Explaining Political Judgement

What is political judgement? Why do politicians exhibit such contrasting thought styles in making decisions, even when they agree ideologically? What happens when governments with contrasting thought styles have to deal with each other? In this book Perri 6 presents a fresh, rigorous, explanatory theory of judgement, its varieties and its consequences, drawing upon Durkheim and Douglas. He argues that policymakers will understand – and misunderstand – their problems and choices in ways that reproduce their own social organisation. This theory is developed by using the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 as an extended case study, examining the decision-making of the Kennedy, Castro and Khrushchev régimes. Explaining political judgement is the first comprehensive study to show what a neo-Durkheimian institutional approach can offer to political science and to the social sciences generally.

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Explaining Political Judgement

Perri 6
Contents

List of figures vi
List of tables vii
Acknowledgements viii
Epigraph ix

1 On political judgement 1
2 The need for richer explanation 16
3 A Durkheimian theoretical framework 53
4 October 1962, before and after 115
5 The Khrushchev régime 161
6 The Kennedy administration 202
7 The Castro revolutionary régime 245
8 Implications 271
9 Coda 290

Notes on the text 295
References 311
Index 339
Figures

Figure 1.1 Types of problem requiring decision  page 8
Figure 3.1 Understandings of institutions  57
Figure 3.2 Forms of social organisation and disorganisation  69
Figure 3.3 Structure of underlying causal mechanism  82
Figure 3.4 A structural typology of elementary forms of network relations  84
Figure 3.5 Hypotheses about the institutional forms of the three governments in October 1962  104
# Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.1</td>
<td>Types of relationship between informal and formal institutions</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.2</td>
<td>Institutional styles of ritual and rhetoric</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.3</td>
<td>Styles of issue linkage</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.1</td>
<td>Framing issue linkage in ExComm</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table N3.1</td>
<td>Models of substantive individualistic ordering</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Epigraph

I

Everybody complains of his memory, but nobody of his judgement.
La Rochefoucauld (1958 [1665], 48)

The great danger and risk in all of this is a miscalculation – a mistake in judgment.
John Fitzgerald Kennedy, President of the United States, 1960–63, Tuesday, 23 October 1962, in conversation with Robert Kennedy, Attorney-General; Kenneth O’Donnell, special adviser; and Theodore Sorensen, special counsel, as reported in Kennedy (1968, 65).

You will never know how much bad advice I had.
John Fitzgerald Kennedy on the Cuban missile crisis, private conversation with John Kenneth Galbraith.¹

II

[Events and results, especially in war, depend for the most part on fortune, which will not conform or subject itself to our reason or foresight . . . our opinions and deliberations depend on fortune just as much, and that she involves our reason too in her uncertainties and confusion.

We are trying to get ourselves out of this avantyura [reckless gamble] and now you are pulling us into another one!
Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, Chairman of the Presidium and First Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR, to Vasili Kuznetsov, First Deputy Foreign Minister, 22 October 1962 (Zubok and Pleshakov, 1996, 260–261)

III

If [the imperialists] actually carry out the brutal act of invading Cuba in violation of international law and morality, that would be the moment to eliminate such danger forever through an act of clear legitimate defence, however harsh and terrible the solution would be, for there is no other.
Fidel Castro, Prime Minister of Cuba, to Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, 26 October 1962 (Blight et al., 2002, 509–510)