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# Lesson 27

## Factors That Influence Presidential Decision Making

### Objective

- To apply the factors that influence presidential decision making to the Cuban Missile Crisis

### Notes to the Teacher

These factors that influence presidential decision making fit well with lessons on the executive branch. These factors may be grouped in three main categories: circumstances of the decision, individual characteristics of the decision maker (president), and other factors or limitations. Each factor is of varying importance, depending on the decision. For example, available resources were very important to Truman's decision to drop the bomb, while personal beliefs were most important to Richard Nixon's decision to make tapes. Every presidential decision can be evaluated with these factors.

These factors make an excellent, outline for use by students viewing the videotape "Missiles of October," starring William Devane. This tape is available from the producer, Maljack Productions, Inc., a local library, or a video store. The tape provides an excellent look at the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and the decisions of President John F. Kennedy.

Going over the factors and explaining them with examples (*not* from 1962) gives students a framework to use as they watch the video. An outline of these factors is provided at the end of the procedure section. Students use **Handout 27** and apply three factors as they view "Missiles of October."

### Procedure

1. On the first day of this lesson present and discuss, with the class, the factors that influence presidential decision making. (See Notes to the Teacher and the outline provided at the end of the procedure section.) Use lots

of examples for each factor. The outline can be used as a student handout and discussed as an alternate method.

2. On the second day of this lesson distribute **Handout 27** and begin showing the videotape. Remind students to realize that the video portrays many decisions made by President Kennedy, not just one or two. Stop the video with five minutes left in the class period and review the factors students have observed.
3. On the third and fourth days of this lesson continue to show the video. Stop the video with ten minutes left in the class period and review the work sheet and students' observations.
4. After students have seen the entire videotape, conclude the activity in one of the following ways.
  - A. Distribute **Handout 27** again as a quiz.
  - B. Collect and grade the students' work sheets.
  - C. Conduct a discussion or oral review of students' work.

Suggested Responses:

**Time Available**—*one day to contract the arc of the blockade, hours to stop campaigning and return to Washington*

**Amount of Prior Study and Preparation**—*much general information of Cuban "threat," not ready for nuclear weapons*

**Importance of the Issue**—*potential nuclear war on blockade had the world at risk; Little importance; the decision to see The Sound of Music*

**Personal Beliefs**—*liberal, anti-war, personal challenge*

**Prior Experience**—*Bay of Pigs, Vienna Conference, Berlin Wall (all saw J.F.K. back down to Soviets).*

**Style of Decision Making**—*small group, large group, and individual*

**Formal Rules**—commander-in-chief, Monroe  
Doctrine

**Informal Rules**—contact with Congress, use  
of the press protocol in White House office

**Available Resources**—U-2 planes and pic-  
tures, ships for the blockade

**Status Relationships**—Robert Kennedy,  
Dean Rusk, Joint Chiefs of Staff

**External Decision Makers**—Khrushchev, U  
Thant

**Public Opinion**—contracting the arc of the  
blockade

## Factors that Influence Presidential Decision Making

**Time Available**—How much (quantity) time does the president have?  
If severe time constraints are involved, the situation is defined as a crisis.

**Amount of Prior Study and Preparation**—Readiness  
The decision to try to send an individual to the moon would involve this factor.

**Importance of the Issue**—How important is the issue really?

**Personal Beliefs**—The president’s political ideology as well as any other convictions that influence decision making (i.e., Nixon and tapes)

**Prior Experience**—Previous experience  
This factor is one of the most important in considering George Bush’s decision making regarding foreign intelligence.

**Style of Decision Making**—How the president makes decisions (by himself (Truman), with advice of inner circle or small group (Carter), or with advice of a large group of 8–10 close advisors)

**Formal Rules**—Written rules such as the Constitution, federal laws, or international treaties

**Informal Rules**—Tradition, protocol, or unwritten rules that govern behavior of the president (i.e., “chain of command” in White House Office)

**Available Resources**—Tangible things that the president has at his disposal  
The two bombs available to Truman heavily influenced his decision of what kind of target to choose.

**Status Relationships**—People who have face-to-face contact with the president and influence his decision (Henry Kissinger was a status relationship for Richard Nixon)

**External Decision Makers**—People who influence the president but never actually communicate with him (i.e., the hostages influenced Carter’s attempted rescue)

**Public Opinion**—The opinion of the populace  
Public opinion is a tough factor because presidents have so much influence on it, it is sometimes difficult to determine which came first, the decision or public opinion.

## **Factors That Influence Presidential Decision Making**

Explain each factor and give an example from “The Missiles of October.”

1. Circumstances of the decision—(Make it clear from which presidential decision you’re getting your examples.)
  - A. Time Available
  - B. Amount of Prior Study and Preparation
  - C. Importance of the Issue
  
2. Individual Characteristics—J.F. Kennedy
  - A. Personal Beliefs
  - B. Prior Experience
  - C. Style of Decision-making
  
3. Other Limitations
  - A. Formal Rules
  - B. Informal Rules
  - C. Available Resources
  - D. External Decision-makers
  - E. Status Relationships
  - F. Public Opinion