonetheless breaks out, that fact does not in itself mean that they had miscalculated; they had not, after all, assumed that war would be impossible. To prove miscalculation, one therefore has to demonstrate somehow that the probability of war breaking out, as it existed at the beginning of a crisis, really was much higher than people thought, which of course might be very difficult to do. If one simply assumes that a gap between expectation and outcome shows that people had miscalculated, one is not really explaining very much; one is simply giving a name to the fact the things worked out in a way people had not initially thought was very likely.

The point here is that we tend to use language in a fairly sloppy way; these habits enable us to avoid focusing on the real issues. The real issue here has to do with how easy it is to slide into a war, even if both sides very much want to avoid that outcome. Those who take "inadvertent war"

seriously tend to assume that that risk is high; their critics, like Brodie, assume that they wildly overestimate the risk of a war happening in that way.

What is to be said about this issue? First of all, it is clear that people who talk about how wars can come about even if no one sets out to engineer them do have something real in mind. As a crisis develops, each side gets more and more deeply involved; the stakes keep rising, the ante keeps going up, and it becomes harder and harder to give way. If one knew this was going to happen, one might have chosen not to engage in the confrontation in the first place. But there is no way to turn back the clock; and so one might be led in this way to fight a war that one would have very much wished to avoid. A dynamic of this sort certainly exists. One thinks, for example, of the crisis set off by the Japanese move into southern Indochina in July 1941, or even of the Anglo-German crisis in the summer of 1939, which led to a war which both Hitler and the British did not intend and would have liked to avoid, at least at that point.⁸ The July Crisis in 1914 is another case in point; it is hard to believe that either side would have conducted its affairs the way it did if it knew at the start that the policy it adopted was going to lead to war, let alone to the kind of war that eventually developed. But does the fact that a dynamic of this kind exists mean in itself that it is appropriate in such cases to refer to the war that breaks out as an "accidental" war?

There are two points to be made on this issue. First of all, as long as states choose courses of action with their eyes open--if they decide to engage in a test of will, knowing full well that this is what they are doing, and deliberately adopt tactics limiting their own freedom of action (and in particular their ability to avoid ending up in an armed conflict) as a way of prevailing in the crisis--then it can scarcely be said that the outcome of that confrontation is to be viewed as essentially an "accident." And the basic point here is that states, by and large, do know what they are doing; to a

certain extent, they burn their bridges in the course of a crisis, but they do this with important political objectives in mind. They know that if their prestige is engaged, their adversary will know that it is hard for them to draw back, and so their adversary will be under more pressure to accommodate them on the issue at hand.

The second point has to do with how much risk there really is in situations of this sort. It should not be assumed too readily that states underestimate the degree to which they lose control of the situation when they engage in a crisis. States can generally pull back from the brink if they really want to; prestige will be sacrificed, but often states are willing to pay that price. The history of international politics in the century that just ended is full of crises that were liquidated by one side accepting what amounted to defeat, sometimes even humiliating defeat; and in the July Crisis in 1914, the German government chose at the most critical moment to let the war come rather than press for a compromise solution.⁹

The key thing here is that in 1914 and 1939 political leaders had not totally lost control, but had chosen to accept war rather than back off in a crisis. Their aversion to war was not overwhelming. But when both sides very much want to avoid a full-scale armed conflict, the story is very different. This was the case during the Cold War. People sometimes seem to assume that peace was hanging by a thread during that conflict, and that we were lucky to make our way through it without a thermonuclear holocaust. But I don't think this is true at all: and in general I think it is very unlikely that a great war would break out if both sides are determined to avoid it.

These arguments about how war could break out almost by accident were frequently made during the Cold War itself--and indeed were made by responsible and experienced officials. A British document from March 1946, for example, argued that the Soviets did not want war, but the kind of

tactics they used with the West might lead to a war that neither side wanted: "although the intention may be defensive, the tactics will be offensive, and the danger always exists that Russian leaders may misjudge how far they can go without provoking war with America or ourselves."¹⁰ A year later, a British Foreign Office official warned that the fact that the Soviets had military superiority in Europe might make them careless, and that they might "misjudge what measures can safely be taken without producing a serious crisis." Events might get out of control and a situation might develop that could "lead to disaster."¹¹

What is wrong with this point of view? It assumes that the Soviets would not be cautious, that they would not frame their actions very carefully with an eye to the American reaction, that in deciding how far to go they would not gauge very closely how the Americans reacted to the measures they had taken up to that point. This point of view assumes also that the Soviets would find it very hard to draw back if it became clear that they had overstepped the bounds and had thought the American reaction would not be as vigorous as it in fact was--or indeed that they had not made the mental reservation that they could draw back, in necessary, when they decided to embark on a provocative course of action. Basically the assumption is that the Soviets did not care enough about what a war would entail to take these rather elementary and normal precautions. This point of view also assumes that the American response would be very rigid and "spring-loaded": a slight Soviet infringement, and the Americans immediately take the plunge into general war--as though there are no intermediate measures of a political or military nature that would be taken, no process that would unfold within which the two sides would test each other out before resorting to extreme measures. To my mind, anyone with any sense should know that things would never move directly and mechanically from initial provocation to full-scale war, that things would unfold almost

inevitably in a more complex way--or, in short, that enough "cushioning" exists in the system to keep relatively minor provocations from leading directly to general war.

When people during the Cold War period spoke about war through miscalculation, they often were not thinking simply in terms of one side overstepping the bounds and setting off a new war essentially by accident. They frequently had a more specific mechanism in mind. During the Berlin Crisis period especially (1958-62), people were worried that a war could come if each side calculated that the other would back down if only one's own side took a sufficiently firm line. This type of argument took shape as an answer to the hard-liners' argument--that is, the argument of people like Dean Acheson and Charles de Gaulle--that one had to be very tough: the adversary, the hard-liners argued, had to be forced to recognize that if he continued with his policy, the result would be war; in that case, the adversary would certainly give way. But what if *both sides* made this kind of calculation? The result might well be war; one therefore could not accept the hard-liners' argument critically, and one perhaps needed to take a more flexible line.

Llewellyn Thompson, the U.S. ambassador in Moscow during this period, frequently argued along these lines. "I think we can be fairly confident," he wrote in March 1959, "that Khrushchev will not deliberately risk total war over Berlin and I suspect his colleagues might pull him back if it were clear that a real risk of this was involved. On the other hand, we must remember that he doubtless holds a similar view about us and thus the real danger is that we could both drift on into a situation which might get out of control."¹² In May 1961, he pushed the argument a good deal further and drew out the implications. "Both sides," he wrote, thought that the other "would not risk war over Berlin." The danger arose from the fact that if Khrushchev "carries out his declared intentions and we carry out ours," the situation would in all probability "get out of control." Each

side's prestige would become increasingly engaged, "making retreat for either side even more difficult." The Soviets had "strong nerves," and geography as well as the local military balance around Berlin were in their favor. If America was in fact prepared to carry her policy through to the end, and Khrushchev "found he had misjudged us," it would probably be "too late for retreat." He concluded that the United States should therefore "make every effort" to prevent such a situation from developing."¹³

The basic point was widely understood not just by the western governments. One top British military leader (Lord Mountbatten) referred at about this time to the "danger of war breaking out by miscalculation since both the Americans and the Russians believed that the other would not resort to global war over Berlin."¹⁴ Secretary of State Rusk told the other western foreign ministers in December 1961 that "one of the quickest ways to have a nuclear war is to have the two sides persuaded that neither will fight."¹⁵ The fact that war could come in this way was understood by the broader public; see, for example, the cartoon reproduced below:



Figure One: This cartoon originally appeared in the *Daily Express* (London); it appeared in the French journal *Occident* in July 1959. Western leaders (Eisenhower, de Gaulle, Adenauer and Macmillan) sit on the missile on the left; Khrushchev and Gromyko are on the right. As they go into opposite ends of the Berlin tunnel, each side says the same thing: "We can go on like this indefinitely; the other side will certainly never risk a nuclear confrontation!" Copied from the version found in Cyril Buffet, "La Politique nucléaire de la France et la seconde crise de Berlin," *Relations*

internationales, no. 59 (Fall 1989), p. 353.

The point here is simply that governments understood what they were doing. They understood the risk inherent in the situation. They were conducting policy with their eyes open; they were not just stumbling through a minefield. If they had *not* understood these mechanisms, and if war had broken out through a process of this sort, then one could reasonably hold that mechanism responsible for the coming of the war. But the fact that they understood this dynamic tended to reduce its importance as a causative factor; an awareness of the problem had been factored in advance into the decision-making process; any war that did break out would, by virtue of that fact, would be rendered less "accidental."

The Role of the Military System

The idea that the political process can be overwhelmed during a crisis by forces arising from within the military system is very common, and indeed probably should be considered as the heart of the "inadvertent war" thesis. To the extent that this thesis has a major historical basis, it is supported essentially by claims about the coming of war in 1914. Many political scientists take it as practically an article of faith that the First World War was an "inadvertent war," brought on by factors of an essentially military nature. The rigidity of the war plans, the emphasis placed on offensive military action, the system of interlocking mobilizations, the premium placed on moving first and getting a jump on one's adversaries, the fact that the political leadership (supposedly) did not understand the logic of the situation created by the war plans--all this is said to have a lot to do

with the outbreak of the war.

For me as an historian, all this was rather bizarre when I first encountered it. But since these arguments were made by intelligent people, and since they were so common and played so important a role in supporting fundamental claims about what made for war, I thought it would be worthwhile to try to get to the bottom of this issue and see what there was to this argument. The answer was: not very much. I am not going to repeat the analysis that supported that conclusion here. Anyone interested should simply read the article in question.¹⁶ I do, however, want to deal with one substantive point, the point about 1914 that Scott Sagan raises in his piece.¹⁷ But mainly I will be talking here not about substance but about the way these issues are dealt with in the literature. The basic point, once again, is that if these issues are to be discussed at all, we really need to analyze them a lot more rigorously than we have so far.

But, as I say, I would like to deal first with Scott Sagan's argument about the July Crisis. There is, he says, one reason why the First World War should be considered an "accidental war," and this has to do with the way General von Moltke undercut Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's efforts to get the Austrians to accept the Kaiser's plan for a peaceful settlement, the so-called "Halt in Belgrade" proposal, a variant of which had also been proposed by the British government.¹⁸ Moltke, the chief of the German general staff, at around 2 p.m. on July 30th told the Austrian military attaché that Austria should mobilize against Russia and should reject the British peace plan. This helped convince the Vienna government that it should indeed reject that plan and, Sagan says, opt instead for "total mobilization and war."

There are a number of issues here. Let us accept, first of all, the point that Moltke's move confirmed the Austrians in their decision to take a tough line--to go ahead with the mobilization and

to ignore the pressure for a compromise peace. Did this mean that this move was therefore a cause, let alone a major cause, of the war? The answer is no, because whatever effect Moltke's advice had on Vienna, it came too late to influence the course of events: the attaché's report was dispatched at 5:30 p.m. on the 30th and was received in Vienna during the night; the decisions it influenced were made the next day--that is, July 31st.¹⁹ But by then, Russia had already ordered general mobilization, the key event that set off the avalanche and made war unavoidable: the Russian decision had been made at around 5 p.m. on the 30th. So even if Moltke had not spoken to the Austrians, one would still have had war; Moltke's move had no fundamental effect on what happened.

We could, if we like, just leave it there. After all, Sagan tells us on p. 6 of his paper that "for a conflict to be considered an accidental war, there would have to be some activity or incident inside the military machine, without which war would not have occurred," and Moltke's move clearly does not fall into that category. But there is a certain value, in the present context, in pushing the analysis a bit further. Let us suppose Russia had not ordered general mobilization on the afternoon of July 30. Would Moltke's move have led to a war, and in that event, could one say that such a war would have been "accidental"? Moltke was asking the Austrians to order general mobilization and, in passing, he also advised them to reject the English plan. Austrian mobilization as such would not have led to war: as the Austrian general Conrad said, "if the Russians do not touch us, we need not touch them either."²⁰ In fact, an Austrian mobilization would in some ways have made general war *less* likely: by mobilizing against Russia, Austria would have found it harder to move against Serbia and thus the Russians would not have been provoked into attacking quite so quickly; and an Austrian army on the Russian frontier would have pinned down Russian forces, thus relieving some

of the pressure on Germany to move quickly against France.

What then about the pressure on Austria to accept the "Halt in Belgrade" proposal? If Russia had not mobilized, there would have been time for Bethmann to exert pressure on Austria effectively; indeed, I think that the reason Moltke toughened his position on the afternoon of the 30th is that he had received information that a Russian general mobilization was imminent and no longer saw any point to doing things other than what was militarily necessary. But whatever line Moltke took, on political issues Bethmann and the Kaiser were still ultimately calling the shots; and if they had both the time and the inclination, they could certainly have brought Austria around.

But time was a factor, and there is no getting around the fact that time was lost because of the way the Germans managed things during this climactic phase of the crisis (July 28-30). Their government was not a well-oiled machine, working out its policy rationally and implementing it efficiently. Moltke's line on the afternoon of the 30th was different from Bethmann's line the previous night; but Albertini shows quite convincingly that the German ambassador in Vienna, Tschischky, did a lot more to sabotage the Halt in Belgrade plan during the really crucial period than Moltke had.²¹ Indeed, as is well known, Bethmann himself had initially tried to sabotage the plan when the Kaiser first proposed it on July 28th. Because all this took place prior to the Russian general mobilization, it was much more important than what Moltke did. Moltke's role is stressed simply because he was a military man, and the theory is that what the military was doing was of primary importance. I think, however, that the evidence shows that Moltke's advice to the Austrians on the afternoon of the 30th played a relatively minor role in bringing on the war; its role is certainly wildly exaggerated in much of the literature.

The more general issue here has to do with the fact that different people in the government

were working at cross-purposes. This is par for the course in political life. As Sagan notes, what this means is that from the point of view of the individual at the top, things are "out of control," and the events that were precipitating the war could be viewed as "accidents." But the real issue is not whether from the point of view of the person at the top, events were not fully under control; the real issue is whether, from the point of view of the *scholar*, what happened was "accidental." My personal view is that what happened with German policy in late July 1914 is typical of the way things work in government. Control and discipline were less than perfect, but this is the way states actually operate, and this kind of thing should be taken as the norm. Power is generally somewhat spread out; you have a variety of people able to influence the course of events, and each of them acts purposefully. This of course makes for a rather complex story. But it does not mean that what finally happens should be regarded, by the scholar at any rate, as "accidental."

But what I really want to talk about here is not Sagan's argument, but the way this set of issues is dealt with in the literature as a whole. Let me begin by citing another extract from the Brodie-Schelling correspondence, this time some comments Brodie wrote on the manuscript of what was to become Schelling's great classic, *Arms and Influence*. To support one of his arguments about how a general war could begin, Schelling made certain arguments about how the military system in place in 1914 helped bring on the First World War.²² Commenting on that section, Brodie suggested that Schelling use the famous story (which Sagan also discusses) about how the Kaiser, having been led to believe that Britain would stay out of the war if France were not attacked, told Moltke to cancel the mobilization plan and fight the war only in east; this Moltke said was impossible and the Kaiser supposedly had to give way. Barbara Tuchman, Brodie wrote, described the incident her best-seller, the *Guns of August*. Schelling replied that he had "thought of using that

business about the Kaiser's being told the trains couldn't be turned around," but he "had a nagging impression that Barbara Tuchman or somebody thought the story was possibly undocumented, and maybe a little too good to be true," so he "let it go." If, however, Brodie or some "other genuine scholar" could assure him that the story was correct," he said he would like to use it. But he was too busy to "trace down any documented version" himself.²³

This exchange I found quite revealing. Here were the two greatest figures in the history of American strategic thought. Brodie repeats a story that radically distorts what actually happened: the evidence, including the evidence Barbara Tuchman presented in her book (although the way she framed the issue gave exactly the opposite impression), shows very clearly that it was Moltke and not the Kaiser who was overruled. What this shows, therefore, is that Brodie had never really studied the July crisis the way it should have been studied, above all by an expert of his stature, and was content to repeat the usual clichés. As for Schelling, his reply to Brodie was even more striking. He could not be bothered to do the work needed to get to the bottom of such an important issue. He could not even go to the library or to a bookstore and look up the story in the Tuchman book. It was as though the historical evidence had purely ornamental value; if this story did not work, well then it need not be used. An accurate understanding of what happened in July 1914 was not seen as fundamental in its own right.

Indeed, Schelling had little feel for what constituted good historical work and tended to use historical sources uncritically. In the final version of *Arms and Influence*, the one book he cited (on p. 223) to support his view about the importance of the mobilization system in bringing on the war was Ludwig Reiners's *The Lamps Went out in Europe*. The Reiners book was not a serious, scholarly work; the book, for example, had no footnotes, and indeed was popular history of the most dubious

sort. Chapters 13-15 in the Reiners book, Schelling wrote, was "the best" source he knew "on the dynamics of mobilization and their effect on decisions." But Reiners did not stress the role of the mobilization system in those chapters; instead he developed a rather bizarre theory that actions taken by the British foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey were crucial in bringing on the war, and indeed that Grey half-wanted the war. Grey, Reiners argued, encouraged the Russians to mobilize against Austria, knowing full well that the Germans would find it hard to sit on their hands if this happened--that is, knowing that it might well precipitate a war. This was why, according to Reiners, Gray supposedly withheld from Russia some key information to the effect that Austria would *not* move against Serbia immediately, even if the Serbs rejected the Austrian ultimatum: he did not want to calm the Russians, Reiners claimed, he instead wanted to push them toward action, even though he knew how risky that action would be. But the claim that Grey "failed to inform St. Petersburg" of this key piece of information was simply false: as soon as Grey learned from the Austrians that a rejection of the ultimatum would lead to "military preparations (not operations)," he informed the Russians of that fact. Reiners was just twisting the evidence to support his own rather idiosyncratic theory of the origins of the war; indeed, in the very first paragraph of the first of the chapters that Schelling cited, Reiners distorts a passage from Grey's memoirs to make it support his theory that Grey's duplicity was an important factor in bringing on the war.²⁴

Is it fair to hold Schelling responsible for relying on a source like this? Given that he was writing a very important book, given that in that book he was making a general argument about how war could break out "accidentally" (because of the "dynamics of mutual alarm"), given that to the extent that this theory was based on the historical record, it turned on a specific interpretation of the coming of the First World War, yes, given all these things, I do think Schelling had a responsibility

to get the story straight. And he had a responsibility to exercise a degree of critical judgment when it was a question of deciding which historical accounts to rely on. The method for making that decision is not hard to master; anyone, for example, can check to see whether claims are supported by evidence cited in footnotes. The claims people make about how a war might come are too important, and their historical basis is too important, to be dealt with in what was essentially a very amateurish way.

Things have of course changed a good deal since Schelling and Brodie had that exchange. Political scientists have become much better at using historical sources, and indeed at doing history themselves. And perhaps one should not be too hard on political scientists and others who accepted these familiar stories, because they probably got them from books by historians. Sagan suggests something of the sort (in his n. 42) and he is absolutely right. Among other works, he alludes in this context to Gordon Craig's *Politics of the Prussian Army*, which in fact (on p. 294) echoes the standard account of the confrontation between Moltke and the Kaiser. But Craig is of course a first-rate scholar, and when you see things like this you begin to suspect that something is going on that is not strictly intellectual in nature.

You have the sense that people argue along these lines because this is what they really want to believe. They really do think that there is a basic danger, even in contemporary America, of things spinning out of control because of the way the military behaves. Craig, in the final sentence of the introduction to his book, points out the contemporary relevance of his argument: reflecting on the history of the Germans, he says, a people "whose political aspirations were defeated in part by their inability to set proper limits to the activities of their military leaders, may help us avoid dangerous mistakes in our own time." But the question for us is whether this is in fact a serious risk--or really

whether focusing on this kind of thing reflects a distorted view of what is important in war causation, and leads us to focus on the wrong questions and neglect the more significant ones.

Let me give another example, this time from the work of a political scientist who, more than most, has actually done serious work in empirical and especially historical sources: Richard Ned Lebow. A few years ago, Lebow published a book called *Nuclear Crisis Management: A Dangerous Illusion*. In that book, he talks a lot about the July Crisis. In one important passage, he stresses the role of miscalculation in 1914. When they ordered general mobilization, he says, the Russian leaders did not understand what they were doing; they did not believe their action "would directly trigger war." And you could not entirely blame them for this, he goes on, because they had not been effectively warned of what the danger was. Bethmann "made only a belated and ineffectual effort to alert the Russians to the danger." As proof, he goes on to cite the fact that Bethmann instructed Pourtalès, the German ambassador in St. Petersburg, to inform Russian foreign minister Sazonov that Russian military measures directed against Germany "would force us to take counter measures which would have to consist of mobilizing the army. Mobilization, however, means war, and would moreover have to be directed simultaneously against Russia and France, since France's engagements with Russia are well-known." Belated? This message was sent on July 26, days before the Russians even ordered partial mobilization against Austria. Insufficiently clear? It is hard to imagine how Bethmann could have put the point more forcefully.

But maybe the message did not get through because Pourtalès fumbled? Lebow in fact goes on to argue that Pourtalès "did not grasp the import of the chancellor's message for, by his own account, in his subsequent conversation with Sazonov he failed to warn him that Russian mobilization would make war unavoidable," and that "if anything, their talk seems to have

strengthened Sazonov's impression to the contrary." The proof here is an extract from the ambassador's memoirs:

Pourtalès relates that Sazonov put the question: "Surely mobilization is not the equivalent of war with you either. Is it?" The ambassador admitted that he *confirmed* Sazonov's belief to this effect, but he also claims to have warned him that "once the button is pressed and the machinery set in motion, there is no stopping it."

Well, doesn't that extract show that Sazonov *was* given the message that even if war and mobilization were not formally the same thing, for all practical purposes, mobilization meant war? You get the feeling that Lebow is aware of this, because he then goes on to discount the importance of a passage he himself had cited as proof that the Russians had not been warned that mobilization would lead to war: he says that it was unlikely that Pourtalès had said anything of the sort since "his memoirs are riddled with self-serving falsehoods." But in that case why had he cited it in the first place? Rather odd, you must admit; but this is not the end of it.

In the next paragraph, the final paragraph in this section, Lebow goes on to quote the warning Bethmann sent on the 29th: "Kindly impress on M. Sazonov very seriously that further progress of Russian mobilization measures would compel us to mobilize and that then a European war could hardly be prevented." Again, one can scarcely imagine how Bethmann could have been any clearer. But Lebow's conclusion here, at the end of this paragraph, is that the German chancellor had "once again failed to make the danger of Russian mobilization explicit!"²⁵

Problems of this sort become quite clear when you make an effort to free yourself from the standard dogmas and get in the habit of reading things critically--that is, with an eye to the evidence. And when you read this sort of thing, you can't help asking yourself: what exactly is going on here?

People like Lebow are not dishonest. If they were, they would never present evidence that so clearly contradicted their basic claims. And they are obviously not stupid either. But they are blinded--blinded by what they want to believe. They do not understand the importance of setting up problems in such a way that the answers turn on what the evidence shows. They know (or think they know) the answers in advance, and that shapes--what I really mean is, that distorts--their reading of the historical material.

People want to believe that the military system can be a major cause of war. They want to believe that rigid war plans can cause trouble: after all, rigidity is bad and war is bad, and people take it for granted that one bad thing must be connected with another.²⁶ They want to believe military officers cause trouble by acting on their own: military officers represent a different culture, and scholars tend to view them with suspicion. They want to believe that the "reciprocal fear of surprise attack" can be a real problem, partly, I suspect, because the idea is so elegant analytically. It doesn't matter that this was not the problem in 1914, because the Germans (for political reasons) had adopted the equivalent of a "second-strike strategy": to get support at home, and to maximize the probability that Britain would stay out of the war, they wanted Russia to take the first decisive step, and had decided not to mobilize until Russia mobilized first. It doesn't matter that this was not a problem during the Cold War either: there was never a period when both sides had anything like a first-strike capability, for the simple reason that it was easier to build a second-strike than a first-strike force, that a second-strike force would therefore come into being first, and when it did the adversary no longer had a first-strike capability. Nevertheless, since the assumption that the "reciprocal fear of surprise attack" was a real problem served as the foundation for a whole superstructure of academic and policy-oriented work (on both military and arms control questions)

people had an interest in not asking whether the assumption itself had much validity.

Why does all this matter? The reason is ultimately quite simple. The belief that "accidental war" is a serious problem results in a misallocation of intellectual effort: it diverts attention away from fundamental issues--namely, political issues--to relatively minor problems. In the case of 1914, especially, people have drawn the wrong lessons, lessons about how the military system created a situation where the political process was overwhelmed, about how generals had to be kept on a short leash, about the great risk of things spinning out of control for military reasons, about miscalculation and ignorance and all their horrifying consequences. And people have tended to not ask the right questions, questions about what should have been done politically, both during the crisis itself and during the period that led up to it. Focusing on those latter questions, I claim, would have a much greater payoff in terms of our understanding of how policy is to be conducted; the problem with the accidental war theory is that it misdirects our attention--that it pulls us away from the questions we should really be concentrating on.

NOTES

1. Brodie to Schelling, December 18, 1964, Brodie Papers, Box 2, UCLA Research Library.
2. State-Defense meeting, January 26, 1963, <http://www.gwo.edu/~nsarchiv/news/predelegation/predel.htm>, document 15, p. 12.
3. Acheson report on Berlin, June 28, 1961, p. 32, National Security Archive (Washington, D.C.), Berlin File.
4. Dulles-Eisenhower meeting, March 7, 1958, Dulles Papers, White House Memoranda Series, box 6, Mudd Library, Princeton University.
5. Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), chapter three.
6. This idea of deliberately creating risk--indeed, of burning bridges by embarking on risk-of-escalation-generating conventional military operations--was the key element in the American strategy in the early 1960s for dealing with a possible Berlin crisis. See Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 291-292; and Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 217--note especially the Schelling paper referred to in the footnote there. Schelling told me subsequently that this paper did have a certain effect on administration thinking at the time. For the institutionalization of the risk-manipulation idea in NATO strategy, see J. Michael Legge, "Theater Nuclear Weapons and the NATO Strategy of Flexible Response," Rand Report R-2964-FF, April 1983, Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, California.
7. See Bernd Greiner's interview with Sergo Mikoyan, *Diplomatic History*, vol. 14, no. 2 (Spring 1990), p. 215.
8. The point about Germany not wanting war with Britain in 1939 was clear very early on. See especially Raymond Sontag, "The Last Months of Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 35 (April 1957), pp. 507-524. There is a famous story that makes the point quite clear. When Hitler was informed of the British declaration of war, he turned to Ribbentrop and said, "Was nun?"--"What are we supposed to do now?"
9. Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy*, p. 91.
10. Report by Joint Intelligence Subcommittee on Russian's Strategic Interests and Intentions, March 1, 1946, *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, series 1, vol. 6, p. 301.
11. Warner, quoted in Victor Rothwell, *Britain and the Cold War, 1941-1947* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), p. 269; see also pp. 245, 255-259.
12. Thompson to Secretary of State, March 9, 1959, Declassified Documents Reference System, 1991/927.
13. Thompson to Rusk, May 27, 1961, 762.00/5-2761, RG 59, U.S. National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

14. Confidential Annex to C.O.S.(61)32nd meeting, May 30, 1961, DEFE 4/135, Public Record Office, Kew.
15. Western foreign ministers' meeting, December 11, 1961, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-63*, vol. 14, p. 656; for the British record, and another version of the Rusk comment, see FO 371/160567, Public Record Office, Kew.
16. "The Coming of the First World War: A Reassessment," in *History and Strategy*, chapter two.
17. Scott Sagan, "Accidental War in Theory and Practice," draft chapter for Betts, Cohen and Rosen, eds., *The Sources of Strategy*.
18. Ibid., pp. 26-31.
19. Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols. (London, 1952-57), vol. 2, p. 673.
20. Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 670.
21. Albertini, *Origins*, 2:659-661, 666-668.
22. This was substantially the same as the discussion that would eventually appear on pp. 222-223 of *Arms and Influence*.
23. Brodie to Schelling, February 8, 1965, and Schelling to Brodie, February 19, 1965, Brodie Papers, UCLA.
24. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 223n.; Ludwig Reiners, *The Lamps Went Out in Europe* (New York: Pantheon, 1955), esp. pp. 127, 123; Communication by Austrian Ambassador, July 24, 1914, and Grey to Buchanan, July 25, 1914, *British Documents on the Origins of the War*, vol. 11 (London: HMSO, 1926), nos. 104-105, and Baron Schilling, *How the War Began in 1914* (London, 1925), pp. 35-36; Viscount Grey of Fallodon, *Twenty-Five Years*, vol. 2 (New York, 1925), p. 48.
25. Richard Ned Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management: A Dangerous Illusion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 111-113.
26. There is a name for this psychological mechanism, but it slips my mind right now.