



**Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive**  
**DSpace Repository**

---

Faculty and Researchers

Faculty and Researchers' Publications

---

2006-12

**Book Review by James Russell of Calculating  
Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats**

Russell, James

---

Contemporary Security Policy, Vol.27, No.3 (December 2006), pp.543-558  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/38373>

*Downloaded from NPS Archive: Calhoun*



Calhoun is a project of the Dudley Knox Library at NPS, furthering the precepts and goals of open government and government transparency. All information contained herein has been approved for release by the NPS Public Affairs Officer.

**Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School**  
**411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle**  
**Monterey, California USA 93943**

<http://www.nps.edu/library>

*Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats*, Daryl Press. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005, pp.161. \$32.50 (hardback).

As American troops flowed into the Persian Gulf during the winter of 2002 and spring of 2003, periodic signs of a potential diplomatic solution caused much fear and loathing in the neoconservative pundit community. Saddam's permission to allow arms inspectors to re-enter Iraq in the fall of 2002 was met by desperate, shrill howls of protest from neoconservative commentators like Charles Krauthammer and Eliot Cohen, who argued that the United States couldn't very well build up its forces in the Gulf and then somehow allow Saddam to wriggle free once again. Such an outcome, it was argued, would damage American credibility and demonstrate weakness – when strength and seriousness of purpose were most needed.

Despite the plethora of books analysing the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, comparatively little of this analysis frames the role that 'credibility' had in building the assumptive framework that led the Bush administration down the path towards the Iraq invasion. This is surprising, since the architects of the Iraq invasion unanimously decried the supposed decline of American power and prestige under the Clinton administration, which, according to these analysts, had only emboldened transnational terrorists and rogue regimes like Saddam Hussein. Reasserting American power and influence using force if necessary to rein in actors like Saddam would, it was argued, restore America's standing in the world and serve notice to friends and foes alike of American intent to reassert its mantle of global hegemony.

In his book *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats*, Daryl Press, associate professor of political science at Dartmouth, takes on the concept of 'credibility' as a decision-making factor drawn upon by policy-makers in military confrontations. In this welcome addition to the literature, Press effectively strips away the intellectual and theoretical veneer surrounding this concept by determining the role that actor credibility played in guiding the bargaining process and policy responses during several notable 20<sup>th</sup>-century military crises. In so doing, Press provides an important added dimension to realist and neo-realist international relations theory, which argues that states are guided primarily by rational analysis and balance of power considerations.

Through extensive research from declassified archives and other primary sources, Press dissects three case studies to determine the role that credibility played in discerning actor intent: the 'appeasement' crises of Munich prior to World War II, US-Soviet interactions during the 1958–61 Berlin crises, and the 1961 Cuban missile crisis. Press looks at each of these crises in the context of the 'past actions theory' of actor credibility, which holds that that past patterns of actor behaviour provide an indication of how the adversary is likely to react during a military crisis and, as a result, serves as a guide to policy actions by other actors in the bargaining framework. According to this theory, for example, Hitler would have been emboldened by the West's allowing him to occupy the Sudetenland and to carve up Czechoslovakia. Moreover, the theory suggests that the United States and Britain would not have treated Khrushchev's repeated threats to Berlin seriously as a result of the series of ultimatums that came and went in the crisis without Soviet action.

Press's meticulously sourced analysis, however, shows that the calculations of Hitler and that of the Allies in Berlin were almost totally based on clear-headed calculations about the balance of power and that perceptions of actor credibility based on past actions played little or no role in crafting their responses during the respective crises. In other words, the evidence indicates that Hitler's decision to invade Poland was shaped not by the demonstrations of allied weakness at Munich but by his calculations of the balance of power that gradually grew to favour Germany during the late 1930s. Hitler overcame the opposition of a sceptical German general staff not with arguments about weakened allied credibility, but with clear-headed geopolitical and balance of power arguments. Likewise, the approach of American and British officials to the Berlin crises were shaped not by Khrushchev's repeated missed deadlines, but by their analysis of the conventional and nuclear balance of power between the adversaries in which they recognised that escalation to a nuclear exchange was all but inevitable once hostilities started.

Press convincingly argues that the case studies support his 'current calculus theory', which suggests that actors are guided more by balance of power considerations that meld assessments of both military capabilities and actor intent. The Cuban missile crisis, according to Press, illustrates the utility of his current calculus theory in which US actions were shaped primarily by the realisation of nuclear parity with the Soviet Union and by Kennedy's desire to avoid escalation to a war he was convinced that nobody could win and which would result in the deaths of millions.

So what is the relevance of the book to foreign policy in the 21st century? Press argues that states should not use force as a tool to signal intent to protect vital interests elsewhere: 'Fighting unnecessary wars reveals one's weakness and reduces one's power for dealing with future crises over more important stakes (p.159)'. Consistent with this analysis, for example, the US now approaches the Iran nuclear crisis in a weakened state as a result of the unnecessary Iraq war.

In addition to the interesting case studies, the book is well written and approachable by military historians, political scientists and students interested in framing the issue of actor credibility in an easily-understood, commonsensical light. This reviewer highly recommends it for the bookshelves of all academics, students and policy professionals with an interest in these issues.

© James A. Russell, Senior Lecturer  
*Department of National Security Affairs*  
*Naval Postgraduate School*

*War and Human Nature*, Steven Peter Rosen. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005, pp.211. \$32.95/£21.50 (hardback).

Steven Rosen's *War and Human Nature* is simultaneously a trailblazing and frustrating book, one that opens exciting new perspectives on international relations while, at times, leaving us uncertain as to where, or how far, these paths actually lead.

The study of international relations in general, and war in particular, usually proceeds from either of two levels of analysis: the system of interacting states or the