Problems, problems, problems: The social construction of 'leadership'

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ABSTRACT   The invasion of Iraq was premised upon accounts of the situation that have proved unsustainable, but that has not generated a change in the strategy of the coalition forces. Conventional contingency accounts of leadership suggest that accurate accounts of the context are a critical element of the decision-making apparatus but such accounts appear incapable of explaining the decisions of those engaged. An alternative model is developed that adapts the Tame and Wicked problem analysis of Rittell and Webber, in association with Etzioni's typology of compliance, to propose an alternative analysis that is rooted in social constructivist approaches. This is then applied to three asymmetric case studies which suggest that decision-makers are much more active in the constitution of the context than conventional contingency theories allow, and that a persuasive rendition of the context then legitimizes a particular form of action that often relates to the decision-maker's preferred mode of engagement, rather than what 'the situation' apparently demands. In effect, the context is reconstructed as a political arena not a scientific laboratory.

> Some problems are so complex that you have to be highly intelligent
> and well informed just to be undecided about them.
>
> (Attributed to Laurence J. Peter)

Introduction

The assumption that successful leaders are those who respond most appro-
priately to the demands of the specific situation is commonplace. When all
is calm successful leaders can afford to relax, seek a consensus and make
collective decisions at a leisurely pace. But when a crisis occurs the success-
ful leader must become decisive, demonstrate a ruthless ability to focus on
the problem and to ignore the siren calls of the sceptics and the cynics. Or,
as Shakespeare put it rather more eloquently:

> In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
> As modest stillness and humility:
> But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
> Then imitate the action of the tiger;
> Stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood,
> Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage.
>
> (*Henry V*, Act III Scene I)

Quite what that crisis might be seems to vary considerably, indeed,
whether calling a situation 'a crisis' is necessarily the appropriate response
seems to depend less on what the situation allegedly 'is' and more on how
that situation can be handled most advantageously – or least disadvanta-
geously – by the leadership. For example, the recent deaths of as many as
1000 Shia pilgrims on a bridge in northern Baghdad heading towards the
Kadhimiya mosque, seems to have been caused by rumours of a suicide
bomber in their midst. In retrospect, an attempt to deny that there was a
'crisis' and that everyone should move off the bridge in an orderly and
controlled manner might have limited the casualties. This is not to deny that
a suicide bomber is indeed a terrible threat, but rather it is to suggest that
how we respond to particular situations is not determined by that situation.[1]
Similarly, when the share price drops it might be interpreted by stockhold-
ers as a crisis – but it may be that the CEO and the board would rather
describe the situation as 'unstable' or 'a restructuring' or whatever it is that
calms the nerves of the stockholder and persuades him or her to hold on to
their shares.

The idea that the situation either does or should determine leadership

is captured dramatically in Ibsen's play, *An enemy of the people*, in which the apparent contamination of the town's new public baths pushes Dr Thomas Stockmann, the town's medical officer, to report his fears to his brother – the mayor, Peter Stockmann. However, closure of the baths would bring financial ruin to the town so the mayor resists, generates community support for keeping the baths open, and declares his brother 'an enemy of the people'. Such a clash of morality and interests is, of course, at the root of many conflicts in all forms of organization but we should not take from this the assumption that interests will prevail over morality in most cases. Indeed, as Tuchman's (1996) *The march of folly* clearly demonstrates, leaders often pursue policies that run quite contrary to their interests – even if they often claim (wrongly) that they had no choice. Partly this is because leaders lust after power, partly it is because leaders are corrupted by power, and partly it is because to admit an error is deemed worse than to persist down the wrong path. As Tuchman laments in her bleak vision, it is as if we are unable to learn from our experiences. Or, to use Samuel Taylor Coleridge's vision as she does: 'If men could learn from history, what lessons it might teach us! But passion and party blind our eyes, and the light which experience gives us is a lantern on the stern which shines only on the waves behind us' (quoted in Tuchman, 1996: 383). And if we look at some of history's most effectively bloodthirsty leaders it becomes clear that the resort to violence often tends not to relate to the situational threats to power but rather to the ideological motivation of the leader to order wide-scale killing irrespective of any threat. So, for example, the resort to the guillotine in the French terror did not relate to levels of anxiety about their power on the part of the revolutionaries but rather their ideological predisposition to execute as many of the nobility as possible. Similarly, the resort to executions by Lenin and the Bolsheviks during the Russian civil war was more to do with eliminating class enemies than those who threatened the fledging state (Mitchell, 2004).

What interests me here is not strictly the question of ethical – or unethical – leadership but the processes through which decision-makers persuade their followers, and perhaps themselves, that a certain kind of action is required. This focus on the decision-makers might suggest a return to Trait-based leadership theories which, despite Stogdill's (1948, 1974) critical demolitions, continue to invest significance in the role of character (Covey, 1990; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; and Yukl, 2005). Such approaches might well look for the explanation for the war in Iraq in the personalities of Bush, Blair, Saddam and their various advisers and opponents. In the latter category, for example, Cindy Sheehan, who held a vigil outside Bush's ranch in the summer of 2005, was credited with single-handedly invigorating the anti-war

movement in the US – at least until Hurricane Katrina arrived (Harris, 2005). Similarly, many political commentators describe the global political situation in terms of the role of individual politicians (Freedland, 2005; Riddell, 2005; Steinem, 2005). Others simply report that politicians are the world's least trusted people, again implying that it is the individual leader that matters not the situation (Whitaker, 2005). Yet there is considerable support for a situational approach, within which even if individual leaders do make a difference, that difference is only marginal in comparison to the influence of more structural features like the economy or religion or political party or social class or gender or any other of the myriad variables on offer (King, 2002).

Leadership theories that eschew the dominant and proactive role of the individual leader in favour of more social or structural accounts tend to assume that the context or situation should determine how leaders respond, thus in terms of the early contingency theories (Fielder, 1967; House & Dessler, 1974), situation X requires leadership X to ensure an appropriate response. More recent developments in contingency theory, for all their more sophisticated accumulation of significant and independent variables, still reproduce this assumption that the 'correct' response is determined by the correct analysis of the situation. For example, Nadler and Tuschman's (1997) Congruence Model suggests that the three primary inputs to the system are the environment, the resources available and the history of the organization. But, to take the latter case first, an organization's history is seldom uncontested and often, as Rowlinson and Hassard (2000) suggest in their analysis of the history of Cadbury, a resource for reconstructing the past to fit the needs of the present. As to the resources available to an organization, it was clear to the Allies in 1940 that they had more than enough resources to defeat any German invasion; unfortunately the latter did not agree with the 'objective' analysis of the comparative resources (May, 2000). As to the role of the environment in determining what leaders should do, we only have to consider the differing positions taken by leaders on the issue of global warming to know that, once again, the environment is not some objective variable that determines a response but rather an 'issue' to be constituted into a whole variety of 'problems' or 'irrelevances'. In effect, I am suggesting that contingency theories, whatever their complexities – and there is little more complex than House's (1996) reformulation of his Path-Goal theory with its multiplicity of variables – are premised upon an essentialist notion of the context: in other words, that we can render the context or situation transparent through scientific analysis.

However, I suggest that this is a naïve assumption because it underestimates the extent to which the context or situation is actively constructed by the leader, leaders, and/or decision-makers. In effect, leadership involves

the social construction of the context that both legitimates a particular form of action and constitutes the world in the process. If that rendering of the context is successful – for there are usually contending and competing renditions – the newly constituted context then limits the alternatives available such that those involved begin to act differently. Or to put it another way, we might begin to consider not what is the *situation*, but how it is *situated*. Shifting the focus from noun to verb facilitates the reintroduction of the proactive role of leadership in the construction of context, not in the sense that individual leaders are independent agents, able to manipulate the world at will, as in Carlyle's 'Great Man' theory, but in the sense that the context is not independent of human agency, and cannot be objectively assessed in a scientific form.

Social constructionist accounts are not new; indeed the early roots can be traced to Kuhn's (1962) work on scientific paradigms, to C. Wright Mills's (1959) work on the vocabularies of motive and to the seminal work of Berger and Luckmann: *The social construction of reality* (1966). However, the recent theoretical developments of the work are best approached through the works of Burr (2003) and Gergen (1999), and their application to leadership can be seen in the work of Grint (2001), and Sjöstrand et al. (2001).

The critical elements – and there are now many different forms of social constructionism or constructivism (Gergen & Gergen, 2003) – are that what counts as 'true', as 'objective' and as 'fact' are the result of contending accounts of 'reality'. That implies that 'reality' is constructed through language and, in turn, since language is a social phenomenon, the account of reality which prevails is often both a temporary and a collective phenomenon. In other words, the 'truth', for example about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq, is not a direct reflection of some objective facts that are undeniable, nor merely a figment of some fetid imagination, but rather the consequence of the temporary ability of particular groups to persuade themselves and others that WMD did (or did not) exist. In contrast, the failed attempt by different groups to deny the existence of WMD rendered their account subordinate and facilitated the invasion of Iraq. The failure of the post war searchers to discover WMD does not, however, simply mean that despite the falsehoods the result was an invasion and hence the temporary nature of the persuasive account is all that matters in any pragmatic sense. Rather, it implies that we will probably never know whether there ever were WMD, or what amount of chemicals or biological elements actually counts as WMD. In short, the book is never closed but permanently open to contestation, just as reviews of, say, Winston Churchill, are never finally agreed but always open to different renderings and potential inversions. The results of this kind of approach are that knowledge – and what

counts as true – is regarded as the property of particular communities and thus knowledge is never neutral, divorced from ideology.

In what follows I develop the model with regard to its role in the understanding of problems facing leaders and then I apply it to three cases: first a short review of the Brent Spar controversy; second a short illustration of its utility as an account of the Cuban Missile Crisis; and third a rather longer case that applies the model to contemporary rather than historical issues: in this case the War on Terror in Iraq. To reiterate the point, my argument, in short, is that contingency theories that are premised on securing independent and objective accounts of the context, situation, leader and followers – essentialist approaches – are fundamentally flawed and we should pay much more attention to the role of leaders and decision-makers in the construction of contexts that legitimates their intended or executed actions and accounts.

Problems, power and uncertainty

Much of the writing in the field of leadership research is grounded in a typology that distinguishes between Leadership and Management as different forms of authority – that is legitimate power in Weber's conception – with leadership tending to embody longer time periods, a more strategic perspective, and a requirement to resolve novel problems (Bratton et al., 2004; Zaleznik, 1977). But in most cases the leader or manager is charged with *solving* the problem that faces them, the only difference tends to relate to the analysis of the situation. Another way to put this is that the division is rooted partly in the context: management is the equivalent of *déjà vu* (seen this before), whereas leadership is the equivalent of *vu jàdé* (never seen this before) (Weick, 1993). If this is valid then the manager is simply required to engage the requisite process to resolve the problem the last time it emerged. In contrast, the leader is required to reduce the anxiety of his or her followers who face the unknown by providing an innovative answer to the novel problem, rather than rolling out a known process to a previously experienced problem.

But the division between Management and Leadership, rooted in the distinction between known and unknown, belies the complexity of the relationship between problem and response. Oftentimes the simple experience of *déjà vu* does not lend itself to the application of a tried and trusted process because it is really '*déjà vu* all over again': in effect, the 'certain process' has not solved the certain problem. And sometimes the situation is interpreted as too complex and divisive to allow the leader to impose his or

her will upon their followers. Anyway, is the imposition of a single will upon a group of followers leadership or something rather more coercive?

Perhaps the first thing we need to do is consider a contextualized typology of problems. Management and Leadership, as two forms of authority rooted in the distinction between certainty and uncertainty, can be related to Rittell and Webber's (1973) typology of *Tame* and *Wicked* Problems. A *Tame Problem* may be complicated but is resolvable through unilinear acts because there is a point where the problem is resolved and it is likely to have occurred before. In other words, there is only a limited degree of uncertainty and thus it is associated with Management. The manager's role, therefore, is to provide the appropriate *processes* to solve the problem. Examples would include: timetabling the railways, building a nuclear plant, training the army, planned heart surgery, a wage negotiation – or enacting a tried and trusted policy for eliminating global terrorism. A *Wicked Problem* is complex, rather than just complicated, it is often intractable, there is no unilinear solution, moreover, there is no 'stopping' point, it is novel, any apparent 'solution' often generates other 'problems', and there is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer, but there are better or worse alternatives. In other words, there is a huge degree of uncertainty involved and thus it is associated with *Leadership*. The leader's role with a Wicked Problem is to ask the right *questions* rather than provide the right *answers* because the answers may not be self-evident and will require a collaborative process to make any kind of progress. Examples would include: developing a transport strategy, or an energy strategy, or a defence strategy, or a national health system or an industrial relations strategy; and developing a strategy for dealing with global terrorism. This kind of issue implies that techniques such as Appreciative Enquiry may be appropriate for Leadership (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). However, not all Wicked Problems are rooted in complex issues that also embody the opportunity to delay decisions. For example, as we shall see, President Kennedy's actions during the Cuban Missile Crisis were often based on asking *questions* of his civilian assistants that required some time for reflection – despite the pressure from his military advisers to provide instant *answers*. Had Kennedy responded to the American Hawks we would have seen a third set of problems that fall outside the Leadership/Management dichotomy. This third set of problems I will refer to as *Critical*. A *Critical Problem*, for example, a 'crisis', is presented as self-evident in nature, as encapsulating very little time for decision-making and action, and it is often associated with authoritarianism – *Command* (Howieson & Kahn, 2002; cf. Watters, 2004). Here there is virtually no uncertainty about what needs to be done – at least in the behaviour of the Commander, whose role is to take the required decisive action – that is to provide the *answer* to the problem,

not to engage processes (management) or ask questions (leadership). Of course, it may be that the Commander remains privately uncertain about whether the action is appropriate or the presentation of the situation as a crisis is persuasive, but that uncertainty will probably not be apparent to the followers of the Commander. Examples would include the immediate response to: a major train crash, a leak of radioactivity from a nuclear plant, a military attack, a heart attack, an industrial strike, the loss of employment or a loved one, or a terrorist attack such as 9/11 or the 7 July bombings in London.

That such 'situations' are constituted by the participants rather than simply being self-evident is best illustrated by considering the way a situation of ill-defined threat only becomes a crisis when that threat is defined as such. For example, financial losses – even rapid and radical losses – do not constitute a 'crisis' until the shareholders decide to sell in large numbers, and even then the notion of a crisis does not emerge objectively from the activity of selling but at the point at which a 'crisis' is pronounced by someone significant and becomes accepted as such by significant others. In another intriguing example, the British government under James Callaghan was apparently in freefall in 1979 after Callaghan returned from an economic conference in the West Indies as strikes in the British public services mounted. Asked how he was going to solve 'the mounting chaos' by journalists at the airport Callaghan responded 'I don't think other people in the world would share the view [that] there is mounting chaos.' But the headlines in the *Sun* newspaper the following day suggested he had said 'Crisis – what Crisis?' In this case the formal political leader was unable to counter 'the critical situation', as constituted by the news media, and Labour lost the subsequent general election.[2] Similarly, it would be difficult to state objectively at what point the Battle of Britain became a crisis and when it ceased to be one because that definition rested upon the persuasive rhetoric of various parties involved. As Overy (2000: 267) suggests,

> Many of those 'decisive strategic results' became clear only with the end of the war and the process of transforming the Battle into myth. The contemporary evidence suggests that neither side at the time invested the air conflict with the weight of historical significance that it has borne in the sixty years since it was fought.

The links between Command and the military are clear, and may well explain why discussion of non-military leadership has tended to avoid the issue of command or explain it as authoritarian leadership that may be appropriate for the military but not in the civilian world (Howieson &

Kahn, 2002). These three forms of authority – that is legitimate power – Command, Management and Leadership are, in turn, another way of suggesting that the role of those responsible for decision-making is charged with finding the appropriate Answer, Process and Question to address the problem respectively.

This is not meant as a discrete typology but as a heuristic device to enable us to understand why those charged with decision-making sometimes appear to act in ways that others find incomprehensible. Thus I am not suggesting that the correct decision-making process lies in the correct analysis of the situation, but that decision-makers tend to legitimize their actions on the basis of a persuasive account of the situation. In short, the social construction of the problem legitimizes the deployment of a particular form of authority. Moreover, it is often the case that the same individual or group with authority will switch between the Command, Management and Leadership roles as they perceive – and constitute – the problem as Critical, Tame or Wicked, or even as a single problem that itself shifts across these boundaries. Nor am I suggesting that different forms of problem construction restrict those in authority to their 'appropriate' form of power. In other words, Commanders, for example, having defined the problem as critical – do not only have access to coercion but coercion is legitimated by the constituting of the problem as critical in a way that Managers would find more difficult and Leaders would find almost impossible. In turn, Commanders who follow up on their constitution of the problem as Critical by asking followers questions and seeking collaborative progress (attributes of Leaderships) are less likely to be perceived as successful Commanders than those who provide apparent solutions and demand obedience.

That persuasive account of the problem partly rests in the decision-makers access to – and preference for – particular forms of power, and herein lies the irony of 'leadership': it remains the most difficult of approaches and one that many decision-makers will try to avoid at all costs because it implies that: 1) the leader does not have the answer; 2) that the leader's role is to make the followers face up to their responsibilities (often an unpopular task) (Heifetz, 1998); 3) that the 'answer' to the problem is going to take a long time to construct and that it will only ever be 'more appropriate' rather than 'the best'; and 4) that it will require constant effort to maintain. It is far easier, then, to opt either for a Management solution – engaging a tried and trusted process – or a Command solution – enforcing the answer upon followers – some of whom may prefer to be shown 'the answer' anyway.

The notion of 'enforcement' suggests that we need to consider how different approaches to, and forms of, power fit with this typology of authority, and amongst the most useful for our purposes are Etzioni's (1964)

typology of compliance, and Nye's distinction between Hard and Soft Power. Nye (2004) has suggested that we should distinguish between power as 'soft' and 'hard'. 'Soft', in this context, does not imply weak or fragile but rather the degree of influence derived from legitimacy and the positive attraction of values. 'Hard' implies traditional concepts of power such as coercion, physical strength, or domination achieved through asymmetric resources rather than ideas. Thus the military tend to operate through 'hard' power while political authorities tend to operate through ideological attraction – 'soft power'. Of course, these are not discrete categories – the military has to 'win hearts and minds' and this can only be through 'soft power' while politicians may need to authorize coercion – hard power. Indeed, as Nye (2004: 1) recognizes, 'The Cold War was won with a strategy of containment that used soft power along with hard power.'

If we return to some of the early modern theorists on power, like Bachrach and Baratz (1962), Dahl (1961) and Schattschneider (1960), all summarized in Lukes's (1974) 'Three Dimensions of Power', then we can see how the very denial of Soft Power is – in itself and ironically – an example of Soft Power – where certain aspects of the debate are deemed irrelevant and thus subordinated by those in power. In other words, and to adopt Nye's terminology again, to deny that any other option exists (e.g. Soft Power) is itself an ideological claim – for example, Soft Power, and not simply a claim to the truth. While Soft Power seems appropriate to Leadership with its requirement for persuasion, debate and ideological attraction, Hard Power clearly fits better with Command, but Management sits awkwardly between the two rooted in both or neither, because coercion is perceived as inappropriate within a free labour contract, while ideological attraction can hardly explain why all employees continue to turn up for work.

The limits of using an analysis based on Hard and Soft Power might also be transcended by considering Etzioni's (1964) alternative typology. Etzioni distinguished between Coercive, Calculative and Normative Compliance. Coercive or physical power was related to total institutions, such as prisons or armies; Calculative Compliance was related to 'rational' institutions, such as companies; and Normative Compliance was related to institutions or organizations based on shared values, such as clubs and professional societies. This compliance typology fits well with the typology of problems: Critical Problems are often associated with Coercive Compliance; Tame Problems are associated with Calculative Compliance and Wicked Problems are associated with Normative Compliance.

Again, none of this is to suggest that we can divide the world up objectively into particular kinds of problems and their associated appropriate authority forms, but that the very legitimacy of the authority forms is

dependent upon a successful rendition of a phenomenon as a particular kind of problem. In other words, while contingency theory suggests precisely this (rational) connection between (objective) context (problem) and (objective) leadership style (authority form), I am suggesting here that what counts as legitimate authority depends upon a persuasive rendition of the context and a persuasive display of the appropriate authority style. In other words, success is rooted in persuading followers that the problematic situation is either one of a Critical, Tame or Wicked nature and that therefore the appropriate authority form is Command, Management or Leadership in which the role of the decision-maker is to provide the answer, or organize the process or ask the question, respectively.

This typology can be plotted along the relationship between two axes as shown below in Figure 1 with the vertical axis representing increasing uncertainty about the solution to the problem – in the behaviour of those in authority – and the horizontal axis representing the increasing need for collaboration in resolving the problem. Again, it should be recalled that the uncertainty measure used here is not an objective element of the situation but the way the situation is constituted by those in authority. Of course, that authority and problem may be disputed by others but the model assumes that successful constitution of a problem as Wicked, Tame or Critical
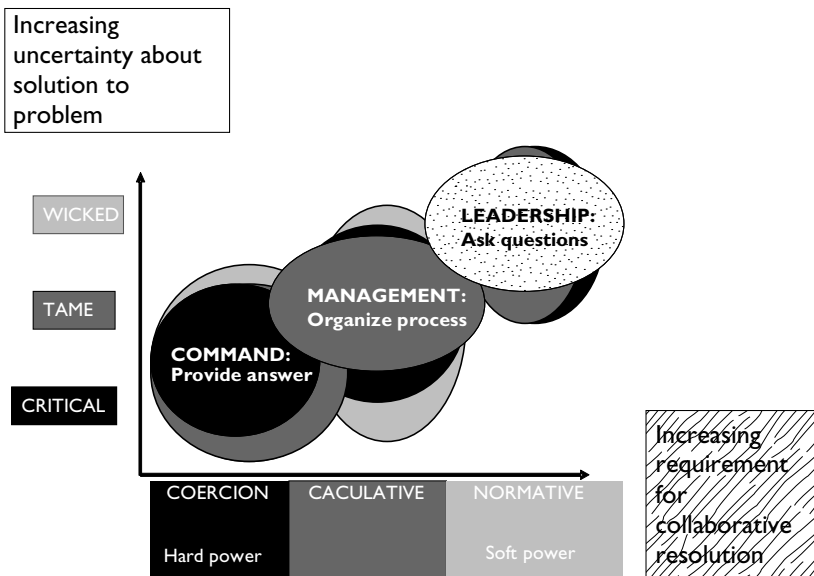
Figure 1   A typology of problems, power and authority

provides the framework for particular forms of authority. The model also represents the most likely variant of authority model, but note again, that while, for example, Commanders may use the resources more commonly adopted by Leaders, or Managers, the most prevalent is likely to be that of coercion.

What might also be evident from this figure is that the more decision-makers constitute the problem as Wicked and interpret their power as essentially Soft or Normative, the more difficult their task becomes, especially with cultures that associate leadership with the effective and efficient resolution of problems. In other words, for a democratic contender to seek election on the basis of approaching the problem of global terrorism as a Wicked Problem that requires long term and collaborative leadership processes with no easy solutions, and where everyone must participate and share the responsibility, the less likely they are to be elected – hence the Irony of Leadership: it is often avoided where it might seem most necessary.

Where no one can be certain about what needs to be done to resolve a Wicked Problem then the more likely decision-makers are to seek a collective response. For example, a road traffic accident is usually deemed to need rapid and categorical authority – Command – by those perceived to have the requisite knowledge and authority to resolve the problems: usually the police, the fire service and the ambulance service. Those who are uncertain about what to do in a road traffic accident should – and usually do – make way for those that seem to know what they're doing, especially if they are in an appropriate uniform. We will, therefore, normally allow ourselves to be Commanded by such professionals in a crisis. However, when the problem is not an emergency but, for instance, the poor phasing of an urban traffic light system, we are less likely to comply with a flashing blue light than with a traffic management expert – at least as long as the procedures work. Even more difficult is rethinking a traffic strategy that balances the needs of the environment with those of rural dwellers, those without private transport, and those whose houses would be demolished if private roads or public railways were to be built. In effect, as the level of uncertainty increases so does our preference for involvement in the decision-making process. The implication of this is that political leaders might well seek to construct political scenarios that either increase or decrease assumptions about uncertainty in order to ensure sufficient political support. For example, it might not be in the interests of political leaders to equivocate about the threat posed by terrorism but to imply that the threat was obvious and urgent such that any necessary measure was taken – including pre-emptive strikes and internment without trial.

The shift from Command through Management to Leadership also relates to degree of subtlety necessary for success. For instance, a sergeant

with a gun standing over a squad of soldiers facing an attack does not need to be very subtle about his or her Command to stand and fight. Similarly, a police officer coming upon a train crash need not spend a lot of time, effort or rhetorical skill in persuading on-lookers to move away; she or he may simply Command them to move. However, for that same police officer to operate as a Manager in a police training academy requires a much more sophisticated array of skills and behaviours in order to train police cadets in the art of policing; and many of these techniques and processes are already well known, tried and tested. But to develop a new policing strategy for Iraq might mean more than Commanding civilians and more than simply training up Iraqi cadets through Management processes; instead it might require a whole new framework for constituting a post-Baathist society and that may necessitate sophisticated Leadership. In the final section I use the framework to analyse the War on Terror in Iraq but first I want to illustrate its utility by a short review of the 'problem' of the Brent Spar and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Case 1: Brent Spar

Brent Spar, or Brent 'E', was an oil storage and tanker loading buoy in the Brent oil field, just two kilometres from the Brent 'A' oil rig which was operated by Shell UK. It was built in 1976 and was 147m tall, 29m in diameter and it displaced 66,000 tonnes with an oil storage capacity of 50,000 tonnes (300,000 barrels). In 1991 Shell decided that Brent Spar was no longer economically viable and therefore needed disposing of, either by dismantling on-shore or by disposal at sea. The on-shore option was estimated to cost £41m and posed the risk of disintegration as it was being towed to land, thus the deep sea disposal option was Shell's preferred position. Sinking it in deep water at any of three sites envisaged off the northwest coast of Scotland would have cost between £17 and £20m and would have spread the pollutants (including 50 tonnes of oil) still contained by the structure over various areas of the surrounding seabed depending on the speed with which the structure sank to the sea floor. Eventually the North Feni Ridge site was chosen and a licence to dispose of the rig was agreed by the British government in December 1994.

Two months later Greenpeace objected to the plan on the grounds that there was no knowledge of the effects of deep-sea disposal on the environment, moreover, since there was no formal inventory of the Brent Spar it was not possible to assess the potential damage to the environment; indeed the policy should be to minimize damage, not encourage it – as this would by setting a precedent. Greenpeace insisted instead that the platform should be

towed to land and dismantled on-shore and Shell should not hide their desire to cut costs behind the pseudo-science of deep-sea disposal.

When Shell appeared intent on executing their decision to dispose of the Brent Spar at sea four Greenpeace activists occupied it in April 1995 and collected samples that suggested that 5000 tonnes of oil remained in the structure, along with various other heavy metals and chemicals. For Shell the problem became exacerbated on 9 May when the German government formally objected to the plan but Shell pressed on, evicting the protesters from the platform on 23 May, and began towing it to its disposal position. However, by 20 June, as the protest movement grew, especially in northern Europe where Shell's garages were boycotted by many consumers, Shell's share price began plummeting and the company abandoned its attempt to sink the Brent Spar. It was then towed to Erfjord in Norway where an independent review suggested that Greenpeace had overestimated the amount of oil left and supported Shell's original estimates. Eventually the Brent Spar was used to rebuild parts of a quay extension and ferry terminal at Mekjarvik in 1999. Overall the cost to Shell of the episode was somewhere between £60 and £100m. The cost to Greenpeace's credibility was also significant as it was forced to retract its claim and was heavily censured by the journal *Nature* for its political, rather than scientific, stance.[3] A subsequent re-examination by the Fisheries Research Services of the potential damage that would have been caused by sea-disposal suggested that the damage would have been minimal.[4]

It should be clear from this episode that the decision taken by both Shell and Greenpeace was not driven by traditional notions of logic or rationality but rather in response to interests, values and political pressure. If we use the problems model to understand this it would appear that initially Shell regarded the 'problem' as Tame, requiring only the resources that Shell had already accumulated or could easily acquire. As such it did not require Shell's board to pose the 'Leadership' question – 'What should we do with old and polluted rigs?', and then facilitate a debate with all interested parties. Nor was it a Critical Problem requiring instant and immediate coercive action to sink the rig as soon as possible without regard to due process. But for Greenpeace the Brent Spar posed an altogether different 'problem'; initially of a Wicked form but then very quickly of a Critical format: it was about to be sunk and it was probably going to pollute the seabed. Hence while Shell proceeded to 'manage' the process of disposal Greenpeace engaged in 'coercive acts' to force Shell to desist from their plans. The subsequent public clamour, the support from the German government and the public boycott of Shell garages all forced the company to reassess what they faced, for a Tame Problem now seemed more like a Critical Problem. Of course, it subsequently became clear that Greenpeace's claims were erroneous and Shell

could have continued with their management of the Tame Problem in good faith. However, the point is that the 'problem' cannot be assessed objectively and it does not explain what the leaders of both sides actually did. In effect, the problem was socially constructed and the solution was the consequence of political negotiations not rational, objective or scientific analysis. Does this model help explain the Cuban Missile Crisis too?

Case 2: The Cuban Missile Crisis

The second case relates to the Cuban Missile Crisis, the events of which are well known (see Allison, 1971; Blight, 1992; Frankel, 2004). In the summer of 1962 the USSR, led by Nikita Khrushchev, began transporting intermediate nuclear missiles to Cuba in an attempt to rebalance the arms race with the USA which the Soviets feared they were losing. On the Cuban side, John Kennedy's support for the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 had left Fidel Castro's revolutionaries feeling very vulnerable to further US intervention and the deployment of Soviet missiles appeared to serve both Cuban and Soviet interests. On 15 October 1962 US reconnaissance photos appeared to reveal the missile sites under construction and John Kennedy organized EX-COMM – the Executive Committee of the National Security Council – (Kennedy's 12 most trusted advisers) to resolve the problem. After a week of discussions and debate, on 22 October Kennedy announced to the US public the existence of the missiles that posed a threat to 90 million Americans and a 'quarantine' of Cuba, insisting that the US would intercept any ship heading for Cuba and turn back any ship found to be carrying missiles or supporting material. Furthermore, he insisted that any missile launched against the US from Cuba would be considered as an attack by the USSR and the USA would respond in kind. Three days later Kennedy raised the military readiness to DEFCON 2 (DEFense CONdition level 2).[5] On 26 October EX-COMM received an emotional letter from Khrushchev proposing to remove the missiles if the US guaranteed they would not invade Cuba. The next day an American U-2 spy plane was shot down over Cuba and a second letter arrived, apparently from Khrushchev but this one was much more hard line and threatened the US rather than sought a way out of the problem. On 28 October, after much secret negotiation, the USSR finally agreed to remove the missiles in exchange for a guarantee from the US that Cuba would not be invaded. A separate and undisclosed element of the agreement was that the US agreed to remove its outdated missiles from Turkey.

On the face of it, the Cuban Missile Crisis seems a relatively straightforward issue: the USSR initially considered the increasing missile gap

between the two superpowers as Wicked – it was not clear how it could be reduced, there was no historical precedent, and it did not seem that increasing the level of coercion was viable. The installation of missiles in Cuba would turn the Wicked Problem into a Tame one: the only issue was how best to use the tried and trusted management skills of the USSR to get the missiles installed before the US realized what was going on.

In contrast, the sudden realization on 15 October by the US that the missiles were being installed generated two rather different interpretations by the American administration. For the US military, especially General Curtis LeMay, the problem was Critical and the resources required were self-evident: Cuba should be bombed and/or invaded before the missiles were armed in order to minimize US casualties and to *prevent* the situation turning into an all-out nuclear war with the USSR. In short the crisis could be resolved by turning it into a Tame Problem that only required the tried and trusted skills and resources available to the US military. In the event – and unknown to the US at the time – the battlefield missiles on Cuba were already armed and the Soviet ground commanders had authority to launch their nuclear missiles if the US attempted an invasion.

John Kennedy, however, supported at different times by his brother Robert, by Robert McNamara and by Tommy Thomson (ex-US Ambassador to Moscow), perceived it rather more as a Wicked Problem: of course it was extraordinarily dangerous, but the solution was not obvious – it might not be appropriate to bomb or invade Cuba immediately; there might be a negotiated way out of the situation – if only they could think through what that might be. Here is the relevant conversation between President Kennedy and Robert McNamara on 16 October:

> Kennedy: 'In the next 24 hours what is it we need to do?'
>
> McNamara: 'Mr President we need to do two things, it seems to me. First, we need to develop a specific strike plan. The second thing we have to do is consider the consequences. I don't know quite what kind of world we'll live in after we've struck Cuba. How do we stop at that point? I don't know the answer to this.'
>
> <div align="right">(quoted in The Fog of War, 2004)</div>

Note here how neither individual pretends he has the answer to what would otherwise be a Tame Problem; instead, they both pose rhetorical questions that capture the Wicked nature of the problem facing them.

It was at this point – on 26 October – that the first of the two letters from Khrushchev – the so-called 'soft letter' – provided the glimmer of hope. As Khrushchev noted to Kennedy:

You and I should not now pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied a knot of war, because the harder you and I pull, the tighter the knot will become. And a time may come when this knot is tied so tight that the person who tied it is no longer capable of untying it, and then the knot will have to be cut. What that would mean I need not explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly what dread forces our two countries possess. I propose . . . you declare that the US will not invade Cuba with its troops and will not support any other forces which might intend to invade Cuba. Then the necessity of the presence of our military specialists in Cuba will disappear.

The second 'hard-letter' signalled a hardening of the political line, perhaps by the Soviet Polit Bureau against the wishes of Khrushchev. It threatened a devastating retaliation by the USSR if the USA attacked Cuba but under the advice of Robert Kennedy and Tommy Thompson, John Kennedy decided to frame the situation as if only the first letter had arrived. In effect, Kennedy treated the situation as a Wicked Problem requiring him to ask questions, not to provide (a Commander's) solutions or to directly engage a trusted (management) process because Kennedy recognized the danger of allowing the military to constitute it as a crisis and he could not – at that time – understand how a management process of negotiations could actually work. But again, this was not a response determined by the situation because the situation was unclear. Here is the conversation between President Kennedy and Tommy Thompson that this decision revolves around:

Kennedy: 'We're not going to get these missiles out by negotiation.'

Thompson: 'I don't agree Mr President. I think there's still a chance'

Kennedy: 'That he'll back down?'

Thompson: 'The important thing, it seems to me, is for Khrushchev to be able to say "I saved Cuba. I stopped an invasion".'

That empathetic understanding by Thompson – of how Khrushchev could get himself out of a situation that he had not really intended – proved to be the key component of a subsequent negotiated settlement and transformed what the military on both sides perceived to be a crisis requiring immediate coercive action into a Tame Problem that could be negotiated away. Let me now turn to the final and largest case: the war on terror in Iraq to establish whether the model remains viable when we move from historical to contemporary cases.

Case 3: The War on Terror in Iraq

The 'War on Terror', that has been in place since immediately after 9/11 poses some intriguing problems for analysts of leadership: not least whether the decision-makers, especially in the USA and UK, have a clear goal, an appropriate strategy and an effective mechanism for achieving their goals. Since the end of major combat operations was announced by George W. Bush on the deck of the USS *Abraham Lincoln* on 1 May 2003, far more Iraqis and coalition military personnel have either died or been wounded than during the war itself – or were being killed and wounded under Saddam Hussein's regime within an equivalent time frame. President Bush claimed that 'The liberation of Iraq is a crucial advance in the campaign against terror . . . We have removed an ally of al-Qaida and cut off a source of terrorist funding.' Yet there is no credible evidence that Iraq supported or sponsored international terrorism before the war – even though Iraq under Saddam Hussein was undoubtedly one of the most oppressive regimes of its time. Thus 'post-war' Iraq is an altogether different place from the image that seems to have driven George Bush and Tony Blair to war, and ironically it now seems to be the very cauldron of terror that the War on Terror was supposed to have eliminated. As CIA Director Porter J. Goss said in February 2005, 'The Iraq conflict, while not a cause of extremism, has become a cause for extremists' (quoted in Priest and White, 2005: 1).

Between September 2003 and October 2004 there were almost 4000 insurgents' attacks on coalition forces, the Iraqi police and other related organizations; indeed, over 300 people were killed in the third week of September 2004 alone, prompting Kofi Annan to suggest first, that the war was illegal, and second that elections could not take place as planned in January 2005. In the event the elections did occur, though how 'representative they were is disputed, as is the assumption that they would ensure the dissipation of the insurgency' (Steele, 2005: 27). At the time of writing (October 2005), since the war there have been 2000 US military fatalities, over 14,300 US military wounded, and a further 19,000 US military evacuees.[6] To this we can add just under 100 British military fatalities, perhaps as many as 2000 wounded,[7] and somewhere between 15,000 and 100,000 Iraqi dead, the vast majority of whom were civilians, many of them women and children. Bearing these numbers in mind we might wonder whether the War on Terror is being won or is simply regenerating a war of all against all in some macabre reinvention of Hercules' struggle against the Hydra.

Explanations for this state of affairs are manifold: from Tony Blair's suggestion that it was always legitimate to displace Saddam Hussein – even

if there were no weapons of mass destruction – to suggestions that the entire war was based on the West's thirst for oil and had little or nothing to do with Iraqi freedom, or that it was just part of grander imperial ambitions on the part of the US neo-conservative administration driven on by the appropriation – or misappropriation (Norton, 2004) – of the ideas of Leo Strauss and one of Plato's 'Noble Lies' – in this case that the danger to the West was so great that a pre-emptive war was necessary.

In order to understand the role of leadership in this we need to consider what kind of problem political leaders say terrorism is, and then what kind of power is constituted through that account as necessary to try and resolve that problem. As should become clear, the temptation of leaders is to define the problem in such a way that it becomes more tractable, such that a quick fix is the most viable option, and intriguingly to turn what may be a problem of Leadership first into a problem of (military) Command and then into a problem of Management.

My concern here is with trying to understand why the US/UK-led coalition became embroiled in a situation that many in the US and UK military, never mind civil society, regard as deeply problematic. How did this happen? How come so many resources were poured into the military defeat of terrorism when there are so many other claims on the public purse? It is not as if terrorism (as defined by the coalition) is – at least as yet – a significant threat to human life, especially compared to other 'traditional' killers. For example, as the graph in Figure 2 suggests, the annual global death rate from road traffic accidents (RTA), HIV/AIDS, breathing problems, diarrhoea and smoking are all hugely more significant than terrorist incidents. Indeed, more people committed suicide in 2000 (around 1 million) than were killed in all the global wars combined in the same year. In Europe more people kill themselves than are killed in road traffic accidents – but we do not appear to have instigated a 'Global War on Suicide', still less a Global War on road traffic accidents, or 'Global War on Diarrhoea'.[8] Indeed, a World Bank report in October 2005 suggested that climate change and pollution were the real killers today: 'some 1.1 billion people lack access to safe water and 2.6 billion lack access to safe sanitation. [This leads to] . . . about 4 billion cases of diarrhoea a year, which cause 1.8 million deaths a year, mostly among young children under five' (quoted in Vidal, 2005: 14).

One response to 9/11 was, of course, the invasion of Iraq and the subsequent displacement of Saddam Hussein for allegedly supporting al-Qaeda, or for threatening the world with his alleged Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), capable of deployment within 45 minutes. As the link between al-Qaeda and Saddam remained unproved, the case for the imminent threat (Crisis) became stronger in the argument for war made by
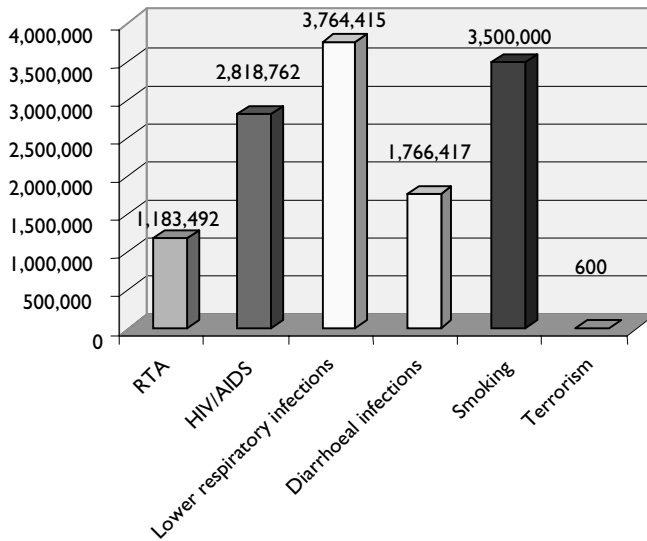
Figure 2 Estimated annual global avoidable deaths, 2003
Source: Reconstructed from the World Health Organization Report, *World Report on Violence and Health*, 2004, available from: [http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/en/].

both 'Commanders', Bush and Blair, and in their related case against Hans Blix that the UN inspection teams that were Managing the Tame Problem were failing. We do not need to rehearse that history to note that although neither the 45 minute claim nor the presence of WMD were proved to be accurate, the case that legitimized the invasion had already been success-fully constructed. In effect, the accuracy of the account of the situation – imminent and significant threat – was less relevant than its initial persua-siveness. Nor has the problematic nature of the initial account led to a change in policy: the explanation has merely shifted from imminent military threat to long term destabilizing influence, undemocratic practice and potential threat.

Clearly, the political significance of terrorism outweighs its social cost in some morbid scale of death, but given this, we might wonder why so many people opposed to the war in Iraq think it has gone wrong? Of course, even that assumption may be wrong: Bin Laden seems to be prospering through it and, as the US, Australian and British re-elections of Bush, Howard and Blair in 2004/5 suggest, it is by no means certain that the political problems in Iraq will mean the defeat of the democratic leaders of those involved in the coalition forces. In effect, if the problem of terrorism is perceived as critical and as one that is deteriorating because of the action or inaction of political leaders then, in a democracy, those leaders may well be perceived

as failing and be replaced. However, if the crisis is regarded as something that only the incumbent leadership can resolve, then they may well defeat any political opponent.

In that sense the continuing insurgency in Iraq can be configured in a multitude of other ways, all of which support the contention that it is a critical problem requiring the authority of a Commander. For instance, it can be read as evidence that terrorism was already there and thus needed to be stamped out, or that whatever the origins it is now a significant danger and needs resolving. Indeed, one might wonder whether the War on Terror has already begun to replicate George Orwell's *1984* where 'endless war' leads to endless effort towards inevitable victory. In the words of Ben Johnson commenting on the Bush re-election in November 2004, 'The American people have given George Bush an unprecedented mandate to *win* the war on terrorism' (Johnson, 2004: 25, my emphasis).

George W. Bush's appropriation of Command authority legitimated by a Critical Problem may also explain the quandary that has led some astute political analysts to query his approach. For example, Gergen (2002) has suggested that Bush's Command and Control style – represented by his favourite painting, W.H.D. Koerner's *A Charge to Keep*, showing a cowboy leading a charge up hill through dangerous ground, works, but only as long as luck is on his side, and it may well endanger the political fabric in the long run. Since Bush's style also runs counter to much of the current support for collaborative and distributive leadership we might simply conclude that Bush is 'wrong' or just 'old fashioned' or out of step with contemporary demands. Indeed, Mitroff (Mitroff & Anagnos, 2000) – a renowned expert in crisis management – has castigated Bush for his approach to truth, error-admission, failing to pick up the early warning signals, and poor preparation for the War on Terror, especially in the war in Iraq (Mitroff, 2004).

But the problem for these analysts is that Bush has been relatively successful, and this might be better explained not by 'luck', or labelling his supporters as mindless, but by suggesting that Bush's rendition of the problem of terrorism as both the most important and critical problem facing the USA predisposes him – and his supporters – to adopt a Command approach; and this approach in turn becomes the default category for decisions – everything is defined as a crisis requiring Command. As Gergen (2002) suggests, 'That [Command] approach worked in rallying the country and then winning conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, but seems peculiarly inappropriate for winning the peace in those same regions.' Again, the issue is not really 'What is *really* the problem facing the USA?' but what is the successful rendition of that problem that facilitates a particular kind of authority? Certainly, as Gergen suggests, there is a long cultural history of this kind of leadership in the USA, embodied by the likes of John Wayne and

the myths of the Wild West (Case & Grint, 1998; Courtwright, 1996), and it may be that certain cultures do facilitate different interpretations of, and approaches to, problems and authority.

The Bush–Blair coalition has also been accused of provoking a Critical Problem from what was a Tame Problem (the Blix-led UN search programme for WMD) and thus *causing* the latter to turn into the former – but without providing the necessary means to resolve it. In fact in the perception of many critics that problem has moved not just from Tame (the search for WMD) to Critical (45 minutes and the war) but on to Wicked (Iraq as the new [post-war] breeding ground for international terrorism). If it is the latter then there is no real stopping point, it is unclear what the solution is, any solution is likely to generate further problems, there is no longer a right and wrong answer – even if there ever was – but there may still be better or worse scenarios to consider. Under this approach some form of collaborative leadership seems crucial to stabilizing Iraq, securing collective consent and preventing a deterioration of security and conditions for all Iraqis, but collaboration is not something the coalition seems able to achieve given its current preference for Command. As Dodge suggested in October 2004, 'The US military can hit towns but there are no civil institutions to run them.'[9] Or in the words of W. Andrew Terrill, Professor at the US Army's War College strategic Studies Institute:

> I don't think you can kill the insurgency . . . The idea there are X numbers of insurgents, and that when they're all dead we can get out is wrong. The insurgency has shown an ability to regenerate itself because there are people willing to fill the ranks of those who are killed.
>
> (quoted in Dodge)

If this prognosis is accurate then the 'war on terror' has begun not just with a stunning military victory but a subsequent and catastrophic political defeat: the coalition won the war but is losing the peace.

Certainly, the UN's approach to the Iraq problem was that it was not embedded in or even linked to the War on Terror. Furthermore, that the problem of Saddam Hussein was essentially Tame; of course it was complex but there was a technical solution rooted in tried and tested managerial processes – using embargoes, weapons inspectors and no-fly zones and so on and so forth. The compliance system was ultimately rooted in Calculation: Saddam Hussein knew he could not invade anywhere again; those sympathetic towards Iraq could not afford to upset the fragile balance of power at the UN; and those wary of Saddam recognized that eliminating him carried the unnecessary risk of escalating the conflict and generating support for the

very terrorism that Saddam was accused of. Indeed, Tony Blair was apparently warned by the Joint Intelligence Committee early in 2003 that invading Iraq would compound rather than resolve the problem of terrorism and that 'any collapse of the Iraqi regime would increase the risk of chemical and biological warfare technology . . . finding their way into the hands of terrorists' (quoted in Norton-Taylor, 2004: 25). It now appears that there were actually many who allegedly warned of the post-war chaos a year before it happened – including Jack Straw, the British Foreign Minister and Sir David Manning, Tony Blair's own foreign policy advisor (Hinsliff, 2004). In the US, President Bush was allegedly informed of the likely 'melt-down' in July 2004 – several months before that melt-down appeared to begin (Younge, 2004). However, by July 2003, when Iraq seemed poised on the edge of an insurgency, President Bush responded with characteristic gusto: 'Bring them on!' were his precise words – the words of a Commander.

If this call leads to the resolution of a critical problem – and the assault upon Fallujah in November 2004 and upon Tall Afar in September 2005 – are manifestations of this – then the coalition leaders will be able to claim that their construction of the problem as Critical both legitimated their resort to Command and explained its eventual success. The vigorous attacks upon John Kerry by the Bush camp in the run up to the November 2004 US presidential election on the basis of his alleged indecisiveness and 'flip-flopping' are witness to this approach, particularly Kerry's early attempts to configure the problem of terrorism as one of Wicked status, requiring deep thought, questions and collaborative solutions: in effect Leadership. In contrast, Bush always represented himself as the 'Commander in Chief', whose unwavering determination in the face of an overt threat, and whose readiness to provide 'the answer' to the problem of terrorism, nestles the problem as one of Crisis where Command is appropriate.

However, if defining a problem as Critical with its requisite Command undermines the political legitimacy of Leadership which is deemed to be 'indecisive', it remains difficult for political leaders to maintain a constant state of public anxiety so as to facilitate support for their Command activities: by definition, and *pace* Orwell, the crisis of war cannot be maintained indefinitely without damaging democratic support. The solution, therefore, might be to displace the anxiety into a more manageable form by encasing it in tried and tested procedures. In other words, by establishing a protective boundary around the threat, the political leadership of the coalition might try and shift the threat from one of Crisis – where Command is required – to one of Tame where Management is required. This shift prevents the problem emerging as one of a Wicked nature – where Leadership and collaboration is required but maintains the level of control because it is

constituted as a technical problem requiring expert resolution. The Iraqi elections due in December 2005 provide one such form of problem shift because the Critical problem of terrorism will – in theory – be Tamed by the tried and tested Management process of democracy; at least that is the theory.

Conclusion

I began by suggesting that assumptions about the importance of context determining leadership response are as traditional as they are illusory: the appearance of the wooden horse outside the walls of Troy did not require the Trojans to bring the horse inside the wall, they chose to do it. This reassertion of the role of choice in the hands of leaders does not imply that leaders are free to do whatever they want but neither are they determined in their actions by the situations they find themselves in. In particular I have been concerned to illustrate the difficulty of separating the situation from the leaders because the former is often a consequence of the latter, in short leaders provide accounts of the world that are implicit in our understanding of 'the situation'.

I then suggested that the limits of contingency theory and the utility of social constructivist approaches might be enhanced by considering the way situations tend to be categorized into one of three types: Tame, Wicked and Critical, and that these three forms can be associated with three different forms of power or resource: calculative, ideological and coercive. The combination of problem analysis and resource availability or preference generates a typology of authority that repositions Leadership as the authority form most suited for the collective addressing of Wicked Problems, while Management is more suited to the deployment of tried and tested processes to resolve Tame Problems. A third category, Critical Problems, generates a compelling case for using some form of coercion by a Command form of authority.

The critical points, then, are twofold. First, it is not *which* context should determine what form of problem exists and what kind of authority is appropriate, but what kind of persuasive account of the context renders it as a specific kind of problem that, in turn, legitimates a certain form of authority. Second, that Leadership may be an appropriate form of authority for coping with Wicked Problems which are perceived as intractable, but this is often constituted as indecisiveness by the opponents of the formal leader(s) and generates what may be considered the Irony of Leadership: it is so difficult to achieve that even where the formal leader(s) may be consider it appropriate and even necessary, they may be very unwilling to attempt it.

I then used this typology as a heuristic device to try and understand

three asymmetric case studies. The first case related to the Brent Spar controversy when what seemed to Shell to be a Tame Problem requiring Management action was turned into Critical Problem by and through the coercive acts of Greenpeace activists who had tried to keep it as a Wicked Problem. The result cannot be explained by an objective understanding of the danger posed by the oil platform but rather by the ability of Greenpeace to represent the situation in a radically different way from that presented by Shell: this was not a Tame Problem that required Managing but a Critical Problem requiring the coercion of occupations, boycotts and protests.

The second application considered the Cuban Missile Crisis when hard-line groups in both the USSR and the USA attempted to portray the situation as Critical, requiring immediate resort to coercive military force, while John Kennedy initially and Nikita Khrushchev eventually tried to keep the situation as Wicked to enable them to delay decision-making, to use questions to secure appropriate information and consensus, and ultimately to engineer a management solution by adopting conventional negotiating strategies.

The third and largest case concerned the War on Terror. The increasingly divisive nature of the War on Terror, at least in its manifestation in Iraq, is usually explained – by both sides – as rooted in a basic misunderstanding of the nature of reality and/or rooted in the self-interest of those involved heavily disguised to retain support. But a more useful approach may be to reconfigure the active construction of the problem by various parties that are based upon legitimating their preferred or available sources of power. This was composed of two key problems: the danger of uncertainty and the avoidance of collaboration. Both, in theory, could be managed through a reliance on Coercion or Hard Power: the overwhelming military strength of the US-dominated coalition would be used, in isolation if necessary, to coerce Iraq into submission, thus creating the space for a problem transition from Critical to Tame that could be solved through the managed process of a democratic election. The difficulty for the coalition is that, ironically, any perceived 'failure' of a Command solution actually facilitates the constitution of the very Wicked Problem they have been trying to avoid; in effect it compounds rather than resolves the problem. The difficulty for their opponents relates to a different irony, the Irony of Leadership, because to configure the problem as Wicked implies a long term collaborative approach to the issue that their opponents in turn, and successfully in the US November Presidential Election, configure as the indecisiveness fatal to a Commander in a Crisis.

The implications of the approach are not restricted to political organizations as the Brent Spar case implies. In many cases in business the context is not the framework within which business leaders operate but part of the arena that they struggle to control. Hence, CEOs should not be assessed

against their ability to 'read' the business environment but rather their ability to render that environment suitable for their intended strategies. Of course, this also implies that this rendering process is not simply another contingency but rather an element in the competition between different accounts, between different interests and between different decision-makers. It may not be a 'war of all against all' but it is certainly more of a political arena than is implied by the rational heads of contingency theorists. In effect, we should spend less time trying to analyse the decision-making of formal decision-makers on the basis of 'objective' or 'scientific' understanding of 'the situation' that faces them – as suggested by conventional contingency theories – and more time considering the persuasive mechanisms that decision-makers use to render situations more tractable and compliant to their own preferred form of authority: what we seem to have is not *situational* decision-making but *situated* decision-making, the 'situation' is not a noun but a verb.

Notes

1   http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4199618.stm.
2   http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/921524.stm.
3   This case is draw from the following: http://www.uyseg.org/risked/pages/spar/spar_index.htm; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brent_Spar; http://www.gre.ac.uk/~bj61/talessi/tlr3.html.
4   http://www.frs-scotland.gov.uk.
5   There are five levels for DEFCON: DEFCON 5 Normal peacetime readiness; DEFCON 4 Normal, increased intelligence and strengthened security measures; DEFCON 3 Increase in force readiness above normal readiness; DEFCON 2 Further increase in force readiness, but less than maximum readiness; DEFCON 1 Maximum force readiness.
6   http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq_casualties.htm.
7   http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq_casualties_notes.htm.
8   http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2004/pr61/en/.
9   Quoted on http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3713614.stm.

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