

# Parenting and Deterrent Red Lines: The Strategic Game of Dessert

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Parents can appreciate the challenges of deterrence. On a daily basis they must try to deter their children (hereafter “the adversary”) from doing all manner of things. One simple problem: preventing this adversary from eating too much dessert. Dessert is among the most frequent parent-child battlegrounds. It is, therefore, a problem that cries out for rigorous academic scrutiny. Here I provide a lens into the complex strategic interactions that characterize these coercive conflicts by making use of a theory designed to explain how red lines with certain characteristics leave openings that the adversary can exploit with *faits accomplis*.

I structure this analysis based on two possible red lines for managing the dessert deterrence problem.<sup>1</sup> The first envisions a regime in which the adversary receives no dessert at all, or at least no dessert in general except for special occasions. The second regime is one dessert per night. As will become clear, the advantages of the no-dessert red line over the one-dessert alternative are considerably greater than the quantity reduction alone would suggest; it makes for stronger deterrence. Both red lines, however, are plagued by four general types of weaknesses in red lines: arbitrariness, imprecision, unverifiability, and incompleteness.

### **Red Line #1: No Dessert as a General Rule**

Surely a deterrent red line of no dessert as a general rule is fairly straightforward, clear, and easily enforced? Nope.

The first problem that immediately arises is one of imprecision: what exactly is a dessert? The food category itself leaves gray areas. Fruit is a dessert in some families, but likely falls outside the red line here (i.e., on the permitted side). More problematic are sodas, hot chocolate, sparkling apple cider, sports drinks, granola bars, “treat” cereals, chocolate chip pancakes, various types of pastries, certain types of crackers, etc. Failure to specify whether each of these items fall into the dessert category makes it easy for the adversary to claim the intent to comply if caught, thereby reducing their risk of punishment.

The second imprecision problem arises if desserts are allowed on special occasions. What, exactly, is a special occasion? Compounding this problem greatly is that the adversary will exploit the third party audience. Parents will prefer to avoid a loud, drawn-out debate about whether dessert is permitted in front of guests. In the worst case, the adversary can

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis makes one assumption: the adversary can unilaterally seize desserts in a *fait accompli*. They may then be subjected to punishment, but the adversary is wily and will endeavor to commit such *faits accomplis* in a manner that evades punishment. If parents can remove desserts from physical access in cabinets and freezers and the like, they acquire a great deal more leverage and remove some of the vulnerabilities discussed here, especially verifiability concerns. Nonetheless, even with complete control of “the stash,” parents will find it more difficult and costly to stave off demands for desserts because of the weaknesses in red lines detailed below. In these circumstances, the adversary will feel and argue that they have a legitimate claim to dessert in accordance with the established regime. Denying them may lead to a heated dispute that parents would prefer to avoid.

back their parents into a corner of either relenting or explicitly arguing that today's guest or occasion is insufficiently special to qualify for dessert. Parents may quickly find that virtually any occasion other than a dinner within the nuclear family qualifies as "special," even if that goes well beyond their original intent.

Another fundamental problem is verifiability. Parents must sleep. Most must work. The adversary can and will exploit these flaws without remorse. Especially as the adversary grows older, parents will find fewer and fewer safe places to store desserts. When backs turn, stocks will seem to dwindle of their own accord as the adversary steals them in deniable increments.

This unverifiability problem is not universal, but instead depends on several conditions. First, in what units do the desserts come? Are they discrete entities, like cookies or individually-wrapped candy bars? Or are they more like ice cream? If they are discrete, are there more than can be counted and recorded with minimal conscious effort? In the ideal case, there would be, say, two wrapped popsicles or two cupcakes. If one goes missing, it is fairly obvious. A large pack of small cookies, in contrast, lets the adversary slip away with one or two without much chance of detection. A missing scoop of ice cream is also much harder to notice, although it may be betrayed by the failure to conceal the dish and spoon if the adversary is careless. At the extreme, a handful of M&Ms from a large bag is essentially impossible to detect after the fact.

The number of adversaries in the house also has an important impact on the verifiability problem. In a purely bilateral conflict, the culprit is immediately clear if the theft is detectable ..., "No, a burglar did not sneak in last night and eat the last slice of cake!" Multiple adversaries complicate matters, as each can deny responsibility and blame others by implication. Third parties such as guests and spouses can also be a problem in this respect, especially those who might be tempted to sneak a dessert without admitting it, perhaps in violation of a diet.

Yet another problem is incompleteness. A red line against desserts at home can be flanked by finding dessert elsewhere. Just as requiring foreign aid to be spent on health clinics may simply enable the recipient state to substitute current health spending for military spending (rather than increase health spending), depriving the adversary of dessert may cause them to substitute within their own allowance budget and spend more of it on dessert. No dessert with dinner? Ahh, but there was a convenience store on the walk home from school. Particularly nefarious adversaries may even steal loose change to finance their red-line flanking. An alternative approach is to cultivate friendships whose parents have looser rules. Just as guns can be purchased in states with lax laws and transported to violence-prone inner cities, the adversary can exploit the relaxed attitudes of the parents of friends to compensate for

burdensome regulations at home. The result may be a race to the bottom in dessert consumption.

All in all, a no-dessert-in-general red line is no cakewalk. The adversary will find ways to persevere.

### **Red Line #2: One Dessert per Night**

Although sustaining deterrence is difficult with an in-general-no-dessert red line, these difficulties pale in comparison to upholding deterrence when the adversary is allowed dessert each night. The above problems persist under this alternative red line, plus some new ones.

Whereas under a no dessert regime the imprecision problem surrounds the definition of “dessert,” here a larger problem joins that problem: the definition of “one.” The discreteness of the dessert is again critical. Ideally, there would be one distinct dessert such as a cupcake or candy bar for each adversary. But if the dessert is small cookies, how many is one dessert? One tiny cookie? How many M&Ms or Hershey’s Kisses? Even worse, how much ice cream? One scoop? But what is a scoop? Dessert types which lack discreteness enable the adversary to take more without clearly violating the red line. Where the parent controls dessert dispersal, the adversary will still exploit this imprecision to insist they have a legitimate claim to more under the operative dessert regime.

In the worst case, this imprecision problem will blend with an arbitrariness problem. That happens when the “one dessert per night” red line slips to two per night. After all, there is nothing terribly unique or special about one, so why one and not two? When one dessert as one large cookie turns into one dessert as two small cookies, it is not so difficult for it to then eventually transform into two of those large cookies as the new normal. This is one reason why smokers tend to find it more effective to go cold turkey when trying to quit. “None ever” is the least arbitrary red line possible. “One a day” ... why not “two a day” or, at least, two today?

The verification problem is also worse under the “one dessert per night” red line. A clever adversary can tell one parent that a first dessert is their one allowed dessert, and then later approach the other with the same claim. Even catching the adversary in the act of consumption may not suffice anymore, because they will inevitably claim that the dessert in question is their allotted dessert. The parent must now observe them doing so twice in the same night to catch them. It is exactly for this reason that arms control negotiators have long preferred to ban certain weapons systems outright rather than limiting numbers. Establishing the presence of a single banned weapon is not so difficult, but proving the existence of more than a high number is extremely challenging.

Worse still than either of these red lines would be a third, “some dessert each night,” which doubles down on the imprecision problem. Although parents may find this flexibility appealing, they will find that the adversary will exploit it and, in the end, succeed in eating more dessert than was intended. With each passing day, the generally understood meaning of “some dessert” will creep to larger and larger quantities. Each increase will be used to justify a similar quantity the next time until an opportunity arises for another increase, and the cycle continues from there.

## **Conclusion**

Parenting is nothing but a battle of deterrence that you eventually lose. Much like the Battle of Thermopylae, the goal is to hold out as long as possible, not to win. As with shifting relative power in international politics, deterrence may slowly give way to a fearful hope that the rising power will react to its newfound freedom of action with uncharacteristic restraint. Unfortunately, preventive war is not an option. The key to success, such as it is, lies in maximizing the effectiveness of deterrence for as long as possible. A clear understanding of how the adversary will exploit weaknesses in the available red lines can only help further this aim.