

Civ-Polemics: The Burden of Command-Script

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A heavy silence fills your new office. The burden is now yours.

Dearest Mother,

Things are... complex. I find myself the leader of this small, scrappy nation.

I have taken this role as the democratically-elected President, and our people are currently prosperous and content.

I must go. My advisors are here, and their faces are grim.

Dilemma 1: The Resource

Your economic advisor steps forward. "Sir, our nation's most valuable resource, natural gas, is controlled by a foreign corporation. They pay us pennies while their shareholders get rich. Our people see this. They are cold, poor, and angry."

"I was in the workers' district last night. Children were huddling around burning trash cans for warmth. The company's executives held a party in their walled compound, and we could hear the music."

Option A: Nationalize the industry. Seize their assets. The wealth of our land belongs to our people.

- The cheers in the streets are deafening. For the first time, your people feel like the owners of their own land.
But the victory is short-lived. International news condemns your "illegal seizure." The corporation sues for billions in damages, and foreign ships-your main trade partners-are already turning away from your ports.

Option B: The contract must be respected. Renegotiate. Offer them tax cuts in exchange for a larger share of the profits. We need their investment.

- Your advisor nods grimly. "A wise, moderate choice, Sir."
But the "negotiations" are a farce. The corporation concedes 2% more in royalties, and in exchange, you've locked your nation into another 20-year contract. The people know you've sold them out.
Trash-can fires in the workers' district continue to burn.

Dilemma 2: The Target

Your top general enters, her face pale. "We have him. The terrorist leader responsible for the market bombing. He is in a compound in a neutral, allied nation."

She places a tablet on your desk. It shows a grainy, live feed. "We can't send troops. The compound is in a residential area. A drone strike is our only option. Sir... there will be collateral damage."

She pauses. "The intel says two women and three children are in the building. But if we let him go, he will strike again-and kill hundreds of our own."

"The window is closing. We need your authorization."

Option A: Authorize the strike. We cannot allow our people to die because we were afraid to act.

- You give the nod. You don't sleep.

At 4:00 AM, the general calls. "Target eliminated."
Relief lasts for one day, until the allied nation's media leaks the photos. The "collateral damage"-the children-are on the front page of every newspaper in the world. Your nation is called a monster. Your people are safer... but at what cost?

Option B: Stand down. He is on allied soil. We will not murder civilians or violate international law. Find another way.

- You stand down. "Find another way," you command.
The general salutes, her face a mask of anger and fear. "Yes, Sir."
Two weeks later, a bomb goes off at the Central Station during rush hour. The death toll is 214. The terrorist leader releases a video claiming responsibility... and mocking your weakness.

Dilemma 3: The Population

Your Minister of Housing is frantic. "Sir. Our population is booming! We can't build houses fast enough. Our hospitals are full, our schools are overflowing. People are living in squalor. Disease is spreading in the slums."

"We are drowning in our own success. If we don't stop this, our entire economy will collapse. We must, for the good of all, limit family size. It is the only rational choice."

"We have two proposals. Both are... extreme."

Option A: Implement a 'Stop at Two' policy. Use harsh financial penalties, tax audits, and social pressure to force families to have fewer children.

The policy is brutally effective. Within five years, population growth stabilizes. The streets are clean, the economy rebounds, and the schools are no longer overcrowded. But the social cost is immense. News reports show a mother wailing as she's denied medical care for her "illegal" third child. The state is rational, cold, and inhuman.

Option B: This is a blessing! A large population is a strong one. Begin a massive subsidy program for large families and build high-density public housing.

Housing projects rise at record speed. The streets are vibrant, loud, and full of life. The people are grateful, and your approval soars.
But the new slums are even more crowded than the old ones. A new plague, resistant to antibiotics, spreads through the high-density zones. The cost in lives is staggering, and your hospitals are overwhelmed.

Dilemma 4: The Trade

Your chief trade negotiator throws a file on your desk. "Sir! They're cheating! The rival superpower is dumping cheap steel, undercutting our factories. Our industrial heartland is dying. Tens of thousands are jobless."

"I've seen men who built this country weeping in unemployment lines. Our 'allies' at the World Trade Organization will do nothing for years. We must act now. This is an economic war, and we are losing."

"They say this will break the 'global order.' I say: what order?"

Option A: Impose a 25% tariff on all their goods. Unilateral. Immediate. Protect our jobs. 'My Nation First.'

The tariffs work. Your factories roar back to life, and you are a hero in the heartland. The people chant your name.

But the rival nation retaliates. The price of everyday goods skyrockets. Your farmers can no longer sell their crops overseas. The global economy teeters on the brink of recession.

Option B: This is madness. We rely on global trade. File an official complaint with the WTO. Do not start a trade war we cannot win. We must lead by example.

You file the complaint. The WTO schedules a hearing... for 18 months from now. Meanwhile, factories in your heartland close, one by one. The region is hollowed out. Your "faith in the system" feels empty to the millions now unemployed, their homes in foreclosure.

Dilemma 5: The Protest

Your Head of Internal Security enters. "Sir. The protests have entered Day 10. They've blockaded the entire financial district. The stock market is in freefall."

"They are demanding... well, it's a long, contradictory list. They are anarchists, idealists, and opportunists. We've tried negotiating. They won't budge. The city is paralyzed, and the public is growing angry."

"We need to end this."

Option A: This is chaos. Authorize the use of riot police and the military. Clear the streets by any means necessary. Order is paramount. Arrest the leaders.

It is over in six hours. The crackdown is swift, brutal, total. The streets are clear by morning. The market rebounds.

But images of your soldiers dragging your own citizens—students, nurses, veterans—through the streets are seen by everyone. Your "order" is built on fear, and the silence in the streets is terror, not peace.

Option B: Hold the police back. Label the protesters 'Enemies of the State' on all state media. Let the chaos build. Use this crisis to pass the Emergency Economic Powers Act.

The media campaign works. Public opinion swings against the protesters, now cast as violent extremists. The Emergency Powers Act passes, giving you unprecedented control over the economy.

The protest fizzles out, its leaders arrested quietly. But your nation is more divided than ever, poisoned by its own propaganda.

Dilemma 6: The Border

A humanitarian crisis is unfolding at your southern border. A caravan of 50,000 refugees, fleeing a brutal civil war in a neighboring state, has arrived. They are undocumented, exhausted, and have nowhere else to go.

Your head of border security reports: "Sir, they are overwhelming our checkpoints. We have no food, no shelter for them. Our citizens are terrified of the security risk. But... these people are desperate. They are families."

"What is the standing order?"

Option A: A nation without borders is not a nation. Send the military. Use whatever force is necessary to turn them back. We must be strong.

The order is given. The images are horrific: your soldiers, in riot gear, forcing desperate families back across the border with tear gas and batons. The international community is appalled.

Your border is secure, but the "refugee problem" becomes a humanitarian nightmare just miles from your homes—a wound that destabilizes the entire region.

Option B: It is our moral duty. Open the camps. Process them as quickly as possible. We will take them in, even if it strains our resources.

The camps are opened. The decision is praised by human-rights groups worldwide.

Your nation is seen as a beacon of compassion.

But the cost is immense. Social services buckle under the strain. Resentment builds as your own citizens feel neglected, and a new xenophobic party surges in the polls, feeding on fear.

Dilemma 7: The Leak

"Sir, we have a catastrophic breach." Your intelligence chief is visibly shaking. "The National Herald has a source. They are publishing classified documents detailing our entire foreign spy network."

"They're painting our agents as assassins and war criminals. This leak will get people killed. Our allies will never trust us again. The editor is refusing to back down, citing 'the public's right to know.'"

"We can stop the next publication... if we act now."

Option A: This is not journalism, it's treason. Use the National Security Act. Raid their offices. Seize their servers. Arrest the editor.

The raid is successful. The editor is dragged out in handcuffs, and the servers are seized. The immediate threat is neutralized.

But a line has been crossed. Your nation is now ranked among the most hostile to a free press. Other journalists are terrified. Without accountability, your government begins to attract the corrupt and the cruel.

Option B: We cannot attack the press. It's a cornerstone of democracy. Condemn the leak, but we will prosecute the leaker, not the journalists. We have to weather this storm.

You hold a press conference condemning the leak as reckless. The Herald publishes its story. Two of your top agents in a hostile country are captured and executed. Your nation's intelligence network goes blind.

The system is preserved, but your nation is newly vulnerable, and your enemies are emboldened.

Dilemma 8: The Plague

Your chief medical officer presents a slide. "Sir, it's here. A new, airborne virus. The mortality rate is high, and it's incredibly infectious. Our models show two million deaths within 12 months if we do nothing."

"The science is clear: the only way to stop this is a total, mandatory national lockdown. For everyone. But... it will shatter our economy."

Your economic advisor speaks up: "Sir, a lockdown is the shatter. It will bankrupt us, starve us. The cure cannot be worse than the disease."

Option A: Listen to the scientists. Lock it down. We will pay our people to stay home. We can rebuild an economy; we can't bring back the dead.

You lock it down. The streets fall silent. The economy craters, unemployment hits 30%, and national debt explodes.

But the models were right. Neighboring countries that stayed open suffer millions of casualties. Your hospitals hold. Your death toll is in the low thousands. You have saved your people, but bankrupted your nation.

Option B: A lockdown is tyranny. Keep the country open. Advise the elderly and sick to stay home, but the healthy must work. We must face this with courage, not fear.

You keep the nation open. The economy surges briefly-you're the "only nation brave enough to work."

Then the wave hits. Hospitals are overwhelmed in days. Mass graves are dug. The economy collapses anyway, as people are too sick or too afraid to work. Your "courage" is seen as sociopathic negligence.

Dilemma 9: The Watchers

Your intelligence chief has a proposal. "Sir, we've stopped most of the attacks since the market bombing, but we are always one step behind. We need to be predictive."

"The new 'Patriot' system will allow us to monitor all digital communications-every email, every text, every call. No warrant needed. It's a dragnet. It will find the plots before they happen. But... it will, by definition, spy on every citizen."

"We believe this is the only way to be truly safe."

Option A: Authorize it. The first duty of the state is security. The innocent have nothing to fear. The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.

The program is authorized. It is a spectacular success. Dozens of plots are stopped; thousands of lives are saved. Your nation is safe.

So safe, in fact, that the system is soon used to monitor not just terrorists, but political dissidents, "problematic" journalists, and anyone who questions your authority. Your nation is secure, orderly, and unfree.

Your Happiness is -10. The people riot in the streets, but your secret police are efficient. The state-run media broadcasts only news of your successes. Your grip is secure... for now.

Option B: Absolutely not. This is a gross violation of liberty. We will not build a prison to keep ourselves safe. It's the infrastructure of tyranny.

You reject the program. The public and civil-rights groups praise your defense of the constitution.

A year later, a sophisticated cell, communicating through encrypted apps, coordinates a massive attack on the power grid. The country is plunged into darkness. Your defense of privacy is cold comfort to the millions freezing in their homes.

Dilemma 10: The Planet

You are at a global summit. The final document is on the table: The Global Climate Accord. It requires all nations to cut emissions by 80%, effective immediately.

Your advisors are split. "Sir, signing this means shutting down our entire coal and oil industry. It's economic suicide. Those regions will be decimated."

The UN Secretary-General looks at you. "The planet is dying. This is the last, best chance for humanity. We need your leadership. The world is watching."

Option A: This accord is a hoax, designed to kill our economy. I'm pulling out. We need energy independence and jobs.

Option B: We sign. The future depends on it. We will launch a massive national project to invest in green energy and retrain the displaced workers.

The Mirror

The final order is given. The journey is over. You are weary.

You walk to the large mirror at the end of the hall.

You look... and you see the face of...

Donald Trump.

Your leadership was defined by a “My Nation First” populism. You were willing to break international rules, demonize opponents, and use state power to protect your domestic base, no matter the cost to global stability or internal unity.

Barack Obama.

Your leadership was defined by faith in the global order. You tried to work within the system, but were willing to use precise, cold, and calculated hard power-like the drone-when you believed it was the only way to protect your people.

Lee Kuan Yew

Your leadership was a study in pragmatism. You were a rationalist, willing to sacrifice individual liberty and democratic norms for the sake of collective security, social order, and long-term economic growth.

Evo Morales

Your leadership was defined by a drive to return your nation’s wealth to its people. You were willing to upend contracts, seize private assets, and defy the international market to fight for the poor and marginalized.

This is too real. I don't want to play.

The Game Is Over

You lean back from the desk. The screen blurs together.

Somewhere, the idea that this was “just a game” stopped feeling like protection.

This was supposed to be a playground of decisions, a safe container where power could be exercised without consequence. That's what games promise, isn't it? The magic circle-a space apart from reality. Inside, the stakes are symbolic, the losses reversible, the world pliable beneath our clicks.

But somewhere along the line, the circle cracked. The dilemmas stopped reading like design patterns and started sounding like headlines. The “drone strike” wasn't a hypothetical-it was a mirror. The “border crisis” wasn't a metaphor-it was memory.

I thought I was playing to understand leadership-to test what kind of ruler I'd be. But each choice began to feel less like play and more like participation. The moment the game started borrowing too faithfully from life, it stopped being a performance of decision-making and became the decision itself.

That's the threshold-where play becomes too real to be playful. It's when distance collapses, when empathy and guilt override curiosity, when mechanics stop abstracting and start implicating.

Games rely on the illusion that we are safe from what they depict. But the more precisely a game mimics reality-the more procedurally honest it becomes-the harder it is to sustain that illusion. Meaning bleeds in.

And suddenly, “fun” becomes impossible. Play turns into moral labor: every click a reckoning, every outcome a reminder that some systems are too cruel to reproduce-even virtually.

I realize I've stopped playing and started enduring. The game has ceased to be a toy; it's become an argument-one that exposes the limits of play itself.

When play becomes indistinguishable from the world it reflects, it stops being a refuge. It becomes responsibility.
And responsibility... isn't a game.
You close the tab.
The black screen reflects your face.
You are done.