

Mundt, and their collaborators seek patterns in the progress and outcome of political crises—patterns describable in terms of four kinds of conceptual approaches. One of these approaches is variably referred to as game theory, coalition theory, or rational choice theory.¹⁰ Its distinctive contribution is described as the systematic appraisal of how choices among possible winning coalitions can influence the outcome of regime-threatening crises. By distinguishing winning coalitions from potential, effective, or preferred coalitions and by emphasizing the impact of polarization during crisis situations on choices among potentially winning coalitions, scenarios of “depolarization” and crisis resolution can be mapped.¹¹

Brian Barry’s detailed consideration of this work suggests that when two complementary coalitions each represent possibly winning coalitions, civil war is threatened. Using language which corresponds closely to Gramsci’s description of the stalemate between opposing blocs likely to produce wars of maneuver, Barry asserts that a polity wherein such an alignment prevails can no longer be considered “operationally constitutional.”¹²

In wars of maneuver over possible disengagement from closely held peripheral territories, formation of a stronger new “winning coalition” would not eliminate risks of regime breakdown. As with regime recomposition, however, an appropriate coalition realignment would make it more likely that governing elites favoring disengagement would not be deterred from attempts to cross the state-contraction threshold by pursuing decisive policies.

Crossing the Regime Threshold in Britain and France

The Ulster Crisis and the Decomposition of the Irish Question

In 1912 and 1913, Churchill had been among those ministers most desirous of accepting the decomposition of the Irish problem as a means of avoiding a regime crisis. As that crisis reached its climax in March 1914, he was the leader of those seeking to sharpen it as a means of destroying the political base of the antiregime coalition. Churchill’s turnabout corresponded to a similar movement in Lloyd George’s thinking. At a closely guarded dinner meeting in November 1913, Lloyd George had proposed to four key members of the cabinet—Asquith, Crewe, Haldane, and Grey—the *temporary* exclusion of heavily Protestant Ulster counties. The purpose of this serial decomposition strategy was to “knock all moral props from under Carson’s rebellion, and either make it impossible for Ulster to take up arms, or if they did, put us in a strong position with British public opinion when we came to suppress it.”¹³

Asquith's March 9 proposal for a six-year exclusion amendment (an option to be exercised by any county choosing, in a plebiscite, to do so) was perfectly consistent with this strategy. Clearly it was an attempt to isolate Milner, Bonar Law, Carson, Craig, and the UVF from the sympathy of British public opinion by removing from the establishment of a Home Rule Parliament in Dublin the drama of physically having to overcome loyalist resistance in Ulster. Warnings of resistance were made to appear all the more unreasonable, and illegitimate, because such appeals for spilling British blood would pertain to a situation (automatic inclusion within the jurisdiction of the Dublin Parliament) not due to arise until after two national elections would allow the arrangement to be scuttled by a new government. When Carson took the bait by refusing the offer out of hand, the government, or at least Churchill, Seely, and other members of the cabinet's Irish Committee, thought the time had arrived for decisive action.

This was the setting for Churchill's March 14 speech at Bradford in which he sought to rally public opinion in preparation for a violent showdown over home rule in Ireland. Churchill began by portraying Asquith's offer for a six-year exclusion as more than any opponent of Irish home rule could legitimately demand of a government legally empowered to enforce home rule over the entire island.

What are we to say of persons, professing to be serious, who are ready, so they tell us, to shed the blood of their fellow men, all because they won't take the trouble to walk into the polling-booth and mark a voting paper?

. . . After this offer has been made any unconstitutional action by Ulster can only wear . . . the aspect of unprovoked aggression, and I am sure and certain that the first British soldier or coastguard, bluejacket, or Royal Irish Constabulary man who is attacked and killed by an Orangeman will raise an explosion in this country (cheers) of a kind they little appreciate or understand, and will shake to its very foundations the basis and structure of society.¹⁴

Churchill cast Ulster Protestants and their die-hard British supporters as violent, dangerous men, engaged in a "treasonable conspiracy" to defy British democracy, wreck British institutions, and kill British soldiers for their narrow and fanatic beliefs. Faced with such a challenge, and in defense of the supremacy of the will of Parliament, the government, declared Churchill, was willing to shed a good deal of Ulster Protestant blood: "Bloodshed, gentlemen, no doubt is lamentable. I have seen some of it—more perhaps than many of those who talk about it with such levity. (Hear, hear.) But there are worse things than bloodshed, even on an extreme scale."¹⁵

In terms of the four rescaling mechanisms presented above, the strategy

developed by Lloyd George and articulated by Churchill employed serial decomposition as a tactical device to shape the dimensions of a regime crisis—a crisis that would be exploited rather than avoided. The key element in this strategy, however, was not problem decomposition but the mobilization of new political resources to be made available by the regime crisis itself. These resources, in the form of widespread “patriotic” support for national institutions and British soldiers under fire, and fear of continuing civil and economic dislocations, would be used to construct a Caesarist bloc—a realignment of political forces based on change in the kind of preferences the British public (including large numbers of Conservative party voters) would perceive as relevant to judging government efforts to contract the state. “Mr. Bonar Law says in effect if there is civil war in Ulster it will spread to England too,” Churchill stated. I agree with him. I go further. Once resort is had to violence by the leaders of a great British party Ulster and Ulster’s affairs will dwindle to comparative insignificance.” Thus would the regime crisis be used as an opportunity to redefine the issue in the mind of the British public, to encourage the substitution of higher-order preferences for whatever specific sympathies Britons might have for “kith and kin” in Ulster.

This will be the issue—whether civil and Parliamentary government in these realms is to be beaten down by the menace of armed force. Whatever sympathies we have for Ulster we need have no compunction here. It is the old battle-ground of English history. It is the issue fought out 250 years ago on the field of Marston Moor. From the language which is employed it would almost seem that we are face to face with a disposition on the part of some sections of the proprietary classes to subvert Parliamentary government, and to challenge all the civil and constitutional foundations of society. Against such a mood, wherever it manifests itself in action, there is no lawful measure from which the Government should shrink, and there is no lawful measure from which this Government will shrink.¹⁶

Churchill intended to follow up this speech with arrests and troop movements that would provoke UVF violence and set the stage for a military crackdown in Ulster. If substantial resistance was offered, political and legal justification would exist for the forcible dissolution of the UVF and its British support groups, accompanied by prosecution on charges of sedition of Carson, Milner, Bonar Law, and others. From heroes and respected political leaders, they would be reduced to criminals. It was a risky strategy. It meant calling the bluff of the antidisengagement coalition, raising real and pervasive fears of violent disorder, and then using those fears to reduce British sympathy for demands that Ulster be given special treatment based on the “loyalty” of its Protestant Unionist inhabitants. If

the strategy was successful, home rule would have an excellent chance of being effected over the whole of Ireland. If unsuccessful, the strategy would result in bloody confrontation, a divided army, and an open-ended struggle over the integrity of the post-Parliament Act constitutional order. The record shows that these were not risks Asquith was prepared to run.

Asquith at least tentatively endorsed some version of this strategy, but backed away from it when confronted with evidence of army unrest. He had appointed General Nevil Macready as, in effect, military governor of Belfast. Macready was known for his effective use of troops to quell disturbances among striking miners and for his antipathy toward the Ulster Unionist movement. Asquith also presided over meetings at the War Office of Churchill's cabinet subcommittee on Ireland, during which the coming confrontation was discussed in detail. As a result of these meetings, orders were issued for the dispatch of three battalions into Ulster, despite clear warnings from Paget (commander in chief in Ireland) that serious trouble in Ulster would result, including UVF attempts to prevent the railroads from being used to carry his soldiers. Paget was promised "as many troops as he needed 'even to the last man,'" while Churchill offered naval transport as an alternative to the railroads. Indeed, whether or not Asquith was aware of it, as first lord of the admiralty Churchill was deploying a fleet not only for logistical purposes or intimidation, but also for bombardment of Ulster fortifications.¹⁷

Instead of gambling on the army's loyalty and the ability of his government to rally public opinion, Asquith retreated. As reported in Chapter 6, the prime minister responded to the resignation of the Curragh officers, and to threats of disobedience elsewhere in the military, by in effect renouncing armed force to impose the terms of the Home Rule Bill on Ulster. The question of whether Churchill's strategy would have worked cannot be answered definitively. However reluctant the officers at the Curragh were to obey orders that would likely have led to bloodshed in Ulster, the incident could well have been handled in a way that would have preserved military options against the UVF.¹⁸

By preserving ambiguities, reinterpreting proposals, and avoiding decisive engagements, Asquith displayed his mastery of the British political game as played in the halls of Parliament and around the cabinet table.¹⁹ Although unsurpassed in the subtle shadings of incumbent-level partisanship, Asquith was incapable of rousing the public with dramatic gestures or clear-cut propositions, and was unprepared for the bold strokes and high risks associated with wars of maneuver.²⁰ His subsequent failure to inspire the British public, organize the national economy on a war footing, or bring quarreling generals to heel over policy on the western front led to his fall from the premiership in the middle of the First World War. In

retrospect, his shortcomings as a leader of a nation at war suggest how thoroughly inappropriate Asquith was, personally, for the role in which he was cast by Churchill's Irish strategy in March 1914. Instead it was Churchill, ordered to return the navy ships he had assembled to their bases and call off his plans for a systematic investment of Ulster, who was required to play a role defined by Asquith—that of misunderstood minister—indignantly denying there ever existed a “pogrom plot” against Ulster and repudiating the “hellish insinuation” that his purely precautionary steps had been designed as a deliberate provocation.²¹

The Basis of De Gaulle's Caesarist Strategy

A Recomposed Regime. The Constituent Assembly's opposition to de Gaulle's constitutional views (and to the advantages he would enjoy within a system designed according those views) was so intense that early in 1946 de Gaulle resigned as head of the provisional government and withdrew from ordinary political competition. As most expected, the Fourth Republic Constitution systematically benefited the existing political parties. Thanks to proportional representation and complex arrangements governing runoffs in fragmented constituencies, parties able to gain a small but significant percentage of the national vote were assured of representation in the Assembly. The Assembly itself was empowered to choose both the prime minister and the president. The president was a figurehead, but even the prime minister's powers were severely limited. Legislation proposed by the government was amended if not redrafted by parliamentary committees before its discussion on the floor. Both the prime minister and his cabinet were creatures of the Assembly—elected to it, approved by it, and subject to sudden dismissal following a failed vote of confidence. The institutional superiority of the Assembly over the government was expressed in the fact that it could dismiss one government and form another without calling new parliamentary elections.

As shown in Chapter 7, the result of this system was a fractionated Parliament and a series of short-lived governments based on negative majorities, most of which were incapable of sustaining bold initiatives in controversial areas, especially toward the most difficult problem of all—the future of Algeria. The shortcomings of the constitution were widely acknowledged. Attempts to strengthen the executive and rein in the power of the Assembly were made by every prime minister, from Mendès-France to Pflimlin. But one consequence of the system as established by the 1946 constitution was the inability of each of these governments (with the interesting but irrelevant exception of Pflimlin's three-week ministry) to agree