INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE:

Most of the time we are abundantly unaware of the conflicting values and possibilities that policymakers face. As a result, we feel unencumbered in criticizing the decisions that were made. If you have been at a football game or a baseball game and criticized the coach’s or manager’s strategy, you might ask yourself: how likely is it that I know more than the decision-maker does? The answer is you don’t. You know a lot less. Humility is the first lesson to absorb if we are to have responsible decision-making. On the other hand, democracy requires that we participate and try to understand as best we can from the bleachers, so to speak, what is actually happening on the field. That said, the purpose of this course is to help you understand better the complexities of decision-making in the policy world from several perspectives. These include: the reliability of information; information analytics (foreign policy analysis and policy analysis); how many variables are in play and do we know what they are, i.e., the role of contingency in decision-making (what can go wrong? anticipated reactions from others? how will choices be perceived?), the political parameters that decision makers face (will their popularity fall or increase? will they stir up increased opposition and lose critical pieces of their political coalition?); the role of values, morality, and precedent in choices. For example, there has been only one country that has actually used a nuclear weapon in warfare. Was that justified or not? Similarly, racial segregation in public accommodations was an undeniable wrong. Yet there was no direct remedy for it in the U.S. Constitution other than the one sentence clause dealing with the regulation of inter-state commerce. Was it an appropriate use of the commerce clause to regulate a non-inter-state business establishment for purchasing catsup or mustard manufactured elsewhere? These are among the difficult dilemmas to consider.
We need also to know something about the psychology of the human animal. People tend to think as Daniel Kahneman (a noble prize winner in economics) has it in fast and slow. Slow means deliberative and analytic. Fast means reflexive and often susceptibility to the way something is phrased or immediately perceived. How we think, especially the person responsible for final decision-making, can make the difference between life and death, between success and failure, and even between modest failure and catastrophic failure. Whether or not we see a problem as complex or simple is a function of whether we utilize our analytic (slow) or our primed (fast) cognitive processes.

We also need to understand how people behave in contexts. Organizations help define how we look at things and our roles within organizations help prime our thinking. Our peers also help prime our thinking. These priors form the lenses through which we see things. At their most rigid, we refer to these as ideologies or in organizations as cultures.

Uncertainty is often a key element in difficult decisions. In some instances, evidence may be relatively clear but in others ambiguity is the norm. Do we err by doing the false positive (doing something that did not require action) or by doing the false negative (not doing something that did require action).

Politics is a central part of decision-making complexity. After all, even if a decision can be analytically or empirically justified, is it in the political interests of the decision maker to make decisions that run against the interests of political coalitions, key constituencies, or “public opinion”? If we think that politicians are unsavory characters, and undoubtedly some are, then we think open political processes are inferior to having benevolent despots or enlightened but inaccessible experts. In other words, there is a potential conflict between expert judgment such as that is and democratic political processes such as these are.

Finally, ethics and moral issues often come into play. And these have a great deal to do with whether we define morality in absolute or relative terms. But all choices reflect values and how we allocate them. The budgets of governments and their allocation and the taxes paid by different sectors of the public are simply allocations of value.
This is an unusual seminar; let’s call it an experiment. There will be a limited set of required readings and much of this will come all at one time. In the first part of the seminar, I will try to provide a framework for thinking about difficult decisions, noting that while there are some inherent features of such decisions including the stakes involved, the uncertainties and risks attached to choices, for example, much is in the eye of the beholder. Compare and contrast the characteristics of two decision-makers: the late Al McDonald, the management guru in the Carter White House, described the principal, President Carter as a 52-48/48-52 person; almost every decision was a close call. His successor, President Reagan, on the other hand claimed that there were no easy problems but there were simple solutions. What kind of decision-maker are you? What kind would you have the most or least confidence in?

After we discuss the framework, we will read and discuss some materials for the course. This will require you to have read the material and to think about it and be prepared to speak about it. I will expect everyone to participate. You do not have the right to remain silent!

By mid-September, we will have a list of topics and cases for you to research, give a preliminary report on, and write a research paper that elaborates the parameters noted above, i.e., the various perspectives on choices and the role of uncertainty in them. Each of you should think of this report as a kind of briefing paper carefully laying out alternative perspectives and then setting forth and justifying a course of recommended action (which may include inaction!). You are moving now from the stands to the playing field. So, after the first week of November, students will start their preliminary reports with an oral presentation and have the opportunity to get some constructive feedback for their papers. I anticipate that you will come to see me and/or my assistant, Charles Wu, multiple times as you work your way through the topic you choose.

In addition, there will be a midterm exam covering some of the ideas in the readings and in class.
Books to be Purchased:


I will also sprinkle a few additional readings and send these to you.

Evaluation

The research project will constitute 50% of your grade. (Suggested length of paper + bibliography approximately 20-25 pps.)

Class participation will constitute another 25%.

The midterm exam will count for a further 25%.

Note: The midterm will be calculated into your grade only if you have performed better or no worse on it than on your research project. Should you do better on your final project, I will drop the midterm grade.

Course Objectives

The idea of the course is to move you from the grandstand to the playing field, so to speak. You should understand that decision-makers are juggling a variety of considerations. Uncertainty of outcomes is real. Uncertainty or Certainty of mind is highly variable. At the very least, it should sensitize you to when hot air displaces thought.
Schedule

**Week 1, August 25, 27**
Introduction and Framework

**Week 2**
September 1
Framework Continued

September 3
No Class

**Week 3**
September 8, 10
Research Topics and
Some Difficult Decisions (Cases)

**Week 4**
September 15, 17

**Week 5**
September 22, 24
Reading: Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*.
   <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/27/your-money/27shortcuts.html?_r=0>

**Week 6**
September 29, October 1
Reading: Hudson, *Deficits and Debt: The Politics of Taxing, Spending, and Borrowing*
Week 7
October 6, October 8
Reading: Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*

Week 8
October 13
No Class – Fall Break
October 15
No Class

Week 9
October 20 & 22
No Class

Note:* This interregnum would be an excellent opportunity to meet with Charles Wu as you bounce ideas off of him for your project which you should be sure to have begun earlier.

Week 10
October 27
Reading
Lawrence J. Korb, “Why It’s OK for Obama to Ignore Military Advice”, DefenseOne, September 19, 2014
Week 11
November 3 & 5
Contemporary Hard Decision Problems

Week 12
November 10 & 12
Presentations of Preliminary Research Papers

Week 13
November 17 & 19
Presentations of Preliminary Research Papers

Week 14
November 24 & 26
TG Week – No Class

Week 15
December 1 & 3
Presentations of Preliminary Research Papers