The Myth of Choosy Democracies:

Examining the Selection Effects Theory of Democratic Victory in War

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The debate over what some have labeled "democratic efficacy" or "democratic triumphalism"—the view that "democracies systematically outperform nondemocracies in the hurly-burly of international relations"—continues to rage among scholars of international politics.[1] One specific manifestation of this debate concerns the question of whether democracies are more likely than nondemocracies to prevail in war. Dan Reiter and Allan Stam have argued that democracies tend to win wars because democratic leaders have strong incentives to start only those wars they are confident they will win (known as the selection effects argument), and because democratic soldiers fight harder in battle, displaying better leadership and initiative (known as the warfighting argument). Their book *Democracies at War* advances these explanations for democratic effectiveness and counters others, such as the contention that democracies "win wars on factory floors," overpowering their autocratic foes with material power, or that "birds of a feather flock together," whereby democracies come to each others' aid in wartime and form overwhelming alliances.[2]

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[1] Peter D. Feaver, "Correspondence: Brother Can You Spare a Paradigm? (Or Was Anybody Ever a Realist?)," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer 2000), p. 168. See also Michael C. Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness: The Fallacy of Democratic Triumphalism* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

[2] Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002). See also Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, III, "Democracy, War Initiation, and Victory," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 92, No. 1 (June 1998), pp. 377-389; and Reiter and Stam, "Democracy and Battlefield Military Effectiveness," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (June 1998), pp. 259-277.

A number of scholars have criticized the arguments and evidence put forward in *Democracies at War* on both quantitative and qualitative grounds.[3] Reiter and Stam have responded by vigorously defending their position, which has prompted several exchanges in the correspondence section of *International Security*.[4] In the latest iteration of this debate, Dan Reiter offers a spirited brief for the selection effects explanation for democratic victory in his essay "A Closer Look at Case Studies on Democracy, Selection Effects, and Victory."[5] The selection effects argument pertains to wars initiated by democracies, and consists of two mechanisms that purport to explain why democracies prevail in a disproportionate number of these conflicts. First, because democratic leaders are relatively easy to remove from power via regular elections, they attempt to avoid major policy failures—like losing wars—and thus will start only those wars they believe they have a very good chance of winning. Second, democratic leaders benefit from a robust marketplace of ideas—consisting of vigorous public debate as well as good advice from the military—that helps them better estimate the likelihood of victory. In his essay, Reiter revisits several cases of democratic war initiation originally explored by Michael Desch in his book *Power and Military Effectiveness*, and in my article "How Smart and Tough

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[3] For a sampling of these critiques, see Michael C. Desch, "Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters," *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Fall 2002), pp. 5-47; Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness*; Risa A. Brooks, "Making Military Might: Why Do States Fail and Succeed? A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Fall 2003), pp. 149-191; Stephen Biddle and Stephen Long, "Democracy and Military Effectiveness: A Deeper Look," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (August 2004), pp. 525-546; Alexander B. Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies? Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War," *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Spring 2009), pp. 9-51; and John M. Schuessler, "The Deception Dividend: FDR's Undeclared War," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Spring 2010), pp. 133-165.

[4] See Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, "Understanding Victory: Why Political Institutions Matter," *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003), pp. 168-179; Michael C. Desch, "Democracy and Victory: Fair Fights or Food Fights?" *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003), pp. 180-194; Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, and Alexander B. Downes, "Correspondence: Another Skirmish in the Battle over Democracies and War," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Fall 2009), pp. 194-204. An exchange between Reiter and Schuessler on democracy and deception is forthcoming.

[5] Dan Reiter, "A Closer Look at Case Studies on Democracy, Selection Effects, and Victory," *H-Diplo | ISSF Essays*, No. 2.

Are Democracies?" in *International Security*.[6] Reiter argues that upon close examination, these cases—the Russo-Polish War, the Suez, Six-Day, and Lebanon wars involving Israel, and the Vietnam War—actually reveal substantial support for selection effects.[7]

I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to Reiter's essay and further extend the debate. I divide my contribution into two parts, the first mainly theoretical and the second largely empirical. In the first part of the essay, I make four arguments about the logic of selection effects theory and the evidence offered to support it. First, I argue that Reiter and Stam's electoral accountability argument contains internal contradictions that neither its proponents nor its critics have previously acknowledged. Reiter and Stam assume that leaders seek contemporaneous consent for their decisions rather than retrospective approval, and that leaders follow public opinion but cannot lead it. These assumptions create two problems: the various mechanisms Reiter claims are consistent with the electoral accountability argument for how democracies choose which wars to enter—the leader expects to win, the leader expects the war to be popular, or a hawkish public drags a leader into war—can be mutually contradictory, and war outcome is not the correct dependent variable to test the theory.

Second, Reiter offers no evidence that a key aspect of the marketplace of ideas—public debate and deliberation—leads to better decisions for war. Because this part of the marketplace contributes nothing to decision-making, I contend that Reiter and Stam's marketplace of ideas mechanism reduces to an argument that democracies are characterized by better civil-military relations than nondemocracies. Other scholars have written on this subject and found that only some nondemocracies have toxic relations between political and military leaders, while civil-

[6] Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness*; and Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?"
[7] The first four of these cases are examined in Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness*, while the last is explored in Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?"

military relations in democracies are not uniformly positive.[8] The implication is that scholars should redirect their attention away from the marketplace of ideas and toward civil-military relations as an explanatory factor of military effectiveness.

Third, the issue of secrecy in democratic preparations for war is a major conundrum for selection effects. Reiter ends up arguing that secrecy can both increase the chances of victory and the chances of disaster, but provides no guidance for when it will have which effect. The effect of secrecy on the odds of democratic victory is thus indeterminate.

Finally, I argue that the quantitative evidence for democracy and victory is less clear than Reiter would have us believe. Reiter dismisses quantitative critiques of selection effects in a single sentence when these critiques actually pose a major challenge to the correlation he and Stam identified in their earlier work.

In the second section of the essay, I argue that contrary to Reiter's claims, the details of the Vietnam case do not comport with selection effects theory and exemplify some of the problems with the theory mentioned above. In my 2009 article, I argued that President Lyndon B. Johnson and his closest advisors initiated war in Vietnam despite knowing that victory was unlikely and the war would be costly and protracted. Reiter does not contest this argument, but he suggests several other ways in which the case is supposedly consistent with selection effects: the United States did not initiate or lose the war; the marketplace of ideas operated effectively; going to war was popular with the American people; Johnson's domestic political reasons for escalating are explained by the theory; and the public believed the stakes were so high in Vietnam that they approved of fighting even though the probability of winning was low. I show, to the contrary, that the United States should be coded as the initiator of the war against North

[8] See, for example, Risa Brooks, *Shaping Strategy: The Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Vietnam and that the war ended in a draw (which is nevertheless inconsistent with selection effects because the United States failed to win); the marketplace of ideas was an utter failure; the American public was remarkably ambivalent about fighting in Southeast Asia; Johnson's reasons for escalation—although rooted in domestic politics—are not explained by selection effects theory; and that the public did not view the stakes in Vietnam as so critically important that it offered its consent for war even though the outlook was not sanguine.

I conclude the essay by offering a few thoughts on the prospects for future development of selection effects theory and on the study of military effectiveness more broadly.

I. Theory, Evidence, and Selection Effects

The Contradictions of Selection Effects Theory

The selection effects theory as described by Reiter and Stam is disarmingly simple. Democracies prevail more often in wars they initiate because leaders in democracies start only those wars they have a high degree of confidence they will win. Why? Because leaders understand that starting a losing war is a good way to get voted out of office, and the lively marketplace of ideas that characterizes democracies allows them to differentiate wars that promise to be easy victories from those that will be costly slugfests.

Underneath the surface of this seemingly simple theory, however, things quickly become complicated. In fact, a fundamental contradiction lies at the heart of the theory. Reiter and Stam's electoral accountability argument appears at first glance to be a straight-forward application of the retrospective model of voting. In this model, voters "reward success and punish failure" focusing on the incumbent's past record.[9] In the selection effects theory of war initiation, the key question voters would ask when they went to the polls would be: did the leader

[9] Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 6.

win the war he or she started during the last term? If yes, then reward him or her with another term; if no, punish the leader by voting for another candidate.[10] Because elections are not held every year, and rarely coincide with the beginnings or endings of wars, the public can only register its approval or disapproval of a leader's policies after the fact. Leaders seek to achieve policy success with the hope of being retained in office the next time the country votes.

According to Reiter and Stam, however, this is *not* the model of voting that underpins their argument. Rather, they prefer a model termed "contemporaneous consent," which they describe as follows: "Leaders in liberal democracies seek out contemporaneous approval for political choices. Voters then punish leaders not so much for particular failure or success, but instead for failing to heed the more popular sentiments at the time the leaders settle on a particular policy."[11] What matters most, in other words, is what public opinion supports at the time a decision is made, rather than how the public will judge the success or failure of leaders' policies come election time. Indeed, although the bumper sticker version of the selection effects argument is that leaders start only those wars they believe they have a high chance of winning, as Reiter points out there are at least two other mechanisms that are consistent with the argument: (1) when the war is likely to be popular with the public or is for a popular cause; and (2) when "publics gripped by war fever…drag a reluctant leader into war," the leader following presumably because the public's war fever guarantees that the war will be popular.[12] These two mechanisms flow from the contemporaneous consent model of leader behavior that lies at the heart of the electoral accountability mechanism of selection effects theory.

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[10] Technically, voters compare the payoff they received under the incumbent with what they expect to receive under a prospective challenger. Failing to win a war reduces voters' payoffs and makes choosing the challenger more attractive. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), p. 228.

[11] Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 6.

[12] Reiter, "Closer Look," p. 7. Reiter does not explain how a leader being forced to start a war he otherwise would not by a bloodthirsty public is consistent with the idea of a selection effect.

Reiter and Stam's understanding of leaders as responding to public consent at the time policy is made, however, does not square with their description of the consequences of failure in war, which is clearly retrospective. When voters go to the polls, do they cast their ballots based on whether the leader obeyed public opinion when he originally made a policy decision, or based on the success or failure of the war? The way Reiter and Stam describe their argument throughout the book implies the latter: "Because democratic executives know they risk ouster if they lead their state to defeat, they will be especially unwilling to launch risky military ventures." As the first President Bush put it, "I'll prevail or I'll be impeached."[13] A theory based on contemporaneous consent, however, predicts that a leader who won a war but chose to start it when public opinion did not support war should be removed from office. Similarly, a leader who lost a war that the public supported when it was declared should not be punished for losing. In short, according to Reiter and Stam's own description of their theory, war outcomes are not the proper dependent variable to test the theory.

Furthermore, as articulated by Reiter and Stam, selection effects theory is internally contradictory. One mechanism maintains that leaders choose wars they think they can win, while two others contend that leaders start wars they believe will be popular. But what is popular is not always what is strategically sound, and although the theory seems to assume that all good things go together, sometimes they do not. What if the leader expects a quick and decisive victory but public opinion opposes going to war? What if initiating war is a popular option but the leader doubts victory is possible? What if a public gripped by war fever compels a leader to start a war he or she believes stands little chance of yielding a victory? What if the leader gets sound advice from the military that victory is unlikely but goes to war anyway? What if the public debate on the war is weak and ineffective, but the war is still won? Are cases like these consistent with

[13] Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 20.

selection effects, or do they contradict it?[14] As the theory is currently articulated, it is impossible to determine, and proponents of the theory can always fall back on a different mechanism in the event that the historical evidence contradicts one of them.[15]

If war outcomes are not the correct measure to test an electoral accountability mechanism based on contemporaneous consent, how can the argument be tested? The correct metric for testing the theory is whether leaders followed the will of the public when they initiated wars. The evidence to look for in case studies of democratic war initiation would thus be measures of public approval for going to war. Unfortunately, there are two serious problems with this approach. First, the key assumption of the contemporaneous consent model is that leaders are followers of public opinion, not shapers of the public's views. Leaders are constantly trying to determine which way the wind is blowing, and do their best to do what is popular at the time. Not only is this description inconsistent with how Reiter and Stam test the theory, as shown above, it also neglects the possibility that politicians can shape and lead public opinion. In *Democracies at War*, Reiter and Stam make repeated references to leaders being able to "generate" consent, i.e., persuade the public to support an action of which they previously disapproved.[16] John Schuessler has shown how President Franklin D. Roosevelt was able to deploy deception to swing the American public behind a policy of intervening in Europe before

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[14] At a broader level, it is unclear if the electoral accountability and marketplace of ideas parts of the theory are individually or jointly sufficient. Is the vibrant public debate and expert advice from a professional and meritocratic military the source of leaders' beliefs about the winnability of wars, or are those views formed separately?

[15] One way to try to square this circle would be to argue that public consent is only forthcoming for wars that are likely to be relatively easy victories. Reiter does not make this argument, however, and it is not clear the historical record supports it given that democracies have fought many long wars. One would also have to assume that members of the public base their decisions on whether or not to support a war on the same kinds of short-term factors that drive democratic leaders and not on calculations of what is in the national interest, and that leaders are unable to persuade constituents (using truthful or deceptive arguments) that a conflict is winnable. Reiter and Stam argue that publics offer support for wars that they believe are in the national interest rather than those they perceive will be won easily; see *Democracies at War*, pp. 148-149. I address the point about the persuasive abilities of leaders below.

[16] Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, pp. 148, 200.

U.S. entry into World War II.[17] Reiter and Stam also acknowledge that "there is great variability among democracies in different eras as to the conditions that are sufficient to generate public consent for the use of force against some other state."[18] These kinds of statements suggest—in contradiction to the view that political elites merely follow some preexisting public consensus—that leaders in fact have a fair amount of leeway in persuading publics that something is in "the national interest." If leaders in democracies have formidable resources at their disposal to shape and mould the public's views on the use of force, then it is hard to sustain the argument that public opinion acts as much of a constraint on leaders' decisions to start wars.

Second, public opinion is notoriously difficult to measure. The answer one gets often depends heavily on the way one asks the question. As I demonstrate below, arriving at a coherent view of "public opinion" on the course the United States should have followed in Vietnam in the months before President Lyndon Johnson launched the air campaign against North Vietnam in February 1965 is confounded by the baffling array of polls that show support for options ranging from escalation to holding the line to negotiations and withdrawal. A related difficulty concerns the type of evidence that can be deployed to support arguments about public opinion for war. Because of the possibility of rally effects, it is not valid to use measurements of public support for military action taken after the war has begun. To test whether a leader is following public opinion when choosing to go to war, evidence of the public's views must be obtained from the period before force has been used on either side.[19]

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[17] Schuessler, "Deception Dividend."

[18] Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 148.

[19] Rally effects do not always occur when a democratic leader puts troops in harm's way, but scholars have identified several cases (including after U.S. entry into the Korean and Vietnam wars), and the possibility of such effects taints *ex post* evidence as potentially unreliable. See John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973); Matthew A. Baum, "The Constituent Foundations of the Rally-Around-the-Flag Phenomenon," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (June 2002), pp. 263-298; Marc J. Hetherington and Michael Nelson, "Anatomy of a Rally Effect: George W. Bush and the War on Terrorism," *PS: Political Science*

In sum, Reiter and Stam's version of selection effects theory posits multiple causal mechanisms for how democratic leaders choose to go to war that are mutually contradictory. The dependent variable they have used to evaluate the theory—war outcome—is also incorrect. To be consistent with the logic of contemporaneous consent, they should examine pre-war public opinion to determine if leaders are following the policy that is popular with the majority. Pursuing this investigation is fraught with difficulty because leaders have the ability to change the public's views over time and it is hard to get an unambiguous reading of public opinion.

Laying the Marketplace of Ideas to Rest

The second half of selection effects theory consists of the marketplace of ideas, which is composed of two separate mechanisms that combine to allow democratic leaders to make informed decisions for war. One mechanism is the venerable idea of discussion: the more voices that participate in debate on a given subject, the more likely that the decision arrived at will be correct.[20] Freedom of expression and freedom of the press in democracies foster a vibrant public sphere and stimulate productive debate on important decisions like whether to use force abroad. The second mechanism focuses on the military: because democracies tend to have amicable civil-military relations, officers are promoted based on merit and are able to provide high quality military advice to civilian leaders.[21]

In his essay, Reiter provides no evidence for the first plank of the marketplace of ideas, nor is any such evidence offered in *Democracies at War*. Indeed, to date there is little evidence

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and Politics, Vol. 36, No. 1 (January 2003), pp. 37-42; and Michael Colaresi, "The Benefit of the Doubt: Testing an Informational Theory of the Rally Effect," *International Organization*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (Winter 2007), pp. 99-143.

[20] This is also known as the Condorcet jury theorem, which holds that if each member of a jury is more likely to be right than wrong, increasing the size of the jury increases the probability that it will arrive at the correct decision. See Christian List and Robert E. Goodin, "Epistemic Democracy: Generalizing the Condorcet Jury Theorem," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (September 2001), pp. 277-306.

[21] Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, pp. 23-24.

in the literature that this mechanism operates to produce better decisions on national security in democracies, but a fair amount of evidence that the marketplace is vulnerable to subversion by elites bent on persuading the public of the wisdom of a particular military venture.[22] A multitude of critics have argued quite persuasively, for example, that the George W. Bush administration was able to manipulate public debate to obtain support for the invasion of Iraq in 2003.[23] In the face of these critiques, proponents of the public discussion aspect of the marketplace of ideas need to provide compelling evidence of debate in the public sphere working to improve the quality of democratic decisions for war or risk seeing this concept consigned to the theoretical dustbin.

Given the dearth of evidence for public discussion, the marketplace of ideas part of selection effects theory reduces to the argument about meritocratic militaries. The argument maintains that because civilian control of the military is well-established in democracies, civilian elites need not fear military coups and thus are able to promote officers solely on the basis of merit. A thoroughly professionalized officer corps then provides expert military advice to political leaders, which aids them in formulating strategy and choosing wars that will turn out victoriously.

There is some support for the view that certain types of nondemocracies are handicapped by civil-military relations plagued by mistrust, and that this problem undercuts their military effectiveness. Stephen Biddle and Robert Zirkle, for example, chronicled how Saddam Hussein's fear of overthrow at the hands of his officer corps led him to purge it frequently of any

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[22] Chaim Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Summer 2004), pp. 5-48; and Schuessler, "Deception Dividend."

[23] Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas"; Jon Western, "The War over Iraq: Selling War to the American Public," *Security Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (January 2005), pp. 106-139; and Jane Kellett Cramer, "Militarized Patriotism: Why the U.S. Marketplace of Ideas Failed before the Iraq War," *Security Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (July 2007), pp. 489-524. These and other pieces on this question are collected in A. Trevor Thrall and Jane K. Cramer, eds., *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear: Threat Inflation since 9/11* (London: Routledge, 2009).

contenders for power, thereby crippling the army's ability to fight external foes.[24] Similarly, Risa Brooks has shown how the parlous state of relations and unclear lines of authority between Nasser and his chief military advisors contributed to the disaster suffered by Egypt in the Six-Day War.[25] However, these and other scholars also identify nondemocracies characterized by much healthier civil-military relations and link this variable directly to improved war performance. This literature contends that authoritarian states are not uniformly characterized by poor civil-military relations or disastrous levels of military effectiveness.[26] Nor is it the case that civil-military relations in democracies are uniformly harmonious. Some scholars have linked cases of ineffective military performance by democracies with unhealthy relations between officers and civilian leaders.[27] To preview my discussion of Vietnam later in the essay, President Johnson and his civilian advisors in 1964-1965 went to great lengths to exclude the Joint Chiefs of Staff from crucial deliberations on strategy, misrepresented the chiefs' views to others in government, misled them on numerous occasions, and politicized relations with the JCS to shape the content of military advice the chiefs would provide. It is thus not clear that there is a necessary connection between democracy, positive civil-military relations, and victory in war. This is a potentially fruitful avenue for further research.

[24] Stephen Biddle and Robert Zirkle, "Technology, Civil-Military Relations, and Warfare in the Developing World," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (June 1996), pp. 171-212. See also James T. Quinlivan, "Coup-proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Fall 1999), pp. 131-165.
[25] Brooks, *Shaping Strategy.*
[26] See, for example, Biddle and Zirkle's discussion of North Vietnam during the Vietnam War, and Brooks's discussion of Egypt in the Yom Kippur War. See also Jessica L. Weeks, "Leaders, Accountability, and Foreign Policy in Non-Democracies," Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 2008; and Caitlin Talmadge, "Explaining Military Effectiveness: Political Control and Battlefield Performance," Ph.D. dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2010.
[27] On France and Britain before World War II, see Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine between the Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997). On the United States in Vietnam, see H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperPerrenial, 1997).

Selection Effects and Secrecy

Reiter discusses at some length how secrecy in democratic war preparations fits with selection effects theory. An earlier generation of democratic peace theorists maintained that one reason democracies did not fight each other was because the public nature of war preparations in democracies precluded them from launching surprise attacks.[28] This feature of democratic decision-making meant that inter-democratic crises could be resolved peacefully since neither side had to be concerned about a bolt from the blue. By contrast, although Reiter concedes that "examples of leaders deliberating in secret have complex implications for the theory," he ultimately concludes that keeping these deliberations out of the public eye does not contradict selection effects theory.[29]

Reiter's discussion of secrecy demonstrates that the effect of secrecy on the likelihood of democratic victory is indeterminate. On the one hand, he argues that secrecy sometimes contributes to victory by facilitating the success of surprise attacks. On the other hand, secrecy—because it bypasses the marketplace of ideas and thus sacrifices the benefits of full and frank discussion of the merits of going to war and the modalities of attacking—also increases the risk of failure. Reiter does not give any hint as to which of these effects may be greater, and thus theoretically the effect of secrecy on the likelihood of democratic victory is indeterminate. It is not possible to declare, as Reiter does, that the "desire to maximize the chances for victory through secrecy is consistent with selection effects theory's premise that elected leaders have a very strong incentive to avoid military defeat" because—as he admits—secrecy also raises the

[28] Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 38-40.

[29] Reiter, "Closer Look," p. 9. Secrecy in war preparations, however, cannot be a reason that democracies prevail at a higher rate than nondemocracies unless one makes the argument that democracies are better than nondemocratic states at cloaking their preparations for war in secrecy. I have not encountered this argument in the literature (indeed, democratic peace theorists, as noted above, have made the opposite argument), and Reiter does not make it in his essay. He simply argues that secrecy is not inconsistent with selection effects.

likelihood of defeat, and is thus inconsistent with the incentive to avoid military defeat.[30] It is also worth noting that it is difficult for contemporaneous consent to operate if an attack is planned secretly because leaders cannot be sure whether the public supports or opposes such an attack beforehand.

Reiter's discussion of secrecy in the context of covert action merely inserts another source of indeterminacy into the equation. Reiter argues that "leaders in some cases may be motivated to circumvent public constraints by acting covertly," and that "covert actions such as the Bay of Pigs invasion often fail because secrecy increases the risk of policy failure by cutting out the marketplace of ideas," causing democratic decision-making to approximate autocratic decision-making.[31] But how constraining are democratic institutions and public opinion if leaders can simply sidestep them by employing covert measures? One recent study identified literally hundreds of instances of covert action by the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations during the Cold War.[32] This seems to be an admission that selection effects theory applies to a rather small proportion of democratic foreign policy decisions.

Reiter's argument about secrecy and covert action also states quite clearly that secrecy increases the likelihood of failure, which contradicts his earlier argument that it is consistent with selection effects because it increases the likelihood of victory. Reiter tries to distinguish between secrecy in overt wars versus covert action by saying that wars obviously become public knowledge whereas "leaders may have more confidence that 'plausible deniability' will enable them to escape or mitigate the negative consequences of a failed covert plot."[33] On the contrary, the latest research on democracy and covert action has found that democratic leaders often

[30] Reiter, "Closer Look," p. 9.
[31] Reiter, "Closer Look," p. 8.
[32] Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), p. 180.
[33] Reiter, "Closer Look," p. 9.

proceed despite having little confidence that covert plots will succeed *and* little confidence that failed plots will remain secret.[34] Some covert plots—such as the Bay of Pigs or the Iran-Contra affair—have failed publicly and dramatically, resulting in enormous embarrassment at a minimum to criminal indictments and convictions at a maximum. Democratic leaders, in short, are typically not confident that covert failures will remain covert, yet they order them nonetheless, in contradiction to the dictates of selection effects.

Quantitative Critiques of Democracy and Victory

My final point in this section concerns the quantitative evidence for democracy and victory. In their 1998 article in the *American Political Science Review* and four years later in their book *Democracies at War*, Reiter and Stam presented a statistical analysis of democracy and victory in interstate wars.[35] They found that democracies that initiated wars and democracies that were targeted by other states were each more likely to prevail than nondemocratic initiators and targets. In my 2009 article I reanalyzed their data and came to a different conclusion.[36] Reiter and Stam restricted their analysis to wars that ended in victory or defeat, excluding draws and analyzing them separately. The logic of selection effects, however, clearly states that democratic leaders only start those wars they think they can win, and avoid wars that are likely to end in defeat or stalemate. According to that logic, all war outcomes—including draws—should be analyzed. Reiter and Stam also classified all belligerents as either initiators or targets, thereby omitting an important class of combatants: states that join ongoing wars after they have started. Using these tripartite classifications of war outcomes and belligerents, I found that although

[34] Alexander B. Downes and Mary Lauren Lilley, "Overt Peace, Covert War?: Covert Intervention and the Democratic Peace," *Security Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Summer 2010), pp. 297-299.
[35] Reiter and Stam, "Democracy, War Initiation, and Victory"; and Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*.
[36] Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?" pp. 15-31.

democratic initiators, targets, and joiners were somewhat more likely to win than their autocratic counterparts, in no case were the differences between them statistically significant. In other words, statistically speaking, we cannot be confident that there is actually no difference between the rates at which democracies and autocracies prevail in war.

Reiter and Stam penned a response to my article that was published (along with my rejoinder) in the correspondence section of an ensuing issue of *International Security*.[37] Curiously, they did not dispute my findings directly; instead, they argued that I had incorrectly tested their theory, which they maintained divided states into three types—democracies, autocracies (states at the lowest end of the democracy-autocracy spectrum), and oligarchies (states falling between autocracy and democracy, sometimes also called anocracies)—whereas I had lumped all nondemocracies together and tested their effectiveness against that of democracies. Although Reiter and Stam had performed exactly this same test in their work,[38] they contended that my failure to differentiate among three regime types rather than two was the source of my insignificant findings. They used fractional polynomials to argue that the relationship between regime type and victory is actually curvilinear: democracies are best, oligarchies are worst, and autocracies fall in between.

In my rejoinder I tested this argument and found it to be incorrect. There is no significant curvilinear relationship between regime type and victory. Reiter and Stam claimed that merely showing that the fractional polynomial terms in their model were statistically significant sufficed to show evidence of a curvilinear relationship.[39] But this is mistaken: the way to test for curvilinearity is to compare the explanatory power of the model including the fractional polynomial terms with that of the model that includes the linear terms. If the former is

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[37] Reiter and Stam, and Downes, "Another Skirmish in the Battle over Democracies and War."
[38] Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 45, Table 2.2, models 1 and 4.
[39] Reiter and Stam, "Another Skirmish in the Battle over Democracies and War," p. 199.

significantly larger than the latter, then the curvilinear version is superior.[40] Comparing these figures showed them to be *exactly the same*, even when using Reiter and Stam's original data (excluding draws and war joiners).[41] There is also no evidence of curvilinearity when draws and joiners are added. Thus, whether one posits a linear or a curvilinear relationship between regime type and victory, when all war outcomes are examined, democracies are no more likely to prevail than other types of polities.[42]

Reiter argues that his findings with Stam regarding the efficacy of democracies in conflict have been widely corroborated by other studies.[43] He neglects to mention a growing body of work that reaches different conclusions. Reiter, for example, claims that a recent article by H. E. Goemans supports selection effects because Goemans found that "elected leaders who lose wars face significantly higher chances of losing office through extralegal means, thereby facing higher likelihoods of severe personal punishments such as death, prison, or exile."[44] This claim is not only disingenuous, but if true actually undermines the argument. The logic of selection effects theory is that democratic leaders are cautious to start only those wars they think they can win because defeat increases the risk of removal from office via elections (or other regular procedures, such as impeachment). The central insight of the theory is that democratic

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[40] Patrick Royston and Douglas G. Altman, "Regression using Fractional Polynomials of Continuous Covariates: Parsimonious Parametric Modeling," *Applied Statistics*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (1994), pp. 429-467; Patrick Royston and Douglas G. Altman, "Using Fractional Polynomials to Model Curved Regression Relationships," *Stata Technical Bulletin*, Vol. 21 (September 1994), pp. 11-23; Patrick Royston and Willi Sauerbrei, "A New Approach to Modelling Interactions between Treatment and Continuous Covariates in Clinical Trials by Using Fractional Polynomials," *Statistics in Medicine*, Vol. 23, No. 16 (July 2004): 2509-2525; and Patrick Royston and Willi Sauerbrei, *Multivariable Model-Building: A Pragmatic Approach to Regression Analysis Based on Fractional Polynomials for Modelling Continuous Covariates* (Chichester, U.K.: John Wiley, 2008), pp. 82-83.
[41] Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 45, models 4 and 5.
[42] In addition to my contribution to "Another Skirmish in the Battle over Democracies and War," see Alexander B. Downes, "Comparing the Effect of Linear versus Curvilinear Specifications of Democracy on War Outcomes," and "A Note on Curvilinearity, Democracy, and Victory," both available on my website, http://www.duke.edu/~downes/publications.htm.
[43] Reiter, "Closer Look," pp. 4-5. See also Reiter and Stam, "Correspondence," pp. 194-195.
[44] Reiter, "Closer Look," p. 5. The article in question is H. E. Goemans, "Which Way Out? The Manner and Consequences of Losing Office," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 52, No. 6 (December 2008): 771-794.

leaders are constrained because there are regular institutionalized opportunities to remove them, whereas authoritarian leaders—who must be ousted violently—are not so constrained. The theory says nothing about the possibility of violent overthrow of democratic leaders, and thus evidence that democratic leaders who lose wars are at increased risk of falling victim to a coup cannot be used as support for selection effects. Indeed, the fact that democratic losers are more likely to be removed by irregular means undermines the argument that democratic procedures are sufficient to punish (and hence deter) errant leaders. Goemans further shows that defeat in war does not increase the likelihood that leaders are removed from office via *regular* procedures.[45] In an earlier article, Goemans and a co-author similarly found that neither victory nor defeat had any systematic effect on the likelihood of democratic leaders' removal from office.[46] These sophisticated empirical studies on the effect of conflict involvement on leader survival thus contradict selection effects theory.

Other recent work has begun to chip away at democratic exceptionalism in war. Stephen Biddle and Stephen Long, for example, have shown that the effect of democracy on the casualty ratio between attacker and defender depends crucially on how one interprets the contribution of human capital.[47] When an indicator of human capital is included along with democracy in a regression, regime type becomes insignificant.[48] If it could be shown that democracy causes higher levels of human capital, this result would support democratic triumphalism, but if better human capital leads to democracy, then democracy is at best epiphenomenal and perhaps even harmful to military effectiveness. Other studies have found that democracies are at best no

[45] Goemans, "Which Way Out?" p. 784.
[46] Giacomo Chiozza and H. E. Goemans, "International Conflict and the Tenure of Leaders: Is War Still Ex Post Inefficient?" *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (July 2004), pp. 604-619.
[47] Biddle and Long, "Democracy and Military Effectiveness."
[48] Worse, when variables accounting for different combinations of belligerents' cultures are included, attacker democracy predicts a significantly worse loss exchange ratio for the attacker. Ibid., pp. 537-538.

better—and possibly worse—than nondemocracies at fighting irregular, counterinsurgency wars.[49] Still others maintain that democracies with high levels of income inequality are systematically biased toward building capital-intensive militaries and fighting small wars with inappropriate firepower-intensive strategies because this way of fighting lowers the economic burden on the median voter even as it makes democracies likely to lose.[50]

In the broader literature on regime type and conflict, a number of studies have begun to challenge or qualify democratic efficacy. Jessica Weeks, for example, argues that leaders in several types of nondemocratic regimes are subject to institutional constraints on their power that cause them to exercise caution in the types of crises and wars they undertake. Weeks finds that democracies are not uniquely advantaged in being able to make credible threats: most nondemocracies have their threats reciprocated at rates that are not statistically different from the rates that democracies' threats are reciprocated.[51] Douglas Gibler and Marc Hutchison argue that there is no general democratic audience costs advantage that makes democratic threats more effective; audience costs are present only in those rare cases when the issue is highly salient to the public, such as during a dispute with an enduring rival.[52] In a major reassessment of the democratic audience costs thesis, I argue with a co-author that the evidentiary basis for the

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[49] Jason Lyall, "Do Democracies Make Inferior Counterinsurgents? Reassessing Democracy's Impact on War Outcomes and Duration," *International Organization*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (Winter 2010), pp. 167-192; Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, "Rage against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency," *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Winter 2009), pp. 67-106; and Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failure of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
[50] Jonathan D. Caverley, "The Myth of Military Myopia: Democracy, Small Wars, and Vietnam," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Winter 2009/10), pp. 119-157. See also Jonathan D. Caverley, "The Political Economy of Blood and Treasure," unpublished manuscript, Northwestern University, July 2009.
[51] Jessica L. Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve," *International Organization*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (Winter 2008), pp. 35-64. Also making the case that autocracies can generate audience costs is Jessica Chen Weiss, "Playing with Fire: Nationalist Protest and Authoritarian Diplomacy," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., September 2010.
[52] Douglas M. Gibler and Marc L. Hutchison, "Territorial Issues, Audience Costs, and the Democratic Peace: The Importance of Issue Salience," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., September 2010.

argument that democracies make more credible threats in international crises is deeply problematic.[53] The reason is that the principal datasets used to test the argument—Militarized Interstate Disputes (MID) and International Crisis Behavior (ICB)—are nearly devoid of actual threats. We reanalyze prominent empirical studies that use these datasets and find that the results are driven almost entirely by cases that do not contain threats. Analysis of an original dataset of compellent threats shows that democracies are no more likely than autocracies to obtain their demands.

In short, the quantitative debate about democratic efficacy in international relations is far from over. A large body of research questions the view that democracies are both more likely to prevail in wars and in international crises.

Summary

To sum up, I argue that selection effects theory as articulated by Reiter and Stam, because it relies on an understanding of leaders as seeking contemporaneous consent for their policies, makes predictions about when democratic leaders will initiate wars that are mutually contradictory. War outcome is also not the correct dependent variable to test the theory; instead, public support for war should be examined prior to the onset of fighting. Second, empirical support for the marketplace of ideas is surprisingly sparse; I argue that the public discussion aspect of the marketplace is moribund and thus scholars should focus on the claim that superior civil-military relations facilitate democratic success. Third, secrecy cannot be reconciled with selection effects because it can both increase and decrease the likelihood of victory; its effect on the likelihood of victory is thus indeterminate. Lastly, the quantitative evidence for democracy

[53] Alexander B. Downes and Todd S. Sechser, "Are You Threatening Me? A Reassessment of the Credibility of Democratic Threats in International Relations," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., September 2010.

and victory—as well as for a variety of other positive conflict outcomes—is much more contested than Reiter admits.

II. Vietnam

I now turn to Reiter's reaction to my analysis of the U.S. decision to engage in war in Vietnam, which exemplifies some of the issues discussed above. In my *International Security* article I argued that President Johnson chose to initiate war against North Vietnam despite deep pessimism among top U.S. political and military officials regarding the ability of the United States to win. I contended that this decision contradicted the selection effects theory's prediction that democratic leaders start only those wars they believe they can win. Reiter does not dispute my core claim, but he does raise five other objections to my interpretation of the case.[54] First, he argues it is not clear that the United States initiated or lost the war. Second, Reiter claims that the marketplace of ideas actually functioned quite well in the decision-making that led to Vietnam. Third, he asserts that LBJ's decision to fight was popular at the time, and thus was consistent with the selection effects mechanism that leaders start wars they believe will be popular. Fourth, Reiter contends that because I argue that Johnson was motivated to fight in Vietnam by domestic politics, this is consistent with selection effects. Finally, Reiter claims that even though the chances of victory in Vietnam were relatively low, the public perceived the stakes involved to be so high that fighting was worthwhile. Overall, Reiter concludes that Vietnam "demonstrates

[54] Although Reiter does not contest my fundamental claim, he downplays it by stating repeatedly that members of the Johnson administration and the U.S. public thought the chances of victory in Vietnam were "only moderate" rather than poor. Reiter, "Closer Look," pp. 3, 27, 28. I am satisfied that the large number of documents I cited in my article supports my argument that Johnson and his advisors were more pessimistic than Reiter allows. My view also echoes the conclusion of most historians. See Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?" pp. 34-43, and the works cited therein. See also Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

many of the patterns predicted by selection effects theory."[55] I address each of these points in turn.

Initiator and Outcome of the Vietnam War

Reiter's first counterargument is that the United States did not clearly initiate the Vietnam War and also did not lose it. On the war's outcome, I never claimed the United States lost the war,[56] although this is a common interpretation. The U.S. war aim in the conflict was to preserve an independent, noncommunist South Vietnam. The peace settlement that ended U.S. participation in the war in January 1973 partially achieved this outcome: the Republic of Vietnam continued to exist, but roughly 200,000 North Vietnamese soldiers were permitted to remain south of the border. The settlement in reality purchased a "decent interval" to separate the U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam's ultimate defeat, which did not occur until April 1975. For their part, the North Vietnamese failed to conquer South Vietnam but they did obtain the U.S.'s exit from the conflict. Many analysts code the U.S.'s inability to impose its will on Hanoi as a defeat.[57] I think it is more accurate to code the war as a draw because each side achieved some but not all of its objectives. Because risk-averse, forward-looking democratic leaders want to avoid bloody eight-year battlefield stalemates, however, I argue that selection effects theory predicts that Johnson should have avoided war in Vietnam.

Reiter does not contest my decision to code the United States as the initiator of the war against North Vietnam. After repeating my argument (drawn from a source not at all sympathetic

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[55] Reiter, "Closer Look," p. 26.

[56] Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?" p. 19, n. 31.

[57] See, for example, Jeffrey Record: *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam* (Annapolis, Md.: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1998); Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars*; Charles E. Neu, *America's Lost War: Vietnam: 1945-1975* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 2005); and Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008).

to the communist side) that the Pleiku bombing by the Viet Cong in February 1965 was not ordered by Hanoi, Reiter suggests that U.S. leaders perceived the attack to have been instigated by North Vietnam, and thus "the decision to escalate was seen more as a reaction to attack rather than a war of choice."[58] Reiter neglects to mention that LBJ had already decided to initiate a campaign of sustained bombing of North Vietnam on December 1, 1964, and sought only a propitious provocation to justify his attack. Johnson's National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy said at the time that "'Pleikus are streetcars'—meaning that the United States had been waiting for such an incident and planned to make use of it."[59] The United States was the first state actor to use military force against another state, which is the criterion used by the Correlates of War project to identify war initiators, and the same criterion endorsed by Reiter and Stam in *Democracies at War*.[60] Recoding war initiation along the lines suggested by Reiter—whether a state's leaders perceived themselves to be acting defensively or offensively—would be an arduous task and could result in cases where both sides or neither are coded as the initiator.

The Marketplace of Ideas and Vietnam

Reiter's second counter-claim is that "the marketplace of ideas seems to have worked reasonably well, as many components of government (including the White House) correctly understood that the Vietnam War was a risky bet in which victory was not guaranteed."[61] Reiter refers here to the assessments of the U.S.'s military prospects in the war offered by both civilian analysts and military officers, which forecast that victory was not likely even if the United States introduced

[58] Reiter, "Closer Look," p. 25, n. 95. My information is from Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 486, n. 14.
[59] Quoted in Robert L. Galluci, *Neither Peace nor Honor: The Politics of American Military Policy in Viet-Nam* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 46.
[60] Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 40.
[61] Reiter, "Closer Look," p. 26.

hundreds of thousands of ground troops into South Vietnam. He does not address a large body of evidence that the discussion aspect of the marketplace was subverted and rendered ineffective by the Johnson administration. Here I first provide evidence on how Johnson avoided a full public debate on the merits of escalation in Vietnam and the level of deception the president practiced on Congress, the public, and even members of his own administration. Second, I demonstrate that although civilian and military officials correctly predicted that fighting in Vietnam would be a tough, costly, and protracted slog, these pessimistic forecasts had little impact on decisions to escalate. Moreover, civil-military relations under Johnson bore little resemblance to Reiter and Stam's ideal: LBJ largely excluded military officers from planning and decision-making on Vietnam, relied almost exclusively on civilians for military advice, and co-opted members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to prevent them from publicly airing their disagreements with administration strategy. Johnson wanted the credibility that their uniforms lent to his preferred strategy of gradual escalation, not their professional military advice.

Administration Subversion of Public Discussion. The discussion logic implies that a multiplicity of voices should participate in a free-wheeling debate on going to war that improves the quality of information available, helping to produce better decisions. One is struck, therefore, by the narrow range of the debate on Vietnam within the Johnson administration, as well as the extent to which the president restricted debate to a few individuals and concealed his decisions for war not only from the public and Congress, but also from second-tier officials within the government who disagreed with escalation.[62]

One of the remarkable facts about the decisions for war in 1964 and 1965 is the narrowness of the debate both inside and outside the administration. Certain options were simply

[62] The policymaking predilections of Lyndon Johnson are well-known: the president preferred unanimity among his advisors, disliked free-wheeling debate, and for those reasons confined important deliberations to a small circle of trusted aides.

out of bounds. Neither the Kennedy nor Johnson administrations, for example, ever seriously pursued negotiations as an alternative to standing firm or escalating in Vietnam. Kennedy administration officials opposed any diplomatic settlement until the insurgency in South Vietnam had been defeated, and Johnson repeatedly rebuffed feelers for talks well into 1965, including two orchestrated by UN Secretary General U Thant.[63] Just as negotiations were beyond the pale, any discussion of neutralizing South Vietnam was similarly anathema. When Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield presented the president with a memorandum in January 1964 suggesting neutralization as a possible way out of Vietnam, Johnson's top aides blasted it. McGeorge Bundy, Secretary of State Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and others pointed to the apocalyptic international and domestic consequences of accepting a neutral South Vietnam (since they equated neutralization with communization), including falling dominoes in Southeast Asia, a decline in U.S. prestige, doubts about the credibility of U.S. commitments to defend other countries, and the possible evisceration of the administration's domestic effectiveness because it "lost" Vietnam.[64]

Suggestions that the United States should withdraw its forces from South Vietnam, finally, were enough to get officials—even the Vice-President of the United States—banned from participation in further deliberations on Vietnam. Vice-President Hubert Humphrey gave Lyndon Johnson a memo on February 17, 1965, in which he advised the president to cut rather than enlarge the U.S. presence in Vietnam. Arguing that "American wars have to be politically understandable by the American public" to "enjoy sustained public support," Humphrey warned

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[63] Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 212; George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1987), pp. 288-289; and William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships*, Part 3: *January-July 1965* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 97-103.

[64] Mansfield's memo was originally given to President Kennedy in August 1963. See Memorandum, Mansfield to Kennedy, in *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), 1961-1963, Vol. 3, doc. 258. The responses of Johnson's advisors are in *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 1: 8.

that in Vietnam, the public simply "can't understand why we would run grave risks to support a country which is totally unable to put its house in order." Citing the unpopularity of the stalemated Korean War, Humphrey presciently cautioned that should the United States find itself "embroiled deeper in fighting in Vietnam over the next few months, political opposition will steadily mount….with serious and direct effects for all the Democratic internationalist programs to which the Johnson Administration remains committed: AID, United Nations, arms control, and socially humane and constructive policies generally." Humphrey's dissent merely infuriated Johnson and resulted in the vice-president's banishment from policymaking on Vietnam.[65]

Much has been made of Undersecretary of State George Ball's October 1964 memorandum as an example of the consideration and acceptance of dissenting views within the Johnson administration. One problem with this view is that Ball's paper received limited distribution within the government; the president, for example, did not read it until late February 1965, after he had decided to initiate sustained bombing of North Vietnam. Moreover, it is not clear that Ball's views were taken seriously in the administration since some now believe that he had accepted the role of "house dove" assigned by the president "to shoot holes" in the plans to fight in Vietnam.[66] Ball denied this in his memoirs, but others in the administration seem to have understood this to be his role. Regardless of whether Ball was playing a role or not, he was virtually alone among the upper echelon of officials in suggesting options other than escalation for Vietnam. Ball did not even do this consistently, as he often kept silent or supported the administration's policies in internal debates or discussions with Congressmen. Ultimately, his

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[65] Quoted in Gibbons, *U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 3: pp. 94, 95. A similar fate befell a lower-ranking official—Paul Kattenburg, a widely-respected Vietnam specialist in the State Department—late in the Kennedy administration for advocating withdrawal from Vietnam. See Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 51; and David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2000), pp. 244-245.
[66] Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 248-250.

loyalty to the president kept him on board and prevented him from breaking with the path Johnson had chosen.[67]

The Johnson administration also practiced an exceptional level of deception on Congress and the public. The Tonkin Gulf episode in August 1964 is a good example.[68] On August 2, three North Vietnamese patrol boats approached the U.S.S. *Maddox*, a destroyer on an intelligence-gathering patrol near the North Vietnamese coast. Perceiving that the vessels were intent on attacking, the *Maddox* fired on and damaged one of the ships. The North Vietnamese were retaliating for a covert attack on their coast under OPLAN 34-A that had taken place in the area on the night of July 30-31, but the actual attack on the *Maddox* was unauthorized; U.S. intelligence intercepted a message to the three boats canceling the mistaken order to attack. The president and McGeorge Bundy both understood that the OPLAN 34-A operation had caused the attack on the *Maddox*, but the White House ordered a continuation of the destroyer patrols (known as DeSoto patrols), and specifically ordered another 34-A mission for the next day. On August 4, the *Maddox* reported it was under attack again. Administration officials, who had already discussed retaliatory options if a second attack occurred, decided to strike back. Later in the day, Admiral Sharp, commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific, and Captain Herrick of the *Maddox* contacted Washington and raised doubts about the attack: Herrick reported that it now appeared that the sonar contacts and torpedo firings were doubtful, and carrier pilots on the U.S.S. *Ticonderoga* were unable to find any enemy vessels in the area. Later scholarly analysis concluded that a second North Vietnamese attack almost certainly did not occur.[69] Nonetheless, Johnson and his top aides decided to launch a retaliatory strike against North Vietnam, and

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[67] Ibid., p. 249.
[68] My narrative of this incident relies on Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, pp. 331-336.
[69] Edwin E. Moïse, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

quickly followed that up by sending the Gulf of Tonkin resolution to Congress, which permitted the president to use armed force to prevent further attacks on U.S. forces and to defend any ally in Southeast Asia from aggression.

In order to obtain Congressional authorization for the resolution, however, administration officials departed significantly from the truth in their version of events in the Tonkin Gulf. Secretary McNamara, for example, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the *Maddox* had been on a "routine patrol" rather than a classified mission to obtain electronic intelligence.[70] This was obviously false. He also said that the Navy knew nothing about any South Vietnamese operations against North Vietnam and denied any connection between such operations and the destroyers' presence in the Gulf. McNamara of course knew the two were connected, and knew that was also the North Vietnamese understanding. As Director of Central Intelligence John McCone put it in an NSC meeting on August 3, "The North Vietnamese are reacting defensively to our [Oplan 34-A] attacks on their off-shore islands."[71] The administration also neglected to mention that it had ordered another covert attack on North Vietnam and a continuation of the DeSoto patrols after the first incident, hoping to provoke a reaction from Hanoi that would justify retaliation and a Congressional resolution.[72]

It is also startling the lengths to which Johnson and his advisors went to stifle debate on the war and to conceal their decision to wage war against North Vietnam. According to George Herring,

> Johnson thus took the nation into war in Vietnam by indirection and dissimulation. The bombing was publicly justified as a response to the Pleiku attack and the broader pattern of North Vietnamese 'aggression,' rather than as a desperate attempt to halt the military and political deterioration in South Vietnam. The administration never publicly

[70] Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 336.
[71] Quoted in Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 201.
[72] This episode fits well with Schuessler's argument that democratic leaders use deception to shift the blame for war onto the opponent, thereby generating public support for the use of force. Schuessler, "Deception Dividend."

> acknowledged the shift from reprisals to 'sustained pressures.' The dispatch of ground troops was explained solely in terms of the need to protect U.S. military installations, and not until June, when it crept out by accident in a press release, did administration spokesmen concede that American troops were authorized to undertake offensive operations.[73]

Similarly, Logevall writes that "Johnson in the first half of 1965 escalated the Vietnam War by stealth. More than that, he set out to quash debate on the war, to manufacture consensus….to keep the American people in the dark about Vietnam, to foster apathy, to conceal for as long as possible the Americanization of the war."[74] The president, for example, repeatedly stymied Senate debates on the way forward in Vietnam proposed by Senator Mansfield by deploying his aides to conduct personal discussions with senators and dissuade them from airing their differences with the administration in public. In a meeting with key legislators on January 21, 1965, for example, Johnson asked for bipartisan support for his policies and swore participants to secrecy. Briefings at this meeting by Rusk and McNamara, however, significantly misrepresented those policies, claiming that the United States was open to negotiations and a multi-power conference on Vietnam (it was not) and that significant military progress was being made by the South Vietnamese (also not true).[75] But the biggest whopper came from Johnson himself: the president, who had cabled Taylor in Saigon three weeks earlier to indicate his interest in the deployment of U.S. ground troops, told the assembled legislators that "[t]he war…must be fought by the South Vietnamese. We cannot control everything that they do and we have to count on their fighting their war."[76]

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[73] George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1986), p. 133.
[74] Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 304-305. For similar assessments, see Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983), pp. 430, 433; Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, pp. 355, 369, 414-416; Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 39, 54, 68, 70-71, 110, 130-131, 211; and Gibbons, *U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 3: p. 78.
[75] On this meeting, see Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 314-315.
[76] Quoted in Gibbons, *U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 3: p. 40.

A few weeks later, when Johnson endorsed McGeorge Bundy's policy of sustained reprisal, he refused Bundy's recommendation to inform the public, preferring to pretend that no policy shift had taken place. Indeed, as the bombing got underway, some commentators wondered why the president had made no public statements regarding U.S. policy even as American involvement in the war deepened.[77] "In Washington," writes Robert Mann, "there was no public announcement that the United States was finally at war with North Vietnam."[78] The president at this time (late February-early March) was busy suppressing dissent in the Senate, and succeeded in keeping the most important Senate Democrats who opposed enlarging the war—Mansfield, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee J. William Fulbright, and Johnson's mentor Richard Russell—from voicing their dissent publicly. On April 1, the president in a press conference denied knowing of any plans in the U.S. government for expanding the war, and the next day McGeorge Bundy told participants at an NSC meeting: "Under no circumstances should there be any reference to the movement of U.S. forces or other courses of action."[79] This campaign of deception continued well into June, when Johnson told Fulbright that he had resisted the military's attempts to escalate and had worked hard to open discussions with the North.[80] Finally, when Johnson announced to the country on July 28 that he was sending additional troops to Vietnam, he first misrepresented the true number he had approved (50,000 instead of 100,000), and then denied that these deployments constituted any change in policy.[81]

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[77] Ibid., p. 86, n. 116.
[78] Robert Mann, *A Grand Delusion: America's Descent into Vietnam* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 408.
[79] Quoted in Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 419.
[80] Ibid., p. 449. Perhaps Johnson was referring to his speech at Johns Hopkins University in early April where he stated he was open to "unconditional discussions" with Hanoi. This speech was an empty gesture because it was designed primarily to quiet the administration's critics and was not an offer to negotiate. Indeed, there was no change in policy at all. Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 371-372.
[81] VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, p. 211.

Perhaps the best illustration of Johnson's systematic "policy of minimum candor" was the flap that arose in response to the statement by a U.S. State Department spokesman on June 8, 1965, regarding the mission of U.S. troops in Vietnam.[82] Two months earlier, when LBJ approved the deployment of two additional Marine battalions and 18,000 to 20,000 support troops, the president had also signed off on a change of mission for the Marines from static base security to a more active patrolling and combat role. Formalized in NSAM-328, Johnson concealed this decision to allow American troops to engage in combat from all but his top three advisors. On June 8, however, the spokesman told the press that U.S. troops were "available for combat support together with the Vietnamese forces as and when necessary." Although the White House quickly issued a denial, the announcement caused widespread comment and provoked the following editorial by the *New York Times*: "The American people were told by a minor State Department official yesterday, that, in effect, they were in a land war on the continent of Asia. This is only one of the extraordinary aspects of the first formal announcement that a decision has been made to commit American ground forces to open combat in South Vietnam: The nation is informed about it not by the President, not by a Cabinet member, not even by a sub-Cabinet official, but by a public relations officer."[83]

The president thus systematically concealed his decisions to escalate the conflict from the public, worked to suppress debate in Congress, and lied to senators (and the American people) about steps he had taken. Rather than encourage debate, the administration squelched it. Officials in the executive and legislative branches who dissented from the steadily escalating commitment were excluded from the policymaking process or misled about decisions that had been made.

[82] This expression is from Karnow, *Vietnam*, p. 430.
[83] Gibbons, *U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 3: p. 278. See also VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, pp. 109-111, 155-156.

Quality of Strategic Assessment. What about Reiter's claim that the strategic assessment plank of the marketplace of ideas worked effectively because Johnson had good information about what he was up against in Vietnam? As I demonstrated in my article, the bulk of the evidence on this question is that after 1963, civilian policymakers had access to accurate information about the nature of the political and military situation in South Vietnam, and the likelihood that using force against North Vietnam would help the South defeat the Viet Cong insurgency.[84] That information was overwhelmingly pessimistic: the Viet Cong gained strength and ground throughout 1964 while coup followed coup in Saigon. Moreover, few believed that deploying U.S. air power against the North would do much to improve things in the South. Even with the infusion of massive American ground power, all signs pointed to a protracted war of attrition. Yet with all of this accurate information in hand, Johnson and his men continued to escalate U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Officials were getting the bad news by 1964, but it did not have much of an impact on their willingness to escalate. As Logevall has put it, "To independent observers, this reality foretold gigantic, perhaps insurmountable, problems in any defense of South Vietnam…to the top figures in the Johnson administration, it necessitated merely a redoubled effort."[85]

Indeed, administration officials seemed to be able to convince themselves that the course of action they wanted to take would have positive effects that previous analysis and neutral observers did not find credible. A good example is McGeorge Bundy's recommendation for sustained reprisals of February 8, 1965. First of all, Bundy's report—contradicting all evidence—claimed that morale in South Vietnam was not nearly as bad as previously thought and that the South Vietnamese Army's ability to engage in combat was improving. Bundy went

[84] Evidence indicates that in late 1963 the military presented an overly optimistic picture of progress in South Vietnam by omitting data on increased Viet Cong attacks from its reports. See Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 268.
[85] Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 216.

on to argue that bombing the North would improve morale in the South, get contending political factions to work together, weaken support for the Viet Cong, and perhaps persuade Hanoi to halt its support for the insurgency. As Logevall notes, however, "Each of these claims about the benefits of bombing North Vietnam went against the bulk of U.S. intelligence analysis dating back several months."[86] Second tier State Department officials who saw Bundy's report were stunned to see these assertions—which they believed had been thoroughly discredited—recycled.

The historical record is replete with incongruous episodes of this type, many of which I reported in my article. In September 1964, for example, LBJ declared that he would not begin bombing North Vietnam until the political and military situation stabilized in Saigon. When improved conditions failed to materialize, however, Johnson and his advisors argued that bombing was necessary to stabilize the situation.[87] Perhaps most striking in this regard is McNamara's paper from July 20, 1965, that formed the basis for the crucial discussions in Washington on the escalation to ground troops. McNamara's memo, after recounting a rapidly deteriorating military situation, recommended an increase to 175,000 troops by the end of 1965, a further increase of 100,000 in 1966, and possibly more to follow, all while conceding that the Viet Cong might simply revert to a strategy of protracted war. McNamara, in complete contradiction to his own arguments, then concluded that this plan offered "a good chance of achieving an acceptable outcome within a reasonable time in Vietnam."[88]

In short, the administration substituted hope for analysis and chose to continue escalating in Vietnam despite having access to highly prescient assessments of the consequences of their actions. The question, therefore, is whether one can claim that strategic assessment was effective

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[86] Ibid., p. 330.
[87] Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?" p. 38.
[88] On this episode, see ibid., pp. 42-43. Quote is from McNamara to Johnson, Memorandum, July 20, 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 3: 67.

if policymakers—fully aware of the perils of their preferred path—simply ignored the advice and continued to advocate policies they knew would lead to an unhappy outcome.

An even more damning critique of strategic assessment on Vietnam—especially given the weakness of the public discussion plank of the marketplace of ideas detailed above—is the malignant state of relations between the president's legally designated military advisors—the Joint Chiefs of Staff—and the civilian leadership. Reiter and Stam argue that because civilian control of the military is robust in democracies and the military does not represent a threat to political leaders' tenure, officers are promoted solely on merit and thus provide leaders with expert military advice that allows civilian elites to choose wisely which wars to enter and which to avoid. In his essay, Reiter provides no direct evidence from the Vietnam case to support this argument; instead, he cites the fact that decision-makers understood that the odds of success were poor as proof that the system of military advice must have worked as posited. Again, as with the public discussion argument, the available evidence tells a very different story. In fact, civil-military relations under Lyndon Johnson diverged in several important ways from the Reiter and Stam model that had deleterious consequences. Johnson and McNamara largely excluded the JCS from the planning process, and misrepresented or even suppressed the military's views on strategy in Vietnam. Moreover, relations between soldiers and civilians were highly politicized, which allowed Johnson and McNamara to shape the advice they received from the chiefs.

The fundamental difficulty that Johnson faced in his relationship with the Joint Chiefs was that the chiefs in 1964 favored a much more aggressive approach to containing communism in Southeast Asia than did the president.[89] Johnson, influenced heavily by his civilian advisors,

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[89] Johnson's predecessor, John F. Kennedy, faced the same problem, first in Laos and then in South Vietnam. In Laos, for example, where the president favored negotiations and neutralization, the JCS on March 20, 1961,

preferred a course of gradual escalation and the use of force primarily to send signals of American resolve to stand firm in Vietnam rather than to achieve outright victory. Gradualism also fit well with Johnson's domestic political priorities, which were to win the November 1964 election and achieve passage of his Great Society programs before taking any serious action one way or the other on Vietnam. Finally, Johnson feared repeating the mistakes of U.S. intervention in Korea, where the U.S.-led invasion of North Korea triggered Chinese entry into the war, leading first to a disastrous U.S. retreat and then to a costly and protracted battlefield stalemate. The Chiefs, by contrast, wanted from the president a clear commitment to winning in Vietnam and a rapid escalation to forceful measures against Hanoi necessary to achieve victory. This divergence between the JCS and the president was highlighted soon after Johnson took office by a memorandum the Chiefs sent to McNamara in January 1964, which rejected limited force and called for more aggressive actions against North Vietnam, including air attacks and sea mines.[90] Johnson, faced with military advice that contradicted his own objectives and strategy, neither changed his approach to the war in response to the Chiefs' views nor openly rejected their recommendations. Rather, Johnson—aided by McNamara—moved to sideline the JCS from the planning process but keep them on board so that he could benefit from the credibility their uniforms lent to his administration's policies.

The leading study of U.S. civil-military relations in the period of U.S. escalation in Vietnam—H. R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty*—provides an abundance of evidence regarding the ways in which the president and his Secretary of Defense marginalized and manipulated the JCS. First, McMaster argues that Johnson and McNamara worked to exclude the JCS from the

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recommended inserting up to 60,000 U.S. troops backed by air power and nuclear weapons. Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 43. Similarly, the chiefs favored sending troops to South Vietnam in October 1961. Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 26.

[90] McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, pp. 64-65.

planning and decision-making process on Vietnam. Before his trip to South Vietnam in early March 1964, for example, McNamara promised the chiefs that they would be able to review his report before the president acted on it. Little did they know that William Bundy had already written two drafts of the report before McNamara even departed for Saigon and that Johnson had read the document twice before the chiefs even saw it.[91] Beginning in May, McNamara ended the JCS's ability to speak directly to the president by requiring that all communications from the Chiefs go through his office rather than straight to Johnson.[92] The role of the Joint Chiefs was further diminished that summer when Johnson appointed former JCS chairman Gen. Maxwell Taylor as ambassador to Saigon and granted him extraordinary powers to coordinate the entire military effort in South Vietnam.[93] Johnson and McNamara also shaped the recommendations the chiefs could make by issuing narrow guidelines that essentially forced the JCS to produce the type of gradualist advice the administration sought.[94] Military participation in important reviews of administration policy on Vietnam—such as the Vietnam Working Group in November 1964 and the decision to fulfill MACV commander Gen. William Westmoreland's thirty-four battalion request in July 1965—was limited; the chiefs often found themselves reacting to positions developed without their input by civilians in the Defense Department.[95]

The corollary to Johnson's and McNamara's exclusion of the JCS from deliberations on Vietnam was their reliance on civilians with little military experience to formulate military strategy and plans. While Johnson distrusted his military advisors, McNamara simply thought that "military experience mattered little" and that "JCS advice" in particular "was

[91] Ibid., p. 72. McMaster notes that sending "draft memorandums to the president before the Joint Chiefs had an opportunity to comment" was common practice for McNamara. Ibid., pp. 74-75.
[92] Ibid., pp. 90-91.
[93] Ibid., p. 111.
[94] Ibid., pp. 115-116, 222.
[95] Ibid., pp. 181, 301-303. See also pp. 208-209.

inapplicable."[96] Johnson's inner circle consisted of McNamara, Dean Rusk, and McGeorge Bundy. This group met for lunch most Tuesdays starting in early February 1964. Although Vietnam was often on the agenda, no military representative was invited until the war was well underway in 1966. Furthermore, none of the second-tier officials who helped draft plans for military action in Vietnam—men like Paul Nitze, John McNaughton, William Bundy, and Roswell Gilpatric—had any combat experience. As McMaster puts it, "William Bundy of the State Department and McNaughton of the Defense Department became the principal planners for Vietnam."[97]

Second, McMaster argues that Johnson and McNamara politicized relations with the JCS by cultivating close relationships with members of that body to shape the advice they dispensed.[98] In February 1964, for example, after the chiefs voted to recommend an Air Force general for the job of commander-in-chief of Pacific Command, a post traditionally held by a Navy officer, chief of naval operations Admiral McDonald protested to McNamara. The Defense Secretary intervened and gave the job to Admiral Ulysses Sharp. According to McMaster, however, "McNamara's intervention on behalf of the Navy had a price—McDonald, who had hitherto opposed McNamara's plans [for Vietnam], no longer objected to them outside JCS meetings."[99]

Johnson and McNamara also capitalized on their relationships with JCS chairmen Gens. Maxwell Taylor and Earle Wheeler. McNamara, for example, exploited his close relations with Taylor when he was chair of the Joint Chiefs to quell dissent within that body. According to

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[96] Ibid., pp. 50, 72-73.
[97] Ibid., p. 160.
[98] This trend had begun under Kennedy, who—in an attempt to dilute the Chiefs' influence after the Bay of Pigs fiasco—appointed retired Gen. Maxwell Taylor as "Military Representative of the President," essentially his personal advisor on military matters.
[99] McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, p. 83.

McMaster, Taylor "assisted McNamara in suppressing JCS objections to the concept of graduated pressure" and protected Johnson from "the views of his less politically sensitive colleagues while telling the Chiefs that their recommendations had been given full consideration."[100] In one episode in May 1964, Taylor withdrew a memo to McNamara written by the other chiefs without his input that called for sharp escalation against North Vietnam; when his colleagues redrafted the paper and asked him to submit it, he refused.[101] As McMaster puts it, Taylor had "foiled another attempt to question the validity of the assumptions on which the concept of graduated pressure was based."[102] Relations with Wheeler followed a similar pattern. Johnson and Wheeler became good friends, and this was no accident. As Taylor's former assistant Gen. Andrew Goodpaster once put it, "Johnson had a way of 'befriending' people and then using that friendship to extract acquiescence on controversial issues."[103] According to Robert Buzzanco, Wheeler "enforced conformity within the JCS" and "pressured the Army and Navy into supporting the air war in order to send unified proposals to McNamara."[104] Wheeler could also be counted on to keep quiet when civilian officials lied and to mislead his colleagues and members of Congress.[105]

Third, Johnson and McNamara employed a significant amount of deception in their dealings with the JCS. McNamara sometimes misrepresented—and even lied about—the chiefs' views in high-level administration meetings. The chiefs, for example, lodged serious objections to McNamara's report advocating gradual escalation in March 1964. Taylor first watered down the chiefs' language in a memo to McNamara; the Secretary of Defense then quashed even this

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[100] Ibid., p. 106.
[101] Ibid., pp. 100-101.
[102] Ibid., p. 102.
[103] Ibid., p. 110.
[104] Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, p. 194.
[105] McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, pp. 135, 221, 320. Other members of the JCS also occasionally were not fully truthful with Congressmen. Ibid., pp. 309-312.

milder memo and proceeded to tell the National Security Council that the JCS "supported the McNamara report."[106] Similarly, a year later McNamara reported to the president that the military agreed with the pace of bombing in North Vietnam when in fact Wheeler and Admiral Sharp both recommended it be augmented.[107]

Johnson, for his part, repeatedly misled the Chiefs, telling them that although he could not presently implement their recommendations for more aggressive military measures, he would follow them in the future. The president used this ploy to prevent the JCS members from becoming disaffected and to keep them on the team. McMaster identifies a typical interaction between the president and the JCS after the Viet Cong attack on Bien Hoa airfield on November 1, 1964: "The Chiefs tried to use the attack to gain approval for additional actions on the list they had developed less than a week earlier. To keep the Chiefs 'on board,' President Johnson and his closest advisors appeared sympathetic to the JCS recommendation and held out the promise of future action" while denying permission to strike now.[108] Five months later, Johnson similarly "promised more determined action in the future" while rejecting a JCS recommendation to deploy three divisions to South Vietnam.[109] McNamara also took this tack with the chiefs to tamp down their frustration over the administration's refusal to heed JCS advice.[110]

Finally, it is worth noting that although Reiter and Stam's model assumes that "the military" speaks with one voice in providing advice to political leaders, in fact the armed forces are comprised of several services, each with its own interests and culture, which often disagree over strategy. Indeed, the JCS in the 1960s was riven with interservice rivalries that hobbled its

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[106] Ibid., p. 77.
[107] Ibid., p. 280. For other examples, see ibid., p. 301
[108] Ibid., p. 175.
[109] Johnson approved an increase of only one brigade. Ibid., pp. 270-271.
[110] Ibid., pp. 175-176, 317.

ability to offer unanimous advice on Vietnam.[111] In July 1964, for example, the chiefs were unable to agree on a request from Westmoreland for 4,200 additional troops and failed to submit a recommendation until after Johnson had already authorized the increase. In early August, a debate among the chiefs over Westmoreland's request for Army aviation assets devolved into an ugly shouting match between Gens. Curtis LeMay of the Air Force and Harold Johnson of the Army. According to McMaster, the Air Force and Marines "questioned the need for more Army aircraft in South Vietnam because they believed that Westmoreland's request represented a surreptitious attempt to expand the Army's air arm."[112]

Disagreements among the chiefs were particularly salient on the question of bombing North Vietnam. Throughout 1964 and 1965, the chiefs feuded over the role of air power. Underlying the dispute were fundamental disagreements on the nature of the war in Vietnam and how to fight it that were never resolved. LeMay and Marine Corps commandant Gen. Wallace Greene believed strongly that air attacks on North Vietnam would reduce Hanoi's capability and will to support the insurgency.[113] Harold Johnson of the Army disagreed, arguing that the insurgency was largely indigenous and could not be defeated by the application of air power against the North. These internal disputes erupted periodically, as in September 1964 and March 1965.[114] The chiefs tended to paper over their disagreements in an attempt to present a united front to the civilian leadership, but these compromises and logrolls rendered it difficult for the JCS to formulate coherent strategy.

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[111] Ibid., pp. 82-84.
[112] Ibid., pp. 114-115. Each service tended to view the conflict from its own perspective and proposed solutions in which it would play the leading role. Ibid., pp. 142-144.
[113] Greene also favored inserting Marines into coastal enclaves in South Vietnam.
[114] On the September 1964 episode, see McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, pp. 148-149; and Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, p. 171. On the March 1965 dispute, see McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, pp. 249-250.

In sum, civil-military relations during the period when the key Vietnam decisions were made bear little resemblance to Reiter and Stam's democratic ideal of a meritocratic military providing expert, nonpolitical strategic advice to policymakers, thereby enabling them to select wars that can be won quickly and decisively. Instead, Johnson and his right-hand man McNamara worked assiduously to prevent meaningful military participation in decision-making, politicized relations with the JCS to manage dissent and solicit advice that supported their preferred policies, and deceived the chiefs about the possibility of future escalation to keep them from going public with their frustrations. The chiefs eventually decided to work within the administration's constraints of graduated force, supporting measures they believed were ineffective in the hope that more aggressive moves would be forthcoming.[115] Lastly, intra-military relations also diverged from Reiter and Stam's model because rivalries among the services prevented the JCS from providing unanimous recommendations.

A Popular War?

Reiter's third counterargument is that going to war in Vietnam was popular with the public, and thus the decision to fight is consistent with the selection effects argument that leaders will initiate war if they perceive that public opinion approves. Reiter offers evidence from several Harris surveys that he contends show that the American public supported escalation in Vietnam. We can investigate this claim by scrutinizing public and Congressional attitudes before President Johnson chose to attack North Vietnam. It is sometimes noted that support for taking the war to the North was high after the bombing began and inferred that this means there was solid support for going to war before-hand. This is incorrect. As noted above, research has shown that leaders may receive a bounce in approval when the country becomes involved in external hostilities as

[115] Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, pp. 186, 188, 227; and McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, pp. 146-147, 169, 209.

people rally behind the flag. In the case of Vietnam, for example, public approval for Johnson's handling of the situation in Vietnam jumped almost twenty points from before the United States undertook the February reprisal attacks (41 percent approve) to after (60 percent approve).[116] One cannot, therefore, infer pre-existing support for war by observing approval ratings after hostilities commence.[117] This disqualifies most of the polling numbers that Reiter cites as evidence supporting his argument that the war was popular.[118]

In fact, the evidence shows that there was little public pressure for escalating American involvement in Vietnam. The public was not strongly opposed to expanding U.S. participation, but nor was it strongly in favor. Polls in the first half of 1964 showed that most Americans knew little about Vietnam and the war. A Gallup poll from April 1964, for example, found that slightly more than one-third of Americans said that they paid attention to events in Vietnam.[119] Of the few who knew what was going on, opinions were equally split among those who wanted to get out, maintain the current policy, get tougher without using force, fight a war, and the difficult to classify all-or-nothing category of "go all the way or pull out."[120] A Harris poll from the previous month—which asked more directly about approval for putting "military pressure on the Communists in North Vietnam" at the risk of China entering the war—showed that nearly half of those queried opposed such a move while only a quarter favored it.[121]

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[116] VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, p. 76; Gibbons, *U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 3: pp. 75-76.
[117] Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 281-282.
[118] Only the first two polls he cites—in September and November 1964—preceded the beginning of the air war. Reiter, "Closer Look," p. 26. The first of these polls, which found that 45 percent favored continuing to support South Vietnam, 36 percent supported attacking North Vietnam, and 19 wanted to withdraw, was taken shortly after the Gulf of Tonkin episode and reflects the surge in public bellicosity in reaction to that skirmish.
[119] Gallup Poll USAIPO1964-0689, April 24-29, 1964, Q7. Gallup and Harris polls referenced here are available from the Roper Center Public Opinion Archives, http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/.
[120] Gallup Poll USAIPO1964-0689, April 24-29, 1964, Q9.
[121] Harris Survey, USHARRIS.033064.R2, March 1964. It also demonstrates the importance of question wording: the Harris question, by cueing the possibility of Chinese intervention, elicited much more opposition to escalation than questions that omitted this possibility.

Table 1 summarizes public opinion on Vietnam in mid-1964, showing the diversity of views on the question. The Gulf of Tonkin incident in early August caused a spike in the percentage of those polled who preferred to hold the line in Vietnam and a decline in the proportion of the public who wanted the United States to extricate itself from the country. The Gulf of Tonkin—at least in these polls, however—did not lead to an increase in the numbers in favor of going to war, which actually dropped from 12 percent in April to 9 percent in early August and further to 4 percent in late August.[122]

Table 1
Results of Gallup Polls:
"In your opinion, what would you like to see the United States do next about Vietnam?"

	April 1964	Early August 1964	Late August 1964
Withdraw completely	11	4	7
Sit down and talk it over	NA	10	4
Continue present policy	7	27	10
Step-up present efforts, but no war	12	12	13
Go all-out, declare war	12	9	4
Go all the way or pull out	11	3	7
Don't know/No opinion	27	30	49

Note: Figures are percentages. Gallup Polls USAIPO1964-0689, 0696, and 0697.

Public awareness of events in Southeast Asia grew as the year went by (spiking around the Gulf of Tonkin episode), but public views about appropriate U.S. policy remained divided. In a Council on Foreign Relations poll taken in December, the proportion of those surveyed who were unaware there was fighting in South Vietnam dropped to one quarter. Of the remaining three quarters, nearly 50 percent were in favor of pulling out, while only about half that many preferred committing U.S. ground troops to defeat the communists. According to a University of Michigan study also from December, when asked if the United States should withdraw from Vietnam right away, twice as many Americans were strongly opposed as were in favor (37 versus 18 percent). But these figures reversed when the question was should the United States

[122] Members of Congress were no more enthusiastic, exhibiting "low understanding or care about the problem." Of the handful of legislators who cared about Vietnam, most opposed any escalation there. Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 148.

commit its own troops to fight in Vietnam: 32 percent opposed such a move, with only 24 percent in favor. According to a Harris poll from the same time, 18 percent backed the idea of bombing North Vietnam, while 20 percent said they preferred to withdraw.[123] Another Harris poll taken at the end of January 1965 showed that a plurality of Americans (40 percent) wanted to continue the current policy of holding the line, but when it came to other options, the public was about evenly split between negotiating and getting out (23 percent) versus carrying the fight to North Vietnam (17 percent). As the figures in Table 2 show, the largest group consistently favored maintaining the status quo, but those who desired negotiations and a quick exit from Vietnam consistently outnumbered advocates of escalation. The gap between the two grew wider in spring 1965 until nearly three times as many Americans preferred negotiations to escalation, but by summer the difference between the two positions was negligible.[124]

Table 2
Results of Harris Polls:
"Which of these three courses do you favor for the United States in Vietnam: Carry the war into North Vietnam, at the risk of bringing Red China into the war; negotiate a settlement with the Communists and get out now; or continue to hold the line there to prevent the Communists for taking over South Vietnam?"

	Nov. 1964	Jan. 1965	Feb. 1965	March 1965	Early April 1965	Late April 1965	Late June 1965
Hold Line	40	40	40	46	48	43	36
Negotiate	20	23	23	35	31	28	24
Carry war into North Vietnam	20	17	13	12	17	20	20
Not sure	20	20	24	7	4	9	20

Note: Figures are percentages. Compiled from William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships,* Part 3: *January-July 1965* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 42, 145, 353.

Even after the United States began bombing the North, and strong majorities expressed their approval of the policy, large numbers also hoped the war could be ended by negotiations.[125] A Harris poll in mid-February 1965 showed that while 83 percent supported bombing, 75

[123] Ibid., p. 282.
[124] Elite opinion was similarly divided, according to another CFR survey: 20 percent favored military disengagement as opposed to 24 percent who wanted to expand the war. Gibbons, *U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 3: pp. 41-42.
[125] Kahin, *Intervention*, p. 324.

percent also favored trying to obtain a negotiated settlement.[126] A Gallup poll from March showed similar numbers, with 81 percent supporting a conference to negotiate a peace agreement.[127] In a head-to-head comparison of escalation versus negotiations in March, Gallup found equal support for each alternative (42 to 41 percent).[128] The diversity of opinion displayed in the Gallup polls in Table 3 suggests that although a majority of Americans favored both bombing and negotiations, when asked to get more specific there was little unanimity on the best course of action. Support for dovish (withdrawal, negotiations) and hawkish (escalation, going all-out) options was fairly similar, with maintaining the status quo also drawing double-digit support.[129]

Table 3
Results of Gallup Poll:
"In your opinion, what would you like to see the United States do next about Vietnam?"

	April 23	May 16	June 9	July 2
Withdraw completely	17	13	12	13
Start negotiating, stop fighting	12	12	16	11
Continue present policy	14	13	20	16
Step-up present efforts	12	8	4	6
Go all-out, declare war	19	15	17	17
No opinion	33	39	33	37

Note: Figures are percentages. See William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships,* Part 3: *January-July 1965* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 353.

As Harris concluded in a February 22 report for the Johnson administration, "The clear mainstream of America [sic] opinion is this: We should shore up the efforts of the South Vietnamese to resist further Communist advances, use retaliatory airstrikes only when extreme

[126] Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 360.
[127] Gibbons, *U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 3: p. 74, n. 85.
[128] VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, p. 120.
[129] As James Reston commented about public views of LBJ's policies in the *New York Times* on March 7, "one has the impression that the mood would be about the same if he stepped up the bombing, or stopped it, or followed any other policy except ordering the American Army into battle on the ground." Quoted in Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 361.

guerrilla activity warrants it, and when we have made enough show of power so that the Communists can see that we will not yield, then finally negotiate a settlement."[130]

Just as the public was not crying out for escalation in Vietnam, nor was Congress. Almost all of the leading skeptics of increasing American involvement in Southeast Asia were from the president's own party, and included several of the Senate's most influential members: Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, Foreign Relations Committee Chairman William Fulbright, and Richard Russell. As discussed above, Johnson had to work hard to prevent these men from voicing their views publicly. Although the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed unanimously in the House and with only two negative votes in the Senate, this should not be interpreted as a sign that legislators were enthusiastic about the prospect of war. Many legislators made clear that they were supporting retaliation for specific attacks, not advocating a wider war.[131]

In short, before the bombing of North Vietnam began, opinion in the United States was divided over the wisdom of taking military action against Hanoi and sending U.S. troops to South Vietnam. After the bombing started, large majorities supported it but at the same time supported attempts to negotiate a way out of Vietnam. The evidence indicates that rather than following a public mandate for escalation, LBJ led a public that was uncertain regarding the correct course in Vietnam but was willing to follow its commander-in-chief. But follow him how far? The president's old friend Mike Mansfield warned Johnson that the public did not support his policies because they understood or were strongly committed to them; rather, their support was based largely on his status as president. If the war began to go badly, this support would

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[130] Quoted in Gibbons, *U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 3: p. 75. The editorial pages of the nation's leading newspapers at the beginning of 1965 reflected the public's uneasiness about escalation, with many staff editorials expressing opposition to escalation. Even after the bombing began, about half of the editorial boards opposed more energetic involvement and favored a negotiated exit. Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 283, 361.
[131] Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 337.

evaporate.[132] Johnson himself, according to Moyar, "remained convinced that domestic opinion did not provide compelling grounds for intervention in Vietnam," noting that although the public appeared to support his policies now, "if you make a commitment to jump off a building, and you find out how high it is, you may withdraw the commitment."[133]

Domestic Politics Does Not Equal Selection Effects

A fourth critique leveled by Reiter is that because I argue that Johnson considered domestic politics when he chose to go to war in Vietnam, my argument is "consistent" with selection effects. This statement betrays a misconception that any argument that relies on domestic politics is necessarily consistent with selection effects. Reiter, as noted, lays out three mechanisms that selection effects theory posits can lead to war: the leader believes victory is likely, the war is likely to be popular, or the leader is dragged unwillingly into war by a fire-eating public. I argued that LBJ felt compelled to fight in Vietnam because if he did not, the Republican opposition would torpedo his cherished Great Society legislative program. This motivation does not fall into any of Reiter's three categories.[134]

Not a High Stakes War

The final argument Reiter makes is that although the American people understood that victory was not likely in Vietnam, "the high stakes merited escalation regardless."[135] Reiter offers no evidence in support of this assertion. There is plentiful evidence to the contrary, however. Table 4 summarizes several Gallup polls from 1964 that asked people what they thought was the most

[132] Herring, *America's Longest War*, p. 143.
[133] Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, pp. 413 and 501, n. 59.
[134] Nor does Johnson's desire to postpone escalation in (or withdrawal from) Vietnam until after the 1964 elections support selection effects. I address this issue in "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?" p. 37, n. 77.
[135] Reiter, "Closer Look," p. 27.

important issue facing the country. The percentage of respondents who said Vietnam is compared to the proportion who indicated racial discrimination or civil rights, which during this period was consistently the first or second most important issue in the public consciousness. As the figures in the table clearly show, Vietnam was not foremost in the minds of the vast majority of Americans prior to the Johnson administration's decision to bomb North Vietnam in early February 1965. Even immediately after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, a mere 14 percent of those polled thought Vietnam was the most important issue confronting the nation. This figure quickly receded to 6 percent by the end of the same month. Vietnam began to eclipse civil rights only *after* the war officially began, but still less than 30 percent of the public named it as the preeminent problem facing the United States. It is hard to imagine that if the stakes involved in Vietnam were as high as Reiter claims they were that less than one-third of the population would rank the conflict as the country's most important problem even after it had started. Of course, only a very few felt this way before the war began. This evidence undercuts his claim that the magnitude of the stakes in the Vietnam War drove people to support fighting it even though the prospects for victory were poor.

Table 4
Results of Gallup Poll:
"What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?"

	April 1964	July 1964	Early Aug. 1964	Late Aug. 1964	Feb. 1965	May 1965	July 1965	Sept. 1965
Vietnam	2	3	14	6	29	23	37	19
Racial Discrimination or Civil Rights	NA	58	36	46	24	23	20	25

Note: Figures are percentages. Gallup Polls USAIPO1964-0689, 0695, 0696, 0697, and USAIPO1965-0706, 0711, 0714, and 0717.

III. Conclusion: Taking Stock of the Debate

In this essay I have argued that selection effects theory is flawed and that the empirical evidence—both quantitative and from the important case of Vietnam—does not support it. The

most important problem for the theory is the conflict between the idea that leaders seek contemporaneous consent for their policies and the way in which the theory is tested, which relies on retrospective judgments of policy success. A theory based on contemporaneous consent predicts that publics reward or punish leaders based on whether they did what was popular at the time a decision was made, not whether the policy ultimately succeeded or failed. Testing such a theory by looking at war outcomes thus does not fit well with the theory's logic, but even if it did, proponents would have to confront quantitative evidence that democracies do not prevail more frequently than nondemocracies. The proper way to test the theory would be to look at public support for war as a policy option at the time a leader chose to fight rather than whether the war was won or lost. Performing such an exercise is perilous, however, because democratic leaders—contrary to the theory's depiction of them as mere followers of public opinion—have powerful tools at their disposal to manufacture consent for war. This observation reveals the second problem with selection effects theory: the marketplace of ideas does not function as predicted to inform decisions for war and peace or constrain leaders from launching wars for which there was little public impetus. Leaders are able to shape public opinion via deception, shifting the blame for war onto the adversary, exaggerating threats, and downplaying or concealing the probable costs of fighting. Military advisors who oppose a leader's strategy can be excluded from the debate, deceived into believing that their views are being taken seriously when they are not, or co-opted into providing the advice a leader wants to hear.

These problems were on full display on the Johnson administration's road to war in Vietnam. There was no consensus among the American people that attacking North Vietnam or fighting a major ground war in South Vietnam was a good idea. Johnson sought to escalate the war by stealth, painting Hanoi as the aggressor against the United States and capitalizing on

events like the Gulf of Tonkin, Pleiku, and others to rally support for air strikes and eventually a ground commitment. The administration deceived the public and its elected representatives on numerous occasions and the president used his influence to avoid substantive debate in Congress on the wisdom of fighting in Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs of Staff—the president's designated military advisors—were largely unable to influence the administration's decision-making because they were excluded from Johnson's inner circle. Johnson and McNamara kept them on board, however, by leveraging their personal relationships with some of the chiefs (including chairmen Taylor and Wheeler) and by promising that more aggressive policies would be forthcoming in the future. In this way, Johnson muzzled military dissent and benefited from the credibility that the chiefs' uniforms lent to his strategies.

I see two possible ways forward for proponents of selection effects theory. First, they could try to repair the logical inconsistencies inside the theory by abandoning contemporaneous consent and adopting a retrospective model of voting. This would make the theory internally consistent, but would still face the challenges posed by evidence that democracies are not more likely to prevail in war, democratic leaders' likelihood of regular removal from office is unaffected by victory or defeat in crises or wars, the audience costs argument that heavily informs the theory is empirically questionable, and that audience costs and selection effects are not unique to democratic institutions. Second, proponents could retain contemporaneous consent and drop war outcomes as the dependent variable, instead investigating the prediction that leaders initiate war when the public supports or demands it. Going this route would entail grappling with the point raised by Desch, Schuessler, and myself that public support is not an independent variable. Acknowledging this fact would force selection effects theorists to confront

tough questions about the conditions under which leaders choose to initiate or join wars beyond the facile assumption that they somehow know they will win.

More broadly, the study of military effectiveness would benefit by refocusing on explanatory factors that cross-cut regime type. Institutional constraints, for example, are not unique to democracies; all governments have institutions that may improve or detract from their ability to choose which wars to enter and how they fight those wars. Similarly, almost all modern states have professional militaries, and the relations between civilian and military elites can explain variation in military performance that cuts across regime type. The same can be said for cultural or identity-based factors.[136] One can imagine theories of institutional constraints, civil-military relations, and identity that explain military effectiveness regardless of regime type.[137] In my view, this is the research challenge for scholars of military power and military effectiveness.

[136] See, for example, Jasen Castillo, "The Will to Fight: National Cohesion and Military Staying Power," book manuscript in progress, Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University; and Jason Lyall, "Paths of Ruin: How Identity Shapes Military Effectiveness in Modern War," book manuscript in progress, Yale University.
[137] Indeed, one can more than imagine it; I have cited many examples of such work throughout this essay.