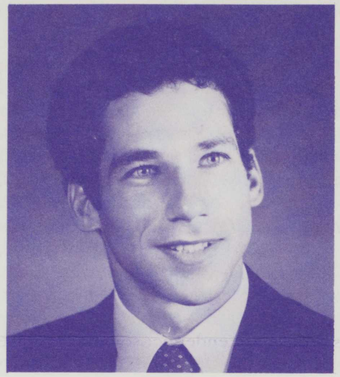
Beyond the Hotline:
How Crisis Control Can Prevent Nuclear War

by William L. Ury

William Ury is director of the Harvard Nuclear Negotiation Project. The following excerpts are drawn from his book of the same title, © William L. Ury, reprinted by permission.



In the days of King Arthur, Mordred, the king's son, rebelled and raised an army to overthrow his father. Two great hosts of knights met on the field of Camlan, but at the last moment father and son decided not to fight. Instead they called a truce and sent spokesmen forward to seek an agreement. Meanwhile, each army, suspecting a trick, stood poised for battle.

Negotiations were proceeding smoothly until a snake, slithering in the grass, suddenly bit one of the knights. The knight cried out and drew his sword to kill it. The assembled armies mistook this as a general signal for battle and sprang to the attack. By day's end, all but two of the one hundred thousand warriors lay dead. King Arthur and his son fought and killed each other, and with them perished Camelot, forever.

Today the nations of the West and the nations of the East face a similar danger. Each side has marshaled enormous military forces poised to strike at any moment. Fearing total mutual destruction, the two sides have been talking—but gingerly, suspiciously, and sometimes very little. An uneasy truce has lasted almost forty years. Yet, at any time, a regional conflict, a terrorist act, or an accident could suddenly ignite a deadly confrontation between the superpowers.

A Simple Signal

If we could rewrite the legend of Arthur and Mordred, we might choose to give father and son each a silver trumpet so that they could have blown them to signal their armies that a mistake had been made and that no battle was intended. A simple pair of trumpets would have permitted the peace talks to continue. Eventually the armies might have disbanded and Camelot might have survived.

Today the United States and the Soviet Union, and their allies around the world, need the equivalent of those silver trumpets. That is the subject of this book.

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We live in a world of crises . . . . To many, they seem like brush fires raging in different spots around the world, never very far from a highly combustible conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union with their huge nuclear arsenals. A single spark conceivably could start a fire that, if allowed to burn out of control, might ultimately become an inferno that destroys our societies. . . .

This book grapples with the questions: Is there a way out? Is there some way to begin to regain the control we appear to have lost over our collective and individual destinies? And is there some constructive way an individual can channel his concern into practical action? This book discusses the approach of crisis control: improving the ability of nations to halt crises before they become wars, and, better still, to prevent crises from erupting in the first place. Crisis control offers one of the most promising opportunities today to reduce the risk of nuclear war.

To explain the significance of this approach requires returning to the question of how a nuclear war between superpowers could ever come about. On first thought, it seems inconceivable. No leader in his right mind would deliberately launch a nuclear attack, because it would only provoke a devastating retaliation. It would be tantamount to national suicide.

Unfortunately, however, there exists another path to war. It receives less attention than does the danger of deliberate attack, but it is real nonetheless—perhaps even more so. It is the path of miscalculation in time of intense crisis, of miscommunication, of human blunders and organizational foul-ups. It is the path not of cool calculation but of runaway escalation. . . .

1914 . . . 1962 . . .

This is what happened in the summer of 1914. On June 28 Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir apparent to the Austrian throne, was assassinated in the sleepy provincial town of Sarajevo. The murder, a tragic but comparatively minor incident, nonetheless ignited a European crisis. No leader wanted a world war. Throughout the month of July, each tried to prevent it or at least to limit it. But through a combination of miscalculations, misunderstandings, and rigidly laid plans, the crisis escalated out of control by August into a war that continued for four years and decimated a generation of young Europeans.

The danger has continued into the nuclear age. During the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, both President John F. Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev were desperately anxious to avoid war, yet each was conscious of how all too easily the situation could slip out of their control. Kennedy calculated, rightly or wrongly, the odds of war at "somewhere between one out of three and even." Khrushchev described the crisis as a time "when the smell of burning hung in the air." He pleaded with Kennedy not to pull any tighter on "the knot of war."

What makes a crisis so treacherous? Most crises, including U.S.-Soviet confrontations, are ignited by the spark of some sudden event. As in July 1914 or October 1962, decision makers are quickly compelled to make life-and-death decisions with little time to decide, a dangerously high level of uncertainty, and few usable options to choose from. Under these conditions, even the most rational decision makers can miscalculate or miscommunicate. One human error often triggers another. A hasty decision to escalate in order to protect one's interests may provoke a similar escalation by the other side, which in turn impels the first side to escalate still further. A point may soon be reached in this action-reaction cycle when the decision makers simply lose control and war breaks out.

This is the process of runaway escalation. It may be the most likely path to nuclear war. At its heart is the human factor—the propensity to make mistakes in time of intense crisis. Against this no number of weapons, no threat of retaliation, can offer protection. Deterrence asumes that the other side will decide rationally. It may not work against nonrational and irrational behavior by people and organizations. . . .

Like fires, crises are endemic; some are accidental, others are caused deliberately. In either case, they can be effectively stopped before they go out of control. For instance, a joint U.S.-Soviet crisis control center—half in Washington, half in Moscow, linked by instant teleconferencing—could monitor possible dangers and stand ready to help defuse a crisis on a moment's notice. The two sides could agree on standard procedures to keep a spark from being ignited when their worldwide forces come in contact with each other. . . . The president and his advisers could receive a detailed briefing, just before entering office, on what is known about controlling crises. Such institutions and procedures would be central elements of a crisis control system.

Can such a system work between nations that are in deep-seated conflict with each other? In some ways, it already does. Every even hour on the hour, an American officer in the Pentagon sends a message on the Hotline to his Soviet counterpart in Moscow; every odd hour on the hour, he receives a message back. Continually tested, the Hotline comes into use during times of high tension. The president and the Soviet premier communicate directly to defuse crises, as they already have, for example, over the Middle East war of 1967 and the Lebanon crisis of 1982.

Hotlines and Cool Heads

Consider, too, that around the world, at each moment of the day, Soviet and American naval vessels and planes are following each other, sometimes coming dangerously close. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, this practice led to numerous collisions and near-misses. Since 1972, however, with the signing of the Incidents at Sea Agreement, these "close encounters" have drastically decreased. Captains in both navies have special rule books that tell them how to communicate and avoid accidents. Every six months, in times of high tension as well as in more normal times, officers from both navies meet to review the process.

The Hotline and the Incidents at Sea Agreement are two initial building blocks of a crisis control system. Learning from their success, we can create a full-fledged system to prevent runaway escalation.

Such steps are politically feasible. Both the superpowers want to eliminate the risk of unintended war; and crisis control does not evoke the fears of military inferiority that stymie the arms talks. The time is right, too; interest is growing. In June 1984 the United States Senate voted 82 to 0 for a resolution, originally offered by Senators Sam Nunn of Georgia and John Warner of Virginia, urging the president to propose a crisis control center to the Soviets. Shortly thereafter, both nations agreed to improve the Hotline, allowing it to transmit pages of information almost instantaneously. . . .

This book is not about "command, control, communication, and intelligence" (or c^3i), the technical term for unilateral measures to improve control over one's nuclear forces. Admittedly, though, each side's c^3i systems are extremely important to its ability to control crises. Nor is this book about traditional "confidence-building measures," such as agreements by NATO and the Warsaw Pact nations to exchange observers during troop movements. Instead, this book focuses on new measures the United States, the Soviet Union, and other nations can take *together* to prevent and stop crises.

Crisis control is in no way a substitute for arms reductions, improved relations, or deterrence. It is an essential complement to all three, a systematic handling of the human factor. It deals with the most likely way war might occur. It is practical and politically feasible. Comparatively little has been done so far. For all these reasons, crisis control offers great promise as a means of reducing the nuclear danger.

Whether you favor the nuclear freeze or oppose it, whether you believe in peace through strength or peace through disarmament, whether you believe you can act constructively or despair of the ineffectiveness of action, crisis control should be of keen interest. Because it is common sense, crisis control is common ground.

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Caveat

A word of caution is in order. A crisis control system is not without pitfalls and risks. Crisis control contains a basic paradox. The very information that leaders should have during a crisis in order to control and end it is often the same information that, if available before the crisis, might lead to overconfidence. Having a crisis control system could conceivably cause leaders to relax in times of crisis or even to take risks they would not take without the system. However, just as people did not turn their backs on the invention of smoke detectors for fear everyone would grow careless with matches, so it would not be wise for this reason alone to pass up creating a new generation of crisis control measures. . . .

Finally, some fear that the creation of a crisis control system could breed a false confidence that the nuclear danger has been disposed of and that efforts to reduce weapons and improve relations could be relaxed. Ironically, crisis control, far from being a rival approach, is a twin. Just as emergency care and regular monitoring can give a heart disease patient the time to implement a long-term prevention program of diet and exercise, so effective crisis control can help provide the time needed for genuine and significant arms reductions and for developing a better working relationship between the United States and the USSR. There is no room for complacency in working toward limiting weapons and relaxing tensions, nor is there any in working toward preventing the runaway escalation of a crisis.