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The Strategic Consequences of Military Quagmires:

An Examination of War-weariness Theory

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

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Professor Deborah Larson, Chair

The purpose of this dissertation is to develop an improved theoretical understanding of how enduring a military quagmire is likely to influence a state's subsequent conflict decisions. Building upon previous scholarship on *war-weariness* and *foreign policy learning*, I have conducted comparative case studies examining how the Korean, Vietnam, and Soviet-Afghan wars affected the propensities of the United States and Soviet Union to use military force in the aftermath of each respective conflict. Those case studies suggest that quagmires typically generate competing impulses within societies. They increase many individuals' inclination to resolve international disputes through diplomacy rather than military force. At the same time, however, such conflicts often compel others to reassert their country's power and determination to combat threats to its interests. Which of those impulses predominates depends upon the

strategic and political context of specific crises. Quagmires are thus likely to exert marginal influence over states' decisions on *whether* to use military force. Moreover, that influence is not unidirectional. Such conflicts are likely to diminish states' inclination to intervene in peripheral, intra-state conflicts. At the same time, however, quagmires may often *increase* those same states' propensity to combat acts of international aggression—particularly those that threaten vital interests. Even in cases in which states are compelled to use military force, however, a recent quagmire is likely to influence *how* they do so. To allay public concerns that new hostilities could devolve into another quagmire, leaders will be more likely to combat security threats with proxy forces and standoff strike capabilities in lieu of ground troops.

The dissertation of Bradford Ian Stapleton is approved.

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To Lynlee and O'Malley

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Chapter One: The Quagmire Problem

In December 2011, the United States completed the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Iraq. In all likelihood, President Obama will also extricate the American military from the ongoing war in Afghanistan. The nation's longest, costliest, and most divisive wars since Vietnam will both be at an end. Yet a legion of scholars, journalists, and political commentators anticipate that the wars will cast a dark shadow over U.S. foreign policy in the coming years. Many have argued, in particular, that the United States will be extremely reluctant to employ military force (particularly ground troops) to address international security challenges.

That expectation is clearly derived from the Vietnam precedent. Shortly following the intensification of the Iraqi insurgency, observers began drawing parallels to the earlier conflict in Vietnam. The dirty Q-word—quagmire—seeped into the public discourse, which naturally led to the conclusion that since the Vietnam quagmire had produced a Vietnam syndrome, the Iraq and Afghanistan quagmires are bound to produce similar consequences. Most notably, John Mueller suggested: “In the wake of the wars in Korea and Vietnam, the American public developed a strong aversion to embarking on such ventures again. A similar sentiment—an ‘Iraq syndrome’—seems to be developing now, and it will have important consequences for U.S. foreign policy for years after the last American battalion leaves Iraqi soil.”¹ And Mueller was not alone in that assessment. Quite a number of commentators have endorsed the notion that in the years to come the United States is going to suffer from something akin to the Vietnam syndrome.²

¹ John Mueller, “The Iraq Syndrome,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 6 (2005): 44–54.

² A selection of predictions of an Iraq/Afghanistan syndrome can be found in: James Kurth, “Humanitarian Intervention After Iraq: Legal Ideals vs. Military Realities,” *Orbis* 50, no. 1 (2006): 87–101; Christopher J. Fettweis, “Post-Traumatic Iraq Syndrome,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 12, 2007; Kurt Campbell and Derek Chollet, “Symptoms

Although journalists and pundits have invoked the “Vietnam syndrome” more frequently than scholars, the academy has by no means ignored the concept. For decades scholars have devoted recurring attention to understanding how war typically influences states’ subsequent conflict behavior. Over the years, theorists have elaborated two general competing hypotheses. The first, which has somewhat erroneously come to be known as the *war-weariness hypothesis*, posits that wars are likely to diminish states’ propensity to engage in new conflicts, particularly with ground troops.³ But the second, competing hypothesis, predicts that military defeats are likely to cause quite the opposite consequences. According to the *reassertion hypothesis*, policymakers are likely to be *more* inclined to employ military force in the aftermath of an unsuccessful war in order to reassert their power and determination to resist rival pressure.

The intellectual foundations of the debate are to be found in the mid-20th century work of Arnold Toynbee and Lewis Richardson. Richardson proffered that “a long and severe bout of fighting confers immunity on most of those who experienced it.” Yet he warned that such “immunity is not permanent but fades out after a decade or two,” particularly as “there arises a new generation, not rendered immune by experience.”⁴ Moreover, Toynbee discerned from history a recurring cyclical pattern of war and peace in which a general war would give way to a

of ‘Iraq Syndrome’ May Not Be All Bad,” *Financial Times*, June 15, 2007; and “Libya and the Iraq Syndrome,” *The Economist*, March 5, 2011. More cautious, nuanced predictions appear in: Lawrence Freedman, “Iraq, Liberal Wars and Illiberal Containment,” *Survival* 48, no. 4 (2006): 51–66; and Adam Quinn, “The Great Illusion: Chimeras of Isolationism and Realism in Post-Iraq U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Politics & Policy* 35, no. 3 (2007): 522–47. ; And for arguments that an Iraq syndrome is unlikely to prevent the United States from employing military force in the coming years, see: Steven E. Miller, “The Iraq Experiment and US National Security,” *Survival* 48, no. 4 (2006): 17–50; and Ronald Steel, “An Iraq Syndrome?,” *Survival* 49, no. 1 (2007): 153–62.

³ Some have also suggested that such syndromes are likely to embolden rival nations to pursue more aggressive external policies. This *predation corollary* is based on the logic of foreign policy-making as a two-level game. Because a nation’s rivals can observe the public dissatisfaction bred by a quagmire, they are likely to anticipate that their defeated rival will be unwilling to use military force in subsequent crises and consequently feel more at liberty to pursue more aggressive foreign policies.

⁴ Lewis F. Richardson, *Arms and Insecurity; a Mathematical Study of the Causes and Origins of War* (Pittsburgh: Boxwood Press, 1960), 232.

period of tranquility; which would be interrupted by minor bouts of fighting to settle unresolved disputes; which would eventually produce a long period of general peace...until the outbreak of another major war would renew the cycle.⁵

Although Toynbee's cyclical theory was clearly flawed, and perhaps stretched the theory of war-weariness "to the point of snapping," the Vietnam War rekindled scholarly interest in the hypothesis.⁶ As the notion of America's Vietnam syndrome emerged and subsequently took hold in popular discourse, it seemed that there had to be some validity to the hypothesis. A succession of scholars therefore tested a bundle of variants of the war-weariness hypothesis against the historical record—primarily using statistical methods. They examined whether nations that participate in wars in one time period are less likely to become *involved* in new wars in subsequent periods; or whether they are just less likely to *initiate* new wars.⁷ They examined whether involvement in more serious or costly wars reduces the probability that a nation will be involved in another war in subsequent years; or whether involvement in a costly war reduces the probability that a nation's next interstate dispute will escalate to war; or if it does, whether that war is less likely to be very costly—perhaps because that nation is likely to seek peace terms at an earlier date than it otherwise would. They examined whether war-weariness might only apply to great power wars, or might only affect the international system's three long-term democracies—France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.⁸ Most recently, they examined whether a series of defeats reduces the probability of subsequent war initiation

⁵ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. 9 (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 252–253.

⁶ The quoted phrase is from Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 6.

⁷ Benjamin A. Most and Harvey Starr, "Diffusion, Reinforcement, Geopolitics, and the Spread of War," *The American Political Science Review* 74, no. 4 (1980): 932–46.

⁸ David Garnham, "War-Proneness, War-Weariness, and Regime Type: 1816-1980," *Journal of Peace Research* 23, no. 3 (1986): 279–289.

(particularly large-scale interventions) more significantly than does a single defeat.⁹ But no matter how they have tried to conceptualize the hypothesis, and regardless of how they have tried to operationalize variables, scholars have failed to provide convincing evidence that participation in a war has any systematic effect on a nation's subsequent conflict behavior—positive or negative.¹⁰

Why then is it necessary to revisit the issue? Primarily because the proliferation of predictions of an Iraq/Afghanistan syndrome demonstrates quite clearly that people continue to believe in the validity of the war-weariness phenomenon. It is tempting to conclude that such predictions are simply evidence of the chasm dividing the academy from the policy community and the popular media. But that explanation is unsatisfying since the academic community has also been reluctant to abandon the hypothesis. David Garnham, for instance, has argued that the failure of large-n studies to demonstrate a systematic pattern of war-weariness “do[es] not disprove that war-weariness has exerted a powerful impact in specific cases.”¹¹ In fact, quite a number of scholars remain convinced that certain conflicts have influenced states' subsequent conflict decisions quite significantly: Britain and France during the interwar years; the United States following the Korean and Vietnam wars; the Soviet Union following its disastrous war in Afghanistan.

⁹ John A. Nevin, “War Initiation and Selection by Consequences,” *Journal of Peace Research* 33, no. 1 (1996): 99–108; Jeffrey Pickering, “War-Weariness and Cumulative Effects: Victors, Vanquished, and Subsequent Interstate Intervention,” *Journal of Peace Research* 39, no. 3 (2002): 313–37.

¹⁰ One of the earliest studies--Most and Starr, “Diffusion, Reinforcement, Geopolitics, and the Spread of War”--provided cautious support for the notion that a nation that participates in a war is less likely to become involved in a war in the years following that conflict. Most and Starr demonstrated that during the period 1946-1965, most nations that entered new wars in five- and ten-year intervals (1946-1950, 1951-1955, 1956-1960, 1961-1965; and 1946-1955, 1956-1965) entered fewer wars in subsequent intervals. But the more recent studies failed to support that finding.

¹¹ Garnham, “War-Proneness, War-Weariness, and Regime Type,” 287.

Up to this point, however, nobody has conducted an in-depth comparative analysis of any of those cases—a serious lacuna, which this study is designed to fill. One virtue of such an analysis is that unlike previous large-n studies, it permits examination of causal dynamics. Rather than simply ascertaining *whether* a military defeat influenced states’ subsequent conflict behavior in those instances, case analysis can illuminate *how* that influence operated. Moreover, comparison of multiple cases facilitates the identification of intervening variables upon which the operation of those causal dynamics may depend. In other words, this study is designed to accomplish more than merely provide another test of the war-weariness and reassertion hypotheses; it aims to improve our understanding of the circumstances and manner in which quagmires are likely to influence a states’ subsequent conflict behavior.

Quagmire

Scholars frequently point to the First World War as the quintessential example of how war can beget pacifism. In their view, the carnage of World War I produced widespread “war-weariness,” which inhibited British and French citizens and policymakers throughout the 1920s and much of the 1930s.¹² That argument is certainly plausible. The Great War utterly decimated the male population of Europe’s great powers and scarred the continent’s landscape. In the aftermath of such a devastating conflict, it would not be at all surprising if policymakers (and their constituents) took great pains to avoid becoming embroiled in new conflicts.

But for a number of reasons, I have chosen not to include an analysis of Europe’s interwar years in this study. First of all, as I have made clear, one of my primary objectives is to improve

¹² Pickering, “War-Weariness and Cumulative Effects,” 314; Garnham, “War-Proneness, War-Weariness, and Regime Type,” 279.

our understanding of how the United States' two recent wars are likely to influence U.S. foreign policy in the coming years. I am skeptical that studying the consequences of the First World War would prove very fruitful in that endeavor. The United States' wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are quite obviously very different from the Great War in Europe. In over ten years of fighting, U.S. forces have lost a third as many lives as the 20,000 troops Great Britain sacrificed on a single day in 1916—the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Due to the magnitude of the conflict, the Great War also commanded much greater public attention than have the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although the initial invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq generated global interest (and quite a bit of controversy in the latter case), domestic attention drifted quite significantly as the two conflicts dragged on. To a large degree, the global financial crisis, which erupted in 2007, overshadowed the two wars.

Given such dramatic differences, one would not expect that the consequences of the First World War would shed much light on how the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are likely to influence U.S. foreign policy. Different types of conflicts are likely to yield different consequences. Moreover, even if the two recent wars do inhibit U.S. foreign policy in the coming years, the causal dynamics that produce such inhibition may be very different from those that operated in the aftermath of the First World War. That conflict would likely illuminate how another great power war could be expected to influence combatants' subsequent conflict behavior. Yet Jack Levy and T. Clifton Morgan have already tackled that issue through statistical analysis—concluding that great power wars do not exert any systematic influence.

Perhaps more importantly, great power wars appear to have become significantly less common occurrences. Major war, in the view of many, is becoming obsolete.¹³

Whether great power war is indeed obsolete is, of course, an open question; but the world's current and burgeoning great powers certainly seem more likely to engage in limited, asymmetrical conflicts—similar to the United States' campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, for instance, it is not difficult to envision Russia getting bogged down in another, more ambitious, campaign to reassert its authority in another of the former Soviet republics. At this point in history, it thus appears quite exigent to understand the strategic consequences of this particular type of conflict. The best way to develop that insight is by examining how similar conflicts have affected great powers in the past. It is therefore essential to stipulate more precisely the *type* of conflict of which the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are examples. For without a clear definition of what constitutes such conflicts, it is difficult to select cases to examine that fit the category.

As I have already noted, many analysts have labeled the United States' recent wars *quagmires*. Yet that concept remains quite ill-defined. Scholars have yet to explicate exactly what constitutes a military quagmire. As it is commonly bandied about, however, the term seems to denote five essential characteristics. First, a quagmire is an asymmetrical conflict, pitting a powerful state against a much weaker adversary (state or non-state). Second, the conflict occurs outside the territory of the more powerful state. People typically do not refer to states' attempts to ward off outside aggression or subdue domestic rebellions as quagmires. I would therefore argue that the term does not encompass states' efforts to retain control over

¹³ See: John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), chap. 10; Michael Mandelbaum, "Is Major War Obsolete?," *Survival* 40, no. 4 (1998): 20–38; and Raimo Väyrynen, ed., *The Waning of Major War: Theories and Debates* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

contiguous territory—although it could certainly apply to the campaigns that resulted in the acquisition of that territory in the first place. For instance, the Russian Empire’s campaign to establish dominion over the Caucasus in the 1800s could be categorized as a quagmire; but the Russian Federation’s ongoing struggle to maintain control of Chechnya should not. I would also argue, however, that wars to retain dominion over non-contiguous colonies certainly can constitute quagmires. For colonial powers have much more choice in such matters; the defection of a distant colony does not threaten the territorial integrity of the metropole to the same extent as does the secession of a contiguous province. Third, a quagmire is characterized by the more powerful state encountering significant difficulty achieving its strategic objectives. Fourth, the conflict consequently drags on for a prolonged period of time. Fifth, the more powerful state incurs substantial casualties over the duration of the conflict. On the basis of those five characteristics, I therefore define a quagmire as: *an asymmetrical extra-territorial conflict of at least two years’ duration in which the stronger state experiences considerable difficulty achieving its strategic and political objectives.*

This definition does not require that a quagmire entail the ultimate defeat of the more powerful state. In my view, a quagmire is characterized by the nature, rather than the ultimate outcome, of the conflict—particularly since determining victory and defeat is often a highly subjective enterprise. Even in circumstances in which a more powerful state ultimately achieves its objectives, a conflict should be classified as a quagmire if the achievement of those objectives proves significantly more difficult and costly than decision-makers anticipate. Moreover, quagmires that culminate in utter defeat might produce different consequences than those that result in stalemate or eventual success. Employing a definition that allows for variation on that dimension, conflict outcome, is therefore desirable insofar as it promotes comparative analyses

that might suggest whether the extent to which a quagmire influences subsequent conflict behavior depends upon the ultimate outcome of that war.

Conceptualizing the Dependent Variable

Of course, *conflict behavior* is a broad and somewhat ambiguous term. The reader is probably wondering: what exactly is the dependent variable under examination? To put it simply, I have focused on examining how quagmires affect combatants' subsequent use of military force. But my decision to focus on the use of military force, and the manner in which I have conceptualized that variable, deserves more detailed explanation.

I have quite consciously selected a much broader dependent variable than a number of recent studies. In examining states' capacity to learn, for instance, Andrew Bennett focused on military intervention.¹⁴ That study represented a significant contribution to an important body of literature, which has developed over the past few decades, on the subject of intervention. That literature has produced a general consensus that intervention is something less than war: that "intervention policies lie at the boundary of peace and war in international politics."¹⁵ Scholars have therefore strived to distinguish intervention from war. Quite a few have stipulated that interstate war is characterized by the deployment of military forces to alter the international division of territory or resources, or to influence other states' external policies; intervention, on

¹⁴ Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition?: The Rise, Fall, and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Military Interventionism, 1973-1996* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Quoted from: Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 8. Also see: Ariel Levite, Bruce W. Jentleson, and Larry Berman, eds., *Foreign Military Intervention: The Dynamics of Protracted Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Elizabeth N. Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); and Sarah E. Kreps, *Coalitions of Convenience: United States Military Interventions after the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

the other hand, entails the deployment of military forces across international boundaries to influence the *internal* political structure or policies of another state.

As Martha Finnemore has noted, however, that conception reflects primarily how intervention was used during the Cold War.¹⁶ For that reason, she (and a number of subsequent scholars) have adopted broader conceptions of intervention. Rather than stipulating that intervention must entail interference in another state's domestic political structure, recent studies have employed definitions that encompass *all* short-term deployments of combat-ready ground troops across international boundaries—even if the purpose of such a deployment is merely to influence the outcome of an interstate dispute. As Elizabeth Saunders has explained, one of the virtues of that definition is that it treats “variation in the purpose and nature of intervention as part of the phenomenon to be explained.”¹⁷

Although recent conceptions of intervention have certainly allowed for greater variation in *purpose*, they have actually allowed for little variation in the *nature* of intervention. Scholars continue to stipulate that military intervention involves the deployment of ground troops. Saunders has argued that such a stipulation is important because the causal processes governing decisions to intervene covertly or to engage in “an air-only operation” are “theoretically very different” from the causal processes governing decisions to deploy ground troops overtly. If those processes are different in theory, however, they are inseparable in practice. A decision *to* launch an air-only operation is simultaneously a decision *not to* employ ground troops. As

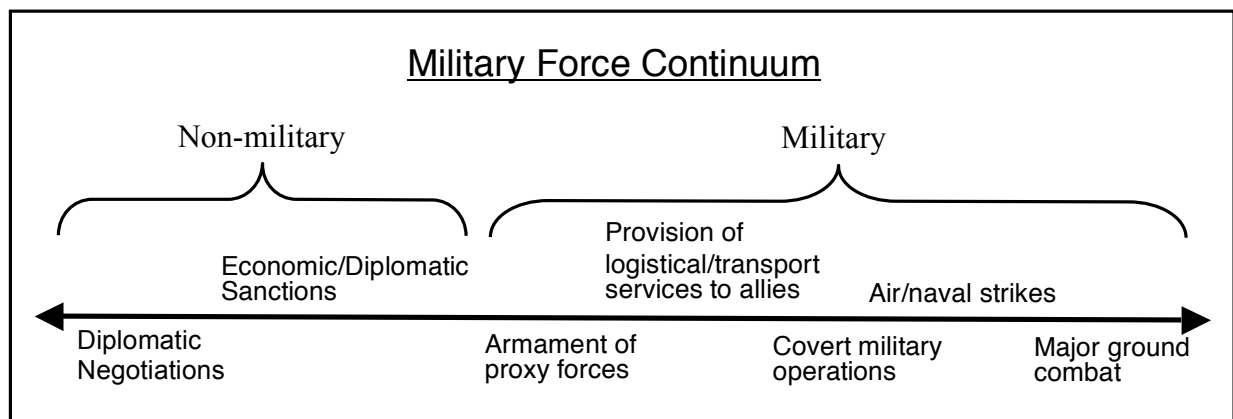
¹⁶ Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, 9.

¹⁷ Saunders, *Leaders at War*, 21.

Saunders herself notes, “leaders may choose air-only operations in the hope of minimizing casualties or political debate.”¹⁸

Since those are precisely the considerations that are of interest in this study, I have therefore elected to examine states’ decisions to use (or not use) military force to influence international disputes (both intra- and inter-state). Doing so allows for variation in both the purpose and method of military operations. It thus captures the fact that decisions to use military force are two-dimensional. Leaders must decide not only upon *whether* to employ military force in different circumstances; in the cases in which they choose to do so, they must also determine *how* to employ military force. The use of military force can therefore be conceptualized along a continuum, which constitutes, in a sense, a menu from which states choose among progressively robust military actions: funneling weapons to proxy forces; providing logistical and transport services to allies; engaging in covert military operations; launching standoff air or naval attacks; inserting small contingents of special forces; or deploying large formations of regular ground troops.

Figure 1



¹⁸ Ibid., 21–22, 230 n.6.

It is essential to recognize, however, that war-weariness theory, the reassertion hypothesis, and popular predictions of an Iraq syndrome are all probabilistic. Enduring a military quagmire is purported to alter states' *propensity* to use military force (or particular types of military force). That propensity thus constitutes the key intervening variable of interest in this study—and as previous scholars have noted, it presents significant analytical challenges. A decision not to employ military force in a given crisis is not, for instance, *prima facie* evidence of war-weariness; it might be due simply to the unique strategic considerations or political pressures inherent in that particular situation.¹⁹ In the final section of this chapter, I will therefore explain how I have attempted to evaluate the extent to which military quagmires influenced states' propensities to resort to the use of military force.²⁰

Before delving more deeply into that issue, however, it is necessary to reiterate the importance of examining both dimensions of states' decisions to use military force: the issues of *whether* and *how*. For a military quagmire could potentially engender countervailing influences on those two dimensions. An embarrassing military defeat could increase a state's propensity to intervene abroad by motivating its leader to reassert his determination to defend vital interests. At the same time, however, the prospect that a new intervention could engender domestic fears of another quagmire might encourage that leader to reassure his constituents—perhaps by pledging not to introduce ground troops, or encouraging allied nations to assume responsibility for combat operations. A quagmire could thus increase a state's propensity to employ military force in subsequent international crises *and* diminish its propensity to engage in the most robust types of military operations.

¹⁹ Along these lines, Bennett conceptualized *interventionism* “as the propensity to resort to military intervention in varying contexts.” See: Bennett, 16; and Levy.

²⁰ Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition?*, 16.

Of course, a quagmire could also produce the opposite effect. By dramatically highlighting the risks and costs of foreign military operations, a quagmire could render a leader—and by extension his state—more reluctant to attempt to resolve international disputes militarily. In situations in which that leader felt compelled to employ military force, however, he might be more prone to employ massive force, including large ground formations, if the previous quagmire convinced him that incremental escalation was unlikely to prove successful—a lesson that many Americans extrapolated from the Vietnam War. It is thus conceivable that a quagmire could diminish a state’s propensity to use military force, but increase its propensity to employ massive military force in the rare circumstances in which it does resort to military action.

Causal Processes

As I suggested above, the term “war-weariness” is a bit of a misnomer for the hypothesis that war is likely to diminish the participants’ propensity to engage in new conflicts. Great power wars certainly have the potential to induce “weariness” or exhaustion amongst the combatants’ general populations. Yet Americans seem not to have grown weary of the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as much as they have become rather uninterested—preoccupied with their own lives. That is not to say, however, that quagmires are unlikely to diminish the United States’ propensity to use military force. For what has come to be known as war-weariness theory actually encompasses a number of different causal mechanisms—most of which have nothing to do with “weariness.”

Learning

First of all, states can learn from their mistakes. The generational arguments propounded by Toynbee and Richardson are, in essence, learning hypotheses; war is purported to foster the

development of a set of beliefs, a sort of pacifism, which dramatically reduces recent combatants' propensity to engage in new conflicts. To be sure, those arguments were theoretically under-developed—a quality that is, almost by definition, characteristic of the foundational works of any research agenda. Over the past few decades, however, international relations scholars have elaborated much more sophisticated theories of foreign policy learning.

Perhaps the most fundamental insight to emerge from that stream of research is that foreign policy learning is essentially a two-step process in which: 1) new experiences or information cause a shift in individuals' beliefs; and 2) those altered beliefs induce alterations in state behavior.²¹ It is certainly plausible that enduring a dramatic military failure could alter people's foreign policy beliefs. For Jonathan Renshon has argued that “There seems to be substantial support for the importance of traumatic events in changing beliefs.”²² Since a military quagmire would seem to constitute a “traumatic event,” one might expect such conflicts to undermine people's confidence in the utility of military force, and convince them that international disputes can be resolved more profitably through negotiation and accommodation. In other words, quagmires could quite plausibly catalyze the fundamental reconceptualization of many individuals' foreign policy objectives and the means for achieving them—what previous scholars have called “complex learning.” Even in the absence of fundamental foreign policy belief change, quagmires could prompt individuals to alter their tactical approaches toward the

²¹ Like most international relations scholars, I am employing a belief system approach to learning. The issues of whether learning entails the development of greater cognitive complexity or the ability to connect means and ends more efficiently are beyond the scope of this analysis. For discussion of the “efficiency” and “complexity” conceptions of learning see: Philip E. Tetlock, “Learning in U.S. and Soviet Foreign Policy: In Search of an Elusive Concept,” in *Learning in U.S. and Soviet Foreign Policy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 32–38; and Jack S. Levy, “Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield,” *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (1994): 291–296.

²² Jonathan Renshon, “Stability and Change in Belief Systems: The Operational Code of George W. Bush,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, no. 6 (2008): 841. Also see: Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 235, 239–246.

achievement of existing foreign policy goals—“simple learning” might occur.²³ They might conclude not that military adventures should be avoided, but that their militaries must prepare to fight future wars differently than a recent quagmire.

In circumstances in which a quagmire is insufficient to alter people’s foreign policy beliefs, such a traumatic experience could still influence subsequent conflict decisions through the process of analogical reasoning. Levy is correct to caution that “learning should not be equated with the ‘lessons of history’ or historical analogies.”²⁴ But analogical reasoning is certainly an important type of learning. A number of previous studies, most notably that of Yuen Foong Khong, have demonstrated that decision-makers frequently employ historical analogies to come to grips with new foreign challenges and to devise policies to address those challenges.²⁵ It is therefore plausible that the perceived lessons of a previous quagmire could engender a strong determination to avoid repeating the mistakes that produced such a dramatic policy failure.

There is certainly much reason to expect that international crises will often evoke analogical parallels to a recent quagmire. Previous research has established that the retrieval of source analogs depends largely upon *availability* and *similarity*. As Khong has explained, “Which historical event or experience is invoked depends, all other things being equal, on the ease with

²³ The distinctions between simple and complex learning are elaborated in William W. Jarosz and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “The Shadow of the Past: Learning from History in National Security Decision Making,” in *Behavior, Society, and International Conflict*, vol. 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 130–131; and Joseph S. Nye, “Nuclear Learning and U.S.–Soviet Security Regimes,” *International Organization* 41, no. 03 (1987): 371–402. And for discussion of people’s inclination to tinker with tactics: Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 275.

²⁴ Levy, “Learning and Foreign Policy,” 287.

²⁵ See: Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986); and David Patrick Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

which it can be recalled”—that is, its cognitive availability.²⁶ It is therefore quite reasonable to expect that a military quagmire would serve as a powerful source analog in the years immediately following the conflict. Such costly failures are not easily forgotten. Moreover, because of the media attention that such conflicts command, they are familiar to a broad population—participants and general observers alike.²⁷

People may be particularly likely to invoke a recent quagmire as a source analog in situations that share superficial characteristics with that previous conflict. For experimental research has established that the *superficial* similarity of source and target analogs is a key determinant of source retrieval. In other words, when accessing stored analogs to new problems, people usually retrieve those in which there is a strong resemblance between the respective objects in the source and target domains—the actors, the location, the actions, etc.²⁸ One would therefore anticipate, for instance, that in the coming years, new terrorist attacks against the United States, or increasing WMD proliferation threats, or crises in West/Central Asia will likely evoke analogical parallels to the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The ease with which a recent quagmire can be retrieved as a source analog does not, however, ensure that it will invariably influence decision-making. Depending on the situation, people may retrieve other source analogs. They may latch onto more distant historical events

²⁶ Khong, *Analogies at War*, 35.

²⁷ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 239.

²⁸ Dedre Gentner and her collaborators have conceptualized a two-dimensional “similarity space” in which analogs can be categorized based upon their superficial (or attribute) and structural similarities. According to Gentner and Markman: “Analogy occurs when comparisons exhibit a high degree of relational similarity with very little attribute similarity. As the amount of attribute similarity increases, the comparison shifts toward literal similarity. Mere-appearance matches share object descriptions but no relations.” Literal similarity comparisons are generally easier to notice and map than are strictly analogical comparisons. See: Dedre Gentner and Arthur B. Markman, “Structure Mapping in Analogy and Similarity,” *American Psychologist* 52, no. 1 (1997): 48.

that share more superficial (or structural) similarities with a current challenge than does a recent quagmire. In many cases, distant events may be highly salient in the minds of people who participated in them directly—particularly if those events contributed significantly to the construction of their general beliefs.²⁹ To be sure, such source analogs are likely to present themselves to a much smaller population than will a recent quagmire. But since that population will often include key decision-makers, more distant source analogs might contribute quite significantly to foreign policy-making.

In situations in which individuals do learn from quagmires, there are a number of mechanisms through which such learning could effect significant policy change. A quagmire could diminish a state's propensity to intervene in new conflicts by catalyzing learning amongst leaders. By undermining their confidence in the efficacy of military force, or by evoking analogical parallels to new international crises, a quagmire could very well motivate leaders to strive to resolve international disputes through negotiation and accommodation, rather than through brute force or intimidation. Of course, leaders' ability to impose their own preferences on the formulation and implementation of state policy is often severely circumscribed. For that reason, according to Janice Gross Stein, "No explanation of individual learning, even by a senior leader in a hierarchical system, can explain foreign policy change. Institutional and political

²⁹ Khong argues that many of the key policymakers in the Johnson administration invoked source analogs that occurred during their "formative years." Yet he acknowledges that "members of the same generation may be influenced by different historical analogies," and that "when the members of a given generation look at the same historical event, they may derive different lessons." Those considerations lead him to conclude: "The most helpful way to look at the problem, then, is to view each policymaker as having a repertoire of analogies, some shared by the policymakers' generation, others more peculiar to the individual policymaker's career and personal experiences." And along these lines, Jervis has suggested: "the greater the number of analogies available to the person, the less will be the influence of each individual event. This means that the perceptions of elder statesmen will usually be less influenced by the most recent war than will those of young decision-makers, and the older leaders will therefore be less likely to advocate policies that are based on lessons of the immediate past. Their presence will often be a moderating influence." See: Khong, *Analogies at War*, 33, 214–215; Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 214–215, 269–270; and Thomas Gilovich, "Seeing the Past in the Present: The Effect of Associations to Familiar Events on Judgments and Decisions," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 40, no. 5 (1981): 802.

processes must intervene to build the political support to transform individual learning into changes in foreign policy behavior.”³⁰ Nevertheless, state leaders typically exercise much greater authority over decisions regarding the use of military force than other foreign policy pursuits such as the negotiation of international economic agreements or environmental accords.³¹ The transformation of an individual leader’s foreign policy beliefs could therefore, quite plausibly, alter a state’s propensity to use military force—particularly in highly-centralized states.

Individual learning amongst leaders is by no means a necessary condition for state learning, however. Even if leaders continue to believe in the efficacy of military force, they might be disinclined to act on their bellicose impulses if a quagmire dramatically alters their constituents’ foreign policy beliefs—or if a new crisis evokes analogical parallels to that quagmire amongst domestic constituents.³² After all, a number of previous scholars have attributed the “democratic

³⁰ Janice Gross Stein, “Political Learning by Doing: Gorbachev as Uncommitted Thinker and Motivated Learner,” *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (1994): 180.

³¹ Levy, “Learning and Foreign Policy,” 289.

³² Over the past few decades, scholars have made substantial progress in elucidating the determinants of public support for military operations (primarily focusing on the United States). There is now fairly broad consensus that Americans are not invariably casualty averse. Public support for military operations also depends upon a number of other variables: the “principal policy objective” of the operation; the level of allied support for the operation; the relative success (or failure) of the operation; and the degree of elite consensus on the wisdom, necessity, and legitimacy of the operation. Unfortunately, previous studies have failed to shed much light on the extent to which the public’s enthusiasm for employing military force depends on the experience and outcome of a previous conflict. In other words, it remains unclear whether and how the public learns from foreign policy mistakes (or gets carried away by successes). For more detailed reviews of the literature, see: John H. Aldrich et al., “Foreign Policy and the Electoral Connection,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 9, no. 1 (2006): 477–502; and Louis Klarevas, “The ‘Essential Domino’ of Military Operations: American Public Opinion and the Use of Force,” *International Studies Perspectives* 3, no. 4 (2002): 417–37. The foundational work on public casualty sensitivity is John Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973). For analyses highlighting the relative importance of different variables, see: Bruce W. Jentleson, “The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force,” *International Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1992): 49–73; Adam J. Berinsky, *In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2009); Bruce W. Jentleson and Rebecca L. Britton, “Still Pretty Prudent: Post-Cold War American Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 4 (1998): 395–417; Steven Kull and I. M. Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press,

peace” to the restraining influence of public. Reiter and Stam, for instance, have argued that democratic leaders cannot wage war without at least the tacit consent of their citizens.³³ If that argument is valid, leaders’ *perceptions* of public opinion may be more important than whether the public truly learns from previous military operations.³⁴ If leaders believe that a quagmire has diminished the public’s willingness to support the use of military force, they might demur from intervening in new conflicts, or restrict the level of military involvement in any new conflicts.³⁵

Yet the persistence of any alteration in a state’s conflict behavior could depend on the extent to which the lessons of a recent quagmire are institutionalized. As Barbara Levitt and James March have suggested, organizations can learn “by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behavior.”³⁶ Experience can, and often does, prompt organizations to amend

1999); Eric V. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1996); Eric V. Larson, “Putting Theory to Work: Diagnosing Public Opinion on the US Intervention in Bosnia,” in *Being Useful: Policy Relevance and International Relations Theory*, ed. Miroslav Nincic and Joseph Leggold (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 174–233; Eric V. Larson and Bogdan Savych, *American Public Support for U.S. Military Operations from Mogadishu to Baghdad* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2005); Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, “Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq,” *International Security* 30, no. 3 (2006 2005): 7–46; and Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Richard C. Eichenberg, “Victory Has Many Friends: U.S. Public Opinion and the Use of Military Force, 1981–2005,” *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 140–77.

³³ Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

³⁴ According to Aldrich et al., “America’s experiences in Lebanon and Somalia clearly illustrate that the elite perception of public opinion can have a profound impact on foreign policy. The widespread assumption of public casualty aversion that flowed from these experiences also shaped American policy in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo.” Aldrich et al., “Foreign Policy and the Electoral Connection,” 492.

³⁵ A number of scholars have argued that public opinion can exert such influence over foreign policy, particularly intervention decisions. The strongest such argument is Richard Sobel, *The Impact of Public Opinion on U.S. Foreign Policy Since Vietnam: Constraining the Colossus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Douglas Foyle has argued that the extent to which public opinion influences policy depends upon presidents’ beliefs regarding the importance of public support to legitimize their decisions. See: Douglas C. Foyle, *Counting the Public In: Presidents, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

³⁶ Barbara Levitt and James G. March, “Organizational Learning,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 14, no. 1 (1988): 320. For additional detailed analyses of organizational learning see: Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schon,

the rules, procedures, and processes by which they operate; it can catalyze changes in *how* they work. On a more fundamental level, experience can also alter the beliefs, goals, and paradigms that guide organizations; it can redefine *why* they work.

The process through which organizations learn is far from straight-forward, however. Individual learning is a necessary condition for organizational learning. But organizational learning does not simply constitute the institutionalization of individual lessons. Even strong leaders are rarely able to impose their personal preferences on the organizations over which they exercise authority. Organizational learning is typically the result of a process in which individuals debate, negotiate, and compromise over how to alter institutional routines. Yet because it is a political process, there are a number of obstacles to organizational learning. Individuals may be deterred from attempting to institutionalize new ideas. They may try, but fail, to do so. Or reforms may fail to significantly alter organizational performance—particularly in circumstances in which new leaders are able to ignore or circumvent institutional routines.³⁷ Moreover, *organizational* learning is not easily translated into *governmental* learning. Since governments are composed of multiple organizations with competing interests, reforms within any single organization may often fail to significantly alter state behavior.

Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method, and Practice (Reading, Mass.: FT Press, 1995); James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, "The Uncertainty of the Past: Organizational Learning under Ambiguity," in *Decisions and Organizations*, ed. James G. March (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 335–58; Bo Hedberg, "How Organizations Learn and Unlearn," in *Handbook of Organizational Design*, ed. Paul C. Nystrom and William H. Starbuck, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 3–27; George P. Huber, "Organizational Learning: The Contributing Processes and the Literatures," *Organization Science* 2, no. 1 (February 1991): 88–115; Daniel H. Kim, "The Link between Individual and Organizational Learning," in *The Strategic Management of Intellectual Capital*, ed. David A. Klein (Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1998), 41–62. For more direct discussion of organizational learning in the context of foreign policy, see: Levy, "Learning and Foreign Policy," 287–9; Jarosz and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "The Shadow of the Past: Learning from History in National Security Decision Making"; Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition?*, 98–112; and John P. Lovell, "'Lessons' of U.S. Military Involvement: Preliminary Conceptualization," in *Foreign Policy Decision Making: Perception, Cognition, and Artificial Intelligence* (New York: Praeger, 1984), 129–57.

³⁷ Levy, "Learning and Foreign Policy," 288.

Because of these obstacles, one would expect organizational learning to exert greater influence over *how* states employ military force rather than *whether* to do so. Militaries typically devote a great deal of attention to extrapolating “lessons learned” from their operations. Often, those lessons learned guide preparations for subsequent conflicts—training, doctrine, even procurement. Those preparations can, however, alter states’ propensities to engage in certain types of conflict. If the lessons of a recent quagmire were to prompt heavy investment in training and equipping for counter-insurgency operations, for instance, the military could end up relatively unprepared to wage conventional warfare. In such circumstances, a quagmire could potentially increase a state’s propensity to intervene in conflicts that require counter-insurgency operations, but diminish its propensity to engage in those that would likely entail conventional warfare.

Public Opinion and Turnover

Even in the absence of genuine learning amongst leaders, a quagmire could diminish a state’s propensity to use military force through turnover. Cursory retrospection suggests that a leader who plunges his citizens into a costly, unsuccessful war is often unable to maintain his grip on power. Previous scholars have suggested that such turnover may very well be an important condition for successful war termination.³⁸ If leadership transitions can significantly diminish a state’s determination to continue fighting, one would think that they would likewise diminish its propensity to use military force in new conflicts.

Particularly in democracies, learning amongst the general public could quite plausibly cause such a shift. A quagmire might convince citizens that military force is an ineffective means of

³⁸ Elizabeth A. Stanley, *Paths to Peace: Domestic Coalition Shifts, War Termination and the Korean War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

resolving international disputes, or that their government should steer clear of foreign entanglements altogether. By altering their foreign policy beliefs in such a manner, a quagmire could motivate voters to elect new leaders who share those beliefs—leaders who experienced a similar transformation, or perhaps leaders who held more pacifist beliefs all along. And one would expect that such leaders—elected with a public mandate to resolve international disputes peacefully—would be less willing to intervene in the same sorts of conflicts, or less willing to use the same types of military force, as their more bellicose predecessors.³⁹

Of course, widespread learning is not a necessary condition for leadership turnover. In democratic states, voters might very well elect more pacifist leaders even in cases in which quagmires do not catalyze any fundamental transformation of their foreign policy beliefs. Leadership turnover could result less from their support for the new leader (and his foreign policy ideology) than from a determination to punish the previous leader.

Regrouping

A quagmire could also foster an impulse among the governing elite to steer clear of (or limit involvement in) new conflicts in order to regroup following a costly war. An analogy from sport is illustrative. In baseball, a manager is often reluctant to employ a relief pitcher in consecutive games—particularly following games in which that pitcher struggles and consequently throws a great many pitches. The manager’s decision not to play that pitcher in a subsequent game is not necessarily an indication of any diminished general propensity to call upon him; it merely reflects an inclination to wait until he has recovered his fitness before sending him back into action. As in baseball, so in international politics: even if a military quagmire does not significantly alter leaders’ beliefs in the efficacy of military force, either through learning or

³⁹ Jack S. Levy and T. Clifton Morgan, “The War-Weariness Hypothesis: An Empirical Test,” *American Journal of Political Science* 30, no. 1 (1986): 29.

turnover, they may demur from using military force in the short-term in order to provide their societies—most particularly their armed forces—ample time to recover.

One would expect that impulse to be most salient following general wars. As Levy and Morgan have noted, such conflicts can result in “the depletion of a nation’s resources...leaving it incapable of the rational initiation of another war.”⁴⁰ Indeed, wars that result in the destruction of combatants’ industrial facilities and national infrastructure significantly diminish their preparedness to engage in new hostilities. In many circumstances, regaining a state of war-readiness could prove to be a slow process. For in the aftermath of devastating conflicts such as the Second World War, leaders might spurn new conflicts in order to redirect national resources away from military enterprises to more productive economic activities.

Unlike in general warfare, the direct costs incurred by a great power’s involvement in a quagmire fall primarily upon its armed forces. For instance, although the Korean and Vietnam wars wore down the American military—by degrading equipment, eroding troop morale, and disrupting training regimens—the United States’ national infrastructure and industrial capacity remained unscathed. Yet military wear and tear could be sufficient to diminish a great power’s propensity to intervene abroad—at least in the short run. One would expect military officials to counsel against foreign adventures until they have been able to rebuild their forces; and such advice may indeed encourage leaders to shy away from new conflicts.

The Reassertion Hypothesis

As I have already indicated, previous scholars have suggested that a military defeat could conceivably increase a state’s propensity to intervene in new conflicts by compelling them to reassert their power and resolve. Robert Jervis, for instance, has suggested that policymakers

⁴⁰ Ibid., 28–29.

may anticipate that rival states will pursue adventurous foreign policies because they expect that the “war-weary” state will be reluctant to confront them. Those policymakers will therefore be motivated to disabuse their rivals of the notion that the defeat had not afforded them any sort of window of opportunity to pursue more adventurous, revisionist foreign policies. In other words, the belief that other nations will anticipate, and seek to exploit war-weariness will prompt leaders to adopt policies that invalidate the war-weariness hypothesis.⁴¹

As with the learning hypotheses, a quagmire could conceivably catalyze such behavior either directly or indirectly. A quagmire could motivate top decision-makers to prove their mettle in international crises. Or even if leaders are not so inclined, a quagmire might engender such an impulse amongst important domestic constituencies—opposition politicians, the military, interest groups, or even the general public. Those groups could bring significant pressure to bear on decision-makers to get tough with rival nations.

Case Selection and Method of Analysis

To test the validity of the foregoing hypotheses, I have elected to examine the consequences of three quagmires: the Korean, Vietnam, and Soviet-Afghan wars. There are two key benefits to focusing on those cases. First, they represent “most likely” cases for war-weariness theory. Shortly after extricating themselves from their respective quagmires, the United States and Soviet Union decided against intervening militarily in subsequent conflicts. Eisenhower decided not to intervene in Indochina to rescue the besieged French fortress at Dienbienphu. Congress

⁴¹ The most interesting discussion of what I am calling the reassertion hypothesis is Robert Jervis’ discussion of “the Domino Theory Paradox” in Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 266–271. The hypothesis is also put forward in: Most and Starr, “Diffusion, Reinforcement, Geopolitics, and the Spread of War,” 934. Garnham, “War-Proneness, War-Weariness, and Regime Type,” 280. Greg Cashman, *What Causes War?: An Introduction to Theories of International Conflict* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2000), 154–155.

prohibited CIA involvement in the Angolan civil war in 1975. President Carter elected not to deploy U.S. forces to oppose Soviet involvement in Ethiopia or Afghanistan. The Soviet Union demurred from suppressing the liberation movements that erupted in Eastern Europe just as Soviet troops were withdrawing from Afghanistan. In fact, previous scholars have attributed those decisions to the shadow of the preceding quagmires.⁴² One would therefore expect that careful examination of these cases would reveal the operation of the causal dynamics elaborated by war-weariness theorists. The failure to uncover such evidence would seriously undermine the proposition that military quagmires are likely to diminish states' propensity to use military force.

A second virtue of studying the Korean, Vietnam, and Soviet-Afghan wars is that the three cases are all drawn from the Cold War. Focusing on cases from the same historical period provides a measure of analytical control, for it allows one to hold constant a number of variables, to which IR scholars frequently attribute great importance. Throughout the Cold War, the international system was characterized by a bipolar power distribution between the United States and Soviet Union. Furthermore, both superpowers possessed nuclear weapons—although the nuclear balance did shift significantly over the four decades. Since we all know that change cannot be explained by a constant, any variation in the extent to which the three conflicts influenced U.S. and Soviet conflict behavior cannot be attributed to shifts in system polarity or the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

Focusing on Cold War quagmires also provides a more limited degree of analytical control for shifting attitudes toward war. Previous scholars have noted that attitudes toward war have shifted quite significantly over time.⁴³ In past centuries, war was considered exhilarating,

⁴² Garnham, "War-Proneness, War-Weariness, and Regime Type," 280.

⁴³ Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*, chap. 1–3, 10.

romantic, and heroic. Over the course of the 20th century, however, war came to be viewed, at least in the West, as a dirty, lamentable, even barbaric enterprise. “War has lost the romantic appeal it once had,” according to Mueller, “and it has been discredited as a method for obtaining desirable goals.”⁴⁴ It is therefore conceivable that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will influence the United States much differently than, say, the Boer War influenced Great Britain at the turn of the previous century. In theory, Victorian values of martial glory and valor could have compelled Britain to attempt to expurgate the ignominious quagmire in South Africa by wielding the cudgel again, more successfully. In contrast, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan might reinforce modern convictions that war is a senseless waste of the lives of productive citizens, and consequently motivate Americans to avoid engaging in new hostilities at almost any cost.

Focusing on Cold War quagmires does not control entirely for variation in attitudes toward war. The Soviets and the Americans could have viewed war quite differently. Moreover, those attitudes probably did shift from 1949 to 1991. In fact, it is quite plausible that the quagmires under examination catalyzed such shifts—a possibility that this study aims to elucidate. Yet contemporary attitudes toward war seem more similar to those of the Cold War than to those that prevailed in previous centuries. For that reason, an examination of Cold War quagmires should shed more light on how current and future quagmires are likely to influence combatants. Of course, that influence could vary over time. One would expect that war-weariness, or strategic lessons, or the compulsion to reassert power and resolve would be most potent in the immediate aftermath of a military quagmire. I have therefore focused on examining how the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 89, 220.

Korean, Vietnam, and Soviet-Afghan wars affected U.S. and Soviet conflict decisions in the immediate aftermath of each conflict—not more than five years.⁴⁵

Inevitably, there are a number of challenges inherent in testing war-weariness theory and the reassertion hypothesis. As I have explained, it is extremely difficult to determine whether a single decision against using military force was due to “war-weariness” or if it resulted simply from strategic and political calculations. Any attempt to gauge the causal impact of a quagmire should therefore begin with an evaluation of the *patterns* of recent combatants’ use of military force. As Bennett has suggested, one of the most effective ways to gauge changes in state interventionism is by comparing intervention decisions. For instance, if a state intervened in a number of peripheral conflicts prior to becoming entangled in a military quagmire, and subsequently demurred from intervening in a conflict in which vital strategic interests were at stake, one could reasonably conclude that the quagmire had diminished that state’s propensity to intervene abroad. I have therefore evaluated whether the patterns of U.S. and Soviet use of military force shifted noticeably following the Korean, Vietnam, and Soviet-Afghan wars. For such shifts would suggest that those conflicts had indeed altered the superpowers’ respective propensities to use military force. Yet identifying shifting patterns of conflict behavior is insufficient for evaluating the various causal mechanisms through which a quagmire could influence subsequent conflict decisions. I have therefore attempted to assess, through process-tracing, the relative validity of those different causal mechanisms.

⁴⁵ The extent to which a quagmire influences subsequent conflict behavior could, however, be characterized by a lag effect. If generational arguments are valid, such conflicts might exert greater influence over a state’s conflict behavior once a new generation of leaders (for whom a quagmire constituted a formative experience) accedes to power—perhaps decades later. But investigating that possibility is beyond the scope of this study. See: Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 260.

Unfortunately, ascertaining whether states learn is extremely difficult. Since individual learning is a prerequisite for state learning, one must first determine whether an experience caused people's beliefs to change. The most effective method of making such a determination is through comparison of people's attitudes before and after a crucial event. To evaluate the extent to which the United States and Soviet Union learned from each respective quagmire, I have therefore sought to determine whether people's foreign policy beliefs were significantly different in the aftermath of those conflicts than they had been in the preceding years. To make that determination, I have evaluated whether the documentary record reflects shifts in leaders' foreign policy beliefs—i.e. their fundamental views on the nature of international politics, their assessments of rival states' intentions, their confidence in the efficacy of military force, or their optimism that international disputes can be resolved through negotiation and compromise. It is important to note, however, that there are serious holes in the historical record. Most notably, there is little documentary evidence indicative of the foreign policy beliefs of either Jimmy Carter or Mikhail Gorbachev prior to the Vietnam and Soviet-Afghan wars. It is therefore difficult to determine the extent to which those conflicts shaped each leader's respective foreign policy beliefs. To compensate for that deficiency, I have examined the extent to which analogical references to each quagmire figured in debate over subsequent conflict decisions. Did, for instance, officials within the Eisenhower administration dwell on the possibility that intervention to save Dienbienphu could turn into another Korea? If so, how did those considerations influence their approach to the crisis?

I have not focused solely on decision-makers' use of analogies, however. For it is certainly plausible that leaders' domestic constituents could have been more prone to view new crises through the lens of a recent quagmire. People less well versed in foreign affairs probably

experience much greater difficulty grasping the political nuances and strategic considerations that influence foreign policy experts. That difficulty could certainly encourage them to employ historical analogies to come to grips with novel security challenges. I have therefore evaluated the use of historical analogies among a broad range of political elites—most notably, legislators and journalists. Unfortunately, most of the evidence of those individuals’ use of historical analogies consists of public statements, which should not be taken at face value. As previous scholars have noted, historical analogies serve multiple purposes. They can certainly help people understand and devise policies to deal with novel foreign policy challenges. But people can also use analogies instrumentally. Even in circumstances in which analogical reasoning does not play a crucial role in the formulation of people’s policy preferences, they might very well invoke analogical precedents to sell their opinions. As I will discuss later, the fact that some cautioned that U.S. involvement in Angola could become “another Vietnam” does not prove that the recently concluded conflict in Southeast Asia had diminished their propensity to intervene abroad. Their reluctance to intervene in Angola might have been due primarily to the clear lack of vital American interests in the conflict. The Vietnam analogy might simply have provided a convenient justification for views that anti-interventionists would have espoused even if the United States had not recently emerged from a military quagmire.

For similar reasons, validating that a quagmire diminished state interventionism through turnover is also extremely challenging. It is difficult to ascertain the true extent to which a leadership transition was influenced by disillusionment with the policies or leadership that resulted in quagmire. For instance, it seems clear that the stalemate in Korea contributed to a dramatic decline in Truman’s public support, which culminated in his defeat to Estes Kefauver in the 1952 New Hampshire Democratic primary election—a result that prompted the president to

abandon his campaign for a second full term. Yet it is less clear whether Eisenhower's pledge to "go to Korea" was a decisive factor in his victory over Adlai Stevenson, as many have claimed. Rather than focusing solely on whether a quagmire precipitates turnover, I have therefore examined the extent to which turnover (when it does occur) significantly alters the pattern of a state's conflict behavior.

My ultimate goal, of course, is not to identify the extent to which military quagmires influence public opinion, but to determine how they influence states' use of military force. In each case study, I have consequently examined how leaders' perceptions of public opinion influenced their decisions regarding the use of military force. For leaders' *perceptions* of the public's reaction to a quagmire could be more consequential than constituents' actual attitudes. Did Eisenhower, for instance, express skepticism that the American public would be unwilling to go to war in Indochina *because of the lingering trauma of Korea*? Did Ford and Kissinger anticipate that Americans had little appetite to intervene in Angola *because of the lessons of Vietnam*? Did Gorbachev reason that his compatriots had lost interest in propping up communist regimes in Eastern Europe *because of the fiasco in Afghanistan*? If the documentary record reflects that such considerations figured prominently in decision-making, one could reasonably conclude that the three quagmires had indeed attenuated each state's inclination to use military force.

Likewise, if a desire to regroup in the aftermath of a quagmire did, in fact, diminish a state's inclination to intervene or employ its armed forces in new conflicts, the documentary record should reflect that the issue of military readiness figured prominently in decision-makers' foreign policy deliberations—particularly in the midst of international crises. Those discussions might include expressions of concern: that due to the high operations tempo resulting from the previous

conflict, military units required more time to devote to training and restore morale before they could or should be deployed for additional combat operations; that significant equipment replacement and recapitalization was necessary before military units would be combat-ready; or that due to the operational strain and losses incurred in the preceding quagmire, a new military engagement would stretch the force too thin to insure the security of the state's vital interests. The compulsion to regroup would appear most consequential if civilian leaders broached that exigency amongst themselves. Yet evidence that the military leadership pushed those views on their civilian bosses would certainly validate the influence of such considerations. Conversely, evidence that civilian leaders authorized new military operations in spite of such arguments would seriously undermine the hypothesis that states are likely to steer clear of new conflicts in order to rebuild their military strength.

In fact, a number of different pieces of evidence could lend credence to the reassertion hypothesis. If any of the three conflicts under investigation compelled leaders to employ military force in order to reassert national power and resolve, the documentary record should include at least some discussion of the necessity of such action to deter rival adventurism. For instance, if a compulsion to reassert U.S. resolve influenced the Ford administration during the Mayaguez incident, the minutes from the series of NSC meetings that took place over the few days of the crisis should reflect that administration officials believed that military action was necessary in order to prove to rival nations, most notably the Soviet Union, that the Vietnam debacle had not turned the United States into a paper tiger. If leaders did not reason along those lines, however, other evidence could still lend credence to the reassertion hypothesis. For if leaders felt pressured to demonstrate national resolve, the documentary record should reflect two separate phenomena. First, there should be evidence that some domestic constituency believed

that foreign intervention was necessary in order to reassert national resolve. Evidence of such an inclination might be found in the records of legislative debate, news commentary, or even influential individuals' personal records. Such evidence is not sufficient to validate the reassertion hypothesis. If, however, the documentary record reflects that top decision-makers felt pressured by those constituents to intervene abroad—and ultimately gave in to that pressure—one could conclude that the recent quagmire had, indeed, increased that state's propensity to intervene abroad.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the failure to uncover different types of evidence would not necessarily invalidate the foregoing causal hypotheses. Leaders certainly could have contemplated the lessons of the previous quagmire without ever openly invoking analogical parallels to new crises. Or they might have taken it for granted that the recent conflict had diminished their constituents' willingness to support new military ventures. Moreover, even if decision-makers did express those concerns, such expressions might not have made their way into the documentary record. For leaders are probably more likely to discuss political considerations, including the constraints of public opinion, during informal discussions with their political advisors rather than in formal national security meetings, which are typically much more well documented. The key point is that a paucity of evidence is not sufficient to reject hypotheses that a military quagmire is likely to reduce a great power's propensity to intervene in subsequent conflicts.

Moreover, it is quite possible that different causal dynamics could operate in different circumstances. The Korean War could have engendered a widespread impulse amongst Americans to reassert their determination to resist Soviet expansion; and the Vietnam War could have convinced most Americans that superpower competition and a strategy of military

containment were counterproductive. This study consequently aims to accomplish more than simply test different variants of war-weariness theory against the reassertion hypothesis. For “the researcher should be open to unexpected clues or puzzles that indicate the presence of left-out variables,” as Bennett has pointed out, which “can lead to the development of new hypotheses.”⁴⁶ Through comparative case analysis, I have therefore sought to construct an empirically-based explanation of the conditions under which different causal mechanisms are likely to operate. I have attempted to build upon a deductive examination of causal hypotheses by inductively developing new contingent generalizations.

The next three chapters provide detailed analyses of the extent and manner in which the Korean, Vietnam, and Soviet-Afghan wars influenced subsequent U.S. and Soviet conflict behavior. As I will explain in the conclusion, those case studies suggest that military quagmires are likely to exert marginal influence on states’ subsequent decisions on *whether* to use military force. That is not to say, however, that such conflicts are likely to alter recent combatants’ *general* propensities to use military force. For military quagmires typically generate competing impulses within a country: a desire to avoid repeating the mistakes that resulted in such misfortune; and an urge to prove to rival nations that a quagmire has not opened a window of opportunity to pursue revisionist aims with impunity. Which of those impulses predominates typically depends upon the strategic and political stakes that inhere in specific international disputes. *Quagmires are likely to diminish states’ inclination to employ military force in peripheral conflicts in which vital interests are not at stake. At the same time, however, such*

⁴⁶ Andrew Bennett, “Case Study Methods: Design, Use, and Comparative Advantages,” in *Models, Numbers, and Cases: Methods for Studying International Relations*, ed. Detlef Sprinz and Yael Wolinsky-Nahmias (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 23.

humiliating experiences are likely to increase their inclination to combat acts of international aggression—particularly when important national interests are at stake.

Chapter Two: After Korea

To many Americans, the Vietnam War is the archetypal military quagmire. The conflict has assumed a quasi-mythic status, due largely to its repeated artistic representation—in song, film, and literature. For the past few decades, Vietnam has consequently overshadowed Korea, America’s “forgotten war.” Yet the Korean War was also a quagmire, which in many respects was just as tragic as Vietnam. In the first three months of fighting, following the North Korean invasion of the South in June 1950, U.S. forces succeeded in repelling the communist invaders. If the Truman administration had been content to restore the status quo ante, the containment of communist expansion could have been achieved at relatively little cost. Flush with confidence from a string of battlefield victories, however, the American leadership was unable to resist the temptation to achieve a decisive victory over its communist adversaries. As is well known, MacArthur’s subsequent push into North Korea prompted China to enter the fray in October. Although U.S. forces were significantly more technologically advanced and better equipped than the communists, an overwhelming manpower advantage enabled Chinese forces to bog the United States down in a fruitless stalemate. Over the course of the three-year conflict, 33,000 American troops ultimately perished.

As I noted in the introductory chapter, it is tempting to conclude that war-weariness or a “Korea syndrome” diminished the United States’ propensity to use military force in subsequent international crises. After all, less than a year after Eisenhower achieved an armistice in Korea, he opted not to deploy forces to save the besieged French garrison at Dienbienphu in 1954. A number of scholars have attributed that decision (at least in part) to the lingering trauma of Korea. William Conrad Gibbons, for instance, has argued that “it was the domestic after-effect of [the Korean War] which was the principal deterrent to the use of force by the United States in

Indochina in 1954.”¹ Was that the case? The argument is seductive. But temporal proximity is not proof of causality. And most assertions that Eisenhower suffered from a Korea syndrome are based on the mere existence of a correlation—a costly, stalemated war, followed by a decision not to intervene militarily in a subsequent crisis. Although that correlation does not validate the war-weariness hypothesis, it does render the case an excellent one for in-depth qualitative examination, for it constitutes a most-likely case. Because both the independent variables (war involvement/outcome) and dependent variable (subsequent conflict decision) have values that war-weariness theory would predict, one would expect to find evidence of the hypothesized causal dynamics at work.

This chapter will not focus solely on the Dienbienphu case, however. Although scholars typically point to Dienbienphu as evidence of war-weariness, we should not ignore the fact that the Eisenhower administration was drawn into another international crisis only a few months after the fall of the French garrison in Indochina—the first offshore islands crisis. It is therefore important to examine the extent to which war-weariness influenced U.S. foreign policy during that second crisis. For if the trauma of Korea restrained the administration’s approach to Indochina, one would expect it to have done likewise in the Taiwan Strait.

As I will demonstrate, however, the Korean War did not diminish the United States *general* propensity to use military force. The conflict certainly generated a widespread reluctance to engage in another land war in Asia. And the lessons of Korea evidently attuned decision-makers

¹ William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 65; Also see: Douglas C. Foyle, *Counting the Public In: Presidents, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 83; David Garnham, “War-Proneness, War-Weariness, and Regime Type: 1816-1980,” *Journal of Peace Research* 23, no. 3 (1986): 280; and Steven Casey, *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion in the United States, 1950-1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 365. Casey argues that although “a ‘Korean Syndrome’ of sorts did develop...this ‘Korean Syndrome’ was never an all-powerful constraint.” In particular, the “Korean Syndrome” did not enervate the Eisenhower administration’s policy toward the Soviet Union.

to the risks of intervening at Dienbienphu. Yet the ignominious stalemate in Korea also compelled many Americans to reassert the United States' power and resolve to combat communist expansion—as the reassertion hypothesis would predict. And that impulse encouraged Eisenhower to adopt provocative policies that increased the risk of war in the Taiwan Strait.

The Dienbienphu Crisis

Upon entering the White House in January 1953, Eisenhower inherited both the Korean War and the deteriorating Indochina situation from the Truman administration. During its first year in office, ending the war in Korea was arguably the new administration's primary foreign policy objective. As Eisenhower extricated the United States from the Korean stalemate, however, administration officials grew increasingly concerned about the prospect of further communist expansion in Southeast Asia. The French had been extremely unsuccessful in their campaign to suppress the nationalist rebellion in Indochina, which Ho Chi Minh's communist Vietminh forces had been waging since 1946. And the Vietminh's invasion of Laos in April 1953 shattered Washington's confidence that the French would ultimately be able to prevail in the conflict. So even as the administration increased financial and materiel assistance to France, they began considering more direct U.S. involvement in the conflict—particularly when the Vietminh surrounded the French fortress at Dienbienphu in January 1954. During the subsequent 55-day siege of the fortress, which endured from March 13 until the French finally

surrendered on May 7, the Eisenhower administration deliberated, intensely at times, over whether to deploy U.S. forces to Indochina.²

There is no doubt that there was significant opposition to intervention throughout the American body politic. In early February, Eisenhower's decision to deploy uniformed aircraft technicians to Indochina sparked a flurry of agitation in the news and the halls of Congress that the administration was inching towards another war. Although Eisenhower was able to quell that backlash by pledging to withdraw the technicians no later than June 15, intense opposition to intervention flared up on two more occasions during the crisis: first, following Secretary of State John Foster Dulles' proposal of "united action" at the end of March; and then again in mid-April in response to a widely-reported "off-the-record" suggestion by Vice President Richard Nixon that it might be necessary for the United States to intervene in Indochina if France withdrew its forces.³

The documentary record does suggest that memories of Korea lurked beneath that opposition. Newspapers warned of "a new and more risky and more bothersome Korea."⁴ Journalists questioned: "are we willing to fight another Korean-type conflict with the necessary

² Good historical accounts of the Eisenhower administration's approach to the crisis can be found in: "The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam. History of the Indochina Incident, 1940-1954." (JCS Historical Division, 1971); David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Melanie Billings-Yun, *Decision Against War: Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, 1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); William J. Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); and John Prados, *The Sky Would Fall: Operation Vulture: The U.S. Bombing Mission in Indochina, 1954* (New York: Dial Press, 1983).

³ Interesting discussions of domestic opposition to intervention in Indochina during the Dienbienphu crisis appear in: Foyle, *Counting the Public In*, chap. 4; Jon W. Western, *Selling Intervention and War: The Presidency, the Media, and the American Public* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); and Justus D. Doenecke, *Not to the Swift: The Old Isolationists in the Cold War Era* (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 1979), 238–242.

⁴ "War in Indochina?," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 31, 1954.

costs in money, men and blood?”⁵ And the specter of Korea hung over debate within the halls of Congress. Senator Mike Mansfield warned early on that the “crisis might easily resolve itself into a Communist victory or the entanglement of the United States in another Korean situation.”⁶ And at the height of the crisis, a few days after the reporting of Nixon’s off-the-record comment, Senator Wayne Morse demanded: “Did the administration mean it when its leading spokesmen said there would be no more peripheral wars, no more Korea?”⁷ The trauma of Korea was clearly fresh in legislators’ minds—as the war-weariness hypothesis would predict.⁸ But had the difficulties encountered in Korea really convinced Americans that they simply could not afford to engage in a new war in Indochina?

A public opinion poll conducted in the summer of 1953, just as Eisenhower was solidifying the Korean armistice, indicated that 47 percent of respondents thought the United States should help fight if it seemed the communists were going to invade Indochina; 32 percent disagreed; and 21 percent did not know. Yet only 30 percent of the respondents thought such help should include American soldiers fighting in Indochina; and only 11 percent favored unilateral U.S. involvement without U.N. cooperation. But a large plurality, 46 percent, supported increasing armament assistance to Indochina. And later polls reflected that the public was much more inclined to support the use of U.S. air forces, rather than ground troops, to check the spread of

⁵ Hanson W. Baldwin, “‘New Look’ Re-Examined in Light of Indo-China,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1954. Summaries of media attitudes toward Indochina can be found in the state department’s: Daily Summaries on International Topics and Foreign Policy 1952-1954, Box 6, Office of Public Opinion Studies (OPPS), 1943-1965, Record Group (RG) 59, United States National Archives (USNA).

⁶ *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(2):1503.

⁷ *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(4):5291.

⁸ Such references to Korea are peppered throughout the record of congressional arguments against intervention in Indochina: *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(4):5178, 5292; *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(5):5794-5795, 6074; *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(6):7195.

communism. A September 18, 1953, Gallup poll found that 85 percent disapproved of “sending United States soldiers to take part in the fighting” in Indochina. But a poll conducted by the State Department the next month indicated that 53 percent approved of using U.S. air forces “if it looks like the Communists might take over all of Indochina.”⁹

The lessons of Korea apparently had not convinced either the general public or the Congress that the United States should not intervene in Indochina under any circumstances. The primary conviction that many derived from the Korean War was not that the United States needed to avoid peripheral wars to stop communist expansion; they simply determined that in future wars it was imperative for U.S. allies to shoulder more of the burden. A number of legislators, perhaps reflecting the views of their constituents, fumed over the failure of the United States’ allies to shoulder more of the burden for the fighting in Korea.¹⁰ Even Senator William Knowland, one of the legislators most disposed to support intervention in Indochina, harped on the necessity of ensuring a more equitable division of labor. On a number of different occasions, Knowland asserted that “we want no more Koreas with the United States furnishing 90% of the manpower.”¹¹ For Congress, greater burden-sharing was thus a precondition for U.S. intervention in Indochina.

There was concern, however, that even limited U.S. involvement in the Indochina conflict could lead inexorably to the introduction of U.S. ground troops.¹² Although Dulles assured legislative leaders, during an April 3, 1954, meeting that the administration was not

⁹ The polling data discussed here are presented in Foyle, *Counting the Public In*, 85–86.

¹⁰ *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(4):4679; *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(5):5794, 6226, 6917.

¹¹ Quoted in FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):1224. For similar comments see: *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(4):4674, 5119.

¹² *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(2):1551-1552; *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(3): 2904.

contemplating the commitment of land forces, the legislators were skeptical, retorting “that once the flag was committed the use of land forces would inevitably follow.”¹³ Many legislators and journalists were fearful that if U.S. air and naval forces failed to turn the tide of the war, the United States would face the dilemma of either conceding defeat to the Vietminh or escalating its involvement in the conflict; and they believed that conceding defeat would be unthinkable, that the administration would be compelled to deploy ground forces.¹⁴

Although the Korean War may have heightened public and congressional sensitivity to those risks, the strength of that influence should not be exaggerated. For references to Korea did not constitute the core argumentation against intervention. Most opponents of intervention focused on either of two arguments: the inadvisability of intervening in a colonial/nationalist war; or the low likelihood that U.S. intervention would succeed in overcoming the Vietminh forces.¹⁵

¹³ Memorandum for the File of the Secretary of State, April 5, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):1225. Senator Stennis had also communicated this concern a few months earlier in a letter to the Secretary of Defense, which is printed in *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, vol. V.B.3.b (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1969), 239.

¹⁴ For such arguments see: “The Terms of Intervention,” *Washington Post*, May 28, 1954; William R. Matthews, “Aid to Indochina Opposed,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1954; and Cong. Rec., 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(4):5116.

¹⁵ This finding jibes with previous public opinion research, which has established that Americans are more willing to tolerate casualties and support the use of military force: 1) to resist international aggression; and 2) when there is perceived to be a high probability of success. See: Bruce W. Jentleson, “The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force,” *International Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1992): 49–73; Bruce W. Jentleson and Rebecca L. Britton, “Still Pretty Prudent: Post-Cold War American Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 4 (1998): 395–417; Eric V. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1996); Eric V. Larson and Bogdan Savych, *American Public Support for U.S. Military Operations from Mogadishu to Baghdad* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2005); Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, “Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq,” *International Security* 30, no. 3 (2006 2005): 7–46; Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Richard C. Eichenberg, “Victory Has Many Friends: U.S. Public Opinion and the Use of Military Force, 1981–2005,” *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 140–77. For a detailed account of domestic opposition to intervention in Indochina see Western, *Selling Intervention and War*, 53–61 Western argues that “the crisis in Indochina came less than a year after the conclusion of the war in Korea, and latent public opinion was overwhelmingly opposed to another American military deployment to Asia,” but the emphasis of his argument

Although the Eisenhower administration endeavored to frame the conflict in Indochina as a war between communism and the forces of the free world, large factions of the American public, media, and Congress remained convinced that the war was really about the maintenance of the French colonial empire.¹⁶ They understood that the war in Indochina was quite unlike the war in Korea: that it was much easier to justify deploying military force to oppose external aggression than to oppose internal communist subversion.¹⁷ And a number of legislators believed that French assurances of independence for Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam were disingenuous.¹⁸ They believed that granting genuine independence was vitally important since most Vietnamese would be unwilling to fight the Vietminh, or to support American intervention as long as doing so guaranteed remaining in thrall to French imperialism.¹⁹

Wariness about supporting colonialism thus fueled pessimism about whether intervention could succeed. Anti-interventionists argued that the problem in Indochina was not military but

suggests that concerns over associating the United States with a colonial war were more salient than wariness that Indochina could become another Korea.

¹⁶ Western, *Selling Intervention and War*, 60–61. See also: *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(4):5477-5479; *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(5):5778; *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(6):7194-7195.

¹⁷ See “The Stakes in Indochina,” *Washington Post*, April 20, 1954. The *Washington Post* editorialized: “No greater mistake can be made than to compare Indochina with Korea, where there was a clear case of external aggression and the nation rallied behind a strong leader. There is neither the leader nor the popular support in Indochina: nor are there the natural features for good defense.” See also: Herbert Ellison, “Plain Talk Needed on Indochina War,” *Washington Post*, April 18, 1954, sec. B4. *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(2):1505; *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(3):3611.

¹⁸ See: John F. Kennedy to Dulles, May 7, 1953, 751g.00/5-753, RG 59, USNA; *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(4):5113-5117; *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(5):5801, 6917.

¹⁹ See: *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(4):5117, 5292; *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(5):5875. Senator Kennedy provided perhaps the most eloquent explanation of that view during an April 6 Senate debate, arguing: “When the United States is perhaps getting ready to take affirmative action, which may even be unilateral action, it seems to me that we have every right to insist that the causes of the struggle be clarified and that its nature be made certain to our people and the people of the Associated States. Otherwise, we will go in on the ‘short end of the stick;’ the Communists will continue to pour across the border, the people of the Associated States will be hostile to our efforts, and we will find ourselves in a far worse military situation than we ever experienced in Korea.” *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(4):4675.

political. They noted that the military forces of the French and Associated States, which totaled roughly 500,000 men, outnumbered the communist forces by a two to one margin.²⁰ They noted that the United States had provided over a billion dollars in economic and military assistance to Indochina. And they concluded that the deployment of any U.S. forces, particularly air or naval forces alone, would not stem the tide of the war in the absence of the provision of genuine independence for the Associated States.²¹

One could argue, of course, that the trauma of the Korean War had made Americans more attuned to the political and military problems that intervention in Indochina would entail. Fortunately, from a methodological standpoint, since the war in Indochina had commenced a few years prior to the Korean War, we can assess whether American attitudes toward Indochina shifted appreciably following the Korean War. What the documentary record demonstrates is that even prior to the Korean War, American officials were wary of supporting French colonialism in Indochina. On March 2, 1949, during an executive session of the Foreign Affairs Committee dealing with the extension of the Marshall Plan, Senator Mansfield (later one of the most prominent opponents of intervention in Indochina) proposed an amendment providing for the termination of Marshall Plan aid to any country “so long as it denies to its citizens or citizens in any dependent area under its jurisdiction, the principles of individual liberty, free institutions, and genuine independence.”²² But Mansfield also indicated that he did not anticipate that the amendment would deprive the French of any aid for the struggle in Indochina, suggesting, “I do

²⁰ The Associated States of Indochina comprised Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, which France accorded limited autonomy within the French Union in 1950.

²¹ See: *Cong. Rec.*, 83rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1954, 100(4):5113, 5292; “The Terms of Intervention”; and “Gloom Over Indo-China,” *Washington Post*, February 5, 1954.

²² Quoted in Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 52.

not know too much about the Indochinese situation. I do not think anybody does...but I think there is a lot that the French must answer for in Indochina and the Dutch in Indonesia.”²³ The war in Indochina was not yet a salient issue for legislators, and certainly not for the general public.²⁴ Nevertheless, the Truman administration was torn by the same conflicting impulses that later characterized the debate over intervention. Truman and his advisors were intent on preventing communist nationalist movements from deposing their colonial masters and were therefore eager to forestall a Vietminh victory in Indochina.²⁵ At the same time, however, the administration was convinced that colonialism was a bankrupt political construct and that “19th Century imperialism is no antidote to communism in revolutionary colonial areas. It is rather an ideal culture for the breeding of the communist virus.”²⁶

The crucial point is that significant opposition to the perpetuation of colonialism in Indochina pervaded American society prior to the onset of the Korean War. It therefore seems

²³ Ibid. Gibbons notes that “Mansfield subsequently withdrew the amendment, however, and joined Representative Javits in sponsoring an amendment to terminate assistance to any participating nation ‘which fails to comply with the decisions or accept the recommendations of the Security Council of the United Nations on measures to maintain or restore international peace or security...’ This was directed primarily at the Netherlands, which was then defying efforts by the U.N. Security Council to prevent further use of force against Indonesia. The State Department opposed the Javits-Mansfield amendment, saying that such a political factor should not be used as a condition for aid to Europe. The amendment was defeated 3-17 in the committee and 5-136 when offered again in the House.”

²⁴ Although the issue was not yet important to the general public, significant concern amongst journalists regarding the colonial stigma of the French-Indochina War is summarized in the state department’s: “Summary of Current American Attitudes on U.S. Policy Toward the Far East,” February 13, 1950, Asia 1947-1952, Box 42, OPPS, 1943-1965, RG 59, USNA.

²⁵ The Secretary of State to the Embassy in France, FRUS 1947, 6:67-68.

²⁶ Policy Planning Staff Paper on United States Policy Toward Southeast Asia, March 29, 1949, Lot 64D563, files of the Policy Planning Staff, Department of State, 1947-1953. For similar arguments, see: The Secretary of State to the Embassy in France, FRUS 1947, 6:95-97. The tension between the competing impulses to combat communism and oppose colonialism was exacerbated by bureaucratic politics within the Truman administration. The State Department’s Division of Southeast Asian Affairs (SEA) and Division of Western European Affairs (WE) typically advocated competing approaches toward Southeast Asia. SEA generally advocated pressuring the metropolitan powers in Europe to do more to satisfy the Nationalist demands of their colonies. WE, on the other hand, preferred to soft-peddle the issue of decolonization so as not to disrupt the process of unifying Western Europe as a bulwark against communism. For discussion of these bureaucratic disputes, see Robert M. Blum, *Drawing the Line: The Origin of the American Containment Policy in East Asia* (New York: Norton, 1982), 108–123.

likely that, had the United States not endured two years of stalemated war in Korea, similar public and congressional opposition to U.S. military intervention in Indochina would still have materialized. So even though anti-interventionists frequently insisted on ‘no more Koreas,’ we should not conclude that war-weariness or the lessons of Korea engendered their opposition. The Korean War may have simply served as a convenient cautionary tale, which they were able to deploy to bolster the advocacy of their pre-existing preferences. But even if the Korean experience did reinforce the public’s reluctance to intervene in Indochina, particularly with ground troops, that is only half the story.

If we are to conclude that war-weariness prevented the United States from intervening in Indochina, it is necessary to demonstrate that the Korean War influenced the Eisenhower administration’s decision-making during the crisis. Indeed, there is evidence that military officials estimated the requirements and challenges of a potential war in Indochina with reference to the difficulties the military encountered fighting in Korea.²⁷ As early as July 1953, during a meeting at the Pentagon between the Joint Chiefs of Staff and high-level State Department officials, General J. Lawton Collins, the Army Chief of Staff, warned that if the U.S. were to intervene in Indochina, “militarily and politically we would be in up to our necks. In Indochina we wouldn’t have as advantageous a position as we have in Korea...if we went into Indochina with U.S. forces, we would be in for a major and protracted war.”²⁸ And Collins’

²⁷ Scholars have suggested that the Korean War spawned a “Never Again Club” within the U.S. defense establishment, principally the Army, which ardently opposed fighting another limited land war in Asia. See: Richard K. Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 167–168; Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 34; and David H. Petraeus, “Korea, the Never-Again Club, and Indochina,” *Parameters* 17, no. 4 (1987). Also see John Western’s argument that “as American troops withdrew from Korea in the summer of 1953, senior Army strategists and planners led by Army Chief of Staff General Ridgway committed themselves to ensuring that the United States would not soon find itself in another land war in Asia” in Western, *Selling Intervention and War*, 39.

²⁸ State-JCS Meeting, July 10, 1953, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):650.

successor, General Matthew Ridgway, was, if anything, even more sensitive to the lessons of Korea. Throughout the crisis, he staunchly opposed the introduction of U.S. military forces, insisting that intervention “would constitute a dangerous strategic diversion of limited United States military capabilities.”²⁹

Ridgway’s opposition was certainly not as decisive as he claimed in retrospect.³⁰ But administration officials, including the president, certainly shared his aversion to a potential ground operation. During a meeting with his National Security Council (NSC) at the beginning of the crisis, Eisenhower asserted, “with great force, he simply could not imagine the United States putting ground forces anywhere in Southeast Asia, except possibly in Malaya, which we would have to defend as a bulwark to our off-shore island chain.”³¹ He was convinced that the “war in Indochina would absorb our troops by divisions!”³² The president was clearly attuned to the strategic risks that would accompany the introduction of U.S. ground troops.

It is also clear, however, that domestic political considerations informed the administration’s reluctance to deploy ground troops. In the first week of 1954, the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs warned Dulles that “public opinion in the US is not now ready for a decision to send US troops to Indochina and in all probability will not support such a decision unless

²⁹ Ridgway to JCS, April 6, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):1269-1270.

³⁰ For Ridgway’s account, see Matthew B. Ridgway, *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway* (New York: Harper, 1956), 275–278. A number of scholars have pointed out, however, that the advice proffered by Ridgway and others lagged behind Eisenhower’s decision making. For instance, the Army’s report on battlefield conditions in Indochina and the requirements for U.S. intervention, which Ridgway claimed “played a considerable, perhaps a decisive, part in persuading our government not to embark on that tragic adventure,” was not completed until July, two months after Dienbienphu had capitulated. This argument can be found in: Billings-Yun, *Decision Against War*, 56–57; and George C. Herring and Richard H. Immerman, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu: ‘The Day We Didn’t Go to War’ Revisited,” *The Journal of American History* 71, no. 2 (1984): 354–355.

³¹ NSC Meeting, January 8, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):949.

³² NSC Meeting, January 8, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):949.

convinced that such action is necessary to save Southeast Asia from Communist domination.”³³

But Dulles and Eisenhower were hardly in need of such a reminder. At the height of the crisis, the president cautioned his advisors, “If we wanted to win over the Congress and the people of the United States to an understanding of their stake in Southeast Asia, let us not talk of intervention with U.S. ground forces. People were frightened, and were opposed to this idea.”³⁴

It is not clear, however, whether Eisenhower believed that the lack of public enthusiasm for U.S. intervention was due to the fresh wounds of Korea? The president’s Chief of Staff thought so.³⁵ Unfortunately, there is little in the documentary record that lends credence to that belief.

Eisenhower was not just worried about public opposition to another war, though; he also had to contend with the pervasive fear of further communist expansion. As some scholars have suggested, Americans did not just want to avoid a repeat of the Korean War. They also wanted to avoid a repeat of the loss of China.³⁶ And Eisenhower was certainly concerned about the domestic political ramifications of losing Indochina. In a meeting with congressional Republicans toward the end of April, one legislator “suggested that the Administration would be equally criticized if it were not calling attention to the danger of losing Indochina. The president agreed and recalled what was said about the failure of the Democrats to face up to the situation in China.”³⁷ Such concerns surely informed Eisenhower’s decision to warn the American public of

³³ Robertson to Dulles, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):945.

³⁴ NSC Meeting, April 29, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(2):1445.

³⁵ In his memoirs, Sherman Adams indicated, “The President knew that the American people had no appetite for another prolonged war in Southeast Asia.” Sherman Adams, *Firsthand Report: The Story of the Eisenhower Administration* (New York: Harper, 1961), 118.

³⁶ Foyle, *Counting the Public In*, 83.

³⁷ Memorandum by the Assistant Staff Secretary to the President, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(2):1413. A similar quotation can be found in Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, vol. 2 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 173.

the dangers of falling dominoes.³⁸ Yet we should not dismiss those public warnings as pure rhetoric designed to appease domestic anti-communists. For the president dwelt on the risks of losing Indochina in private meetings as well.³⁹

The administration faced a serious dilemma. They were determined not to engage in another land war in East Asia. But they were alarmed by the prospect of ceding more territory to the communists, and the political fallout that would inevitably follow.⁴⁰ It was probably the tension between those two competing fears, which prompted the administration to entertain, quite seriously, employing air and naval forces to combat the Vietminh. The president's principal military advisor, Admiral Arthur Radford, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was the most ardent proponent of air strikes. He shared the anti-interventionists' opposition to the introduction of U.S. ground troops to the jungles of Southeast Asia, but persistently trumpeted the virtues of deploying air and naval forces.⁴¹ Shortly after the beginning of the siege, he suggested to the NSC, "if we could put one squadron of U.S. planes over Dien Bien Phu for as little as one afternoon, it might save the situation."⁴² And when General Paul Ely, Chairman of the French General Staff, visited Washington in late-March to solicit more U.S. aid,

³⁸ See *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1960), 381–390.

³⁹ As early as April 1953, following the Vietminh invasion of Laos, Eisenhower reportedly cautioned his National Security Council that, "if Laos were lost we were likely to lose the rest of Southeast Asia and Indonesia. The gateway to India, Burma and Thailand would be open." NSC Meeting, April 28, 1953 FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):519. Also see NSC Meeting, April 6, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):1261.

⁴⁰ This tension is discussed in Foyle, *Counting the Public In*, 83.

⁴¹ To some extent, employing air and naval forces instead of ground forces fit with Radford's pre-existing strategic preferences. Scholars have argued that Radford was eager to conventionalize nuclear weapons by proving the value of massive aerial attacks. See Billings-Yun, *Decision Against War*, 35.

⁴² NSC Meeting, January 8, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):953.

Radford began advocating a plan to launch unilateral American air strikes, codenamed Operation VULTURE, which had been conceived by American and French military officers in Saigon.

Although he was unable to drum up much enthusiasm for Operation VULTURE at the end of March, Radford was not as isolated as many scholars have suggested. A number of administration officials grew more inclined to intervene as the fall of the French fortress loomed. During the critical April 29 NSC meeting, Nixon and Walter Bedell Smith, the Under Secretary of State, insisted that U.S. air strikes might “save the situation,” without obliging the administration to commit ground troops.⁴³ Even the president entertained the option quite seriously. In a March 24 meeting with Dulles, Eisenhower confided that although he was reluctant to get involved in the war in Indochina, he did not “wholly exclude the possibility of a single strike.”⁴⁴ In the final days of March and early days of April, however, Eisenhower decided that any U.S. intervention would have to be part of a broad “united action.”

In a March 29 speech to the Overseas Press Club of America, Secretary Dulles announced to the world that the permeation of communism throughout Southeast Asia, “should not be passively accepted but should be met by united action,” although he only conveyed a vague sense of what “united action” would entail.⁴⁵ A few days later, on the morning of Saturday, April 3, Dulles and Radford pitched united action to the congressional leadership. Dulles had initially intended to introduce a draft resolution seeking advance authorization for the president to employ air and naval forces, if he deemed necessary. But Eisenhower instructed him “to develop first the thinking of congressional leaders without actually submitting in the first

⁴³ NSC Meeting, April 29, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(2):1442-1444.

⁴⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, by the Secretary of State, March 24, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):1150.

⁴⁵ The text of Dulles’ speech, entitled “The Threat of Red Asia,” is printed in the Department of State Bulletin, Vol. XXX:772, April 12, 1954, 539-542.

instance a resolution.”⁴⁶ During the April 3 meeting, the legislators delineated a number of pre-conditions that would need to be satisfied before they would endorse employing U.S. military force.⁴⁷ Eisenhower subsequently decided that the U.S. could only intervene militarily: 1) as part of an international coalition, with the active participation of other Southeast Asian nations as well as Britain, Australia, and New Zealand; 2) if France guaranteed the independence of the Associated States, and agreed to remain in the war to its conclusion; and 3) if Congress provided advance approval. Since the administration was subsequently unable to satisfy those conditions, however, united action never got off the ground.⁴⁸

Although some scholars apparently believe that war-weariness motivated Eisenhower’s insistence on united action, there is much reason to doubt that contention.⁴⁹ For there were

⁴⁶ Memorandum of Conversation, April 2, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):1210.

⁴⁷ During that meeting, Dulles suggested to the legislators that “the President should have Congressional backing so that he could use air and seapower in the area if he felt it necessary in the interest of national security.” The legislators indicated that they would be willing to pass a congressional resolution authorizing the President to employ military forces in Indochina—but only after the administration had secured commitments from the British and other free nations to participate in any military action. Memorandum for the File of the Secretary of State, April 5, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):1224-1225.

⁴⁸ It seems doubtful that, as Billings-Yun has suggested, Eisenhower conceived of united action as a ruse for providing “congressional leaders a free hand to construct barriers to intervention that he could then display mournfully to the French and to American jingoes ready to pounce on the creator of another ‘loss’ in Asia.” After all, Dulles spent most of April shuttling back and forth to Europe earnestly striving to enlist allied cooperation in fulfillment of the pre-conditions for united action. And once it had become clear that the British were unwilling to participate in any coalition, Eisenhower indicated that he was willing to undertake united action without them, so long as the French kept fighting, and other Southeast Asian nations agreed to participate. The fact that Eisenhower was willing to relax his pre-conditions for intervention lends credence to Duiker’s contention that Eisenhower “was genuinely ambivalent about the issue and driven by two potentially irreconcilable objectives; to save Indochina from communism and avoid an escalating risk of global war.” For if Eisenhower had really just wanted to make Congress a scapegoat for non-intervention, he would have embraced Britain’s de facto veto of united action. See: Billings-Yun, *Decision Against War*, 95; and Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina*, 169–172.

⁴⁹ According to Foyle, “Since Eisenhower was already sensitive to the Korean analogy, the insistence by the congressional leaders on ‘no more Koreas’ in which the United States acted unilaterally would have made him concerned about public opinion.” Foyle, *Counting the Public In*, 99–100. Although the legislators’ position definitely appears to have strengthened his conviction, Eisenhower was already partial to united action prior to April 3. During the March 25 NSC meeting, the President spent a good deal of time prodding his advisors to begin considering which nations the administration should attempt to enlist in such a coalition. And he had already come to the conclusion that the United States could not intervene without a Vietnamese invitation. NSC Meeting, March 25, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):1167.

sound strategic arguments, which made Eisenhower shy away from unilateral intervention. Administration officials were acutely concerned about the payoff they could expect to garner from launching unilateral air strikes. That was the prime criterion that prevented the Joint Chiefs from concurring to a memo, which Radford drafted at the end of March, advising the president to offer the French assistance from U.S. air units.⁵⁰ Lemuel Shepherd, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, explained to Radford:

If I could convince myself that such intervention—on any scale now available to us—would turn the tide of military victory in favor of the French I would hold an entirely different opinion despite the hazards and uncertainties attending such a course. But I feel that we can expect no significant military results from an improvised air offensive against the guerilla forces. They simply do not offer us a target which our air [sic] will find remunerative—they are nowhere exposed at a vital point critical to their continued resupply and communications.⁵¹

Similar skepticism also informed the Army and Navy Chiefs' refusal to advocate air strikes.⁵² And Eisenhower was attentive to his military advisors' doubts.⁵³

Of course, the Korean War may have heightened officials' sensitivity to the risks of engaging in an unsuccessful air campaign. They shared the public and congressional apprehension that an initial air/naval intervention, if unsuccessful, could require the subsequent introduction of U.S. ground troops to salvage victory. The service chiefs were particularly sensitive to that risk. According to Shepherd, an unsuccessful aerial intervention would

⁵⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense, March 31, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):1198-1199.

⁵¹ Memorandum by the Commandant of the United States Marine Corps, April 2, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):1223.

⁵² Memorandum by the Chief of Staff, United States Army, April 2, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):1220. Memorandum by the Chief of Naval Operations, April 2, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):1221-1222. Army Position on NSC Action, No. 1074-a, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, V.B.3.b:332.

⁵³ In an April 1 NSC Meeting, Eisenhower indicated that “he understood...that the Joint Chiefs of Staff, except for the Chairman, were opposed to an airstrike using U.S. planes and pilots,” and then asserted that “this was certainly a question for statesmen.” NSC Meeting, April 1, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):1201.

inevitably result in “the necessity of either admitting a fresh military failure on our part or intervening further with ground forces in an effort to recoup our fortunes.”⁵⁴ That concern was not simply due to over-cautious military planning. It also gave pause to civilian administration officials. Talking points prepared by Robert Bowie for Dulles to use in a meeting with the president argued that the “U.S. should assume need for some U.S. ground forces and for large forces under some contingencies. U.S. should not intervene with idea it can be done cheaply by air and naval forces.”⁵⁵ According to Sherman Adams, Eisenhower’s Chief of Staff, the Korean experience had attuned the president to the risk that a limited unilateral intervention could escalate to general war.⁵⁶

Insofar as Korea rendered the deployment of U.S. ground troops to Southeast Asia politically unthinkable, the war therefore made united action extremely desirable, if not essential. For organizing a coalition would enable the administration to develop a division of labor, which would fence off the slippery slope to ground war. Eisenhower and Dulles both frequently peddled that argument to build congressional support for united action. In a late-April meeting with legislators, at the height of the crisis, the president assured legislators, “that he was not advocating the commitment of U.S. ground forces...United Action by the free world was necessary, and in such action the U.S. role would not require use of its ground forces.”⁵⁷ In

⁵⁴ Memorandum by the Commandant of the United States Marine Corps, April 2, 1954 FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):1223.

⁵⁵ Memorandum Prepared in the Department of State, May 11, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(2):1534. There is not any evidence that Dulles actually raised this point during his discussion with the President. See also, Stevens to Wilson, May 19, 1954, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, V.B.3.b:475-476.

⁵⁶ In his autobiography, Adams argued that “having avoided one total war with Red China the year before in Korea when he had had United Nations support, [Eisenhower] was in no mood to provoke another one in Indo-China by going it alone in a military action without the British and other western allies.” Adams, *Firsthand Report*.

⁵⁷ Memorandum by the Assistant Staff Secretary to the President, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(2):1413.

keeping with the New Look, indigenous forces would provide ground troops, and the U.S. would provide air and naval support, in addition to equipment and finances. In such circumstances, even if air strikes proved insufficient to alter the situation, the United States would not be obliged to introduce U.S. ground troops. And the United States could not be left holding the bag if the French decided to withdraw.⁵⁸

United action was also attractive, however, because Eisenhower shared the conviction, which pervaded American society, that the United States, as the globe's pre-eminent beacon of democracy, must not contribute to the perpetuation of colonialism. He feared that unilateral U.S. intervention would "lay ourselves open to the charge of imperialism and colonialism or—at the very least—of objectionable paternalism."⁵⁹ Administration officials were acutely aware that the Cold War was quintessentially an ideological struggle; and in a war of ideas, even a military victory in Indochina could benefit the communist bloc if the specter of western imperialism alienated the Asian peoples and drove them to the Soviet camp. Ensuring that any intervention in Indochina was a multilateral effort, which included regional allies, was therefore critically important to lifting the colonial shroud, which enveloped the French war effort.⁶⁰ Eisenhower was determined not to intervene unilaterally in what, to him, amounted to a colonial/civil war.

The president and his top advisors were, however, prepared to deploy military force to check more clear-cut acts of international aggression. That attitude pervaded NSC contingency planning even prior to the onset of the Dienbienphu crisis. NSC 5405, for instance, asserted that

⁵⁸ Herring and Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu," 350.

⁵⁹ Eisenhower to Gruenther, April 26, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(2):1419-1421. These concerns strengthened Eisenhower's conviction that united action, including Southeast Asian nations, was an essential precondition for U.S. intervention. This argument can be found in: Cutler to Smith, April 30, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(2):1446; NSC Meeting, May 6, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(2):1487-1489; and Memorandum of Conversation, by the Counselor (MacArthur), May 11, 1954 FRUS 1952-1954, 13(2):1526-1528.

⁶⁰ This consideration is clearly enunciated in the NSC Planning Board report on NSC Action 1074-a, April 5, 1954, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, V.B.3.b:301-302.

in the event of Chinese intervention in Indochina, “the United States, in conjunction with at least France and the UK, should take air and naval action against all suitable military targets in China which directly contribute to the war in Indochina...If the UK and France do not agree to such expanded military action, the United States should consider taking such action unilaterally.” The administration made this determination with full recognition of the costs of such action. For NSC 5405 also acknowledged, “the United States should recognize that it may become involved in an all-out war with Communist China, and possibly with the USSR and the rest of the Soviet bloc.”⁶¹ Although Eisenhower was ultimately unwilling to intervene in Indochina in the absence of Chinese aggression, administration officials were prepared to engage in what they believed would have been a much more intense war if China had intervened.⁶²

And it appears that the Korean experience might actually have fostered that disposition. By demonstrating that peripheral wars could be extremely costly, yet indecisive, the Korean War impressed upon the president that “the cause of the free world could never win, the United States could never survive, if we frittered away our resources in local engagements,” and that “it almost appeared that we would have to choose between actually launching an attack on Soviet Russia or gradually permitting ourselves to be exhausted in piecemeal conflicts.”⁶³ That reasoning convinced Eisenhower that in the event of Chinese aggression, “there should be no half measures

⁶¹ NSC 5405, January 16, 1954, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, V.B.3.b:235. The report was prepared by the Planning Board of the National Security Council, and was approved by the Council at its 180th meeting on January 14 and by the President two days later.

⁶² American officials believed, however, that Chinese military intervention was unlikely except, perhaps, in response to successful U.S. military action in Indochina. They believed that China was more likely to try to affect the outcome of the war through “subversion” and materiel support rather than through the deployment of Chinese troops. For these views, see: Special Estimate, December 18, 1953, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(1):924-929; Dulles to Eisenhower, May 28, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 12(1):527-528; and Special National Intelligence Estimate, June 15, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(2):1702-1708.

⁶³ NSC Meeting, April 29, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 13(2):1441-1442.

or frittering around. The Navy and Air Force should go in with full power, using new weapons, and strike at air bases and ports in mainland China.”⁶⁴ And even though concerns over the public’s appetite for another war persisted, Eisenhower was determined to convince them, if the need arose, of “the necessity of striking directly at the head instead of the tail of the snake.”⁶⁵ It thus seems extremely doubtful that the Korean War had diminished the United States *general* propensity to use military force; for the Eisenhower administration had apparently extrapolated lessons that could have sparked a much more tumultuous conflict.

The Offshore Islands Crisis (September 1954 – April 1955)

If the Korean War had diminished the United States *general* propensity to use military force, it should have compelled Eisenhower to shy away from a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait as well as Indochina. Yet the offshore islands crisis demonstrates that even in the aftermath of the Korean War, the United States was willing to use its military forces to protect vital interests. Although deploying ground troops was still anathema, Congress provided Eisenhower a blank check for fighting in defense of Formosa. And even though Eisenhower and Dulles hoped the deterrent value of the Formosa Resolution would make war unnecessary, there is every reason to believe they would have followed through on the threat if China had moved

⁶⁴ Quoted from Cutler to Dulles, June 2, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 12(1):531. Along these lines, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that in the event of intervention in Indochina, “the United States should adopt the concept of offensive actions against the ‘military power of the aggressor,’ in this instance Communist China, rather than the concept of ‘reaction locally at the point of attack;” in JCS to Wilson, May 21, 1954, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, V.B.3.b:480-482. A more detailed discussion of the “greater sanctions” debate, specifically the impact of the nuclear balance on administration thinking, can be found in Marc Trachtenberg, “A ‘Wasting Asset’: American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949-1954,” *International Security* 13:3 (1988): 32–44. Trachtenberg notes that even Ridgway, “by far the strongest advocate of the ‘limited war’ philosophy in the JCS, had by 1954 evidently moved very far toward the idea of hitting the enemy at his heart.” The basis for that conclusion can be found in: “JCS History of the Indochina Incident,” 388.

⁶⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953-1956: The White House Years* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963), 354–355.

against Formosa. Moreover, although Eisenhower never explicitly pledged to defend Quemoy or Matsu, he adopted policies toward the offshore islands, which entailed a significant risk of being drawn into a war over the group of islands, whose importance he, himself, denigrated at times.

The crisis flared up when communist China began shelling the Nationalist-held island of Quemoy on September 3, 1954—only a few months after the fall of Dienbienphu. The Communists continued to shell Quemoy—and a handful of other offshore islands—intermittently during the fall of 1954. Then, on January 10, 1955, the Communists launched an intense series of raids against the Tachen Islands. Eight days later, amphibious forces overran the Nationalist forces on the island of Ichiang. Although that aggression prompted the Nationalists to evacuate the Tachens, a tense standoff persisted until the end of April, when Communist Premier Zhou En-lai announced that China was willing to engage in direct talks with the United States to defuse the ongoing tension in the Far East.

There is little evidence that the Korean War had made the Eisenhower administration reluctant to combat Communist aggression. To be sure, as during the Dienbienphu crisis, there was not a great deal of enthusiasm amongst the American public to engage in hostilities in the Taiwan Strait. A Gallup poll published on October 6 had asked: “If Formosa is invaded by Communist China, which of the following statements (on card) comes closest to your own view of what the United States should do?” A plurality, 49 percent, endorsed policies that would not entail direct U.S. military action: 28 percent were inclined to “have the U.S. supply guns and other war materials but take no active part in fighting;” 21 percent hoped to “have the United States keep out of Formosa altogether and let them fight it out themselves.” Only 41 percent of respondents advocated some sort of military intervention: 31 percent preferred to “have U.S.

planes and ships help to keep Communist China from invading Formosa;” 10 percent wanted to “have U.S. planes bomb airfields and factories on the China mainland.”⁶⁶

But again, it is not clear that the public’s lack of enthusiasm for a war in the Taiwan Strait was due to war-weariness. And even if it was, it only restrained Eisenhower to a limited extent. The administration did initially endeavor to check the Communist aggression peacefully by focusing on two diplomatic initiatives: the development of allied support for a United Nations ceasefire resolution (codenamed “ORACLE”) to be put forward by New Zealand; and the negotiation of a Mutual Defense Treaty with the Nationalists, which was signed on December 2.⁶⁷ Yet when the crisis intensified in January, the wariness of the American public was not sufficient to prevent Eisenhower from committing to defend Formosa. The president took a step that he had contemplated but ultimately refused to take less than a year previously during the Dienbienphu crisis—he requested congressional authorization to deploy U.S. military forces for combat in the Far East. And perhaps even more significantly, in order to convince Chiang to evacuate the Tachens, Eisenhower extended a private assurance that if the Communists attacked Quemoy or Matsu, the United States would assist in their defense.⁶⁸

Eisenhower and his advisors were determined that “somehow or other we must make clear to the United States and to the whole world that we are not going to let Formosa and the

⁶⁶ These poll numbers are documented in Foyle, *Counting the Public In*, 67.

⁶⁷ The Mutual Defense Treaty was very much a necessary complement to the Oracle initiative. For the administration recognized that Chiang Kai-Shek would be unwilling to support any ceasefire resolution unless the United States formalized its commitment to the defense of Formosa. Unfortunately, the negotiation of the Mutual Defense Treaty conversely reduced Britain’s enthusiasm for supporting Oracle. For an excellent discussion of the administration’s efforts to balance British and Nationalist concerns, see Robert Accinelli, *Crisis and Commitment: United States Policy Toward Taiwan, 1950-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 165–174.

⁶⁸ Chiang was furious that the administration refused to make the announcement public. He felt betrayed by the Eisenhower administration, believing that the United States had agreed to announce its commitment to the defense of Quemoy and Matsu publicly in conjunction with the evacuation of the Tachens. *Ibid.*, 196–197.

Pescadores to fall into hostile hands even if we must risk war to prevent this.”⁶⁹ Toward that end, the administration introduced the Formosa Resolution, which requested that Congress authorize the president “to employ the Armed Forces of the United States as he deems necessary for the specific purpose of securing and protecting Formosa and the Pescadores against armed attack,” including “the securing and protection of such related positions and territories of that area now in friendly hands.”⁷⁰ Gone were the stipulations that had rendered united action unachievable in Indochina. There was no provision that Eisenhower could only intervene in partnership with allied nations to defend Formosa. There was no provision that any intervention would need to be sanctioned by the UN. And there was surprisingly little difficulty winning congressional approval of the sweeping resolution.

Just as public opinion failed to restrain Eisenhower, so too did it fail to dissuade the Congress from backing his play. The House of Representatives basically rubber-stamped the resolution, passing it by a 410 to 3 margin on January 25. In the days that followed, the Senate did engage in more serious debate over the implications of the joint resolution.⁷¹ But in spite of a few critics’ warnings that passing the resolution amounted to writing “a blank check of dangerous authority—authority which can be used, or which might be used—to involve us in a

⁶⁹ The quotation (of Dulles) is from NSC Meeting, November 2, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):837. Eisenhower also expressed this sentiment in an October 18, 1954, meeting with Dulles at the White House. See Memorandum of Conversation, October 18, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):770.

⁷⁰ Joint Resolution by the Congress, January 29, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):162-163.

⁷¹ For the record of the Senate debate, see: *Cong. Rec.*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess., 1955, 101(1):735-736, 742, 761, 766, 841-842, 844-845, 928-930, 956-958, 980, 992.

war which we do not want and which the free world does not want, and indeed greatly fears,” the Senate overwhelming approved the resolution, unaltered, by an 85-3 margin on January 28.⁷²

All this raises a litany of questions. Why did Eisenhower, who had clearly felt that his authority to deploy force in Indochina was extremely circumscribed, feel free to request such broad authority to intervene militarily in the Taiwan Strait? Why was Congress not more wary about writing a blank check over to President Eisenhower? After all, many of those who voted in favor of the Formosa Resolution had spent the past few years chastising Truman for violating the constitution by waging war in Korea without the imprimatur of a congressional declaration. If a Korea syndrome existed, should it not therefore have made legislators more wary of ceding to the president the authority to embroil the nation in another war in the Far East? And what accounts for the discrepancy in congressional attitudes toward the crises in Indochina and the Taiwan Strait? Why were so many legislators who had railed against intervention in Indochina so willing to authorize the use of force in the Taiwan Strait only a few months later?

To begin, administration and congressional officials had more justification to expect that a war in the Taiwan Strait would not require the deployment of U.S. ground troops. After all, any Communist attempt to retake the Nationalist-held islands would have necessarily been spearheaded by the Seventh Fleet. The U.S. could therefore depend on its overwhelming air and sea superiority to repel Communist attacks. Indeed, following the administration’s introduction of the Formosa Resolution, Radford assured the members of the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees that there were sufficient indigenous Nationalist ground forces to defend Formosa and the offshore islands so that the United States would likely only need to complement those ground troops with air and naval forces; in fact, he explained that some of the

⁷² *Cong. Rec.*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess., 1955, 101(1):992. Even the Senators who decried what they believed amounted to authorizing the President to go to war over the offshore islands, staunchly supported authorizing the President to defend Formosa. *Cong. Rec.*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess., 1955, 101(1):760, 826, 973.

offshore islands were so small that they could not accommodate many more ground troops than were already stationed there.⁷³ Dulles thus had good reason to assure legislators that “there is no reason in sight for using ground forces in the area.”⁷⁴ He and Radford had proffered similar assurances during the Dienbienphu crisis. But the Congress found them more convincing with regard to a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait—even though Radford did conscientiously refuse to rule out the deployment of U.S. ground troops if a war in the Taiwan Strait produced unexpected contingencies.⁷⁵

That compliance was apparently due largely to optimism that the check that was being written would not need to be cashed. Legislators and administration officials were hopeful that passing the Formosa Resolution would deter Peking from attempting to invade Formosa (and possibly the offshore islands). This was perhaps the most significant difference between the Dienbienphu and offshore islands crises. In Indochina, the United States had faced the prospect of intervening in a worsening quagmire. But in the Taiwan Strait, things had really not come to a head yet; there was still a possibility that all-out war could be avoided. The administration insisted that the Formosa Resolution would “reduce the possibility that the Chinese Communists, misjudging our firm purpose and national unity, might be disposed to challenge the position of the United States.”⁷⁶ And most legislators evidently shared the administration’s belief that the

⁷³ *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess., 1955, 7:144-146.

⁷⁴ For the testimony of Dulles and Radford to this effect, see *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 84th Congress, 1st Sess., 1955, 7:76, 185-187, 190.

⁷⁵ *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess., 1955, 7:149, 161, 194-195, 199-203, 209.

⁷⁶ Message from the President to the Congress, January 24, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):117-118. For similar arguments, see: Special National Intelligence Estimate, January 25, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):127; and the testimony of Dulles and Radford to a joint session of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees in *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 84th Cong., First Sess., 1955, 7:87, 111-112, 130, 147.

best way of deterring Communist China and maintaining the status quo was through a demonstration of unified resolve, in the form of the Formosa Resolution.⁷⁷ There was clearly a consensus that not passing the resolution would amount to “a failure to uphold the president,” which could “only be interpreted throughout the world as a faltering in [American] resolve, with disastrous consequences to peace and to the free nations.”⁷⁸ That was a lesson they had gleaned from Korea. The specter of Dean Acheson’s increasingly infamous Press Club speech weighed on the Congress. Some were convinced that North Korea had invaded the South because they doubted that the U.S. would intervene—primarily because the “Secretary of State reassured the Communists on that point in January 1950.”⁷⁹ So the legislators determined that even though there were risks inherent in the Formosa Resolution, those risks were “less than the risks involved in doing nothing.”⁸⁰

Additionally, the prospect of defending Formosa was comparatively palatable to both the administration and Congress because, unlike the war in Indochina, they did not believe the endeavor would be tainted by the stigma of colonialism. As Dulles explained to legislators, in Indochina “the colonial issue was so involved that we finally came to the conclusion that it was imprudent for us to act there without a concurrence and a clarification of issues which we could not get,” but with regard to Formosa, “everybody recognizes that we have a primary

⁷⁷ For such arguments, see: *Cong. Rec.*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess., 1955, 101(1):759, 951-954, 994.

⁷⁸ *Cong. Rec.*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess., 1955, 101(1):975. This consideration apparently ultimately convinced a number of legislators who argued against extending a blank check to the President (or recognized the merit in those arguments) to vote in favor of the resolution—most notably Senators Humphrey, Kefauver, and Long; see *Cong. Rec.*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess., 1955, 101(1):939, 977, 991.

⁷⁹ *Cong. Rec.*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess., 1955, 101(1):669.

⁸⁰ *Cong. Rec.*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess., 1955, 101(1):817.

responsibility.”⁸¹ The administration was therefore prepared to go it alone in defending Formosa. They believed a Communist attack would constitute an act of international aggression and consequently did not consider allied participation necessary to ensure the international legitimacy of U.S. intervention. Of course, it is debatable whether a Communist attack truly would have been an act of international aggression or merely a continuation of the Chinese civil war. But administration officials and legislators almost uniformly seized on semantic legalisms to support the former interpretation. They insisted that because Formosa had been occupied by Japan for decades prior to the Second World War, and the status of the island had not been definitively adjudicated after the war, any Communist attempt to invade Formosa would constitute international aggression. The U.S. would therefore be fully justified in opposing that aggression.⁸²

The administration’s commitment to the offshore islands was much less resolute than its pledge to defend Formosa, however. It is therefore worth considering whether war-weariness inhibited the administration’s approach to the offshore islands. After all, Eisenhower introduced the Formosa Resolution in part to compensate for his decision not to defend the Tachens. The documentary record does reflect that although administration officials were confident that the public would be willing to defend Formosa and the Pescadores, they had grave doubts that Americans would be inclined to go to war over the offshore islands.⁸³ At the outset of the crisis, the president had cautioned his advisors that “the people of the United States won’t go to war for

⁸¹ *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess., 1955, 7:91.

⁸² On the basis of this logic, however, many officials also concluded that since the offshore islands had long been recognized as integral elements of mainland China, any U.S. attempt to defend those positions would amount to intervention in a civil war. Arguments concerning the relative legitimacy of defending Formosa and the offshore islands can be found in: *Cong. Rec.*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess., 1955, 101(1):622, 741-745, 760-761, 848, 928-931, 956-959, 986.

⁸³ Eisenhower to Churchill, September 8, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):578.

‘captious reasons’” and lamented that although he was willing to fight to defend the United States’ vital interests, “as soon as you attempted to define what these vital interests were, you got into an argument.”⁸⁴

Yet it does not appear that those considerations compelled Eisenhower to evacuate the Tachens. The decision was based more upon strategic considerations. Eisenhower and his top advisors focused on the marginal value of the Tachens to the defense of Formosa, and the strategic detriments that attempting to hold the islands would entail. They reasoned that because the islands were located 200 miles from Formosa but only 20 miles from the mainland, communist air forces could execute raids and return to their bases before planes based on Formosa could intercept them. Since air defense could not be provided effectively from Formosa, the provision of ongoing air cover would therefore require the rotation of at least two carriers. Most administration officials shared Dulles’ conclusion that “it would not make any military sense to tie up a major unit of our fleet and its protecting vessels in order to defend a rocky islet of no strategic importance.”⁸⁵

Even if the Korean War did heighten the administration’s sensitivity to those strategic risks, however, that influence was not strong enough to convince Eisenhower to disengage from the offshore islands altogether—even though some of his top advisors advocated such a decision.⁸⁶

From the onset of the crisis, there had been significant disagreement within the administration

⁸⁴ NSC Meeting, November 2, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):834-837. See also: NSC Meeting, September 12, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):621, in which the President indicates “that he did not believe that we could put the proposition of going to war over with the American people at this time. The West Coast might agree, but his letters from the farm areas elsewhere constantly say don’t send our boys to war. It will be a big job to explain to the American people the importance of these islands to U.S. security.”

⁸⁵ Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between Eisenhower and Dulles, January 18, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):37. For the quotation, Memorandum of Conversation, Department of State, January 19, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):40-41. Memorandum of Conversation, Department of State, January 20, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):56.

⁸⁶ Such advocacy appears in: NSC Meeting, January 20, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):75-80.

regarding the strategic value of Quemoy and Matsu, and the risks inherent in defending them.⁸⁷ Many doubted whether “those doggoned little islands” were of much value to the defense of Formosa.⁸⁸ But Eisenhower was conflicted. Early in the crisis, he suggested “that when Formosa was occupied by the Chinese Nationalists, if they had not held the offshore islands he did not think that the defense of Formosa would be considered drastically different from what it is today.”⁸⁹ But following the invasion of Ichiang, the president lamented “in some exasperation...that he sat in this room time after time with the maps all around him, and a look at the geography of the area would explain why we have to hold Quemoy.”⁹⁰

His gut reaction to the invasion was that it was high time to clarify and strengthen the U.S. commitment to the defense of Quemoy (and perhaps Matsu). On January 20, Eisenhower and Dulles agreed that “there was greater risk of war in leaving our position unclear with respect to the offshore islands than in making it clear.”⁹¹ And later that day, Dulles sent Eisenhower an initial draft of the president’s message to Congress introducing the Formosa Resolution, which declared that “in the light of the present threat of attack against Formosa, the United States must

⁸⁷ For the competing arguments, see: JCS to Wilson, September 2, 1954, CCS 381(11-28-50) sec. 21, RG 218, USNA; NSC Meeting, September 9, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):586-587; Radford to Wilson, September 11, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):598-610; NSC Meeting, November 2, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):831-833; NSC Meeting, January 20, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):81.

⁸⁸ Secretary Wilson quoted from, NSC Meeting, September 9, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):588. For similar views, see: Radford to Wilson, Enclosure B: Views of the Chief of Staff, United States Army, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):605; NSC Meeting, October 6, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):696; NSC Meeting, January 20, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):75-80; NSC Meeting, January 21, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):93-94; Memorandum of Conversation, Department of State, March 28, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):411.

⁸⁹ NSC Meeting, September 12, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):616.

⁹⁰ NSC Meeting, January 21, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):94. Later in the crisis, in a letter to Lewis Douglas, Eisenhower argued that “the offshore islands do have a defensive value to Formosa...Defensively they practically block almost any communist attempt to use the two available harbors immediately west of Formosa for the initiating of amphibious operations.” Eisenhower to Lewis W. Douglas, March 29, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):424.

⁹¹ NSC Meeting, Department of State, January 19, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):75.

be prepared to join in denying control of” Quemoy and Matsu to the Communists.⁹² By the next day, however, they had decided “that it would be best not to nail the flag to the mast by a detailed statement respecting our plans and intentions on evacuating or holding certain of these islands.”⁹³

Instead, Eisenhower extended Chiang the secret pledge to assist in the defense of Quemoy and Matsu. That promise did not necessarily commit U.S. forces to fight in defense of the offshore islands.⁹⁴ The administration did not specify that U.S. assistance would automatically entail direct military intervention. Moreover, the administration was careful to stipulate that the United States would not be obliged to intervene in any conflict triggered by Nationalist aggression. That restriction was not new; it was one of the primary benefits the United States had garnered from the negotiation of the Mutual Defense Treaty. The U.S. had insisted that the treaty be accompanied by an exchange of notes, which stipulated that the use of force could only

⁹² Draft Message from the President to the Congress, January 20, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):83.

⁹³ NSC Meeting, January 21, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):91.

⁹⁴ I think Gordon Chang overstates the firmness of the commitment by suggesting, “if the Communists had actually threatened to overwhelm the offshore islands, Eisenhower was clearly committed to intervene. He would not have stood aside and watched the loss of the islands.” I certainly do not think that “as far as Eisenhower himself was concerned, there was no question in his mind as to what he would do if the Communists attacked in force.” The record of the NSC meeting, which Chang cites to support that claim, includes only one comment by Eisenhower, indicating: “he could not help but feel that we are underestimating the sanity of the Chinese communists. It seemed to him that our very great military capabilities against them should surely give them pause before they undertook a resort to military measures to seize the offshore islands in defiance of the United States.” Eisenhower was clearly still hopeful that deterrence would prevail, but he remained ambivalent about how to respond in the event of a Chinese attack on the offshore islands. A few days after the NSC meeting that Chang cites, Eisenhower wrote in a memorandum to Dulles that “the inter-mixture of warfare, negotiations, public statements and military understandings have given the Chinese Nationalists some right to assume that the United States would probably participate in an active defense of the Quemoy and Matsu groups of islands...the Formosan situation presents a hard choice to American political and military leaders; the only logical course of action is to attempt to bring about reasonable changes in the situation rather than to remain inert awaiting the inevitable moment of decision between two unacceptable choices.” This statement hardly suggests that Eisenhower believed he was indeed committed to going to war over the offshore islands. He still believed he had choices, albeit “hard choices,” to make, and was still trying to find a way to avoid having to intervene. See: NSC Meeting, March 31, 1955, Eisenhower Papers (AW), NSC Series, Box 6, NSC Summaries of Discussion, cited in Gordon H. Chang, “To the Nuclear Brink: Eisenhower, Dulles, and the Quemoy-Matsu Crisis,” *International Security* 12, no. 4 (1988): 119. Eisenhower to Dulles, April 5, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):445-450.

be undertaken “as a matter of joint agreement, subject to an action of an emergency character which is clearly an exercise of the inherent right of self-defense.”⁹⁵ Nevertheless, although the administration had diminished the risk that the Nationalists could unilaterally draw the United States into an offensive war, the secret commitment would have made it extremely difficult for the United States to avoid intervening in opposition to any major Communist attack against the offshore islands. Chiang likely would have interpreted Eisenhower’s promise to entail the active participation of U.S. military forces. And even though the administration extended the commitment privately, the risk that news of the commitment would leak into the public domain would have pressured the president to intervene in order to preserve U.S. credibility.

One is therefore left to wonder: why did Eisenhower decide to strengthen the United States’ commitment to the defense of Quemoy and Matsu without enjoying the deterrent benefits that would have accrued from announcing that commitment publicly? Was the president’s peculiar change of heart due to fear that a war-weary public would recoil from the prospect of defending the islands?⁹⁶ Probably not. For the most significant development that occurred between the NSC meetings on January 20 and 21 (the period during which Eisenhower decided against promulgating a firm intention to defend Quemoy and Matsu) was a meeting between Dulles and the British Ambassador to Washington, Sir Roger Makins, on the evening of January 20. Makins informed the secretary that the British cabinet had believed the two governments’ common objective was to separate Formosa from the mainland and convince the Nationalists to abandon

⁹⁵ According to Robert Accinelli, “The Notes were the instrument by which the United States formalized its control over Nationalist offensive operations.” And he argues that Dulles “saw the pact and the exchange of notes as devices to stabilize the Taiwan area...by both guaranteeing the security of Taiwan and restricting Nationalist offensive military actions, the treaty and accompanying notes contained the potential for a de facto tow-China arrangement.” Accinelli, *Crisis and Commitment*, 175, 179.

⁹⁶ According to Foyle, “When faced with the need to choose a policy, Eisenhower rejected the use of force to defend the offshore islands primarily because he feared public opposition.” Foyle, *Counting the Public In*, 53.

the offshore islands; Westminster was therefore skeptical of making any “provisional guarantee” of Quemoy or Matsu. The Ambassador leveraged the fact that New Zealand had still not introduced its resolution to the U.N. to pressure the administration to refrain from extending such a provisional guarantee. He warned Dulles:

The British government had always been in favor of United Nations intervention in the situation and accordingly they were ready to move at once on ORACLE (subject to New Zealand concurrence) if the United States would withhold its proposed provisional guarantee of Quemoy. If the latter is impossible then the Cabinet felt that the fundamental basis for ORACLE had changed and the entire matter would require reconsideration.⁹⁷

The British threat inspired Dulles to contrive of being less specific in public about U.S. intentions regarding Quemoy, but making them clear to the Nationalists privately.⁹⁸ The secretary was unwilling to forfeit all the work he had put into crafting the ORACLE initiative, which had by then been in the works for months. He continued to believe that a U.N. resolution was desirable for legitimating the U.S. approach to the crisis and casting the Communists as provocateurs. The administration was mindful, if not paranoid, that the communists could use situations like the offshore islands crisis to drive a wedge between the United States and its allies—most importantly those in Western Europe.⁹⁹ According to Dulles, “the big danger resulting from a war between the U.S. and Communist China was not to be found in the realm of military action...the great danger of such a war was the possibility that it would alienate the

⁹⁷ Memorandum of Conversation, January 20, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):86.

⁹⁸ According to Accinelli, Makins informed London that the administration had abandoned the notion of committing to defend the offshore islands either in public or private. The cabinet therefore proceeded with ORACLE on the basis of an incorrect belief that Eisenhower had given up on the proposition of defending Quemoy or Matsu. Accinelli, *Crisis and Commitment*, 191.

⁹⁹ The President to the Acting Secretary of State, September 8, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):577; Bowie to Dulles, February 7, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):239; Eisenhower to Churchill, February 10, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):259.

allies of the United States and might indeed block all our best-laid plans for Western Europe.”¹⁰⁰ It thus appears likely that if not for the British threat to abandon ORACLE, Dulles and Eisenhower would have followed through on their initial decision to publicize U.S. determination to defend Quemoy and Matsu. At perhaps the most crucial point in the crisis, then, it was allied pressure, not the pressure of a domestic constituency inhibited by the trauma of Korea, which most strongly restrained the administration.¹⁰¹

In fact, rather than resigning themselves to the fact that the American public would not support defending Quemoy and Matsu, Eisenhower and Dulles subsequently resolved to prepare the public for such a war. In early March, after a trip to the Far East had convinced Dulles that the Communists were determined to retake Formosa, he and Eisenhower agreed that it was necessary to take “urgent steps to create a better public climate for the use of atomic weapons by the United States if we found it necessary to intervene in the defense of the Formosa area.”¹⁰² In a succession of public appearances, Dulles, Nixon, and Eisenhower asserted that the administration was prepared to employ tactical nuclear weapons against Communist China in the event of war in the Taiwan Strait.¹⁰³ Those comments may have been designed more to deter the

¹⁰⁰ NSC Meeting, January 27, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2:138. For similar comments, see: Memorandum Prepared by the Secretary of State, September 12, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):611; NSC Meeting, November 2, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):835.

¹⁰¹ Foyle acknowledges that Eisenhower and Dulles were concerned about allied opinion, but he significantly underemphasizes its importance in comparison to domestic public opinion. Foyle, *Counting the Public In*, 68, 76.

¹⁰² NSC Meeting, March 10, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):347.

¹⁰³ They continued to stipulate, however, that the administration was not authorized by either the Formosa Resolution of the Mutual Defense Treaty to defend the offshore islands unless an attack against them was part of an invasion targeted at Formosa or the Pescadores. Elie Abel, “Dulles Says U.S. Pins Retaliation on Small A-Bomb,” *New York Times*, March 16, 1955. Richard J.H. Johnston, “Nixon Gives Reds Warning on Atom,” *New York Times*, March 18, 1955.

Chinese Communists than to actually prepare the American public for war.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the threats would have made it more difficult for the administration to back down if the communists had ultimately attempted to seize Quemoy or Matsu.¹⁰⁵

That more bellicose approach backfired to some extent, however, by contributing to a war scare, which swept over the American body politic at the end of March, and consequently brought domestic political pressures into play to a much greater extent. Admiral Robert B. Carney, the Chief of Naval Operations, ignited the scare by offering some indiscreet remarks during a private meeting with a group of journalists. The comments prompted a wave of front-page newspaper articles warning that China was preparing to attack Quemoy and Matsu and that Eisenhower would soon have to “determine whether Matsu and Quemoy are important enough to send this country into a limited war similar to Korea.”¹⁰⁶

That question divided the American body politic.¹⁰⁷ Some Democrats in Congress criticized their more hawkish colleagues for “talking war.”¹⁰⁸ Yet that criticism did not cow the more

¹⁰⁴ Again, I think Gordon Chang exaggerates in suggesting that “Eisenhower was fully prepared, but reluctant, to use nuclear weapons in the Taiwan Strait crisis.” Gordon H. Chang, *Friends and Enemies: The United States, China, and the Soviet Union, 1948-1972* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 131. More persuasive is Gaddis’ contention that the administration’s nuclear threats were “more a declaratory than an actual policy.” Gaddis provides a useful account of the political factors inhibiting Eisenhower from employing nuclear weapons in the Taiwan Strait. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 137–139.

¹⁰⁵ Chang, *Friends and Enemies*, 128.

¹⁰⁶ Walter Trohan, “War or Peace? Showdown by April 15 Seen; Attack on Matsu by Then Hinted,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 27, 1955. For similar articles, see: Anthony Levieros, “Policy Restudied; Eisenhower May State Get-Tough Decision at Coming Talks,” *New York Times*, March 26, 1955. James Reston, “‘The Darkness Is Coming On in the Far East,’” *New York Times*, March 27, 1955.

¹⁰⁷ To some extent, the war scare confirmed the prediction, which Senator Kefauver made during debate over the Formosa Resolution, that “the people of the United States are going to be tremendously alarmed, when the truth is made [known] to them, that Congress, by this resolution, was authorizing the President to use the Armed Forces for the defense of little islands over which we have never had any claim... the people of the United States do not want to go to war over some unnamed little coastal island of the Chinese mainland, an island about which they have never heard and do not care anything about.” See *Cong. Rec.*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess., 1955, 101(1):982-983.

hawkish wing of the Republican Party, which insisted that “the road of appeasement is not the road to peace, but is surrender on the installment plan.”¹⁰⁹ A significant minority were inclined to conclude that all the recent troubles in the Far East were due to Eisenhower’s failure to continue fighting for a total victory in Korea; that the Korean armistice had convinced the Communists that the United States was a “paper tiger,” which would be unwilling to prevent further communist expansion in the Far East. Proponents of this view insisted that “the Korean truce led directly, inevitably and naturally to the crisis in Indochina,” and that “the Geneva Munich,” which sealed the fate of Indochina, “in turn, led directly, inevitably and naturally to this year’s crisis in the Formosa Strait.”¹¹⁰

And administration officials were not immune to such thinking. A number of them were wary that Beijing was probing U.S. intentions, and they evidently believed that the shadow of Korea was encouraging those probes.¹¹¹ Some shared the congressional hawks’ concern that the United States’ failure to secure victory in Korea through the application of overwhelming force had signaled irresolution.¹¹² Others thought that China’s success in keeping the free world at bay

¹⁰⁸ For the quotation, see the comments by Senator Lyndon B. Johnson in *Cong. Rec.*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess., 1955, 101(3):3784-3785. For similar arguments, see Adlai Stevenson, “Stevenson Talk on U.S. Policy on Quemoy, Matsu, and Formosa,” *New York Times*, April 12, 1955.

¹⁰⁹ Variations of this argument appear in: “Mid-April Invasion of Matsu Islands Predicted,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 27, 1955. Grant Dillman, “Knowland Doubts Reds ‘Change Spots,’” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, March 28, 1955. and (for the quotation) Congressional Record, March 28, 1955, 3789.

¹¹⁰ Joseph Alsop, “Will ‘Paper Tiger’ Turn Rabbit?” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, April 17, 1955.

¹¹¹ See: NSC Meeting, September 12, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):618-620. Dulles’ comments in Memorandum of Conversation, January 20, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):60. National Intelligence Estimate, March 16, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):377-378.

¹¹² A National Intelligence Estimate issued shortly after the evacuation of the Tachens speculated that the Communists, “may not be convinced, in the light of the restraint exercised by U.S. policy in Korea and Indochina, that the U.S. would in fact react to attacks on the offshore islands by attacks on the mainland.” Special National Intelligence Estimate, February 15, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):274.

had buoyed their confidence.¹¹³ And some were certainly fearful that the Communists were betting that war-weary Americans would be unwilling to oppose their campaign to recapture the offshore islands. The secretary of defense surely had a Korea syndrome in mind when he warned that the Communists were “likely to believe that U.S. political considerations, both domestic and international, [would] inhibit the U.S. from reacting militarily to attacks on the offshore islands.”¹¹⁴

And as the reassertion hypothesis would predict, those concerns apparently did encourage the administration to adopt a tough position toward the offshore islands, even though doing so entailed a calculated risk of war. Following the invasion of Ichiang, Dulles was skeptical that the Communists were really itching for a fight, but reasoned that they would continue to probe “until the United States [decided] to ‘shoot off a gun’ in the area.” And as the crisis wore on, Eisenhower and Dulles continued to fear that abandoning Quemoy and Matsu would only encourage further aggression, which inclined them to demonstrate the administration’s resolve “by deeds rather than words.”¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Secretary Dulles was conflicted on this point. As noted earlier, he evidently believed that toughness—the threat of escalation—had compelled the Communists to agree to an armistice in Korea. Yet he also worried that “the Chinese communists were arrogant and more or less drunk with power because of their recent successes in” Korea, Dienbienphu, and the Tachens. Bipartisan Congressional Luncheon Meeting, March 30, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):425. See also Memorandum of Conversation, March 24, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):393.

¹¹⁴ Wilson to the JCS, March 22, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):385.

¹¹⁵ Quoted from NSC Meeting, March 10, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):348-349. The compulsion to reassert U.S. power and resolve was by no means the only factor that encouraged the Eisenhower administration to adopt an uncompromising position toward the offshore islands. There appears to be much truth in Gaddis’ contention that Eisenhower and Dulles adopted a tough stance in order to “undermine the relationship between Moscow and Beijing.” In December 1953, during the tripartite conference in Bermuda, Dulles had explained to the British and French delegations that “it was the view of the United States that the best hope for intensifying the strain and difficulties between Communist China and Russia would be to keep the Chinese under maximum pressure rather than by relieving such pressure;” he reasoned that “pressure and strain would compel [the Chinese] to make more demands of the USSR which the latter would be unable to meet and the strain would consequently increase.” Dulles had clearly conceptualized a strategic rationale, which subsequently counseled adopting an assertive approach toward the offshore islands. And that rationale was based, to some extent, on the lessons he had extrapolated from Korea. The Secretary was convinced that the administration’s willingness to escalate hostilities had compelled the

But Eisenhower was in a difficult position. Although the president recognized that the congressional hawks would excoriate him for ceding any more territory to the communists, the war scare reinforced his fears that sending U.S. forces to fight in defense of the offshore islands would cleave American and allied public opinion.¹¹⁶ He therefore decided to dispatch Radford and Walter Robertson, the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, to Taipei in order to retract the administration's secret defense pledge and encourage Chiang to reconceptualize his position on the offshore islands. The president had come to believe that it would be best to treat the offshore islands as "outpost positions," to whose "full-out defense" neither the Chinese Nationalists nor the United States were committed.¹¹⁷ To Eisenhower's mind, "one of the greatest advantages" of the outpost idea "would be a practically solidified public opinion in the United States."¹¹⁸ It would diminish the doves' fears that the U.S. would be drawn into a war in the Taiwan Strait, but satisfy the hawks' refusal to cede any more territory to the communists. However, Eisenhower's top advisors (particularly Dulles and Radford) counseled that such a solution was infeasible. Instead, they recommended that it would be better to encourage Chiang to make "a clean break" from the islands—to execute a complete

Chinese to agree to an armistice. Pressure, not appeasement, was the only way to shatter the communist bloc. See: Gaddis, *The Long Peace*, 183–185. United States Delegation Minutes, Second Restricted Tripartite Meeting of the Heads of Government, December 7, 1953, FRUS 1952-1954, 5(2):1809-1813.

¹¹⁶ Critical views regarding appeasing the communists can be found in: "Knowland, at Dutch Treat Club, Scores Appeasement," *New York Times*, April 6, 1955; and Joseph Alsop, "Matter of Fact...," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, April 15, 1955. H.W. Brands argues that "no Republican administration could lightly disregard the wishes of the China bloc, a significant element of its party." H.W. Brands, "Testing Massive Retaliation: Credibility and Crisis Management in the Taiwan Strait," *International Security* 12, no. 4 (1988): 124–51.

¹¹⁷ Eisenhower to Dulles, April 5, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):448. See also: Draft Policy Statement Prepared in the Department of State, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):461-463; and Hoover to Dulles, April 1, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):440.

¹¹⁸ Eisenhower to Dulles, April 5, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):449.

evacuation from the vulnerable positions.¹¹⁹ And they suggested that the United States offer to provide military cover for the evacuation and subsequently impose a maritime blockade to prevent the delivery of any seaborne supplies for a Communist military buildup opposite Formosa.¹²⁰ Although Eisenhower remained partial to the outpost concept, he surprisingly afforded his subordinates ample discretion to focus on selling Chiang on the evacuation-blockade plan.¹²¹ In fact, there is no evidence that Radford and Robertson ever mentioned the outpost option in their meetings with Chiang toward the end of April.¹²²

Although the war scare apparently motivated Eisenhower to retract the secret commitment to defend Quemoy and Matsu, it was thus not sufficient to dissuade him from authorizing provocative policies that could have actually intensified the crisis.¹²³ And there is no doubt that both Eisenhower and Dulles understood that a blockade would be provocative. Toward the end of the previous November, hardliners such as Knowland had begun clamoring for a blockade in response to China's conviction of eleven U.S. airmen and two CIA operatives. But Herman Phleger, the State Department legal advisor, warned the administration "that any blockade would

¹¹⁹ Memorandum of Conversation between the President and the Secretary of State, April 17, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):491.

¹²⁰ Memorandum of Conversation between the President and the Secretary of State, April 17, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):494-495.

¹²¹ Eisenhower reportedly "finally agreed that we would leave this up to the Chinats,"—that is, whether to evacuate the islands completely or to garrison the islands as outposts for the defense of Formosa. See: Memorandum of Conversation between the President and the Secretary of State, April 17, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):491. And for a more detailed account of the discussions regarding the outpost and evacuation-blockade options, see Accinelli, *Crisis and Commitment*, 219–228.

¹²² Robertson to Dulles, April 25, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):510-517.

¹²³ According to Ronald Pruessen, Eisenhower and Dulles "were never able to cease doing battle with the more aggressive voices around them," such as Radford. But Pruessen also suggests that "the president and the secretary of state were never able to totally avoid their own personal attraction to behavior that was far from moderate," and that their attraction to more aggressive policies waxed as the crisis dragged on. Ronald W. Pruessen, "Over the Volcano: The United States and the Taiwan Strait Crisis, 1954-1955," in *Re-Examining the Cold War: U.S.-China Diplomacy, 1954-1973* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 77–105.

be an act of war” and would consequently violate the United States’ “obligations under the UN Charter to settle disputes peaceably and without resorting to force.”¹²⁴ Eisenhower shared that assessment. He was furious with the blockade advocates and was convinced “that a blockade is an act of war which could at best lead only to serious consequences.”¹²⁵

It is not entirely clear why Eisenhower and Dulles, who recognized the risks of imposing a blockade, and were unwilling to accept those risks in December 1954, were suddenly willing to do so in April, after the war scare.¹²⁶ If Eisenhower had truly been intent on disengaging from a possible conflict over Quemoy and Matsu, he certainly could have instructed Radford and Robertson to turn the screws on Chiang. They could have informed the generalissimo that the administration was going to announce unilaterally that it had no intention of defending Quemoy and Matsu, and that he could therefore either evacuate the islands under the aegis of the U.S. military or remain on the islands without any hope of U.S. assistance in the event of a Communist attack. Eisenhower remained staunchly opposed, however, to getting tough with Chiang in such a manner. In fact, the president’s firmest instructions to Radford and Robertson indicated that “under no circumstances should there be allowed to develop an atmosphere which

¹²⁴ Memorandum by the Director of the Policy Planning Staff, November 26, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):950-951.

¹²⁵ Extract from the Diary of James C. Hagerty, November 29, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):956-957. Although Eisenhower believed a blockade would lead to serious consequences, a Special National Intelligence Estimate indicated that the Chinese Communists would be unlikely, initially, to respond militarily to an offshore blockade. See Special National Intelligence Estimate, November 28, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):954.

¹²⁶ Dulles, in particular, had changed his tune significantly. Although Eisenhower initially expressed some doubts about a blockade, Dulles insisted that a blockade “could clearly be justified as a measure of self-defense, particularly after Quemoy and Matsu had been evacuated so that there could be no question but what the Chicom build-up was for an attack against Formosa.” Memorandum of Conversation between Eisenhower and Dulles, April 17, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):492. Even Phleger provided a more generous interpretation of the legality of a “maritime zone”, reportedly indicating: “there is nothing in the U.N. Charter or in international law which prevents such a zone...A blockade is permissible only in time of war, or when authorized by the United Nations and therefore the use of that term should be avoided, as the measure under discussion is defensive and not intended as an act of war.” Anderson to Radford, April 22, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):505.

could preclude further conversations and negotiations, nor should there be any appearance of trying to force the Generalissimo to adopt a course which is unacceptable to him.”¹²⁷

Eisenhower thus refused to publicly renounce any intention of defending the islands, even though he instructed Robertson to retract the administration’s secret defense commitment. Although retracting the secret defense commitment certainly increased the president’s flexibility, it did not extricate the administration from the crisis. Having refused to clarify the U.S. commitment to Quemoy and Matsu publicly, the president would have been under immense pressure to intervene if the communists had decided to attack. In such an exigency, administration officials certainly would have feared that a failure to intervene would “reflect timidity, irresolution or weakness.”¹²⁸ And hawks such as Knowland surely would have insisted that the United States “should not desert, under fire, an ally who might have had some reason to expect our assistance.”¹²⁹ Fortunately, however, the Communists chose not to attack; instead Communist Premier Zhou En-lai announced at the conference of African and Asian nations that convened in Bandung at the end of April, that China was willing to engage in direct talks with the United States to defuse the ongoing tension in the Far East. And having failed to convince Chiang to reappraise his approach to the offshore islands, the Eisenhower administration was compelled to take up the offer.

¹²⁷ Hoover to Robertson and Radford, April 22, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):502.

¹²⁸ Bowie warned of these risks in a memo to Dulles in early April. His advocacy of a clear public renunciation of any intention to defend Quemoy and Matsu evidently had hardly any influence over Dulles or Eisenhower. Bowie to Dulles, April 9, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):473-475.

¹²⁹ Bowie to Dulles, April 9, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):473-475.

Conclusion

Although Eisenhower was ultimately able to avoid war during both the Dienbienphu and first offshore islands crises, comparative analysis of the two cases lends only partial support to war-weariness theory. Americans clearly drew a number of different conclusions from the Korean War. The conflict convinced many that war was too costly an enterprise, the burden of which the nation could not afford to assume again in Indochina or the Taiwan Strait. But more virulent anti-communists concluded that irresolution only encouraged communist aggression, which disposed them to reassert the nation's determination to contain communism. And to the extent that the stalemate demonstrated the folly of engaging in peripheral wars, it convinced them that in future conflicts it would be wiser "to go to the head of the snake."¹³⁰ Those competing reactions to the Korean War consequently created a tension within American political society with which the president, caught between "the truculent and the timid, the jingoists and the pacifists," had to grapple.¹³¹ And Eisenhower was himself conflicted. Even though he doubted that the public would support another war so soon after Korea, he was mindful of his more hawkish constituents' determination not to accede to communist aggression. Domestic political considerations therefore required acting tough without getting bogged down in another Asian quagmire.

Eisenhower was able to manage that tension in part because of the strength of the United States' air and naval forces. The Korean War apparently did induce an antipathy to deploying ground troops, which pervaded American political society during the crises. Eisenhower was convinced that Korea had made the American public unwilling to support another ground war;

¹³⁰ NSC Meeting, September 12, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 14(1):617.

¹³¹ Eisenhower to Gruenther, February 1, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):190.

and even proponents of intervention in each of the crises, such as Radford and Knowland, recognized that employing ground troops was politically unthinkable. Yet the president could have deployed air and naval forces to combat communist aggression without risking the lives of America's soldiers. He ultimately decided against launching unilateral air strikes to rescue Dienbienphu, and since the Communists chose not to invade Quemoy or Matsu, he was not forced to make the difficult decision of whether to employ the Seventh Fleet to defend the islands (although he did decide against defending Ichiang). Nevertheless, the documentary record reflects that Eisenhower seriously contemplated the use of air and naval forces in both crises. Even though some officials were wary that employing those forces could lead inevitably to the introduction of ground forces, the seriousness with which the administration contemplated their use suggests that they viewed them as viable tools for limiting the costs inherent in combating communist aggression. In that respect, the Korean War exerted greatest influence over *how* the administration contemplated employing military force.

Decision-making on *whether* to intervene remained founded primarily upon the unique political and strategic circumstances of the two crises. The fact that Eisenhower adopted a much more resolute stance during the offshore islands crisis than he had during the Dienbienphu siege suggests that strategic circumstances, which varied from the first crisis to the next, influenced his decision-making more significantly than any Korea syndrome. And the foregoing analysis has highlighted clear strategic differences between the two crises. Saving Dienbienphu required intervening in an ongoing war; the mere threat of intervention could have potentially saved Formosa and the offshore islands. The French-Indochina war was perceived—by the public, legislators, and administration officials—primarily as a colonial struggle; a Chinese attack against either Formosa or the offshore islands would have been regarded as a clear-cut act of

communist aggression. There was significant skepticism that air strikes alone would significantly ameliorate the situation in Indochina; there was more optimism that air and naval forces would be sufficient for defending Formosa, if not Quemoy and Matsu. These are the considerations that really mattered—and they had little to do with Korea.

Moreover, the marginal extent to which the Korean War did influence the Eisenhower administration was not unidirectional. The lessons of Korea reinforced the administration's appreciation of the risks of intervening in Indochina—a wariness that pervaded the American political establishment even prior to the Korean War. But by engendering concern that America's communist rivals would try to exploit American war-weariness, the stalemate in Korea encouraged Eisenhower to reassert the United States' determination to resist communist aggression by adopting provocative policies that could have ignited war in the Taiwan Strait.

Chapter Three: After Vietnam

Although Eisenhower “kept America out of war” during the Dienbienphu crisis, “he kept America in Vietnam.”¹ As we all know, Eisenhower’s successors intervened ever more directly in a war that proved to be costlier, less successful, and significantly more disruptive to American civil society than the Korean War had been. Ever since the last American helicopters ignominiously lifted off from the roof of the American embassy in Saigon in May 1975, observers have perceived the ghosts of Vietnam lurking behind almost every decision regarding the use (or non-use) of American military force. According to Bob Woodward, “the Vietnam War runs through the White House and the government like a ‘bare, 10,000-volt wire.’”²

Quite logically, the Vietnam syndrome is generally believed to have been particularly potent in the years immediately following America’s extrication from the quagmire in Southeast Asia. By shattering America’s Cold War consensus in favor of containment, the Vietnam War reputedly encouraged Soviet adventurism in the third world, and prevented the Ford and Carter administrations from countering those gambits. A number of scholars have suggested that the American defeat in Vietnam engendered optimism in Moscow that the balance of forces had shifted in their favor and the third world was consequently ripe for communist expansion.³

Moreover, many have argued that a window of opportunity did exist—that the determination to

¹ Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1979), 68.

² Bob Woodward quoted in Marvin L. Kalb, *Haunting Legacy: Vietnam and the American Presidency from Ford to Obama* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 29.

³ See, for example: John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 187–196; John E. Mueller, *The Remnants of War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 77; John Mueller, “Questing for Monsters to Destroy,” in *In Uncertain Times: American Foreign Policy after the Berlin Wall and 9/11* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 128; Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition?: The Rise, Fall, and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Military Interventionism, 1973-1996* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 140, 359–360; Jonathan Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 270–71, 312–313; Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 241–242.

avoid another Vietnam prompted Congress to terminate CIA involvement in the Angolan civil war in 1975, and dissuaded the Carter administration from intervening in the conflict in the Horn of Africa in 1978.

Yet Congress did not prevent the CIA from helping the Mujahidin to combat the Soviet Union's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. Nor did a Vietnam syndrome prevent Ford and Carter from each launching military operations to rescue American hostages. In fact, many believe that Vietnam actually encouraged the Ford administration's use of military force during the *Mayaguez* incident in May 1975. This raises an important question. How could Vietnam inhibit U.S. foreign policy in some instances but encourage belligerence in others? Moreover, if a Vietnam syndrome did indeed prompt Congress to prohibit CIA involvement in Angola, why did it not preclude such activity in Afghanistan a few years later?

As I will demonstrate, the answer to that puzzle lies partially in the fact that Vietnam generated competing impulses. The quagmire taught many Americans that it was foolhardy to treat every third world conflict as merely a theater in the grand Cold War; it imbued them with greater sensitivity to the local political dynamics involved in such conflicts. Yet the perceived development of a Vietnam syndrome also engendered trepidation amongst some that the Soviet Union would seek to exploit a window of opportunity to extend Soviet influence throughout the third world. That fear encouraged the adoption of forceful policies designed to reassert U.S. resolve.

Which of those impulses predominated depended primarily upon the political and strategic circumstances involved in specific crises. Although the lessons of Vietnam did induce greater caution in dealing with regional conflicts in which few American interests were at stake, they did not prevent the adoption of forceful policies—including the use of military force—to combat

acts of international aggression that did impinge on vital U.S. interests. In such cases, the urge to reassert U.S. resolve encouraged both Ford and Carter to act tough.

The Nixon Doctrine

Nixon and Kissinger anticipated very early on that in the wake of Vietnam, the American public would be extremely reluctant to undertake new military operations in the third world. A year before he was elected to the presidency, Nixon suggested in *Foreign Affairs* that “If another friendly country should be faced with an externally supported communist insurrection—whether in Asia, or in Africa or even Latin America—there is serious question whether the American public or the American Congress would now support a unilateral American intervention, even at the request of the host government.”⁴ A few months later, Kissinger endorsed that prediction, insisting “that one of the legacies of the war in Vietnam will be a strong American reluctance to risk overseas involvements.”⁵ The men who would ultimately lead the United States into the post-Vietnam era thus entered office with their eyes wide open: they fully expected that a Vietnam syndrome of sorts would restrict the instruments at their disposal for fulfilling the United States’ global responsibilities.

What was to be done then? Their solution was remarkably similar to the approach that Nixon’s former boss had adopted following the Korean War. Like Eisenhower, Nixon concluded that the United States’ allies throughout the world would have to bear a greater burden for their own security—which would require the development of strong regional defense

⁴ Richard M. Nixon, “Asia after Viet Nam,” *Foreign Affairs* 46, no. 1 (1967): 114.

⁵ Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy: Three Essays* (New York: Norton, 1969), 97.

organizations.⁶ That policy was informally enshrined as the Nixon Doctrine in July 1969. The president vowed that although he would continue to uphold existing treaty commitments, the United States would no longer fight its allies' wars for them; Washington would restrict its role to the provision of "assistance in helping them solve their own problems." The Nixon Doctrine was surely conceived largely as a strategy for extricating the United States from the Vietnam quagmire through a process of "Vietnamization." But it was certainly not just a policy for getting out of Vietnam. It was a strategy for providing security in Asia (and beyond) once that withdrawal had been accomplished—a strategy that, by mitigating the risk of getting "dragged into conflicts such as the one...in Vietnam," would convince the American public to continue to provide leadership in world affairs.⁷

When the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam was finally completed in 1975, however, the Ford administration found itself in a tricky position. Although they recognized that Vietnam had diminished the public's willingness to serve as the world's policeman, Kissinger and Ford feared that the Soviets might try to exploit that sentiment. That concern encouraged them to somehow "convey with unmistakable clarity to potential adversaries" that Vietnam had not diminished the United States' "resolve to meet [its] commitments or to respond to challenges"—and that was by no means mere bluster.⁸

⁶ Nixon, "Asia after Viet Nam," 114–117; Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy: Three Essays*, 97.

⁷ "Informal Remarks in Guam with Newsmen. July 25, 1969," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1969* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), 544-556. On the importance, and difficulty, of convincing the American public of the necessity for the United States to continue to provide world leadership, see: Nixon and Rogers Luncheon Meeting, March 6, 1973, FRUS 1969-1976, 38(1):13-14; Sonnenfeldt and Hyland to Kissinger, April 4, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 38(1):282-287.

⁸ Kissinger to All Diplomatic Posts, May 15, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 38(1):315.

Angola

Only a few months after the United States had finally extricated itself from the quagmire in Southeast Asia, the Ford administration began providing substantial covert financial and military aid to two of three militant factions engaged in an increasingly intense internecine conflict in Angola. The three groups—the Front for the National Liberation of Angola (FNLA), the National Union for the Total Liberation of Angola (UNITA), and the leftist Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA)—had coalesced in the late-1950s and early-1960s in opposition to the Portuguese colonial government. But in 1974, once Portugal had committed to decolonization, the groups turned on each other and began jockeying for control of an independent Angola.

Although the Kennedy administration started providing nominal assistance to the FNLA in the early-1960s, the United States generally acquiesced to Portugal's campaign to suppress the three liberation movements.⁹ But in July 1975, as Angolan independence approached, the Ford administration ramped up its assistance quite dramatically.¹⁰ On July 18, Ford approved the provision of \$32 million, plus \$16 million worth of arms, to the FNLA and UNITA. By November, however, CIA coffers were dwindling. The administration therefore sent William

⁹ In January 1970, Nixon approved a National Security Study Memorandum, NSSM-39, which basically concluded that the white regimes in Southern Africa “are here to stay,” and the United States would be best served “to maintain public opposition to racial repression but relax political isolation and economic restrictions on the white states.” The Nixon administration consequently reduced its provision of aid to the FNLA and sought to avoid criticizing Portugal's colonial policies. Upon acceding to the presidency, however, Ford abandoned a number of elements of what critics had derided as a “tar baby” policy. More detail on the tar baby option can be found in: Anthony Lake, *The “Tar Baby” Option: American Policy Toward Southern Rhodesia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976); Hanes Walton Jr, Robert Louis Stevenson, and James Bernard Rosser Sr, *The African Foreign Policy of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger: A Documentary Analysis* (Lexington Books, 2010); and Study in Response to NSSM-39, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:29-54.

¹⁰ In January, President Ford had authorized a covert action program to funnel \$300,000 to the FNLA for political action. At the same time, the administration decided against providing aid to UNITA. Robert Litwak contends that that decision “represented a failure of analysis” since it prompted UNITA to turn to South Africa for assistance, which in turn “legitimized large-scale Soviet/Cuban assistance to the MPLA.” Robert S. Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969-1976* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 180.

Colby, Director of the CIA, to Capitol Hill to request an additional \$28 million dollars. That request was received coolly, however, and prompted Senator Dick Clark to spearhead a campaign to cut off funding for covert action in Angola.

On December 19, in a 54-22 vote, the Senate approved an amendment to the 1976 Defense Appropriations bill sponsored by John Tunney, which prohibited the use of any FY76 funds “for any activities involving Angola other than intelligence gathering.”¹¹ In addition, the Senate subsequently approved Clark’s more restrictive amendment to the International Security Assistance and Arms Export Control Act, which stipulated: “Notwithstanding any other provision of law, no assistance of any kind may be provided for the purpose, or which would have the effect, of promoting or augmenting, directly or indirectly, the capacity of any nation, group, organization, movement, or individual to conduct military or paramilitary operations in Angola unless and until the Congress expressly authorizes such assistance by law enacted after the date of enactment of this section.”¹²

Analysts often cite the passage of the Tunney and Clark amendments as evidence of the Vietnam syndrome at work. Yet it is important to recognize that the apparent development of such a syndrome actually contributed quite significantly to the administration’s decision to back the FNLA and UNITA.¹³ High-level officials in Washington remained relatively uninterested in the Angolan conflict until the late spring of 1975, when intelligence reports began indicating that a surge in Soviet military assistance was shifting the tide of the conflict in favor of the MPLA. Kissinger interpreted that as troubling confirmation of his fear that Moscow might try to exploit

¹¹ The House of Representatives approved the amendment a few weeks later by a 323-99 margin. President Ford grudgingly signed the bill into law on February 9, 1976.

¹² Pub. L. 94-329, sec. 404. Became law on June 30, 1976.

¹³ This point accords with: Thomas J. Noer, “International Credibility and Political Survival: The Ford Administration’s Intervention in Angola,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 23:4 (Fall 1993): 773, 775, 778, 783.

America's Vietnam-induced malaise by actively promoting the spread of communism throughout the third world. The secretary was never all that concerned about Angola itself; his primary concern was that "If all the surrounding countries see Angola go Communist, they will assume that the U.S. has no will. Coming on top of Vietnam and Indochina their perception of what the U.S. can and will do will be negative." The crucial question then was, "If the USSR can do something in a place so far away, what is the U.S. going to do?"¹⁴ For Kissinger and Ford the answer was to increase, quite dramatically, the covert provision of American aid—including weapons—to the two factions fighting the MPLA.

That was by no means a popular decision. The State Department's Bureau of African Affairs, under the leadership of Nat Davis, vehemently opposed taking sides in the conflict.¹⁵ Davis and Colby both warned that the inevitable disclosure of the operation was bound to engender a public backlash.¹⁶ Kissinger was unmoved, however. He and Ford fully expected news of the operation to leak, but were convinced they could defend their decision to the public.¹⁷ Kissinger, in particular, was determined not to let "Nat Davis' heroes" or "that g.d. CIA" deter him from countering the communist intervention in Angola.¹⁸ What's more, the

¹⁴ 40 Committee Meeting, July 14, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:280.

¹⁵ Ironically, Kissinger had fired Davis' predecessor, Donald Easum, for being too supportive of black Africa. Since Davis had been the United States' Ambassador to Chile at the time of the coup that toppled Salvador Allende, Kissinger evidently believed he would be willing to support a more Realist approach to Africa. See: Raymond L. Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, Revised Edition (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1994), 564, n.26; and Nathaniel Davis, "The Angola Decision of 1975: A Personal Memoir," *Foreign Affairs* 57, no. 1 (1978): 109–110. For a detailed expose by the former head of the CIA's Angola task force, see John Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies: A CIA Story* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).

¹⁶ NSC Meeting, June 27, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:269. 40 Committee Meeting, July 14, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:279-280. 40 Committee Meeting, September 13, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:306. 40 Committee Meeting, December 11, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:376.

¹⁷ Ford/Kissinger/Scowcroft Meeting, July 17, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:284-285. Ford/Kissinger/Scowcroft Meeting, July 18, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:286.

¹⁸ Memorandum of Conversation, December 18, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:394.

events that followed the infusion of American aid reinforced his conviction that such assistance was imperative.

The conflict escalated quite significantly during the latter half of the year. In August, Zaire and South Africa deployed small numbers of troops into northern and southern Angola, respectively. A few weeks later, Cuba ferried nearly 500 military advisors and technicians into Angola to shore up the MPLA. Then, on October 23, a few thousand South African troops joined forces with the FNLA and UNITA in launching a major offensive against Luanda. Cuba responded by deploying a 650-man special forces battalion to assist the MPLA in defending Luanda. That deployment marked the beginning of a sustained airlift, which, by the end of January, endowed the MPLA with the backing of nearly 12,000 Cuban troops.¹⁹

Since Kissinger viewed the Cubans as little more than Soviet proxies, he interpreted their intervention as further evidence that Moscow was determined “to take advantage of [America’s] continuing domestic division and self torment.”²⁰ By the fall of 1975, he was more convinced than ever that permitting a communist takeover in Angola would merely whet Moscow’s appetite since it would “prove that the collapse in Vietnam was not an aberration.”²¹ Even more worryingly, it would undermine other nations’ confidence in the American security umbrella.²² Kissinger therefore feared that the United States risked turning the world over to the Soviets by

Ford/Kissinger/Scowcroft Meeting, July 18, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:286. Memorandum of Conversation, November 19, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:343.

¹⁹ A more detailed, but relatively concise, account of the escalation of the conflict can be found in Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*, 556–570. The extent to which U.S. involvement contributed to this escalation is not entirely clear--particularly the extent to which the Soviets and Cubans were reacting to American actions. For discussion of this issue, see: Davis, “The Angola Decision of 1975,” 120–124.

²⁰ Kissinger statement before the Subcommittee on African Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, January 29, 1976, FRUS 1973-1976, 38(1):362.

²¹ Memcon, December 18, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:389-390.

²² Memcon, June 20, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:258-259. 40 Committee Meeting, July 14, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:277-280. Ford/Kissinger/Scowcroft Meeting, December 18, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:396.

default. For if the free nations around the globe could no longer depend on the United States, they would be liable to seek some sort of accommodation with Moscow on their own terms—before being forced to capitulate under duress. In essence, by not acting in Angola, the United States risked pushing more friendly nations into a Russian bear hug.²³

Kissinger was not oblivious to the so-called Vietnam syndrome, however. He sensed that most Americans would recoil against the introduction of U.S. personnel into another third world conflict. Even though the American-sponsored FNLA and UNITA forces were in desperate need of military training, deploying American trainers was out of the question. For such a step would conjure up “the specter of Vietnam.”²⁴ Once news of the operation leaked, administration officials therefore responded by leaking their own assurances that “President Ford [had] ruled out any form of combat intervention in Angola, including the sending of advisers.”²⁵

For a time, it appeared as though legislators were willing to accept the administration’s application of the Nixon doctrine in Angola. Colby met relatively benign questioning in his briefings to the appropriate congressional committees following Ford’s approval of the covert action at the end of July.²⁶ Moreover, contrary to the predictions that inevitable leaks would unleash a public backlash, the first published exposé, which appeared in the *New York Times* on

²³ Kissinger statement before the Subcommittee on African Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, January 29, 1976, FRUS 1973-1976, 38(1):367. Ford/Kissinger/Scowcroft Meeting, July 17, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:284-285. 40 Committee Meeting, September 13, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:307. Kissinger/Journiac Meeting, January 24, 1976, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:427-428.

²⁴ In early August, Kissinger did ask Colby whether the administration should “send in some advisors.” He did not specify that those advisors would be Americans, however. And by the next month he had clearly concluded that sending in Americans would be political dynamite. See: 40 Committee Meeting, August 8, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:294; 40 Committee Meeting, September 13, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:307, 309. During a November 14th meeting, Lt. General H.M. Fish, the Deputy Secretary of Defense for Security Assistance, queried: “Are we willing to put in 50 CIA officers for leadership?” General George Brown, JCS Chairman, replied: “General, did you ever hear of Laos?” 40 Committee Meeting, November 14, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:341.

²⁵ Leslie H. Gelb, “Ford Said to Bar a Combat Role in Angolan War,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1975.

²⁶ 40 Committee meeting, August 8, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:296. 40 Committee meeting, August 20, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:303. 40 Committee meeting, September 13, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:306, 308.

September 25, created barely a flutter.²⁷ When Colby returned to Capitol Hill in November, however, the administration encountered much stiffer opposition: the administration's request immediately leaked to the press, and Senator Clark spearheaded the campaign that ultimately terminated U.S. involvement in Angola. As Leslie Gelb pointed out at the time, "Congress did not object to [the Nixon Doctrine] in the abstract, but Congressional views of the American interest in helping particular countries differed markedly from the Administration's."²⁸

The crucial question is: to what extent was congressional and public opposition to the administration's involvement in Angola due to the lessons of Vietnam? There were certainly strong strategic arguments against getting involved in Angola. Most fundamental was the fact that the United States did not have any vital material interests at stake.²⁹ There was some speculation that a communist victory in Angola would deprive American forces of basing and overflight rights—or in the worst case, enable the Soviets to cut off American access to Africa's mineral resources or establish a submarine base from which they could disrupt passage through the sea lanes of the South Atlantic.³⁰ Yet few officials were seriously troubled by those scenarios.³¹ For some, it was the lack of any vital strategic interests which counseled against intervention. In July, Kissinger's principal deputy, Joseph Sisco, indicated: "I do not think that our interests in Angola are significant enough to warrant covert action. It is simply not important

²⁷ Davis has suggested that the article may have failed to arouse public concern because it focused primarily on covert support for anti-communists in Portugal, which enjoyed considerable public support in the United States. Davis, "The Angola Decision of 1975," 118.

²⁸ Leslie H. Gelb, "Ford Must Find a New Way to 'Resist' the Russians," *New York Times*, February 1, 1976.

²⁹ *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975, 121(31):40465, 40534, 41976, 41985, 42210, 42371. 40534. *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1976, 122(1):640, 1036, 1041-45, 1054, 1431.

³⁰ Task Force Report, 63-65.

³¹ The interagency task force predicted: "There is no reason to suppose that a socialist Angola will refuse to sell us its oil or other mineral production, since the United States will probably be more important to Angola as a customer than Angola will be to us as a source of supply." Task Force Report, 69.

enough.”³² Once Congress got into the act, Representative Ed Koch, who voted in favor of the Clark amendment, echoed that sentiment, explaining that he would have been “willing to support operations to resist Soviet efforts...*if* the United States had a vital strategic national interest in Angola.”³³

Kissinger’s bureaucratic opponents also doubted that covert action would do much to preserve the limited U.S. interests that were at stake in Angola. They anticipated early on that funneling arms to the FNLA and UNITA would merely induce the Soviets to ramp up their assistance to the MPLA. As Colby argued: “While it would be useful to give assistance, it would be matched by the Soviets and there could be increased fighting and there would be no happy ending.”³⁴ The prospect of such escalation did not trouble Kissinger much. Although he initially believed it was essential to “win” in Angola, he had no trouble accommodating himself to the more modest goal of denying a Soviet victory.³⁵

Kissinger’s colleagues, however, feared that the administration’s contribution to such escalation would prove counterproductive to the very goals Kissinger sought to achieve. They disagreed with the secretary’s fundamental premise that a failure to counter Soviet involvement in Angola would undermine other nations’ confidence in the United States. Prior to Ford’s decision to ramp up the covert action program in July, William Hyland, director of the State

³² 40 Committee Meeting, July 14, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:278.

³³ *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1976, 122(1):1045. Italics added.

³⁴ NSC Meeting, June 27, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:269. Also see: Task Force Report, 73, 83-4.

³⁵ As Garthoff explains, “Although later administration statements imply that the American objective throughout had merely been to assure shared participation by all contending Angolan groups, that position really was a fallback that arose only after the MPLA forged ahead in the summer of 1975.” He notes that only in October and November, once the MPLA had gotten the upper hand over the FNLA and UNITA, did the administration reach out to the Soviets to broach the subject of outside powers disengaging from the conflict. See: Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation* Meeting in Kissinger’s office, June 27, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:262. 40 Committee Meeting, July 14, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:278-9. 40 Committee Meeting, August 8, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:297. 40 Committee Meeting, August 20, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:304. Memorandum of Conversation, December 18, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:391.

Department's bureau of intelligence and research, insisted: "our biggest *asset* is that we are not involved militarily."³⁶ For the United States could build more confidence amongst other African states by trying to broker an African solution to an African problem—an approach that would highlight the malign nature of Soviet intervention on the continent. There was broad concern that intervention would do more to alienate the nations of Africa than would non-intervention. South Africa's increasing intervention solidified that conviction—particularly amongst legislators. For in supporting the FNLA and UNITA, the United States aligned itself with the apartheid regime in South Africa—reviled throughout black Africa. As Senator Bayh warned, "It would be a pyrrhic victory, indeed, if the United States were to successfully back a pro-American regime, and at the same time gain the enmity of a major portion of black Africa."³⁷

Of course, it is questionable whether Americans would have been so attuned to such risks without the benefit of the lessons of Vietnam. The documentary record demonstrates quite clearly that U.S. involvement in the Angolan conflict evoked analogical comparisons to the recent quagmire in Southeast Asia. Many legislators expressed misgivings that the United States was sinking into another Vietnam.³⁸ Senator Tunney warned rather grandiloquently that "once again, the phoenix of military adventurism in the guise of making the world safe for democracy has arisen from the ashes of Southeast Asia"—and he was no lonely Cassandra.³⁹ His colleagues

³⁶ 40 Committee Meeting, July 14, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 28:278. Italics added.

³⁷ *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975, 121(31):40465. Similar arguments are documented in: *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975, 121(31):40532, 41082; ; *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975, 121(32):41201, 41209, 41627-8, 42218, 42372; *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1976, 122(1):367, 1046, 1048, 1056, 1431.

³⁸ *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975, 121(31):40856, 40872, 41071, 41082, 41204, 41953, 41976, 41985, 42210, 42217-42219, 42225, 42372. *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1976, 122(1):301, 367, 1020, 1042-1046, 1048-1049, 1053, 1055-1056.

³⁹ *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975, 121(31):40532.

cited a catalogue of lessons from Vietnam, which counseled against U.S. involvement in the Angolan conflict.

For many, Vietnam had demonstrated the folly of viewing third world conflicts through a Cold War lens. They therefore repudiated what they perceived as the administration's conception of the Angolan conflict as the "opening gambit in some colossal scheme of Soviet hegemony."⁴⁰ They insisted that the Angolan conflict was a civil war based on tribal rivalries—not ideology—in which the rival factions were merely exploiting their great power patrons to serve their own purposes.⁴¹ That being the case, they concluded that countering Soviet intervention in Angola was entirely unnecessary. Insofar as Vietnam highlighted the futility of trying to bend nationalistic forces to a superpower's cold war agenda, the United States would be best served to permit the Soviets to slog into their own "morass in Angola, a morass from which they would find it difficult to extricate themselves with any great gain."⁴² For just as the United States failed to achieve its objectives in Vietnam, so too would Soviet ambitions founder on the shoals of African nationalism.⁴³

Of course, the United States' failure in Vietnam was due, in part, to the massive amount of military assistance that the Soviet Union provided to the North Vietnamese. So to the extent that legislators anticipated that the Angola conflict could become a Soviet quagmire, the American covert action program was not entirely incompatible with the lessons of Vietnam. Yet many expressed misgivings that funneling aid to the FNLA and UNITA could be the first step down a

⁴⁰ *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975, 121(31):41208.

⁴¹ *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975, 121(31):40532, 40534. *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1976, 122(1):640, 1044, 1045.

⁴² *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975, 121(31):41647. Also see: *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975, 121(31):42218.

⁴³ *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975, 121(31):41201-3. *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1976, 122(1):640-641, 1041, 1053, 1056.

slippery slope toward full-scale military intervention. For the provision of such aid would engage the United States' reputation. In the face of a possible defeat, the administration would therefore be tempted to gradually escalate its involvement in order to prove American resolve—first by introducing advisors, which “might ultimately lead to the introduction of military forces.”⁴⁴

Despite such statements, there is good reason to doubt that slippery slope concerns were truly decisive. On December 18, the day before approving the Tunney Amendment, the Senate rejected a substitute amendment that sought to allay concerns that covert action could gradually lead to American military intervention in Angola. The amendment, introduced by Senator Robert Griffin, would have permitted further covert action but prohibited the administration from using FY76 defense funds “to finance the involvement of United States military or civilian forces in hostilities in or over from off the shores of Angola.”⁴⁵ The rejection of the Griffin amendment seems to suggest that legislators were not simply interested in preventing another quagmire, but in putting the president in his place. The Tunney and Clark amendments were unequivocal assertions of greater congressional influence in foreign policy-making. Senator Tunney acknowledged that he was “disturbed” that the American aid to Angolan factions was “shrouded in a cloak of secrecy,” and Clark stated even more directly that he sought “to transfer decisionmaking about Angola from a small secret executive branch committee to a forum where the public can participate.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975, 121(31):41196, 41985, 42215. Along similar lines, Davis argued in a July 12th memo to Sisco that it was imperative “to avoid the tempting, gradual, mutual escalation that characterized Vietnam during the 1965-67 period.” See Davis, “The Angola Decision of 1975,” 114.

⁴⁵ *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975, 121(32):41142.

⁴⁶ *Cong. Rec.*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975, 121(31):38548-49, 40534.

Yet there is good reason to doubt whether even Tunney really believed there was much risk that Angola could become another Vietnam. Since the senator was gearing up for a tough reelection battle, imposing a defeat on the president was politically expedient. Posturing as the guardian against another Vietnam would significantly raise his profile for a general election, and help him fend off primary challengers by appealing to his more liberal constituents. In fact, Tunney's democratic colleagues permitted him to lead the charge against the CIA's Angola operation precisely in order to boost his chances of reelection.⁴⁷

To some extent, the administration played into Tunney's hands. Edward Mulcahy, the man who replaced Nat Davis at the helm of the AF bureau, unwittingly galvanized congressional backing for the Clark amendment. In testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on November 6, Mulcahy claimed that the level of U.S. involvement in Angola had not changed from 1974—unaware that a few minutes earlier William Nelson, the Deputy Director of the CIA, had disclosed that the administration had, in fact, allocated \$32 million to the covert action. Mulcahy's prevarication undermined the administration's credibility on the issue to such an extent that the committee unanimously approved the Clark amendment for the consideration of the full senate. As Robert David Johnson has argued, "Most members...acted less from sympathy with Clark's beliefs—which, as one staffer noted, continued to be viewed as 'rather radical'—than from their disgust with Mulcahy's duplicity."⁴⁸ If not for Mulcahy's gaffe, it is doubtful whether the momentum that led to the passage of the Clark and Tunney amendments would have materialized.

⁴⁷ Robert David Johnson, "The Unintended Consequences of Congressional Reform: The Clark and Tunney Amendments and U.S. Policy toward Angola," *Diplomatic History* 27, no. 2 (2003): 228.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 227.

The Ogaden Conflict

The trauma of the Vietnam War (as well as the Watergate scandal) apparently exerted much greater influence on Jimmy Carter than it had on either Ford or Kissinger. The new president entered the White House determined to redefine U.S. foreign policy. He was convinced that “The Vietnamese war produced a profound moral crisis,” and that the conflict demonstrated the folly of adopting “the flawed and erroneous principles and tactics of our adversaries.”⁴⁹ Carter therefore promulgated his determination to instill a new moralism into US foreign policy; to resist focusing on international challenges through the restrictive lens of the East-West conflict; and to reintroduce a transparency in the conduct of foreign policy, which he believed was sorely lacking during Kissinger’s tenure.

Nevertheless, as under Ford, Soviet activism in the third world engendered competing impulses within the Carter administration. That tension first resurfaced during the Ogaden crisis. In February 1977, shortly after Carter’s inauguration, Somalia deployed military forces to the Ogaden desert, a region in southern Ethiopia inhabited largely by ethnic Somalis. The Soviets, who had been supplying Somalia with arms, unsuccessfully attempted to persuade their beneficiaries to desist. In May, having failed to broker a Somali withdrawal, the Soviets began shipping arms and Cuba deployed military advisers to Ethiopia. Somalia responded by intensifying their efforts to secure the Ogaden, eventually committing nearly 50,000 troops. The Soviets gradually increased their military assistance to Ethiopia and in August terminated all military assistance to Somalia. Nevertheless, by the end of September, Ethiopian forces were facing defeat, having ceded 90 percent of the Ogaden to Somalia. To forestall an outright Somali victory, the Soviets initiated a massive airlift at the end of November, which supplied Ethiopia

⁴⁹ Notre Dame Commencement Address, May 22, 1977. In *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1977* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1977), 954.

with nearly \$1 billion in Soviet arms and 15,000 Cuban troops. By March 1978, that assistance enabled Ethiopia to expel Somali forces from the Ogaden.⁵⁰

Somalia began lobbying the White House for aid shortly after the commencement of Soviet assistance to Ethiopia. The Somalis shrewdly attempted to manipulate the United States' Cold War sensitivities to their own advantage. In June, the Somali Ambassador to the United States warned Carter that "The USSR [was] putting enormous pressure on the Somali government to accept its idea of Soviet hegemony in the area," and that Somalia hoped "to be able to count on the U.S. for [its] defense."⁵¹ The previous month, he had similarly assured Mondale that Somalia was prepared to terminate its military arrangements with the Soviet Union in exchange for U.S. assistance.⁵² But the administration resisted the temptation to replace the Soviets as Somalia's great power benefactor. Carter and Mondale initially encouraged the Somalis to buy military equipment from the United States' regional allies.⁵³ When the Somalis issued a specific request for arms on July 9, the administration indicated that the United States would, "in principle," help other countries supply arms necessary for Somalia's defense. After Somalia intensified its military campaign in the Ogaden, however, the administration backtracked. On August 4, Richard Moose informed the Somali ambassador that the United States would not provide any arms as long as Somali forces remained in the Ogaden; soon thereafter, the

⁵⁰ A brief narrative history of the crisis is provided in: Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*, 695–719. For a thorough analysis of Soviet-American competition in the Horn of Africa in the late-1970s, see Louise P. Woodroffe, *Buried in the Sands of the Ogaden: The United States, the Horn of Africa, and the Demise of Detente* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ., 2013).

⁵¹ Carter meeting with Addou, June 16, 1977, catalogued as Record CK3100143623 in the Digital Document Reference System (DDRS) (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale, 2014). Somewhat shamelessly, Addou also attempted to appeal to Carter's interest in human rights, characterizing the Ogaden conflict as "a 'problem of human rights' with Ethiopia."

⁵² Mondale to Carter, May 12, 1977, DDRS Record CK3100477427.

⁵³ Mondale to Carter, May 12, 1977, DDRS Record CK3100477427. Meeting of Carter and Addou, June 16, 1977, DDRS Record CK3100143623.

administration also conveyed that Carter would not approve the transfer of U.S. arms from third countries.⁵⁴

The crucial point is that the administration's decision not to aid Somalia was not due to some fear that the provision of U.S. aid could mark the beginning of a slippery slope to direct military intervention. There were sound strategic and political justifications not to assist Somalia. The greatest obstacle to the provision of military aid was the simple fact that Somalia was the perceived aggressor in the conflict. However distasteful to the United States, the Soviet/Cuban support to Ethiopia did not constitute a breach of international law; the communist nations were perfectly within their rights in assisting a victim of international aggression. Vance therefore warned that supporting Somalia, as long as its forces remained in the Ogaden, would put the United States "inadvertently on the wrong side of one of Africa's most cherished principles—the territorial integrity of post-colonial states."⁵⁵ Administration officials were extremely wary that supporting Somalia's invasion might ultimately cost the United States the goodwill and support of other African nations, potentially rendering them more susceptible to communist subversion. They understood that the political consequences of intervening in the Ogaden conflict could very well outweigh any strategic advantages. As long as Somali forces remained in the Ogaden, the administration therefore remained wary of providing any aid to Mogadishu.

The stigma of Somali aggression was certainly not the only factor that prevented the United States from assisting Somalia, however. The administration was also reluctant to write off

⁵⁴ Cyrus R. Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 73–74.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

Ethiopia as irretrievably lost to the communist camp.⁵⁶ Brzezinski believed that the United States was “far from finished in Ethiopia” since “the whole Ethiopian elite remain[ed] American oriented and dread[ed] total absorption into the Soviet sphere.”⁵⁷ After all, the Ethiopians had only turned to the Soviets after Carter had decided to restrict U.S. military assistance on human rights grounds. U.S. officials were quite eager to renew the U.S. partnership in the event that “a more humane government” replaced Ethiopia’s repressive military junta.⁵⁸ The administration’s ultimate objective in the Horn was therefore not ensuring a Somali victory but “increasing [U.S.] influence in both Ethiopia and Somalia while doing what [they could] to ensure that the Soviets gain[ed] as little as possible.”⁵⁹ Tilting too strongly in favor of Somalia was undesirable in that it risked pushing Ethiopia into a tighter alliance with the Soviet Union. Little would be gained if the two superpowers simply swapped roles as respective benefactors to Ethiopia and Somalia.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ I disagree here with Garthoff’s contention that “the United States in effect wrote off Ethiopia.” Documents that have been declassified since Garthoff’s time of writing demonstrate quite the contrary. Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*, 705.

⁵⁷ Brzezinski to Carter, September 23, 1977, DDRS Record CK3100573364.

⁵⁸ Henze to Brzezinski, August 17, 1977, DDRS Record CK3100151477.

⁵⁹ Summary of Conclusions, PRC Meeting, August 25, 1977, DDRS Record CK3100483339. Henze to Brzezinski, January 24, 1978, CK3100116805. After visiting the Horn in September, an official whose name remains classified offered qualified hope on this score, arguing: “The Soviets could end up increasing their influence in the area, but they are winning neither love nor respect. Their aims are seen everywhere as self-serving and narrowly materialistic and contrasted unfavorably with our own approach. The large African diplomatic/UN community in Ethiopia, almost to a man, sees the Soviets as crass and opportunistic. Thus, in the longer run, their adventures in the Horn are not likely to increase their prestige or attractiveness elsewhere in Africa.” Classified official to Brzezinski, September 19, 1977, DDRS Record CK3100162251.

⁶⁰ In fact, Henze suggested to Brzezinski that Moscow’s displacing the United States in Ethiopia was Moscow’s primary objective: “the major attraction was to replace us in a key area at a time when, in the wake of Watergate and Angola, they estimate that we lack the will and the capacity to counteract what they are doing.” Henze to Brzezinski, January 12, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100143369.

By February 1978, however, the administration had grown more pessimistic about the short-term prospects of displacing Soviet influence in Ethiopia.⁶¹ As Ethiopia gradually recaptured the Ogaden, U.S. officials grew more fearful that Ethiopian and Cuban forces would extend the war into Somalia—either by invading with ground troops or launching air raids.⁶² The administration consequently faced a dilemma: how to get Somali forces out of the Ogaden and keep Ethiopian and Cuban forces out of Somalia.

Brzezinski's preferred solution was to practice some good ol' fashioned gunboat diplomacy. On December 15, shortly after the beginning of the Soviet airlift, Brzezinski warned Dobrynin that if the Soviets did not halt the flow of Cuban and Soviet troops and material to Ethiopia, the United States would undertake more active involvement in the conflict and no longer restrain Ethiopia's neighbors from intervening.⁶³ Having threatened the Soviets with words, the national security advisor then endeavored to build support within the administration for demonstrating U.S. determination with deeds. In a series of meetings of the NSC's Special Coordinating Committee (SCC) in February and March of 1978, Brzezinski advocated deploying a carrier task force to the Horn of Africa, which he envisioned would deter the Ethiopian and Cuban forces from counterattacking across Somalia's border once the Somalis had withdrawn from the Ogaden.⁶⁴

⁶¹ After traveling to Ethiopia and meeting with Mengistu, David Aaron reported to the SCC "that the Soviets are in Ethiopia deeply and pervasively and that we face a long term problem. If we can help settle the Ogaden problem and dampen the Eritrean insurgency, we will help create conditions for diminution of the Soviet role. But we should be aware that the Soviets will be there as long as it takes the Ethiopians to learn how to use modern military equipment." SCC meeting, February 22, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100111020.

⁶² Those fears are documented in: NSC meeting, February 23, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100129506.

⁶³ Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 179–180.

⁶⁴ Brzezinski to Carter, March 3, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100114864.

A number of factors pushed Brzezinski toward such a course. Although the State Department continued to stress the importance of dealing with the conflict as a local issue, Brzezinski was unable to resist interpreting the conflict as a new theater in an ongoing East-West struggle. He was convinced that Soviet involvement in the Horn was merely the latest manifestation of a grand design to extend communist influence throughout the third world, and that “In promoting that influence the Soviets [were] becoming bolder.”⁶⁵ He therefore believed that U.S. credibility was at stake in Somalia; if the United States failed to signal its determination to resist Soviet expansion, America’s allies in the region would increasingly doubt whether they could rely upon the United States as the ultimate guarantor of their own security.⁶⁶

In addition to those international consequences, however, Brzezinski was also concerned about the domestic consequences of another Soviet victory. Most Americans supported the administration’s policy of non-involvement in the Ogaden conflict. Political pundits generally recognized the political considerations that militated against U.S. intervention.⁶⁷ Yet there was also a hawkish minority, which was convinced that, in the wake of Vietnam, it was imperative to reassert the United States’ determination to combat Soviet expansionism. Pat Buchanan, who had served as a special assistant to Nixon and Ford during the Vietnam War, insisted: “Correctly, the Soviet Union and Castro believe that, post-Viet Nam, American threats may be safely ignored.” Convinced that “The domino theory [was] now at work—in Africa,” he concluded

⁶⁵ Brzezinski to Carter, March 3, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100114864. Brzezinski perceived “a striking contrast between the Angolan operation—conducted entirely through proxies—and the Ethiopian affair—in which the proxies still carry the major burden but the Soviet presence is more self-evident.”

⁶⁶ SCC Meeting, February 22, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100111020. Brzezinski to Carter, March 3, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100114864.

⁶⁷ See, for example: David B. Ottaway, “U.S. Wary of Somali-Ethiopian War,” *Washington Post*, November 18, 1977; Joseph Kraft, “The Challenge in Africa’s Horn,” *Washington Post*, February 2, 1978; “A Good War to Avoid,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 1978; “The Dilemma of the Horn,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 23, 1978; “The Horn: Four Questions,” *Washington Post*, February 28, 1978; “Still a Quandary in the Horn,” *Washington Post*, March 11, 1978; David Lamb, “Should the United States Have Come to Somalia’s Aid,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 1978.

“that U.S. credibility [could] not be restored short of American-supported military action.”⁶⁸ For such hawks, permitting the Soviets to determine the outcome of the conflict in the Horn, as they had allegedly determined the outcome in Angola, would encourage further Soviet interventionism throughout the third world by signaling that the Vietnam syndrome had rendered the United States helpless to resist.⁶⁹

Brzezinski was generally sensitive to those arguments. He was concerned that Republicans would increasingly attack the administration for being “soft.”⁷⁰ As early as November he had recommended that Carter “ought to take, before too long, a decision of some sort either on security or foreign policy matters that has a distinctively ‘tough’ quality to it.”⁷¹ Deploying a carrier task force to the Gulf of Aden fit the bill.

Although the NSC staff backed Brzezinski, he was unable to garner any enthusiasm from Vance or Brown. Neither department chief was willing to employ U.S. military force to combat an invasion of Somalia. During a critical debate of the issue on February 22, Brzezinski put Vance on the spot, asking “if he meant that the U.S. should do nothing in the event Ethiopia crossed the frontier?” The secretary didn’t hesitate: “yes.”⁷² Because they were ultimately

⁶⁸ Patrick J. Buchanan, “The Domino Theory at Work,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 22, 1978.

⁶⁹ See: Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “A Warning on Ethiopia,” *Washington Post*, January 12, 1978; “A Wild Gamble for the Horn,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 9, 1978; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “Africa: Will Carter Move Too Late?,” March 2, 1978; Robert Shogan, “Reagan Warns of Soviet Domination in Africa,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1978.

⁷⁰ It is important to note that there was probably a positive feedback loop connecting Brzezinski and the media; he was stoking much of the pressure for a harder line. For he acknowledges in his memoirs that toward the end of 1977 he began briefing the press on the growing Soviet-Cuban military activity in the Horn. Vance regarded such behavior as counterproductive. When Carter and Brzezinski started talking about linkage, he warned “we are stirring it up ourselves.” Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 180. SCC Meeting, March 2, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100111973.

⁷¹ Quoted from Brzezinski, NSC Weekly Report #37, November 18, 1977. Also see Brzezinski to Carter, March 3, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100114864.

⁷² SCC Meeting, February 22, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100111020. Brown expressed more qualified reluctance, acknowledging that if Ethiopian or Cuban forces crossed the Somali frontier, “the task force could attack them but

unwilling to employ military force, Vance and Brown were extremely wary of being caught in a bluff.⁷³ Brown, in particular, was concerned that if the United States deployed a carrier task force but then failed to combat an attack against Somalia, the administration would be unable to credibly threaten to use military force in a subsequent crisis.⁷⁴ Whereas Brzezinski believed that flexing America's muscles was necessary to bolster the nation's credibility, his colleagues feared that such behavior was more likely to undermine it.

Neither Vance nor Brown was opposed to providing military aid to repulse an invasion of Somalia, however. In fact, the defense secretary believed that the administration could not "let the Soviets fish in troubled waters."⁷⁵ The administration therefore contemplated getting the Egyptians, Saudis, and Iranians to deploy proxy forces.⁷⁶ Brown even suggested that if the Iranians or Saudis sent troops to Somalia, he would be willing to deploy the carrier task force to protect them from the Soviets.⁷⁷ The only problem with this approach, which the administration anticipated, was that their regional allies were unwilling to play the role that Washington had cast for them.⁷⁸ The administration therefore decided that the best option was to assure Siad that the administration would be prepared to consult with Congress on the provision of military aid *if*

that he did not favor attacking forces crossing the border with the U.S. task force. He suggested that one alternative would be to go to Iran, Saudi Arabia and Egypt and suggest that they put a force into Somalia to deter Ethiopia from crossing the border and to support Siad-Barre politically."

⁷³ SCC Meeting, February 22, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100111020. In his memoirs, Vance indicated: "I was convinced it was wrong to threaten or bluff in a case where military involvement was not justified, or where Congress and the American people would not support it. It made no sense to bluff when we were not prepared to carry out the threat. In my judgment, the Horn of Africa was precisely such a case." Vance, *Hard Choices*, 85.

⁷⁴ SCC Meeting, February 22, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100111020. SCC Meeting, March 2, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100111973.

⁷⁵ SCC Meeting, February 22, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100111020.

⁷⁶ SCC Meeting, February 22, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100111020.

⁷⁷ SCC Meeting, February 22, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100111020.

⁷⁸ SCC Meeting, March 2, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100111973.

Somali forces withdrew from the Ogaden.⁷⁹ On March 16, the SCC agreed to inform Siad that the United States was “prepared to help meet his legitimate defense needs;” the administration was willing to provide defensive equipment such as anti-tank weapons and ground surveillance radar, but not tanks or aircraft.⁸⁰

Brzezinski was not at all happy with the policy, and he attributed his colleagues’ refusal to threaten military intervention to the insidious Vietnam syndrome. He lamented that they were “badly bitten by the Vietnam bug and as a consequence [were] fearful of taking the kind of action which [was] necessary to convey [U.S.] determination and to reassure the concerned countries in the region.”⁸¹ Although the anti-interventionists within the administration rarely invoked the Vietnam analogy, the recent quagmire could certainly have diminished their inclination to intervene by attuning them to the political and strategic risk of such action. Yet even if Vietnam had decreased their willingness to dispatch U.S. forces to third world conflicts, most administration officials were perfectly willing to support proxy forces to combat Soviet-sponsored aggression—as the administration’s response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan subsequently demonstrated.⁸²

Afghanistan

Although U.S.-Soviet antagonism had mounted in fits and starts throughout the late-1970s, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan clearly signaled the end of a decade of détente. The intervention began in earnest on December 25, 1979, when Moscow began airlifting troops into

⁷⁹ SCC Meeting, March 2, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100111973.

⁸⁰ Summary of Conclusions, SCC meeting, March 16, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100591127.

⁸¹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 183–184.

⁸² SCC Meeting, February 22, 1978, DDRS Record CK3100111020.

Kabul. Over the next few days, Soviet commandos assassinated Hafizullah Amin, the leader of the ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), and installed Babrak Karmal in his place. To underwrite the security of Karmal's new regime, Soviet troops continued to pour into Afghanistan—nearly 100,000 by the end of January. That presence did not pacify the insurgents, however, but elicited a backlash against both the Soviet presence and the new regime—a backlash that gradually drew Soviet forces into a sustained counter-insurgency campaign that lasted until 1989.⁸³

The Soviet invasion certainly did not come as a total surprise to the Carter administration. Following the ascension to power of the PDPA in 1978, U.S. intelligence services kept close watch over the USSR's increasing involvement in Afghanistan.⁸⁴ By the spring of 1979, the administration viewed direct Soviet intervention as a distinct possibility. In March, Brzezinski reported to the president that “according to the NSC staff, recent developments in Soviet policy and propaganda demonstrate that Moscow...is now actively preparing for the contingency of sending Soviet Central Asian troops to Afghanistan if nothing less will save the Khalq regime in Kabul.”⁸⁵ Two months later, William Odom reported to Brzezinski that the U.S. embassy in Kabul “judges the possibility of intervention with Soviet troops quite real but believes the Soviets will try to avoid because it could become a ‘Vietnam-type trap.’”⁸⁶ That judgment

⁸³ For detailed analysis of the political background and considerations that prompted Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, see: Odd Arne Westad, “The Road to Kabul: Soviet Policy on Afghanistan, 1978-79,” in *The Fall of Détente: Soviet-American Relations during the Carter Years*, ed. Odd Arne Westad (Boston: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), 118–48; Odd Arne Westad, “Concerning the Situation in ‘A’: New Russian Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 8/9 (Winter /1997 1996): 128–32; Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011); Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*.

⁸⁴ Brzezinski to Vance, March 30, 1979, DDRS Record CK3100671210.

⁸⁵ Brzezinski to Carter, March 31, 1979, DDRS Record CK3100591329.

⁸⁶ Odom to Brzezinski, May 14, 1979, DDRS Record CK3100670425.

gained greater credence in August when the USSR deployed a high-level military delegation under the leadership of General Pavlovskiy, the commander of Soviet ground forces, to assess the situation in Afghanistan. On September 14, Stansfield Turner issued an “Alert Memorandum,” which warned that “the Soviets may have begun to give more serious consideration to the spectrum of possibilities for direct combat intervention in Afghanistan.”⁸⁷ Most administration officials still viewed a Soviet invasion as unlikely. Since they recognized that the situation could change, however, the administration began drawing up contingency plans for how to respond in the event of a Soviet invasion.⁸⁸

When the invasion finally commenced, President Carter was therefore prepared to respond quite quickly and forcefully to what he characterized as “the most serious threat to the peace since the Second World War.”⁸⁹ In January 1980, the administration introduced a comprehensive set of sanctions designed to punish the Soviets. Most notable (and controversial), were the imposition of a grain embargo, the suspension of sensitive technology transfers, and the boycott of the summer Olympics in Moscow.⁹⁰ In addition to those punitive measures, the president promulgated a number of military policies designed to deter any further Soviet encroachment into the Middle East. On January 23, in his State of the Union address, Carter declared: “An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force,” a policy which came to be

⁸⁷ Turner to NSC, September 14, 1979, DDRS Record CK3100661117.

⁸⁸ See: Brement to Brzezinski and Aaron, September 7, 1979, DDRS Record CK3100094430; Brzezinski to Carter, September 24, 1979, DDRS Record CK3100708548; and Thornton to Aaron, October 2, 1979, DDRS Record CK3100098212.

⁸⁹ State of the Union Address, January 23, 1980. In *The Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1980-81* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1981), 196.

⁹⁰ Carter reluctantly asked Senator Byrd to postpone consideration of the SALT II treaty.

known as the Carter Doctrine.⁹¹ To give some teeth to that declaration, the administration increased the FY1981 defense budget, accelerated the creation of a Rapid Deployment Force, and reinstated mandatory draft registration.⁹² Perhaps most significantly, Carter authorized a covert CIA operation to supply military assistance to the Mujahideen.

In adopting those measures, administration officials invoked the same concerns about American credibility that had motivated the earlier covert action in Angola. Barely a week after the invasion, Brzezinski warned the president: “if the US is perceived as passive in the face of this blatant transgression of civilized norms, our international credibility and prestige will be seriously eroded, particularly in the eyes of those countries most vulnerable to Soviet intervention, either directly or indirectly. Without firm US action, some of these countries may draw the conclusion that they have no choice over the long run except to accommodate themselves to Soviet power.”⁹³ Those words could easily have flowed from the pen of Henry Kissinger in 1975. In fact, Brzezinski perceived the Soviet intervention as the materialization of

⁹¹ State of the Union Address, January 23, 1980. In *The Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1980-81*, 197.

⁹² The Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) was formally established at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida on March 1, 1980, and subsequently transformed into U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) in 1983. The administration had begun developing plans for a rapid deployment force (RDF) long before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In mid-1977, PRM-10, produced under the direction of Samuel Huntington, Brzezinski’s special assistant for national security planning, warned that the United States lacked sufficient capabilities to project power into the Middle East. In signing PD-18 on August 24, 1977, Carter authorized the development of a strike force that could be deployed on short notice to trouble spots around the globe, with particular emphasis on the Persian Gulf. Yet according to William Odom, “once PD-18 was signed, the Pentagon essentially ignored the directive to set up an RDF, and the State Department showed no interest in making it acceptable to U.S. friends in the region.” The Iranian revolution provided fresh impetus to creating the force, however. The fall of the Shah, who for decades had served as the United States’ primary strategic ally in the region, prompted the administration to begin negotiating new basing and over-flight agreements with nations such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, Somalia, Egypt, and Kenya. Although those efforts pre-dated the invasion of Afghanistan, that event created a greater sense of urgency within the administration, and by increasing Middle Eastern states’ sense of vulnerability vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, increased their inclination to grant basing rights to the United States. The most detailed accounts of the development of the RDJTF are: Olav Njølstad, “Shifting Priorities: The Persian Gulf in US Strategic Planning in the Carter Years,” *Cold War History* 4, no. 3 (2004): 21–55; and William E. Odom, “The Cold War Origins of the U.S. Central Command,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 2 (2006): 52–82.

⁹³ Brzezinski to Carter, January 2, 1980, DDRS Record CK3100098575. Also see Brzezinski to Carter, December 29, 1979, DDRS Record CK3100098567; Brzezinski to Carter, January 9, 1980, DDRS Record CK3100092090.

the dire consequences that Kissinger had predicted would result from inaction in Angola: the failure to counter previous Soviet gambits had convinced the Soviets that they could intervene in Afghanistan with impunity.⁹⁴ Brzezinski was determined to stop the rot; and unlike Kissinger, he encountered little opposition. Most of the NSC staff shared their boss' concerns, as did quite a number of the senior officials in Foggy Bottom with whom Brzezinski had sparred quite frequently over the course of the previous three years.⁹⁵ Anthony Lake, for instance, who had turned against the war in Vietnam while working for the Nixon administration, agreed that "it is important that we be perceived as powerful and prepared to defend our interests, and those of our allies."⁹⁶

There was little fear that the enunciation of the Carter Doctrine or the provision of military assistance to the Mujahideen could gradually drag the United States into another Vietnam. In fact, there is some evidence that the Vietnam precedent inspired Brzezinski to begin funneling military aid to the Mujahideen in July 1979 precisely in order to lure the Soviets into a quagmire of their own. In a 1998 interview with the French newspaper, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Brzezinski admitted, "We did not push the Russians into intervening, but we did knowingly increase the chances that they would do so." According to Brzezinski's military assistant,

⁹⁴ Brzezinski to Carter, January 3, 1980, DDRS Record CK3100098578. Brzezinski explained to Carter that "Afghanistan is the seventh state since 1975 in which communist parties have come to power with Soviet guns and tanks, with Soviet military power and assistance," and he concluded that "because we did not overreact to their previous acts of assertiveness, they have discounted the likelihood of a genuinely punitive reaction on our part to this extraordinary application of Soviet military power.

⁹⁵ Larrabee to Brzezinski, December 31, 1979, DDRS Record CK3100098211.

⁹⁶ Lake did add the caveat that "we must find ways to limit the concomitant image of a superpower prepared to intervene in the internal affairs of the non-aligned." Lake to Vance, January 19, 1980, DDRS Record CK3100599478.

William Odom, news of the Soviet intervention in December prompted Brzezinski to thrust his fist into the air in exultation, rejoicing that the Soviets had “taken the bait.”⁹⁷

Although few shared fully in Brzezinski’s machinations, the massive Soviet intervention inspired quite serious discussion—both inside and outside the administration—of the prospect that Afghanistan could degenerate into a Soviet Vietnam. Brzezinski was not overly optimistic, however. On December 26, he speculated that the intervention “could become a Soviet Vietnam”—though he also cautioned that the administration could not afford to “be too sanguine” about the prospect. He highlighted that unlike the North Vietnamese, the Afghan rebels were poorly trained and equipped; they lacked quality leadership; and they had yet to receive any significant outside support or sanctuary.⁹⁸ The upshot was clear: if they wanted the Soviets to get bogged down in Afghanistan, the administration would have to provide greater support to the Afghan rebels, just as the Soviets had patronized the North Vietnamese. Achieving that goal was vital, since the intelligence community projected that if “Afghan resistance becomes or remains persistent and widespread, the Soviets could become so bogged down in guerrilla warfare that they abandon any hopes of further near-term expansion.”⁹⁹

Two crucial factors enabled Brzezinski to sell that strategy—to his colleagues, to Carter, to Congress, and to the American public. First, unlike in Angola or the Horn of Africa, the administration could characterize the Soviet intervention as a clear act of international aggression. As long as the Soviets had restricted themselves to influencing events in Afghanistan through subversion, the State Department remained wary of Brzezinski’s calls “for a

⁹⁷ Quoted in Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall*, 325–326.

⁹⁸ Quoted from Brzezinski to Carter, December 26, 1979, DDRS Record CK3100098565. See also: Larrabee to Brzezinski, December 31, 1979, DDRS Record CK3100094433; Brzezinski to Carter, January 2, 1980, DDRS Record CK3100098575; and Brzezinski to Carter, January 3, 1980, DDRS Record CK3100098578.

⁹⁹ Turner to Carter, Mondale, Vance, Brown, and Brzezinski, January 15, 1980, DDRS Record CK3100685165.

more vigorous reaction” to Soviet interference in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰ But for Vance and Christopher, the Christmas intervention was a watershed. As Vance explained in his memoirs, “it was the first example since World War II of Soviet military occupation of a non-Communist-bloc country. The security interests of the West dictated that we act cohesively and promptly to demonstrate to the Soviets that such behavior was not an acceptable part of the East-West competition.”¹⁰¹

Moreover, unlike in Angola or the Ogaden, Brzezinski was able to characterize the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a threat to vital American interests in the Persian Gulf. Just days after the invasion, he cautioned the president that the occupation of Afghanistan would provide the Soviets a strategic perch from which they could extend their influence into Pakistan or Iran—a position from which they could conceivably choke off the free world’s supply of petroleum from the Persian Gulf.¹⁰² The administration understood quite well that the invasion of Afghanistan was not the opening gambit in some “grand design” to extend the Soviet empire to the shores of the Persian Gulf or Indian Ocean.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, Brzezinski insisted that “Soviet actions in Afghanistan, regardless of their motives, have changed the strategic situation in the region, and we must take steps which will restore a balance.”¹⁰⁴ In his view, even if the Soviets had intervened in Afghanistan to salvage a deteriorating local situation, a weak American response could embolden the Soviets to capitalize on their improved strategic position—when the time was right—and push into Pakistan or Iran. Of course, Brzezinski certainly recognized that any

¹⁰⁰ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 427.

¹⁰¹ Vance, *Hard Choices*, 391.

¹⁰² Brzezinski to Carter, January 3, 1980, DDRS Record CK3100098578.

¹⁰³ Turner to Carter, Mondale, Vance, Brown, and Brzezinski, January 15, 1980, DDRS Record CK3100685165.

¹⁰⁴ Brzezinski to Carter, January 9, 1980, DDRS Record CK3100092090.

military intervention in Pakistan or Iran would have been even more difficult than the ill-fated Soviet foray into Afghanistan. Much like Kissinger before him, however, he insisted that “without firm U.S. action, some of these countries may draw the conclusion that they have no choice over the long run except to accommodate themselves to Soviet power.”¹⁰⁵

To forestall further Soviet expansion, it was therefore essential to take measures to ensure that Soviet troops got bogged down in Afghanistan.

Administration officials did not fear that the American public would recoil against the prospect of a confrontation with the Soviet Union. Quite the contrary, they believed the president would accrue domestic benefits from adopting a tough stance.¹⁰⁶ Brzezinski counseled Carter: “You have the opportunity to do what President Truman did on Greece and Turkey, and I believe that this is desirable both for domestic and international reasons. The country will respond to a firm call for measured but also sustained action, and I am sure the Congressional leadership will support you.”¹⁰⁷ And he was right. Within weeks of the Soviet invasion news that the CIA was arming the Afghan rebels was on the front page of the *Washington Post*.¹⁰⁸ But unlike in Angola, those revelations elicited little public concern. Hardly anyone was concerned that such covert action could draw the United States into direct combat with the Soviets. What’s more, most Americans were inclined to use military force in defense of the United States’ vital interests in the region. A series of polls conducted in February and March reflected that 60-70% percent of Americans favored deploying U.S. military forces, if necessary, to protect the United

¹⁰⁵ Brzezinski to Carter, January 2, 1980, DDRS Record CK3100098575.

¹⁰⁶ Brzezinski to Carter, January 2, 1980, DDRS Record CK3100098575.

¹⁰⁷ Brzezinski to Carter, January 3, 1980, DDRS Record CK3100098578.

¹⁰⁸ Michael Getler, “U.S. Reportedly Is Supplying Weapons to Afghan Insurgents,” *Washington Post*, February 15, 1980.

States' oil supplies in the Middle East.¹⁰⁹ A plurality, 47 percent, was even willing to defend Iran from Soviet invasion—in spite of significant animosity stemming from the ongoing Iran hostage crisis.¹¹⁰

Hostage Crises

Of course, neither Ford nor Carter employed U.S. military forces to prevent Soviet adventurism in the third world. Yet they each authorized military operations to rescue American hostages—with much different results. In 1975, U.S. military forces successfully compelled Cambodia to release the hostage American merchant ship, the *SS Mayaguez*.¹¹¹ In 1980, however, the Iranian rescue mission was an abject failure and certainly contributed to Ronald Reagan's landslide victory over Carter in the 1980 presidential election. Despite the disparate outcomes, however, the two crises both highlight the limits of the Vietnam syndrome.

The trauma of Vietnam clearly did not prevent Ford from using military force to recover the *Mayaguez*. In fact, in the immediate aftermath of the crisis, critics began suggesting that the ignominy of America's defeat in Vietnam had fueled the administration's belligerence. They questioned, in particular, whether the administration had failed to exhaust all the diplomatic

¹⁰⁹ See: Gallup Poll #1148G, February 1-4, 1980; Roper Report 1980-3, February 9-23, 1980; CBS News/New York Times Poll, February 13-17, 1980; CBS News/New York Times Poll, March 12-15, 1980.

¹¹⁰ Roper Report 1980-3, February 9-23, 1980.

¹¹¹ The rescue mission itself was a dubious success. The *Mayaguez* was recovered quite easily. But the assault on the island of Koh Tang encountered significant resistance. Of the eight helicopters in the first insertion wave, three were shot down and two were disabled. Moreover, once the Marines had secured the island, they ascertained that the *Mayaguez* crew was not, in fact, being held there. Fortunately, at about the same time that the rescue operation began, the ship's captors had already decided to release the crew, which the destroyer USS *Wilson* picked up slightly before 10 a.m. as they sailed under a white flag toward Koh Tang in a Thai fishing boat. It had taken only a few hours to secure the 39 seamen—but at a cost of 41 servicemen dead, and another 50 wounded.

options before launching the military operation.¹¹² Many of them speculated that the administration's primary goal had been to reassert U.S. resolve; rescuing the hostage ship was merely a means to that end.¹¹³

Now that the documentary record of the Ford administration's deliberations has been declassified, it is clear that those suspicions were on the mark. When the NSC first met to discuss the incident on May 12, a consensus to use military force coalesced within minutes. The prospect of negotiating the ship's release was given short shrift—even though there was reason for optimism that the situation could be resolved diplomatically. The administration was aware that the Cambodians had previously seized a Panamanian and a Philippine ship, both of which they released.¹¹⁴ But Kissinger was not interested in negotiating. The administration did go through the diplomatic motions: on the afternoon of May 12, the deputy secretary of state, Robert Ingersoll, attempted to transmit a message to Cambodian authorities through the PRC Liaison Office in Washington, D.C.—an overture which the Chinese liaison officer rebuffed; and on the next day, the U.S. Liaison Office in Beijing delivered messages to both the Cambodian Embassy and the PRC Foreign Ministry—messages demanding “the immediate release” of the

¹¹² House Subcommittee on International Political and Military Affairs of the Committee on International Relations. *The Seizure of the Mayaguez: Hearings before the Subcommittee on International Political and Military Affairs of the Committee on International Relations*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975, 157-159, 163, 173-177, 180-181, 273-274.

¹¹³ House Subcommittee on International Political and Military Affairs of the Committee on International Relations. *The Seizure of the Mayaguez: Hearings before the Subcommittee on International Political and Military Affairs of the Committee on International Relations*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975, 165, 171-177. Tom Wicker, “Raising Some Mayaguez Questions,” *New York Times*, May 16, 1975; “The Retrieval of the Mayaguez,” *Washington Post*, May 16, 1975; “Ford Sends a Signal: He Displays U.S. Power in Saving a Ship's Crew,” *New York Times*, May 18, 1975; Anthony Lewis, “The Morning After,” *New York Times*, May 19, 1975; Nicholas von Hoffman, “From the Halls of Montezuma,” *Washington Post*, May 19, 1975; For a supportive assessment of the administration's efforts to reassert U.S. resolve, see: Ernest Conine, “Mayaguez Incident: A Ford Message to Domino Players,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 18, 1975.

¹¹⁴ NSC Meeting, May 12, 1975, 12:05-12:50 p.m., FRUS 1969-1976, 10:978-979.

Mayaguez and its crew.¹¹⁵ But those actions were merely undertaken as necessary precursors, whose failure would justify military action.¹¹⁶

Administration officials viewed the incident “as a test case,” which required a “violent response.”¹¹⁷ Kissinger, ever the professor, explained to his colleagues that getting the ship back was only one of two problems facing the administration: the second was preventing the incident from tarnishing the United States’ international image.¹¹⁸ And the administration clearly prioritized that second problem over the first. As Kissinger suggested: “It [was] not just enough to get the ship’s release;” it was imperative “to use the opportunity to prove that others [would] be worse off” if they challenged the United States; any sign of irresolution would only encourage further communist probes.¹¹⁹ Those considerations very much motivated the air strikes against mainland Cambodia, which were conducted in conjunction with the rescue operation. Although the administration could claim, to avoid “look[ing] as though [they wanted] to pop somebody,” that the strikes served a tactical purpose, the documentary record reflects that they were designed primarily to impress upon other would-be challengers that the United States was “not to be trifled with.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Department of State to Liaison Office in China, May 13, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 10:985-986. Liaison Office in China to Department of State, May 13, 1975, FRUS 1969-1976, 10:987.

¹¹⁶ On this point I am in agreement with Trevor McCrisken: Trevor B. McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam: U.S. Foreign Policy Since 1974* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 49.

¹¹⁷ The quoted comments are those of Vice President Nelson Rockefeller: NSC Meeting, May 12, 1975, 12:05-12:50 p.m., FRUS 1969-1976, 10:981. Rockefeller expressed similar thoughts during the May 13th NSC meeting as well: NSC Meeting, May 13, 1975, 10:22-11:17 a.m., FRUS 1969-1976, 10:997-998.

¹¹⁸ NSC Meeting, May 12, 1975, 12:05-12:50 p.m., FRUS 1969-1976, 10:979.

¹¹⁹ NSC Meeting, May 12, 1975, 12:05-12:50 p.m., FRUS 1969-1976, 10:982. NSC Meeting, May 13, 1975, 10:22-11:17 a.m., FRUS 1969-1976, 10:998. NSC Meeting, May 13-14, 1975, 10:40 p.m.-12:25 a.m., FRUS 1969-1976, 10:1010, 1014.

¹²⁰ Quotations from Kissinger in NSC Meeting, May 12, 1975, 12:05-12:50 p.m., FRUS 1969-1976, 10:983.

Four years later, that same impulse influenced Brzezinski's approach to the Iranian hostage crisis. In the days that followed the embassy seizure, as it became clear that the Iranians had no intention of releasing the American diplomats, the national security advisor quickly grew solicitous of preserving the United States' reputation.¹²¹ On November 9, just five days after the embassy seizure, the national security advisor counseled the president: "it is important that we get our people back. But your greater responsibility is to protect the honor and dignity of our country and its foreign policy interests. At some point that greater responsibility could become more important than the safety of our diplomats." Brzezinski clearly viewed the crisis as an opportunity—"a chance to show American resolve."¹²²

Carter apparently shared that instinct to some extent. Just days after the embassy seizure, the president instructed the JCS to devise plans for both a rescue mission and punitive attacks against Iran. Following a strategy session on November 9, he confided to Brzezinski and Brown: "I want to punish them as soon as our people have been released; really hit them. They must know that they can't fool around with us."¹²³ But the president did not act on that impulse. Instead of reflexively launching a military operation (like his predecessor), Carter adopted what Vance later called a dual-track strategy. The administration spent months trying to secure a diplomatic resolution to the crisis; and to complement those efforts, imposed a series of economic and political sanctions to generate increasing pressure on the Iranian authorities. Only

¹²¹ When the embassy was seized on November 4, administration officials did not initially expect that the incident would drag on for all that long. That expectation was based primarily upon the fact that a similar incident had occurred earlier in the year, on February 14. During that Valentine's Day incident, Iran's transitional government pressured the students to release the hostages. But according to Brzezinski, optimism that the new hostage crisis could be resolved quickly evaporated on November 6, when the Ayatollah Khomeini publicly endorsed the hostage takers. Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 479.

¹²² Brzezinski quoted in Hamilton Jordan, *Crisis: The Last Year of the Carter Presidency* (New York: Putnam, 1982), 44, 53.

¹²³ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 482–483.

after those endeavors proved futile did he finally authorize the rescue mission. That focus on diplomacy was not, however, induced by the Vietnam syndrome. Carter was simply more committed than Brzezinski, Kissinger, or Ford to securing the safe return of the hostages. He prioritized the lives of the American hostages over the United States' reputation.

Military options were therefore unattractive to the president. As Brzezinski noted in his memoirs, the administration went cool on post-release retaliatory strikes “for the simple reason that the release was not forthcoming.” Moreover, they recognized that any conceivable rescue operation offered poor prospects of success. As Harold Brown noted, the hostages were locked up in a compound in the middle of a city of four million people, nine miles away from the nearest airport. He consequently reported to the president quite pessimistically that the JCS considered a potential rescue mission to be extremely difficult, though not impossible.¹²⁴

Those drawbacks did not prompt Carter to foreclose a military solution to the crisis, however. The president tasked Brzezinski to chair a secret committee, which in the following months devised contingency plans for a range of military options. As the crisis dragged on through November and into December, Carter toyed more and more with the idea of using force—particularly as Tehran intimated that it was preparing to try the American hostages as spies. He contemplated a series of escalatory actions to compel the release of the hostages: mining Iranian harbors, bombing oil refineries in Abadan, and instituting a total blockade in the Persian Gulf.¹²⁵ Those actions certainly did not appeal to Vance or Christopher, who remained committed to somehow negotiating an end to the crisis. But Brzezinski and Brown stoked the president's flame. On December 1, Brown urged the president: “we can go for a period of 10-15 days along the diplomatic route if it appears to be moving in a promising way and if there is not

¹²⁴ Jordan, *Crisis*, 52–53.

¹²⁵ See: Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 483; Jordan, *Crisis*, 66; Vance, *Hard Choices*, 380.

evidence or grave suspicion that any hostages have been harmed. If strong economic measures against Iran are taken by our key allies acting with us, that might give us another week or so. But even then I do not think we can delay facing up to at least the mildest military action for more than about a month from now.”¹²⁶ Toward the end of that one-month window, however, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan—an event which arrested the administration’s drift toward war. The invasion compelled Brzezinski, in particular, to reevaluate the impact that military action against Iran would have on U.S.-Soviet competition in the Middle East. Since mobilizing Islamic resistance was considered essential to containing the Soviet Union, potential military action against Iran suddenly became even less desirable to the extent that it “might split Islamic opposition to Soviet expansionism,” and perhaps drive the new Iranian government into Soviet arms.¹²⁷ Of course, after efforts to negotiate the hostages’ release broke down in April, Carter nevertheless decided to attempt the rescue operation.

The crucial point is that the lessons of Vietnam did not dissuade either Ford or Carter from launching military rescue missions. Why not? In the case of the *Mayaguez*, the administration clearly viewed the rescue mission as a low-risk operation. Since Cambodia had little capability to retaliate against the United States, there was little risk of escalation. The administration therefore anticipated that it could present both Congress and the American public with a fait accompli. In fact, that consideration motivated the president to initiate the rescue operation as soon as sufficient forces were in place to offer a reasonable probability of success. Ford’s advisors counseled that, from a military standpoint, it would have been best to wait until May 16 to launch the attack, when an “overwhelming force,” including the *Coral Sea* and the USS

¹²⁶ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 484.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 484–485; Vance, *Hard Choices*, 398; Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America’s Tragic Encounter with Iran* (New York: Random House, 1985), 282.

Hancock would have had time to converge upon Koh Tang.¹²⁸ But Kissinger suggested that the administration “would have to weigh the optimum military time against the optimum political time.” Although it would be preferable, militarily, to wait until the 16th, he was concerned that pressure to negotiate would materialize if the administration delayed. Since the JCS chairman assured the president that even on the 15th, U.S. forces could knock out air and port facilities on mainland Cambodia and secure both the *Mayaguez* and Koh Tang Island “with high assurance of success,” Kissinger recommended that “for foreign policy and domestic reasons” it would be better to strike on the 15th.¹²⁹

Even more important than the relative risks of the operations, though, was the fact that neither the *Mayaguez* incident nor the Iran Hostage Crisis evoked analogical parallels to the Vietnam quagmire. Decision-makers drew on the lessons of previous hostage crises instead. The 1968 *Pueblo* incident served as a cautionary precedent for the Ford administration.¹³⁰ It demonstrated the risks of permitting a hostage crisis to drag on—either the crew or the U.S. government could eventually be forced to issue an embarrassing apology to a small, irrelevant country. That repugnant prospect certainly informed the military measures that Ford authorized to prevent the *Mayaguez* crew from being transferred to mainland Cambodia—if not the punitive air strikes that were subsequently launched in tandem with the rescue operation.

¹²⁸ The Secretary of Defense informed the president unequivocally: “If you want an overwhelming force on the island, you should wait until the 16th.” NSC Meeting, May 13-14, 1975, 10:40 p.m.-12:25 a.m., FRUS 1969-1976, 10:1012. The operational benefits of delaying the rescue operation were subsequently discussed in the GAO’s report on the operation: “The Seizure of the *Mayaguez*—A Case Study in Crisis Management,” 95, 99.

¹²⁹ NSC Meeting, May 13-14, 1975, 10:40 p.m.-12:25 a.m., FRUS 1969-1976, 10:1017. NSC Meeting, May 14, 1975, 3:52-5:42 p.m., FRUS 1969-1976, 10:1025.

¹³⁰ On January 23, 1968, North Korea seized the *USS Pueblo*, a naval intelligence ship, which Pyongyang claimed had entered its territorial waters. The ship’s crew was held in North Korean POW camps, where they were starved and tortured for the next eleven months. The ship’s captain was ultimately compelled to sign an apologetic confession affirming that the ship had been spying in Korean waters and promising that the U.S. would not spy in the future. The crew, but not the ship, was then released into South Korea on December 23.

The Carter administration was also sensitive to the *Pueblo* analogy—though different officials drew different conclusions.¹³¹ Vance argued that both the *Pueblo* and Angus Ward incidents highlighted the virtues of a patient approach.¹³² The secretary believed strongly that the Ward case, in particular, “had many similarities to the seizure in Iran,” and he sought to highlight those similarities to the president. Shortly after the embassy seizure, he sent Carter a copy of the memorandum in which the Joint Chiefs had counseled Truman against using military force.¹³³

Not everyone shared Vance’s historical interpretations, however. Only five days after the embassy seizure, during the administration’s usual Friday morning foreign policy breakfast, Brzezinski countered Vance’s suggestion that the *Pueblo* incident demonstrated that hostage crises could be resolved peacefully and honorably, lamenting that the previous incident “went on for a year!”¹³⁴ Jordan observed sardonically, “if it drags out that long, you can forget about a second term.”¹³⁵ They did not regard the Johnson approach as something to emulate.¹³⁶

Those officials therefore gravitated toward another analogical precedent—the 1976 rescue operation that Israeli commandos conducted at Entebbe Airport in Uganda to liberate the passengers of a hijacked Air France flight. Brzezinski later confided that he believed the

¹³¹ A comprehensive analysis of the role of analogical reasoning in the Iran hostage crisis is provided in David Patrick Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹³² In November 1948, Mao Zedong’s People’s Liberation Army seized the U.S. consulate in Mukden and held the consul-general, Angus Ward, and his staff under house arrest for over a year before releasing them in December 1949.

¹³³ Vance, *Hard Choices*, 408–409.

¹³⁴ Jordan, *Crisis*, 45.

¹³⁵ Quoted in: Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, 102.

¹³⁶ Houghton points out that “no one within the Carter administration seriously questioned the idea that the *Pueblo* strategy would eventually attain the release of the hostages during the Tehran crisis, but...Cyrus Vance was unable to fully convince his colleagues of the worth of the *Pueblo* analogy because that comparison suggested that policy success could come only at the cost of political failure and humiliation. *Ibid.*, 204.

Entebbe operation “was a demonstration that daring works, and that of course it’s chancy, but sometimes the costs of not doing anything are even higher than a chancy undertaking.”¹³⁷ Rather than encouraging the adoption of a similar policy, however, the Entebbe case dampened most officials’ initial enthusiasm for a rescue operation. For it provided a paradigm against which the challenges of rescuing the American hostages could be measured. That paradigm convinced most officials that “Tehran wasn’t Entebbe.”¹³⁸

By no means do I wish to exaggerate the extent to which analogical reasoning guided the Ford or Carter administrations during the two hostage crises. Although decision-makers did extrapolate lessons from historical antecedents during the early days of the crisis, they gradually focused more and more on the particular political and tactical challenges they faced.¹³⁹ The important point, though, is that to whatever extent historical analogies did influence decision-making, the lessons of Vietnam did not intrude—primarily because previous hostage incidents mapped onto the Iranian hostage crisis much more closely than did the Vietnam quagmire.¹⁴⁰

Perhaps due to the absence of analogical parallels to Vietnam, the American public—and their representatives in Congress—expressed little opposition to employing military force in defense of U.S. citizens. Because the *Mayaguez* was sailing under a U.S. flag, the administration could characterize the ship’s seizure as a direct act of piracy against the United States. Although Kissinger believed that Vietnam had diminished the public’s appetite to serve as the world’s

¹³⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, 83 Houghton points out that the Entebbe analogy was probably particularly evocative to Brzezinski who had been in Israel, dining with Israeli defense minister Shimon Peres, on the eve of the Entebbe raid.

¹³⁸ Brown quoted in Jordan, *Crisis*, 43. Also see Sick quoted in Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, 83.

¹³⁹ Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, 155–156.

¹⁴⁰ A more representative precedent was nested within the larger Vietnam analogy. In 1970, American green berets attempted to liberate a POW camp in Son Tay. But Carter administration officials appear to have referenced the Son Tay raid to a much lesser extent than either the *Pueblo* or Entebbe incidents. David Patrick Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 117–118.

policeman, the president had a good sense that most Americans—including those on Capitol Hill—remained willing to use military force to defend U.S. territory and citizens. An NBC poll conducted from May 13-14 indicated that a 65% majority supported military action to recover the *Mayaguez*.¹⁴¹ Moreover, the president's advisors assured him that they had received signals that similar support could be expected from Congress.¹⁴² Indeed, even though some legislators expressed misgivings about striking mainland Cambodia, few objected to the rescue operation itself. Senator Case even assured the president that the eponymous Case-Church Amendment, which prohibited further U.S. military action in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, did not “apply to the purpose of rescuing American citizens.”¹⁴³ The president consequently felt relatively unconstrained by the restrictions on presidential war powers, which Congress had imposed during the last couple years of the Vietnam War. Ford and Kissinger dismissed the White House Counsel's suggestion that either those restrictions or international law posed much of an obstacle to military action.¹⁴⁴

To avoid ruffling congressional feathers too much, the administration did go through the motions of complying with the War Powers Resolution. Soon after American planes began firing upon Cambodian vessels to prevent the transfer of the *Mayaguez* crew to the mainland, administration officials began briefing the congressional leadership. Then, on the evening of May 14, Ford summoned the congressional leadership to the White House for a meeting in which

¹⁴¹ Jerry Jones to Dick Cheney, May 27, 1975, folder National Security: Wars – Cambodia (2), box 33, Presidential Handwriting File, GRFL. The public grew even more supportive, and President Ford received a nice bump in his approval rating, once news of the recovery of the ship and its crew spread--an example of the “halo effect.” Those reactions are detailed in: McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam*, 48.

¹⁴² NSC Meeting, May 13-14, 1975, 10:40 p.m.-12:25 a.m., FRUS 1969-1976, 10:1018.

¹⁴³ President's Meeting with Congressional Leadership, May 14, 1975.

¹⁴⁴ NSC Meeting, May 13-14, 1975, 10:40 p.m.-12:25 a.m., FRUS 1969-1976, 10:1014.

he outlined the military action that he had ordered to commence a couple hours later.¹⁴⁵

Although they generally approved of the rescue operation, the legislators voiced a number of concerns. Some, wary of “again going into the mainland of Asia,” questioned the necessity of attacking mainland Cambodia. Others expressed concern that the administration had not consulted Congress “at the time the decision was still being made,” but had chosen instead to inform the legislators “only after the fact,” once the decision to attack had already been made. But Ford and Kissinger rebuffed those objections fairly easily. They disingenuously insisted that striking the facilities at Kompong Som and Ream was essential for preventing a Cambodian counterattack against the Marines engaged in recovering the *Mayaguez*. Moreover, the president asserted quite bluntly: “the Cambodians have seized a U.S. ship and American citizens...regardless of the 1973 law, I have the authority as Commander-in-Chief to take this action.”¹⁴⁶ Ford clearly believed that Congress and the American public would rally ‘round the flag.

Four years later, public opinion polls suggested that Carter could count on similar support for a military rescue operation in Iran. About 64% percent of respondents to a Time Soundings poll conducted in early-December favored “the use of military force by the United States against Iran: If it [were] the only way to get the hostages out.” Interestingly, that percentage did not shift as the public grew increasingly frustrated. Polls conducted in late-January and mid-March registered 69% and 66%, respectively, in favor of military action.¹⁴⁷ Even after the failed rescue

¹⁴⁵ The administration understood that the War Powers Resolution required the president to “consult” Congress in advance of authorizing military action, not just inform legislators of decisions the president had already made. But Rumsfeld suggested: “we cannot worry about it though they will complain that it is not consultation.” NSC Meeting, May 14, 1975, 3:52-5:42 p.m., FRUS 1969-1976, 10:1034-35.

¹⁴⁶ President’s Meeting with Congressional Leadership, May 14, 1975.

¹⁴⁷ Time Soundings # 8184: December 10-12, 1979. Time Soundings 8600: January 23-24, 1980. Time Soundings 8601: March 19-20, 1980.

attempt, 57% of respondents in another Time Soundings poll indicated that Carter should authorize another military rescue operation “if conditions permit.”¹⁴⁸ As during the *Mayaguez*, most Americans remained willing to support military operations in defense of U.S. territory and citizens.¹⁴⁹

Moreover, rather than dissuading Carter from seeking a military solution to the crisis, public opinion actually encouraged him to roll the dice on the rescue mission as negotiations proved abortive. Shortly after the embassy seizure, Carter speculated: “if I asked the people of Plains what I should do, every last one of them would say, ‘Bomb Iran!’” He hoped that “if they can perceive me as being firm and tough in voicing their rage, maybe we’ll be able to control this thing.”¹⁵⁰ By March, however, Carter found it more and more difficult to keep a lid on things. A frustrated minority had come to subscribe to Senator Richard Lugar’s assertion that “through its actions, the government of Iran, in effect, declared war on the United States.”¹⁵¹ For them, the administration’s failed diplomatic initiatives amounted to nothing more than “a study in

¹⁴⁸ Time Soundings # 8603 May 14-16, 1980. Thirty-seven percent of respondents indicated that Carter should not authorize another rescue attempt.

¹⁴⁹ It is important to note that the public overwhelmingly supported Carter’s initial efforts to negotiate the hostages’ release. In a Gallup poll conducted in early December, 76% of respondents approved “of the way Carter [was] handling the Iranian situation;” only 17% disapproved. But as the crisis dragged on, that support eroded steadily. By early January, approval of Carter’s handling of the crisis had dropped to 61%; disapproval was up to 30%. And later that month, a Time Soundings poll found that 45% of respondents believed the president had been “too soft” in his handling of the Iranian situation—a number that steadily increased to 55% in mid-March, 65% in late-March, and 69% in mid-May, following the failed rescued mission.

Yet there was never much enthusiasm for retributive military action. In an L.A. Times poll conducted in early December, only 7% of respondents believed “military force should be used as a form of punishment, after hostages have been released in good health.” A somewhat higher proportion of respondents to a Time Soundings poll conducted at roughly the same time, 16%, favored retaliating against Iran if the hostages were freed unharmed—a percentage that barely moved in polls conducted in late-January and mid-March. And in January 1981, following the release of the hostages, a slightly lower percentage, 10%, endorsed taking military action against Iran.

See: Los Angeles Times Poll # 1979-020: Dec. 9-12; Gallup Poll # 1145G, Dec. 7-10; Gallup Poll #1146G, January 4-7; Time Soundings #8184, December 10-12, 1979; Time Soundings #8600, January 23-24, 1980; Time Soundings #8601, March 19-20, 1980; Time Soundings #8602, March 29-30, 1980; Time Soundings #8603, May 14-16, 1980; CBS News and The New York Times National Survey, January 26-29, 1981; CBS News and The New York Times National Survey, January 26-29, 1981.

¹⁵⁰ Jordan, *Crisis*, 55.

¹⁵¹ *Cong. Rec.*, 126th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1980, 126(5):5818-5820.

appeasement.”¹⁵² Their solution: to strangle Iran into submission. They insisted that the only feasible way to compel the authorities in Tehran to release the hostages was through the imposition of a comprehensive trade embargo—enforced, if necessary, by an American naval blockade.¹⁵³ They believed that such a demonstration of American resolve would deter other antagonists from challenging U.S. interests.

To be sure, many Americans were extremely wary of such action.¹⁵⁴ But the administration was more attentive to that vocal minority clamoring for military action.¹⁵⁵ They clearly felt pressured to do *something*.¹⁵⁶ Officials anticipated that rather than eliciting a backlash from a war-weary public, decisive military action would score the president political points.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² *Cong. Rec.*, 126th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1980, 126(4):4453.

¹⁵³ Even Bob Dole and Ronald Reagan, perhaps wary of being characterized as warmongers, downplayed the military dimension of their recommendations. Dole urged: “Let us now do everything within our power, short of military force, to bring some sense of crime and punishment, if not justice, to the Iranians.” But he also recommended that if anyone attempted “to circumvent the boycott, then the United States ought to be prepared to make our economic wall real with our naval ships and aircraft.” See: *Cong. Rec.*, 126th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1980, 126(4):5364-5365; 126(5):6684-6685, 126(6): 6948.

¹⁵⁴ Strenuous arguments against military action enunciated by Senators Robert Byrd, Nancy Kassebaum, and Claiborne Pell can be found in: *Cong. Rec.*, 126th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1980, 126(5):6151-6152; 126(7):8402-8403; 126(7): 8962-8963.

¹⁵⁵ Brzezinski indicated in his memoirs that by the end of February, he “sensed increasing pressure from the public and from Congress for more direct action against Iran,” and that “with the political climate heating up, and with our political opponents deliberately exploiting the hostage issue to embarrass the President, public pressures on behalf of [a large military operation against Iran, essentially punitive in character,] were clearly on the rise.” Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 489–490. Also see Sick, *All Fall Down*, 280–281.

¹⁵⁶ Rose McDermott has argued that “Carter was clearly operating in a domain of losses at the time of the decision to go ahead with the rescue mission,” which rendered him less averse to the operation’s risks. Although Jack Levy has pointed out, quite rightly, that Carter’s frame of reference might better be characterized as a “mixed lottery,” which offered potential gains as well as losses, the available evidence demonstrates that Carter certainly felt pressure to adopt a tougher policy. I also suspect that the Rubicon Theory of War, elaborated by Dominic Johnson and Dominic Tierney, provides a compelling explanation of why, in April, administration officials downplayed the rescue operation’s risks: they were more attentive to the risks during the deliberative stage of policy formulation; they downplayed those risks during the “implementation stage,” once Carter had made up his mind to attempt the rescue. See: Rose McDermott, “Prospect Theory in International Relations: The Iranian Hostage Rescue Mission,” *Political Psychology* 13, no. 2 (1992): 237–263.

¹⁵⁷ See: Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 508–509; Jordan, *Crisis*, 229.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis ultimately suggests that the Vietnam War did not diminish the United States' *general* propensity to use military force in the latter half of the 1970s. The Southeast Asian quagmire certainly taught many Americans the pitfalls inherent in viewing localized third world conflicts through a Cold War lens of East-West competition. In so doing, the conflict seriously undermined many Americans' belief in the interdependence of commitments—the idea that the failure to oppose communist expansion anywhere in the world would undermine the overall credibility of the United States' general deterrence posture vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.

Yet the apparent development of a Vietnam syndrome also engendered concern amongst inveterate Cold Warriors, most notably Kissinger and Brzezinski, that Moscow would seek to exploit America's malaise by seizing opportunities to promote communist expansion throughout the third world. To varying degrees, Soviet and Cuban intervention in Angola, the Horn of Africa, and Afghanistan confirmed those fears; and it encouraged them to push back against those ostensibly suffering from a Vietnam syndrome and promote forceful policies designed to reassert the United States' determination to resist communist expansion.

Which of those impulses predominated—the urge to reassert U.S. resolve or the desire to avoid another Vietnam—depended primarily upon the nature of the threat in specific crises. The trauma of Vietnam did little to diminish the United States' willingness to combat acts of international aggression—particularly those directed at the United States. During the *Mayaguez* incident, and to a lesser extent the Iran hostage crisis, the compulsion to reassert U.S. resolve encouraged Ford and Carter to authorize military rescue operations—operations that they fully appreciated would entail casualties. Neither incident evoked analogical parallels to the Vietnam

conflict. Moreover, to the extent that decision-makers were guided by the lessons of history, they referenced previous hostage incidents such as the *Angus Ward*, *Pueblo*, and Entebbe incidents.

During the Angolan and Ogaden conflicts, however, many Americans' increased sensitivity to the political drawbacks to U.S. involvement—and the absence of vital American interests—overwhelmed Kissinger and Brzezinski's compulsion to prevent communist victories. It is certainly difficult to imagine that Congress would have prohibited U.S. involvement in Angola if not for the social and political dislocation engendered by Vietnam. Yet it also seems somewhat dubious that many legislators were truly all that concerned that CIA involvement in Angola might lead to another Vietnam. For in 1979, to counter Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, Carter authorized covert action strikingly similar to that which Congress had prohibited in Angola. Virtually nobody voiced concern, however, that funneling arms to the Mujahideen could draw the United States into direct conflict with the Soviet Union—not the pundits, not the Congress, not even administration officials like Cyrus Vance who had supposedly been traumatized by their Vietnam experience. Yet if Americans really believed there was much risk that covert action could cast the nation down the slippery slope to war, they should have been *more* wary of getting involved in Afghanistan; for a war in Afghanistan would have plunged the United States into direct conflict with the Soviet Union on its own southern doorstep. The equanimity with which most Americans accepted CIA involvement in Afghanistan thus suggests that even in the wake of Vietnam, they believed the United States could assume an indirect role in international conflicts without inevitably having to introduce U.S. troops.

Furthermore, the discrepancy between the United States' policies in Angola and Afghanistan was not due simply to the eroding salience of the Vietnam analogy over time. For

Vietnam was on many peoples' minds following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. The Vietnam precedent did not dissuade the Carter administration from getting involved in Afghanistan, however; it encouraged them to do all they could to make sure that Afghanistan became a Soviet Vietnam. The administration was able to sell that strategy for two crucial reasons. First, unlike in Angola, Soviet ensconcement in Afghanistan posed a direct threat to a vital American interest—the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf. Second, unlike during the Ogaden conflict, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan could be characterized as an “invasion,” a flagrant violation of international law.

So although the lessons of Vietnam caused many Americans to approach third world conflicts with greater circumspection, they did little to restrain the United States' from combating acts of international aggression—particularly those that threatened vital American interests. In fact, those lessons and the perceived materialization of the Vietnam syndrome encouraged the adoption of forceful policies to counter such aggression.

Chapter Four: After the Soviet-Afghan War

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was clearly a disaster. In ten years of fighting, 13,000 Soviet troops perished in the mountains of Afghanistan; another 40,000 were wounded. Moreover, the Soviet Union failed to achieve the political objectives that had motivated Brezhnev to intervene in the first place—namely, the stabilization of Afghanistan under the authority of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). As Soviets troops completed their withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, they left unresolved strife in their wake.¹ Yet just as Gorbachev was finally washing his hands of the tumult in Afghanistan, significant turmoil roiled throughout the eastern bloc.

In April and May of 1988, a wave of strikes spread across Poland. Under popular duress, Poland’s communist regime subsequently agreed first to the re-legalization of the *Solidarity* movement, and then to free parliamentary elections, which *Solidarity* won in a landslide on June 4, 1989. Those events reverberated throughout the Eastern bloc. The demonstration effect of the Polish revolution catalyzed the emergence of democracy movements in Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania. The outer Soviet empire was clearly in jeopardy. Yet unlike his predecessors, Gorbachev refused to employ the might of the Soviet military to suppress the dissent. In fact, Gorbachev encouraged the communist authorities in Eastern Europe to work to satisfy their citizens’ grievances, and ultimately stood aside as the outer Soviet empire disintegrated.

Given that the Soviets had been willing to intervene in a country of such dubious strategic value as Afghanistan, one would surely have expected them to use military force to maintain

¹ Detailed accounts of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan can be found in Sarah E. Mendelson, *Changing Course: Ideas, Politics, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

control of East Germany, the jewel in the crown of the Soviet empire. The Soviet non-intervention in Eastern Europe therefore seems to suggest that the Soviet Union's propensity to use military force had diminished significantly over the course of the 1980s. A number of scholars have attributed that diminution to the lessons of Afghanistan. Most notably, Andrew Bennett has argued that "the ongoing military interventions in Afghanistan, in Angola, and elsewhere caused Soviet leaders to draw lessons that inhibited their use of force in Europe in 1989."²

As I will argue, however, careful analysis of Soviet policy-making under Gorbachev provides little validation of either the reassertion hypothesis or war-weariness theory. There is scant evidence that the Afghanistan quagmire diminished the Soviet Union's propensity to use military force to any significant extent. The "new thinking," which drove Gorbachev to renounce military force as an instrument of foreign policy, had begun germinating long before the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan. Moreover, economic considerations reinforced Gorbachev's natural attraction to new thinking to a much greater extent than did the Afghanistan quagmire.

Public Opinion and Analogical Reasoning

It is important to begin by noting that there is little evidence that public opinion or analogical reasoning contributed significantly to Gorbachev's decision not to intervene in Eastern Europe in 1989. The Gorbachev foreign policy revolution was clearly a revolution from above. The general secretary (and the officials he brought in to advise him) was the driving

² Andrew Bennett, "The Guns That Didn't Smoke: Ideas and the Soviet Non-Use of Force in 1989," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 2 (2005): 82. Along similar lines, Janice Gross Stein has suggested that "The 'failure' in Afghanistan was a powerful incentive to learn." Janice Gross Stein, "Political Learning by Doing: Gorbachev as Uncommitted Thinker and Motivated Learner," *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (1994): 175, 177.

force behind the broad strategic retrenchment that culminated in the peaceful disintegration of the Eastern bloc. Gorbachev did, on occasion, reference public opinion, but those references appear to have been primarily instrumental. The general secretary believed that the winds of public opinion were at his back, and consequently invoked public opinion to justify the policy of retrenchment to which he had already committed.

During a Politburo meeting on October 17, 1985, for instance, Gorbachev reportedly read his colleagues some letters from citizens questioning the war in Afghanistan. According to Anatoly Chernyaev, Gorbachev's chief foreign policy advisor, "They were all different but the common theme was 'International Duty? In whose name? Do the Afghan people want it? Is it worth the lives of our boys, who don't even know why they were sent there, what they are defending, killing old people and children?'" In Chernyaev's view, "Gorbachev was apparently quoting all this to raise the emotional tension."³ He was invoking public opinion to bolster his own policy preference. After Gorbachev had finally extricated Soviet forces from Afghanistan, he sensed that most Russians would be willing to let the countries of Eastern Europe go their own way.

Given that the memories of Afghanistan were so fresh, one would expect that the analogical lessons of Afghanistan would have figured prominently in the Soviet decision-making process. Yet there is scant evidence of such analogical reasoning. In February 1989, Oleg Bogomolov, Director of the Institute of the Economics of the World Socialist System (IEMSS), did caution that the failure to craft a political solution to the crisis in Poland could prompt the "renewal of

³ Anatoly S. Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev*, trans. Robert English and Elizabeth Tucker (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 42.

martial law or a situation approximating civil war—‘Afghanistan in the middle of Europe.’”⁴

Later that year, just nine days before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Yakovlev suggested to Brzezinski that “With all its negative aspects, Afghanistan had one positive moment for us. From Afghanistan’s example we came to the conclusion that not one Soviet soldier should be in a foreign country with the purpose of conducting warfare.”⁵ Yet such comments are few and far between in the documentary evidence that has come to light.

A number of different explanations could account for why there is so little evidence that the Gorbachev team viewed the turmoil in Eastern Europe through the lens of Afghanistan. First, it is possible that Soviet decision-makers did invoke the lessons of Afghanistan to come to grips with the challenges they faced in Eastern Europe, but such instances of analogical reasoning were either not recorded, or remain shrouded in the darkness of documents that have still not come to light. The documentary record of Gorbachev’s decision-making process does remain incomplete. If such analogies had figured prominently in decision-making, however, one would expect to see more evidence of such thinking in the memoirs and documents that have trickled out in the last 25 years.

It is also possible that the Gorbachev team simply did not perceive strong analogical parallels between Afghanistan and the states that comprised the Warsaw Pact. After all, Afghanistan was a pre-modern, tribally-based, predominantly Muslim society perched in the mountains of Central Asia. The states of the eastern bloc were significantly more urban, modern, industrialized, secular states. Although the Afghanistan quagmire was fresh on Soviet minds, it

⁴ Doc. 42: Memorandum from Bogomolov Institute, “Changes in Eastern Europe and their Impact on the USSR,” February 1989, in Svetlana Savranskaya, Thomas Blanton, and Vladislav Zubok, eds., *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989* (New York: Central European University Press, 2010), 370.

⁵ Doc. 96: Record of Conversation between Aleksandr Yakovlev and Zbigniew Brzezinski, October 31, 1989, in *ibid.*, 565.

was therefore a poor source analog to apply to the unrest sweeping over Eastern Europe. The Soviet interventions in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 bore much greater superficial and structural similarities. The socio-political grievances and aspirations that swept through Eastern Europe in 1989 were strikingly similar to those that had pervaded the Prague Spring.

The Soviet leadership certainly did invoke the Hungary and Czechoslovakia analogies more frequently than they did Afghanistan. They certainly believed that the crisis in the Eastern bloc could reasonably “be compared with the one that preceded 1968.”⁶ Yet unlike their predecessors, for whom 1956 and 1968 proved military force was a viable tool for quelling dissent throughout the eastern bloc, the Gorbachev team mapped the new turmoil in Eastern Europe onto the 1956 and 1968 source analogs in a manner which counseled against similar crackdowns. To them, the previous crackdowns were, at best, temporary victories. Although they succeeded in preserving communist authority in the short term, they failed to extinguish the grievances or to address the systemic flaws that fueled popular discontent. In that sense, 1956 and 1968 were more than simple historical source analogs; they were precedents that fueled the resentment which resurfaced in the late-1980s. For that reason, Gorbachev and his advisors concluded that “it is very unlikely that we would be able to employ the methods of 1956 and 1968, both as a matter of principle and because of unacceptable consequences.” To them, “*Authoritarian methods* and direct pressure ha[d] clearly outlived their usefulness.”⁷

⁶ Doc. 55: Report from Vadim Zagladin on Conversation with Jan Pudlak, April 1, 1989, in *ibid.*, 436.

⁷ Doc. 41: Memorandum from CC CPSU International Department, “On a Strategy for Relations with the European Socialist Countries,” February 1989, in *ibid.*, 357. Although the new thinkers clearly viewed the 1956 and 1968 crackdowns as mistakes not to be repeated, Gorbachev was reluctant to disavow those actions—either in public or in meetings with his European counterparts. To Gorbachev, the children of the Prague Spring “had the right idea.” Yet as he told Károly Grósz at the end of March 1989, “the Soviet leadership has recently analyzed the events of 1968 in Czechoslovakia, and they continue to maintain that what happened there was a counterrevolution, with all the idiosyncratic traits of such an event.” And he maintained that reinterpreting those events was an “internal affair” for

Even though Soviet officials invoked the lessons of 1956 and 1968 more frequently than the lessons of Afghanistan, analogical reasoning does not appear to have played a significant role in Soviet decision-making in 1989. For the documentary record suggests that Gorbachev had taken the military option off the table well before popular uprisings throughout the eastern bloc had really gained any momentum. The limited extent to which Soviet officials invoked historical analogies served mainly to reinforce (and justify) a pre-existing determination not to intervene, particularly with military force, in the domestic affairs of fraternal countries.

Gorbachev had begun to dismiss the Brezhnev Doctrine soon after becoming general secretary. In a meeting with his counterparts in Eastern Europe, who had descended upon Moscow in March 1985 to attend Chernenko's funeral, the new general secretary reportedly announced that "from then on there was no more Brezhnev Doctrine, that kindergarten was over."⁸ In other words, the fraternal regimes would thenceforth be responsible for political and economic policies in their respective countries. By the summer of 1986, Gorbachev made clear to his subordinates that the Brezhnev Doctrine was a dead letter. In early July, he asserted quite emphatically that "the methods that were used in Czechoslovakia and Hungary now are no good;

the Hungarian and Czechoslovakian authorities. Gorbachev was apparently reluctant to pull the rug out from under the leadership in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, all of whom, as Ryzhkov reported to Gorbachev, "[we]re connected to '1968.'" See: Doc. 11: Notes of CC CPSU Politburo Session, Report on Mikhail Gorbachev's Visit to Czechoslovakia, April 16, 1987; Doc. 41: Memorandum from CC CPSU International Department, "On a Strategy for Relations with the European Socialist Countries," February 1989; Doc. 48: Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Achille Occhetto, February 28, 1989; Doc. 49: Notes of CC CPSU Politburo Session, March 3, 1989; Doc. 52: Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Károly Grósz, March 23-24, 1989; and Doc. 55: Report from Vadim Zagladin on Conversation with Jan Pudlák, April 1, 1989, in *ibid.*, 248, 355, 408-411, 419, 437.

⁸ Quoted in Svetlana Savranskaya, "The Logic of 1989: The Soviet Peaceful Withdrawal from Eastern Europe," in *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989* (New York: Central European University Press, 2010), 5.

they will not work.”⁹ Nearly two years before Polish demonstrations sparked the gradual disintegration of the Eastern bloc, Gorbachev had thus renounced the Brezhnev Doctrine.¹⁰

The Origins of New Thinking

Gorbachev’s decision against using military force to prop up communist regimes in Eastern Europe was thus a manifestation of fundamentally different foreign policy beliefs than those that had guided his predecessors—a worldview that Gorbachev marketed as “new thinking.”¹¹ Gorbachev and the new thinkers whom he promoted as his foreign policy advisors did not subscribe to the confrontational approach to international politics that had guided Soviet foreign policy throughout the cold war. They rejected the notion that the Soviet Union was engaged in a zero-sum competition with the United States. For they did not harbor the inveterate fear of imperialist expansion, which had gripped their predecessors. Nor did they feel compelled to export the communist revolution. Quite to the contrary, the new thinkers emphasized the necessity of mutual security and universal values.¹² In the context of this study, the crucial

⁹ Doc. 7: Notes of CC CPSU Politburo Session, July 3, 1986, in Savranskaya, Blanton, and Zubok, *Masterpieces of History*, 234.

¹⁰ It is also important to note that the reform movements that toppled the communist regimes in Eastern Europe would likely not have materialized—or at least not have pressed such far-reaching demands—if Gorbachev had not provided a green light by renouncing any right or intention to intervene in the affairs of the fraternal countries. See Mark Kramer, “The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 1),” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 4 (2003): 180, 187.

¹¹ Throughout this chapter I refer to officials who subscribed to and advocated those views as “new thinkers.” Perhaps the most notable marketing of new thinking is Mikhail S. Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

¹² For a variety of ideational explanations of the origins and processes through which new beliefs influenced Soviet foreign policy, see: Jeffrey T. Checkel, “Ideas, Institutions, and the Gorbachev Foreign Policy Revolution,” *World Politics* 45, no. 2 (1993): 271–300; Stein, “Political Learning by Doing”; Richard Ned Lebow, “The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism,” *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (1994): 249–77; Thomas Risse-Kappen, “Ideas Do Not Float Freely: Transnational Coalitions, Domestic Structures, and the End of the Cold War,” *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (1994): 185–214; Jeffrey T. Checkel, *Ideas and International Political Change: Soviet/Russian Behavior and the End of the Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Matthew Evangelista, “The Paradox of State Strength: Transnational Relations, Domestic Structures, and Security Policy in

question is: to what extent did the Afghanistan quagmire contribute to the formation of those beliefs and the concomitant rejection of “old thinking?”

There is strong evidence that Gorbachev and his coterie of new thinkers had grown skeptical of the utility of military force prior to enduring the quagmire in Afghanistan. Few of them supported the initial decision to intervene in that conflict. According to Shevardnadze, he and Gorbachev expressed mutual concern at the time that Brezhnev had made a grave mistake.¹³ They suspected that propping up a new regime would entail a massive ongoing Soviet military commitment. Most new thinkers believed that the costs of the campaign would far outweigh the benefits. Even if the invasion succeeded in preserving a socialist “ally,” they anticipated that the Soviet Union would sacrifice the respect and goodwill of many non-aligned states—not to mention their socialist satellites. Perhaps more importantly, they feared that the Soviet invasion

Russia and the Soviet Union,” *International Organization* 49, no. 1 (1995): 1–38; Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Matthew Evangelista, “Norms, Heresthetics, and the End of the Cold War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 1 (2001): 5–35; Robert G. Herman, “Identity, Norms, and National Security: The Soviet Foreign Policy Revolution and the End of the Cold War,” in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter G. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 271–316; Robert G. Herman, “Ideas, Identity, and Redefinition of Interests: The Political and Intellectual Origins of the Soviet Foreign Policy Revolution” (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1996); Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition?: The Rise, Fall, and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Military Interventionism, 1973-1996* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999); Robert English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Robert D. English, “Power, Ideas, and New Evidence on the Cold War’s End: A Reply to Brooks and Wohlforth,” *International Security* 26, no. 4 (2002): 70–92; Robert English, “The Sociology of New Thinking: Elites, Identity Change, and the End of the Cold War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 2 (2005).

¹³ Eduard Shevardnadze, *The Future Belongs to Freedom* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 26; Such claims should be viewed with some skepticism, however. As Pavel Palazchenko argued in 1997, “Today everyone is portraying himself as a ‘principled opponent’ of that action from the very outset, but I believe that they are less than sincere. As I remember, many people in the Soviet Union, including some of my friends, reacted at best with indifference. Some believed nothing terrible was happening, and some, for no particular reason, even supported the invasion.” Pavel Palazchenko, *My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze: The Memoir of a Soviet Interpreter* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 11.

would preclude any possibility of reinvigorating détente and controlling the arms race—at least in the short-term.¹⁴

Moreover, skepticism regarding the invasion of Afghanistan extended beyond a narrow circle of new thinkers; it pervaded the upper echelons of the Soviet political-military establishment.¹⁵ There was near universal agreement that “under no circumstances can we lose Afghanistan.” Yet direct military intervention elicited little enthusiasm when the Politburo first discussed the prospect in the midst of the Herat rebellion in March 1979. Prime Minister Aleksei Kosygin and CC Secretary Andrei Kirilenko adamantly opposed such an enterprise. Kirilenko, in particular, presciently cautioned that such a campaign would require waging war “in significant part against the people.” For the most part, the Politburo shared that concern. They recognized, as Andropov highlighted, that “the people do not support the government of Taraki. In such a situation, tanks and armored cars can’t save anything.” As Gromyko warned, Soviet intervention would consequently entail “more minuses than pluses:” since the United States would inevitably perceive Soviet intervention as an act of aggression, it would jeopardize any

¹⁴ See the excerpts from a report produced by the Institute on the Economy of the World Socialist System (IEMSS) entitled “Some Considerations of the Foreign Policy Results of the 1970s (Main Points),” January 20, 1980, quoted in: English, *Russia and the Idea of the West*, 162.

¹⁵ As I noted in the previous chapter, more detailed accounts of the political situation in Afghanistan, and the considerations that motivated Soviet decision-makers can be found in: Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*; Odd Arne Westad, “The Road to Kabul: Soviet Policy on Afghanistan, 1978-79,” in *The Fall of Détente: Soviet-American Relations during the Carter Years*, ed. Odd Arne Westad (Boston: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), 118–48; Odd Arne Westad, “Concerning the Situation in ‘A’: New Russian Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 8/9 (Winter /1997 1996): 128–32; Raymond L. Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, Revised Edition (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1994), 977–1075; and Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

hope of reinvigorating détente, completing the SALT II process, or arranging a summit meeting with President Carter.¹⁶

In September, however, Hafizullah Amin's assassination of Nur Muhammad Taraki prompted a powerful troika—Ustinov, Andropov, Gromyko—to reconsider the decision against intervention. Following the coup, that troika comprised the heart of a small group that assumed responsibility for advising the Politburo on Afghanistan.¹⁷ Ustinov, in particular, capitalized on that position to promote full-scale intervention; and Andropov and Gromyko followed his lead.

Ustinov had long been more inclined to intervene than his colleagues, but the conversion of Andropov and Gromyko is more difficult to understand. A number of factors apparently pushed them toward intervention. As Westad has suggested, their renewed enthusiasm for such a course was probably due, at least in part, to the belief that adopting a resolute stance vis-à-vis Afghanistan was essential in the competition to succeed Brezhnev, whose death appeared ever more imminent. At the same time, reports that Amin, who the Soviets already distrusted, was communicating with American CIA officials increased apprehensions that the new regime might defect from the Soviet camp and align with the U.S. Moreover, by the fall of 1979 détente appeared to be dead; the Soviets consequently no longer needed to concern themselves with some of the repercussions that had given Gromyko pause in the spring.¹⁸

Even after the troika had decided to intervene, however, the military leadership remained wary. They shared the new thinkers' concern that a Soviet invasion would alienate much of the third-world, whose sympathy was a prime element of East-West competition. More importantly,

¹⁶ All of the quotations in this paragraph are from: Politburo Meeting, March 17, 1979. In Odd Arne Westad, ed., *The Fall of Détente: Soviet-American Relations during the Carter Years* (Boston: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), 287–310.

¹⁷ Westad, "The Road to Kabul: Soviet Policy on Afghanistan, 1978-79," 130, 132.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 127, 130–134.

though, top military officials recognized the operational challenges inherent in such a campaign. Nikolai Ogarkov, Chief of the General Staff, warned that Soviet “troops did not know the specific circumstances of Afghanistan very well—the tribal relations, Islam, and various other things would put [Soviet] troops in a very difficult situation.”¹⁹ The military recognized that forces which had been equipped and trained for a potential conflict in Central Europe were ill-prepared for a counter-insurgency campaign in the mountains of Afghanistan.²⁰

Yet those perspectives counted for little. Once they had made up their minds to intervene, the troika brooked little dissent. Ustinov dressed down the top brass after they had the temerity to submit a report arguing against intervention. “Since when is the military dictating our policies?” he demanded, before sending them off to get down to work planning the operation.²¹ Moreover, to preempt any further opposition from anti-interventionists, the troika secured Brezhnev’s imprimatur on their intervention plans on December 8—four days before presenting them to the Politburo for approval.²²

The invasion of Afghanistan was thus not indicative of widespread confidence in the utility of military force for solving international problems. If anything, it was a reflection of the paranoia of an isolated gerontocracy. Due to the centralized nature of the Soviet system, however, they had no difficulty getting the Politburo to rubber-stamp their decision to intervene.

¹⁹ Quoted in Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 22–23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev*, 26.

²² Brezhnev evidently viewed Amin’s assassination of Taraki as a personal affront. Westad cites General Aleksandr Liakhovskii as suggesting that after Amin’s coup “Brezhnev’s attitude to the entire issue had changed. He could not forgive Amin, because Brezhnev had personally assured Taraki that he would be able to help him. And then they disregarded Brezhnev completely and murdered Taraki. Brezhnev used to say, ‘how should the world be able to believe what Brezhnev says, if his words do not count in Afghanistan.’” Westad, “The Road to Kabul: Soviet Policy on Afghanistan, 1978-79,” 134, 136.

Nevertheless, many new thinkers had already rejected the class-based confrontational approach to international politics that had characterized Soviet foreign policy since the onset of the Cold War. The “thaw” that occurred following the death of Stalin had provided Soviet intellectuals the opportunity to begin questioning the ways and means of Soviet policy (if not the socialist foundations upon which those policies rested). Moreover, the subsequent creation of a broad array of new research centers provided incubators in which the seeds of new thinking germinated.²³ In 1956, the Institute of World Economy and World Politics, which Stalin had shut down, was resurrected as the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO). Eleven years later, Georgy Arbatov, who had worked as a researcher at IMEMO and later served as one of Gorbachev’s principal foreign policy advisors, became the founding director of the Institute for the Study of the USA and Canada (ISKAN).²⁴ A few years later, Yuri Andropov tasked Oleg Bogomolov with leading the newly created Institute of the Economics of the World Socialist System (IEMSS). Those institutes truly constituted “haven[s] for thinking the unthinkable.”²⁵ Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, researchers challenged the prevailing conception of international politics as a zero-sum competition between opposing ideologies. They argued instead that the inherent interdependence, which characterizes the international system, required cooperation in pursuit of common interests. Many ultimately concluded that class interests should be subordinated to universal values.

²³ For detailed analysis of the early origins of new thinking, particularly the important role of Soviet research institutes, see: English, *Russia and the Idea of the West*, 70–76; Checkel, *Ideas and International Political Change*, 18–19, 31–43, 78, and *passim*.

²⁴ The institute was initially named the Institute for the Study of the USA. See: Georgy A. Arbatov, *The System: An Insider’s Life in Soviet Politics* (New York: Times Books, 1992).

²⁵ Jonathan Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 369.

The research institutes would likely not have fostered such dramatic reassessments, however, if not for the fact that scholars were gradually afforded much greater exposure to the outside world (particularly the West). Beginning in the thaw era, government officials and scholars gained access to information and ideas from abroad that had been severely restricted under Stalin. Newspapers, magazines, and books; academic journals, almanacs, and statistical yearbooks; the flood of new information was mother's milk to fertile minds that had hitherto been weaned on a limited diet of anti-imperialist, socialist dogma. Even more important, though, were the increasing opportunities to travel abroad, which Soviet officials and intellectuals took advantage of throughout the 1960s and 70s.²⁶

Of particular note, a number of Gorbachev's principal advisors had cut their intellectual teeth in 1960s Prague, working for the progressive journal *Problemy Mira i Sotsializma*. Bogomolov, Arbatov, Chernyaev, Georgy Shakhnazarov—all of them imbibed the liberal ideas that constituted the zeitgeist of the time and place. So for them, the Prague Spring represented a fascinating natural experiment.²⁷ As one of them noted, “the political and economic system [the Czechs] were trying to transform had been created as the mirror image of the [Soviet system]. Therefore, Czechoslovakia's experience [was] transferable to [the Soviet Union].”²⁸ In other words, if the Czech reforms proved successful, there would be strong empirical justification for implementing similar policy innovations in the Soviet Union.

²⁶ English, *Russia and the Idea of the West*, 66, 74–75, 82, 89, 103–107, 124–125, 150–152, and passim.

²⁷ The Prague Spring also transfixed Soviet society more broadly, the great majority of whom had not had the opportunity to travel outside the Soviet Union. See: *Ibid.*, 110–111; and Palazchenko, *My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze*, 3–4.

²⁸ Quoted in Ludmilla Alexeyeva and Paul Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), 210.

The Prague clique (as well as the broader Soviet intelligentsia) therefore viewed the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia as “madness...a crime.”²⁹ Their own government had bludgeoned one of its supposed allies. And for what? For daring to experiment with social and economic reforms—the sort of policies that they had begun to believe could potentially drag the Soviet Union out of the socio-economic stagnation induced by Stalinism. The intelligentsia rejected the Kremlin’s justifications for the invasion—the same justifications that had generally been accepted twelve years earlier following the invasion of Hungary. By 1968, they had read, and heard, and seen too much. They knew the Prague Spring was an organic reform movement, not some western plot to subvert communism and sow discord within the eastern bloc. They saw the invasion for what it was: a violent act of Soviet imperialism.

Of course, that was by no means a universal interpretation. To much of Soviet officialdom, the successful interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia proved that military force could be very useful in combating subversive elements within the communist bloc and preserving friendly regimes on the periphery of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the invasion of Czechoslovakia inaugurated a conservative reaction against reform-minded intellectuals in the Soviet Union. To the Brezhnev regime, the Prague Spring was a forewarning of the ominous consequences of too much intellectual freedom. The essential point, however, is that important elements of Soviet society had already begun questioning the foundations and tenets of “old thinking.” For many of them, Moscow’s successful suppression of the Prague Spring engendered a strong aversion to military force long before the disastrous intervention in Afghanistan.

²⁹ Quoted from Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev*, 3 n.2. Also see English, *Russia and the Idea of the West*, 107–115.

Turnover

Although many of the ideas that constituted new thinking developed in the 1960s and 1970s, those ideas did not exert much influence over Soviet foreign policy until the mid-1980s, by which time the USSR was bogged down in Afghanistan. It is therefore quite conceivable that the Soviet-Afghan War could have diminished the Soviet Union's propensity to use military force by highlighting the futility of a confrontational, militaristic approach to international politics in which the Kremlin treated every international challenge as part of a zero-sum competition with the United States. In other words, the Afghanistan quagmire could have catalyzed the implementation of new thinking. By discrediting old thinking (and the conservative officials who clung to such beliefs), the quagmire might have served to empower new thinkers to redefine Soviet foreign policy.³⁰

There is much reason to doubt that the Afghanistan quagmire served as such a catalyst, however. To begin, the gradual deterioration of the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan did little to undermine the authority of Brezhnev's powerful inner circle, which bore sole responsibility for the ill-conceived intervention. In fact, the Reagan administration's bellicose response to the Soviet gambit played into the hands of those Politburo members who maintained a Manichean conception of international politics. They seized upon the American military buildup as justification for increases in the already-bloated Soviet military budget. As Brezhnev grew progressively more infirm, they sought to suppress any advocacy of economic or political reform.³¹

³⁰ Jeffrey Checkel has suggested that in the 1980s international pressures and domestic political processes created a window of opportunity for policy entrepreneurs to promote ideas that they had developed throughout the 1970s. For discussion of policy entrepreneurs and windows of opportunity, see: Checkel, *Ideas and International Political Change*, 8–11, 19–20, 27, 76, 85–88, 90–99; and Stein, "Political Learning by Doing," 178.

³¹ English, *Russia and the Idea of the West*, 169–172.

Moreover, following Brezhnev's death in 1983, the Politburo selected Yuri Andropov, the head of the KGB, to succeed him. The promotion of a core member of the old guard can certainly not be interpreted as any sort of repudiation of the approach to foreign policy that had embroiled the Soviet Union in the Afghanistan quagmire. After all, Andropov was one of the principal architects of the ill-fated intervention. He was by no means as dogmatic as some of his colleagues and rivals, particularly Ustinov. Throughout his career, he had promoted and protected quite a number of more liberal-minded subordinates. In his brief tenure as the General Secretary of the CPSU, he also initiated a number of modest reforms; yet those reforms were restricted almost exclusively to domestic policy. Andropov evinced little inclination either to expedite the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan or to adopt a less confrontational, more cooperative foreign policy in general. As Gorbachev observed, "Andropov always remained a man of his time, and was one of those who were unable to break through the barriers of old ideas and values."³² The same could be said of Konstantin Chernenko. In selecting him to succeed Andropov, who died after only fifteen months in office, the Politburo opted for an unimaginative, dogmatic, wheezing emphysemic. The Afghanistan quagmire had still not produced any significant shift in the balance of power within the politburo in favor of reform.

Upon Chernenko's death, however, the Politburo finally plumped for a leader who was receptive to the progressive ideas that had been developing over the previous decades. Unlike his predecessors, Gorbachev actively solicited the advice of analysts at the more progressive Soviet research institutes. In fact, he promoted a coterie of supporters, in both official and unofficial capacities, who were committed to implementing new thinking in Soviet foreign policy—most notably Shevardnadze, Yakovlev, Primakov, Arbatov, Shakhnazarov, and Chernyaev. Again, however, it seems doubtful that the Afghanistan quagmire contributed

³² Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 153.

significantly to Gorbachev's ascension to leadership and the concomitant empowerment of new thinking. By all accounts, generational concerns weighed more heavily on Politburo members than did specific policy issues. In less than two-and-a-half years, three successive General Secretaries had died. For most of the previous decade, infirmity had prevented those leaders from discharging their responsibilities with much verve or perspicacity. By 1985, the Politburo therefore decided to face up to the inevitable; it was time to pass the leadership reins to the next generation.

If disillusionment with the ongoing quagmire had contributed significantly to Gorbachev's selection, one would have expected him to initiate an expeditious withdrawal from Afghanistan. Yet the new General Secretary did nothing of the sort. Instead, he opted to escalate the conflict. That decision is certainly puzzling. As indicated above, Gorbachev had believed from the outset that the intervention was a fool's errand. There is also substantial evidence that by the end of 1985 he had concluded that withdrawal was imperative.³³ Gorbachev viewed the conflict as a "bleeding wound." After meeting with Karmal in the autumn of 1985, he reported to the Politburo that "With or without Karmal's consent, we'll take a firm line on the matter of our rapid withdrawal from Afghanistan."³⁴ Why, then, did it take the Soviet Union four years to accomplish that objective?

The most plausible explanation for the prolonged withdrawal is that Gorbachev remained torn between old and new thinking. During a Politburo meeting on November 13, 1986, for instance, he warned: "We don't want the United States to move in with their bases."³⁵ Although

³³ Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev*, 28.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 90. According to Chernyaev "the Afghan problem, as in the beginning of that adventure, was still seen primarily in terms of 'global confrontation' and only secondarily in light of the 'new thinking.'"

Gorbachev perceived the futility of the Afghanistan conflict, he still felt compelled to hold the line against American encroachment. He did not care much if Afghanistan remained socialist, just so long as it was neutral. But he clearly felt that he could not permit the establishment of an American foothold on the Soviet Union's southern frontier. In spite of that lingering tendency to think in terms of East-West competition, however, Gorbachev was receptive to new conceptions of Soviet security. As Janice Gross Stein has argued, "Gorbachev's commitment to fundamental change at home, along with an absence of deeply embedded constructs about security, both motivated and permitted him to learn about security."³⁶

The key point is that the Afghanistan quagmire did not catalyze the promotion of a new leader committed to adopting a more cooperative, less militaristic approach to international politics. During the course of the ten-year conflict, the death of three general secretaries provided opportunities for the Politburo to select a new leader. On the first two occasions, the old guard promoted elder statesmen from within their own ranks—men who demonstrated little inclination to alter the foreign policy trajectory they had inherited from Brezhnev. In promoting Gorbachev on the third occasion, the Politburo chose a man who turned out to be a true reformer. But that selection hardly constituted a mandate for the reconceptualization of Soviet foreign policy. For despite his personal inclination to quit Afghanistan, Gorbachev experienced difficulty freeing himself from the shackles of the old thinking.

Economic Considerations

Although Gorbachev clearly regarded the Afghanistan quagmire as a strategic mistake, economic factors motivated his implementation of new thinking—particularly the decision not to

³⁶ Stein, "Political Learning by Doing," 175.

intervene in Eastern Europe—to a much greater extent. That is by no means a novel assertion. A number of scholars have attributed the Soviet Union’s dramatic foreign policy shift to economic imperative: the Soviet economy was in such dire straits that the Kremlin had little choice but to pursue a reduction in East-West tensions in order to escape from the senseless arms race, which was bleeding the Soviet Union white. Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, for instance, have argued that “the intellectual changes that accompanied the reorientation of Soviet foreign policy were largely endogenous to the country’s relative decline. In particular, the mounting material costs of the old Soviet foreign policy created pressure to move toward retrenchment.”³⁷

There is certainly no denying that the Soviet Union had stagnated during the Brezhnev era. After growing impressively in the 1950s, the Soviet economy lost steam throughout the 1960s and 1970s. After a period of impressive growth, a regression to more modest economic growth rates would not have been all that surprising. By the 1980s, however, the Soviet economy had actually begun retracting. Due to a series of bad harvests, agricultural output declined for three consecutive years from 1979-1981.³⁸ Moreover, the average annual growth rate of per capita consumption had slowed considerably from 4.2 per cent in the 1950s to .9 per cent in the early 1980s. Since increases in the incomes of the Soviet populace had outpaced the increases in the

³⁷ Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas,” *International Security* 25, no. 3 (January 2000): 30. For additional materialist accounts that attribute Gorbachev’s implementation of new thinking to Soviet economic stagnation and geopolitical over-extension, see: William C. Wohlforth, “Realism and the End of the Cold War,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994): 91–129; Randall L. Schweller and William C. Wohlforth, “Power Test: Evaluating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War,” *Security Studies* 9, no. 3 (2000): 60–107; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “From Old Thinking to New Thinking in Qualitative Research,” *International Security* 26, no. 4 (2002): 93–111; Dale C. Copeland, “Trade Expectations and the Outbreak of Peace: Détente 1970–74 and the End of the Cold War 1985–91,” *Security Studies* 9, no. 1–2 (1999): 15–58.

³⁸ Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich, “Overview,” in *The Disintegration of the Soviet Economic System*, ed. Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich (New York: Routledge, 1992), 8, 14.

value of goods sold through the retail network, the consumer market was plagued by shortages, queuing, and the emergence of alternative distribution channels (black markets).³⁹

Those problems certainly did not necessitate dramatic reform, however.⁴⁰ Andropov succeeded in spurring modest economic growth by restoring party and workplace discipline, which had eroded dramatically under Brezhnev. He replaced underperforming ministers in a number of different economic sectors, and empowered them to clean house within their respective domains. Those moves effected a substantial increase in labor productivity. As a result, national income increased by 11 percent from 1983 to 1988.⁴¹ That modest recovery indicates that the Soviet leadership could have managed its economic difficulties by instituting modest organizational and administrative refinements of the economic command system. In other words, “muddling through” was a viable option. Nor was that the only alternative available to the Soviet leadership. The Chinese reform model suggests that the Soviets could have introduced liberal economic reforms without relinquishing political authority—at home or abroad.⁴² Economic reform did not require the dramatic reformulation of Soviet foreign policy. It certainly seems doubtful that economic woes would have compelled other leaders to redefine

³⁹ Gertrude Schroeder, “Soviet Consumption in the 1980s: A Tale of Woe,” in *The Disintegration of the Soviet Economic System*, ed. Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich (New York: Routledge, 1992), 91, 95; Michael Ellman, “Money in the 1980s: From Disequilibrium to Collaps,” ed. Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich (New York: Routledge, 1992), 106, 112–113.

⁴⁰ A number of previous scholars have detailed alternative policies that the Soviets could have adopted in response to Soviet economic stagnation. See: Stein, “Political Learning by Doing,” 158–159; Herman, “Ideas, Identity, and Redefinition of Interests: The Political and Intellectual Origins of the Soviet Foreign Policy Revolution”; Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, “Shortcut to Greatness: The New Thinking and the Revolution in Soviet Foreign Policy,” *International Organization* 57, no. 01 (2003): 82–83.

⁴¹ Grigorii Khanin, “Economic Growth in the 1980s,” ed. Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich (New York: Routledge, 1992), 80–81.

⁴² Bennett, “The Guns That Didn’t Smoke,” 86.

Soviet foreign policy to the extent that Gorbachev did.⁴³ Indeed, it is difficult to imagine Andropov or Chernenko doing so if either had survived the 1980s.

Yet economic considerations certainly fostered Gorbachev's adoption (and implementation) of more progressive foreign policy concepts. To be sure, new thinking had begun to influence Gorbachev before he had come to perceive Soviet economic stagnation as a crisis in need of dramatic reform.⁴⁴ As Larson and Shevchenko have documented, new thinking began to influence Soviet foreign policy before Gorbachev launched the dramatic domestic reforms that constituted perestroika.⁴⁵ In his first couple years in office, Gorbachev attempted to reinvigorate the Soviet economy through an "acceleration" program, which built upon the modest reforms that Andropov had introduced. For instance, the 5-year plan adopted at the 27th Party Congress in 1986 sought to jump-start the Soviet economy through a substantial expansion of machine-building. Since more than 60 per cent of Soviet machine-building served the military at the time, Gorbachev's acceleration constituted an ongoing commitment to traditional command-administrative methods, in which the military enjoyed pride of place.⁴⁶ Even as Gorbachev persisted with those tired economic methods, however, elements of new thinking emerged in Soviet foreign policy. In his report to the 27th CPSU Congress in February 1986, Gorbachev enunciated a number of the key principles that constituted the foundation of new thinking: the necessity of forging cooperative solutions to global challenges; the limited utility of military

⁴³ Ellman and Kontorovich, "Overview," 15, 31.

⁴⁴ As Ellman and Kontorovich have explained, the economic situation in the USSR in the early 1980s was not a crisis. Objectively, the situation was not nearly as dire as the Soviet economic crisis of 1931-3, or the recession in Poland in 1979-82. Eventually, however, "although the actual international situation, judged by the crisis of 1931-3 or the experiences of other countries at certain periods, was not so bad, the Soviet leaders felt impelled to launch radical policy initiatives." Ibid., 17.

⁴⁵ Larson and Shevchenko, "Shortcut to Greatness," 81. Also see Checkel, *Ideas and International Political Change*, 79.

⁴⁶ Ellman and Kontorovich, "Overview," 19.

force for ensuring security; the primacy of political methods for achieving *mutual* security vis-à-vis the United States. More significantly, the new general secretary backed those deeds up with words. In April of 1985, he halted the deployment of SS-20s. A few months later, in August, he declared a unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing.

As the acceleration program proved a failure, however, Gorbachev came to believe that reinvigorating the Soviet economy required new thinking.⁴⁷ The general secretary grew convinced that domestic economic reform could not (and should not) be compartmentalized from foreign policy. From the outset of his tenure, Gorbachev viewed international politics through the lens of the Soviet Union's economic predicament. As he suggested in an interview with *Time* magazine in September 1985, "somebody said that foreign policy is a continuation of domestic policy. If that is so, then I ask you to ponder one thing: if we in the Soviet Union are setting ourselves such truly grandiose plans in the domestic sphere, then what are the external conditions that we need to be able to fulfill those domestic plans?"⁴⁸ Although Gorbachev refrained from answering that question, his position was fairly clear: the Soviet Union required respite from the arms race. He clearly believed that the Soviet Union was "in this fix thanks to the priority awarded the defense industry."⁴⁹ As he saw it, the arms race was siphoning resources away from more productive activities—particularly the development of civilian technology. He recognized that "a situation of this sort does not exist in any other country—

⁴⁷ Explaining why Gorbachev believed that economic reform required new thinking in foreign policy is beyond the scope of this chapter. My goal is merely to demonstrate that economic concerns motivated Gorbachev to implement new thinking to a much greater extent than did the Afghanistan quagmire. For analyses of why Gorbachev adopted new thinking, rather than a more limited alternative economic reform agenda, see: Larson and Shevchenko, "Shortcut to Greatness."

⁴⁸ "An Interview with Mikhail Gorbachev," *Time*, September 9, 1985, 29.

⁴⁹ Gorbachev statement to the Politburo, April 1986, quoted in Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev*, 64.

perhaps only in poor, destitute countries where half of their budget goes for military spending.”⁵⁰ The traditional quest for strategic parity was therefore an illusion. Gorbachev was convinced that “if we start counting—they have a rifle, we have a rifle—then we can forget about building socialism.”⁵¹ Moreover, it wasn’t just a matter of money. As he saw it, the Soviet Union would be unable to capitalize on the computing revolution (in which the West was already far ahead) if the army “still gets the best scientific and technical talent.”⁵² Putting the Soviet domestic house in order therefore required ending the counterproductive arms race.⁵³

Of course, not everyone shared that conviction. Quite a number of high-ranking officials (particularly within the military-industrial complex) remained in thrall to old thinking. Military officials continued to insist that the insidious designs of western imperialism could only be held at bay by strengthening Soviet armed forces.⁵⁴ As Dmitri Volkogonov, director of the Defense Ministry’s Military Historical Institute, cautioned, “Our political resolve to meet an encroachment on the security of the Soviet nation and its allies with a shattering retaliatory strike is what restrains them from taking that last militaristic step. Only our resoluteness, multiplied by defensive might, deters those who have not learned the lessons of past wars.”⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Doc. 35: Transcript of CC CPSU Politburo Session, December 27-28, 1988, in Savranskaya, Blanton, and Zubok, *Masterpieces of History*, 340.

⁵¹ Doc. 12: Notes of CC CPSU Politburo Session, May 8, 1987, in *ibid.*, 251.

⁵² Gorbachev quoted in Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev*, 194.

⁵³ In October 1988, Gorbachev also indicated to his foreign policy advisors that he wanted to affirm in his now-famous U.N. speech “that the new thinking, our new foreign policy, is fully connected with perestroika and with objective processes within the country.” See Doc. 31: Notes of a Meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Foreign Policy Advisers, October 31, 1988, in Savranskaya, Blanton, and Zubok, *Masterpieces of History*, 311.

⁵⁴ Thomas M. Nichols, *The Sacred Cause: Civil-Military Conflict over Soviet National Security, 1917-1992* (Cornell University Press, 1993), 135–139, 147–149, 156–159, 171–2, 181–4, 191–5, and *passim*.

⁵⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 157.

But Gorbachev was able to use his power of appointment to marginalize the more conservative opponents of new thinking. In 1987, the general secretary seized on the infamous Rust affair as an opportunity to begin culling the senior ranks of the military establishment.⁵⁶ He swiftly dismissed Marshal Sokolov (an inveterate opponent of new thinking) as well as a number of air defense officers, including Aleksandr Koldunov, Chief Marshal of Aviation. In September of the next year, following the 19th Party Conference, Gorbachev secured the “resignation” of four of the foremost opponents of new thinking within the Politburo: Andrei Gromyko, Mikhail Solomentsev, Vladimir Dolgykh, and Pyotr Demichev. Perhaps more importantly, Viktor Chebrikov was removed as head of the KGB, and Yegor Ligachev was relieved of responsibility for ideology and given charge of an agricultural commission. At about the same time, Yakovlev was given command of a new commission for international affairs, which supervised the international department, of which Valentin Falin became head.⁵⁷

As reform movements began gaining momentum in Eastern Europe, Gorbachev had thus consolidated authority over Soviet foreign policy in the hands of new thinkers who shared his commitment to strategic retrenchment.⁵⁸ The unilateral troop withdrawals, which Gorbachev announced at the United Nations, would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier. By 1988, however, there was fairly broad agreement amongst top foreign policy officials that such retrenchment was indispensable to the ultimate success of perestroika. They recognized that due

⁵⁶ On May 28, 1987, Mathias Rust, an 18-year-old amateur pilot from West Germany, landed a Cessna airplane in Moscow’s Red square. The incident was a major embarrassment of Soviet air defenses. As Nichols notes, in his first few years in office, “Gorbachev had not forced turnover among senior military positions with the same vengeance he had visited on civilian administrative elites, which approached 50 percent in many areas.” But following the Rust affair, Gorbachev cleaned house. *Ibid.*, 142–144, 185.

⁵⁷ Jacques Lévesque, *The Enigma of 1989: The USSR and the Liberation of Eastern Europe*, trans. Keith Martin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 77.

⁵⁸ There is broad agreement that the consolidation of Gorbachev’s authority was crucial to the transformation of Soviet policy toward Eastern Europe. See: Kramer, “The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 1),” 183.

to the massive mistrust, which had long characterized East-West relations, the Soviet Union would have to initiate such a retrenchment unilaterally. As Shakhnazarov said, “only our concrete steps to reduce armaments will trigger corresponding measures in the West.”⁵⁹ Unlike in the past, the prospect of unilateral disarmament did not trouble the Gorbachev team; they were confident that such “action, without doubt, will be met with enthusiasm in our own country, primarily because it will mean a substantial savings of the resources that we now need so much.”⁶⁰

Although one of Gorbachev’s primary objectives, in achieving a détente with the United States, was to establish a benign international environment that would allow perestroika to flourish at home, many new thinkers recognized that the strain of the military-industrial complex extended beyond the Soviet Union. In the spring of 1988, as turmoil was bubbling up throughout the Eastern bloc, Shakhnazarov advised:

Military expenditures in Eastern Europe (albeit according to Western data) are twice as high per capita as in the majority of NATO countries. Our friends understandably cannot afford to carry this burden any further, particularly under pre-crisis economic conditions in almost every [East European] country. Which is more profitable for us: that they continue their arms build-up and march towards economic disaster or, on the other hand, that they save on military expenditures and improve their economic situation, reinforcing de facto, the security of the commonwealth?⁶¹

The answer was clear: perestroika was necessary throughout the Eastern bloc, not just the Soviet Union itself. For many new thinkers had come to regard the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe as

⁵⁹ Doc. 24: Comments from Georgy Shakhnazarov on Viktor Kulikov’s Report at the Warsaw Treaty PCC, May 25, 1988, in Savranskaya, Blanton, and Zubok, *Masterpieces of History*, 279.

⁶⁰ Doc. 93: Memorandum from Georgy Shakhnazarov to Mikhail Gorbachev regarding Military Détente in Europe, October 14, 1989. In preparing for his UN speech, Gorbachev suggested along similar lines, “people will accept the idea of unilateral disarmament in the event that the international situation changes. However, we are already working in this direction. We have just given 6 billion rubles for public health—precisely by cutting military expenditures.” See Doc. 31: Notes of a Meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Foreign Policy Advisers, October 31, 1988. Both documents printed in *ibid.*, 312, 556.

⁶¹ Doc. 24: Comments from Georgy Shakhnazarov on Viktor Kulikov’s Report at the Warsaw Treaty PCC, May 25, 1988, in *ibid.*, 278.

a massive economic burden. In early March 1988, Gorbachev lamented that “our [foreign] assistance alone takes 41 billion rubles annually from our budget.” To his mind, the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) was bankrupt. As he said, “we almost have no trade, only primitive exchange...In the economic sense, socialism has not passed the test of practice.”⁶² Many new thinkers viewed their East European comrades as parasites, who sucked raw materials from the Soviet Union, sold them on to Western Europe for a profit, and excreted shoddy manufactured products back to the USSR.⁶³ Moreover, they recognized that such a relationship was unsustainable.⁶⁴ For perestroika to succeed, structural economic reforms would have to be implemented throughout the Eastern bloc—not just the Soviet Union.⁶⁵

Many new thinkers therefore viewed socio-economic reform throughout Eastern Europe not as a threat, but a necessity. In February 1989, a trenchant IEMSS memorandum insisted, “Even if some decline of Soviet influence in Eastern European affairs takes place, this would not cause us fatal damage but, perhaps on the contrary, resulting from self-limitation, it would place our means in rational harmony with our capabilities.” For the introduction of market reforms would supposedly facilitate the integration of Eastern bloc economies with the European common market—a process which would “help to overcome the elements of parasitism in their economic relations with the USSR.”⁶⁶ Rather than sucking the USSR dry, the most sanguine analysts

⁶² Doc. 19: Notes of CC CPSU Politburo Session, March 10, 1988, in *ibid.*, 265–7.

⁶³ Doc. 51: Notes of Mikhail Gorbachev’s Meeting with Soviet Ambassadors to Socialist Countries, March 3, 1989, in *ibid.*, 417.

⁶⁴ Doc. 19: Notes of CC CPSU Politburo Session, March 10, 1988; and Doc. 97: Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Egon Krenz, November 1, 1989, in *ibid.*, 265–7, 571.

⁶⁵ Doc. 42: Memorandum from the Bogomolov Institute, “Changes in Eastern Europe and their Impact on the USSR,” February 1989, in *ibid.*, 381.

⁶⁶ Doc. 42: Memorandum from the Bogomolov Institute, “Changes in Eastern Europe and their Impact on the USSR,” February 1989, in *ibid.*, 377–9.

hoped that their erstwhile parasites could serve as bridges, facilitating Soviet access to western markets. Such considerations convinced Gorbachev that underwriting the perpetuation of communism in Eastern Europe with Soviet military force was “an illusion...it would mean carrying them on our back.”⁶⁷

Gorbachev certainly did not set out to preside over the dissolution of communism in Eastern Europe, however. Quite to the contrary, he sought to uphold communist authority through the renewal of socialism. By 1988, the Gorbachev team had grown convinced that the economic stagnation, which persisted throughout the Eastern bloc, was symptomatic of severe structural flaws within the communist socio-economic system. As Shakhnazarov argued:

The very similarity of the symptoms of the disease testifies to the fact that its catalyst is not some kind of malignant germ that had managed to penetrate their lowered defenses, but factors rooted in the very economic and political model of socialism as it has evolved over here and had been transferred with minor modifications to the soil of the countries that embarked on the path of socialism in the post-war period.⁶⁸

On the basis of that diagnosis, the Gorbachev team concluded that dramatic political and economic reform was indispensable to the preservation of communist rule—not just in the Soviet Union, but throughout Eastern Europe.⁶⁹ Rather naively, they sought to reinvent the entire communist system. That, in their minds, was “the super-task of *perestroika*.”⁷⁰

By the spring of 1989, however, it was clear that the fraternal regimes in Eastern Europe would not be able to preserve their authority through the introduction of limited political and

⁶⁷ Doc. 7: Notes of CC CPSU Politburo Session, July 3, 1986, in *ibid.*, 234.

⁶⁸ Doc. 29: Preparatory Notes from Georgy Shakhnazarov for Mikhail Gorbachev for CC CPSU Politburo Meeting, in *ibid.*, 307.

⁶⁹ Jacques Lévesque has called this the “initiativist ideology”—the belief that “a political party could regain legitimacy—on the condition that it demonstrated boldness and vision by taking the initiative in making necessary, historic changes.” Lévesque, *The Enigma of 1989*, 81.

⁷⁰ Also see Doc. 5: Notes of CC CPSU Politburo Session, June 13, 1986; Doc. 51: Notes of Mikhail Gorbachev’s Meeting with Soviet Ambassadors to Socialist Countries, March 3, 1989; Doc. 75: Notes of Meeting of Warsaw Treaty Member-States, July 8, 1989, in Savranskaya, Blanton, and Zubok, *Masterpieces of History*, 229, 416, 500.

economic reforms. Yet Gorbachev still refused to contemplate upholding communist rule with military force. He derided the “little Brezhnevs,” most notably Nikolai Ceausescu, who urged him to intervene.⁷¹ Instead, he pressured his counterparts in Eastern Europe to relinquish their monopoly on power peacefully. Toward the end of 1988, for instance, Gorbachev encouraged the Polish United Workers’ Party (PUWP) leadership to enter into roundtable discussions with Solidarity. The following June, after Solidarity achieved a decisive victory in parliamentary elections, which resulted from the roundtable talks, Gorbachev promptly endorsed the election results—and pressured the PUWP leadership to do likewise. The Soviet leader expressed strong support for the formation of a Solidarity-led government. After a Solidarity-led government ascended to power toward the end of August, Gorbachev promptly signaled his willingness to maintain cooperative relations with the new government.⁷² Likewise, he assured Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the new Polish Prime Minister, “We intend to continue developing our relations with Poland in the future, especially since we do not plan to resettle anywhere.”⁷³ As the dominoes fell and communist regimes ceded their monopoly on power—in East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria—Gorbachev proffered his support to the new non-communist regimes.

To Gorbachev, stabilizing the situation in Eastern Europe had become more important than preserving communist rule. For the general secretary viewed the turmoil in Eastern Europe as a bothersome distraction; his overriding focus was on completing the political and economic

⁷¹ Doc. 75: Notes of Meeting of Warsaw Treaty Member-States, July 8, 1989, in *ibid.*, 502.

⁷² For a more detailed discussion of Gorbachev’s role in the emergence of a Solidarity-led government in Poland, see Kramer, “The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 1),” 192–201.

⁷³ Doc. 107: Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Tadeusz Mazowiecki, November 28, 1989, in Savranskaya, Blanton, and Zubok, *Masterpieces of History*, 603.

revolution that he had launched in the Soviet Union.⁷⁴ In the crucial months at the end of 1988 and the beginning of 1989, the Gorbachev regime devoted surprisingly little attention to the reform movements that were sweeping over Eastern Europe. Even Shakhnazarov, Gorbachev's top advisor on East European affairs, was devoting more than 90 percent of his time to domestic political reforms—particularly preparations for the first elections for the Congress of People's Deputies in March.⁷⁵ That preoccupation with domestic reform rendered Gorbachev quite amenable to the ascension of non-communist regimes in Eastern Europe. He anticipated that only those new regimes could establish a modicum of political stability, which would enable him to press ahead vigorously with the (illusory) completion of perestroika.

The Afghanistan quagmire may have reinforced Gorbachev's determination to implement perestroika. The general secretary lamented the billions that the war was costing the Soviet Union each year.⁷⁶ The conflict had cost about 1.5 billion rubles in the first year of fighting, and risen about 12 percent in each subsequent year. By 1985, annual expenditures consequently amounted to nearly 2.7 billion rubles.⁷⁷ The war was certainly a costly mistake. But it is important to recognize that outlays for the war in Afghanistan constituted a small fraction of the bloated Soviet defense budget. By the turn of the 1980s, the Soviet Union was already allocating

⁷⁴ As Mark Kramer has suggested, Gorbachev sought to avoid the "Khrushchev Dilemma." That is, "He could not afford to be confronted by a violent uprising in one of the key East European countries. Only by forestalling such a disastrous turn of events would he have any hope of moving ahead with his reform program." Kramer, "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 1)," 187. ; For similar arguments, see: Lévesque, *The Enigma of 1989*, 86; and Savranskaya, "The Logic of 1989," 24–5, 29, 46.

⁷⁵ See editorial annotation in Savranskaya, Blanton, and Zubok, *Masterpieces of History*, 306.

⁷⁶ Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev*, 145; Doc. 19: Notes of CC CPSU Politburo Session, March 10, 1988, in Savranskaya, Blanton, and Zubok, *Masterpieces of History*, 267.

⁷⁷ CIA Office of Soviet Analysis (SOVA), "The Costs of Soviet Involvement in Afghanistan," February 1987. The document can be found on the website of George Washington University's National Security Archive. It is included in the September 11th Sourcebooks, Volume II: Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last War. Accessed on August 6, 2014, at <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/us.html>.

over 100 billion rubles a year to defense expenditures—a sum that amounted to nearly 15 percent of GNP.⁷⁸ In 1980, the war in Afghanistan therefore amounted to no more than 1.5 percent the Soviet defense budget; by 1985, that share was still less than 2.5 percent.⁷⁹ The cost of the war paled in comparison to Soviet procurement costs, which consumed nearly 50 percent of defense expenditure.⁸⁰ Through 1986, to put things in perspective, the cumulative cost of the Afghanistan conflict amounted to 12 billion rubles—only 3-4 billion more than the amount spent just on aircraft procurement in 1982.⁸¹

Moreover, the intervention in Afghanistan also constituted a small fraction of the cost of maintaining the Soviet empire. A 1986 RAND report estimated that in 1983 the Soviet Union's international commitments amounted to about 5 percent of GNP.⁸² Assistance to Eastern Europe constituted 52 percent of the total, with Vietnam and Cuba sucking up another 28 percent. Obligations to members of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance thus amounted to about 80 percent of the cost of the Soviet empire. The incremental cost of the war in Afghanistan, by contrast, constituted less than 5 percent of the imperial burden.⁸³

⁷⁸ Noel E. Firth and James H. Noren, *Soviet Defense Spending: A History of CIA Estimates, 1950-1990* (Texas A&M University Press, 1998), 102, 130.

⁷⁹ CIA Office of Soviet Analysis (SOVA), "The Costs of Soviet Involvement in Afghanistan."

⁸⁰ Firth and Noren, *Soviet Defense Spending*, 106.

⁸¹ CIA Office of Soviet Analysis (SOVA), "The Costs of Soviet Involvement in Afghanistan."

⁸² RAND's calculations of the costs of the Soviet empire include: trade subsidies, export credits, Soviet economic aid, military aid, the incremental costs of the war in Afghanistan, and estimates of Soviet covert activities. According to RAND, the total cost of the Soviet empire actually decreased substantially in the early 1980s, primarily due to a decrease in world oil prices. Charles Wolf, Jr. et al., *The Costs and Benefits of the Soviet Empire, 1981-1983* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, August 1986), 3, 15.

⁸³ The incremental cost of the war is defined as the amount "above what these forces would cost if their normal basing and operational modes were maintained." *Ibid.*, 3, 13, 19–20, 35.

So although Gorbachev was concerned about the cost of the war in Afghanistan, that was in some ways the least of his worries. For the war in Afghanistan had to end at some point; and when it did, the voracious military-industrial complex and the burdens of empire would continue eating up about 20 percent of Soviet GNP. Even if Brezhnev had decided against intervening in Afghanistan, and the Soviet Union had not had to foot the bill for a ten-year war, it thus seems likely that Gorbachev would have been compelled to implement new thinking, which ultimately dissuaded him from using military force to preserve the Soviet empire.⁸⁴

The Reassertion Hypothesis

Although it seems doubtful that the ignominious Soviet intervention in Afghanistan dissuaded Gorbachev from intervening in Eastern Europe, there is even less evidence that the quagmire compelled Soviet officials to reassert the power and resolve of the USSR. In the documentary record of Soviet deliberations pertaining to the mounting turmoil in Eastern Europe in 1988-1989, there is not a single instance in which a Soviet official advocated suppressing the reform movements with military force. Unlike in 1956 or 1968, even the more conservative

⁸⁴ On this point, I disagree to some extent with Bennett. Bennett has suggested: “Would Soviet leaders have threatened or used force in 1989 if their military interventions in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Third World had been unambiguously successful? In my view, the use of force in 1989 would have been far more likely in these conditions, and, at the very least, the military and the KGB would have advocated the use of force.” As other scholars have noted, however, a useful counterfactual needs to be plausible. Yet it is difficult to imagine a world in which Soviet intervention in the Third World would have been “unambiguously successful.” Such an occurrence would have required the political cleavages within the Third World to have been significantly less intractable; or military force to have been a much more effective instrument for resolving political disputes. It is much easier (and realistic) to conceptualize a world in which Brezhnev decided against intervening in Afghanistan. After all, the Brezhnev regime was hardly enthusiastic about the venture. The key decision-makers had to overcome a significant degree of reluctance—in their own minds, and throughout the Soviet political establishment—before they authorized the invasion. Given those misgivings, Brezhnev could quite plausibly have resisted the temptation to intervene in Afghanistan. See: Andrew Bennett, “The Guns That Didn’t Smoke: Ideas and the Soviet Non-Use of Force in 1989,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 2 (2005): 104; Max Weber, “Objective Possibility and Adequate Causation in Historical Explanation,” in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1949), 164–88; Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 158; Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, “Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Methodological, and Psychological Perspectives,” in *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics*, ed. Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 23–24.

officials within Gorbachev's political/military establishment—those who remained wary of American expansionism—did not perceive or attempt to portray the unrest in Eastern Europe as a “counterrevolution” orchestrated by the West. Since they recognized that the unrest sweeping over the communist bloc was an organic manifestation of domestic political grievances, not some sort of western attempt to exploit Soviet war-weariness, they did not perceive any need to prove to the United States that the Soviet Union remained willing and able to defend its vital interests with military force.

The absence of such evidence does not necessarily prove that those sentiments did not exist. After all, in strong states like the Soviet Union, policies stand little chance of being implemented without the support of the top political leadership.⁸⁵ By 1988 Gorbachev had made it abundantly clear—both at home and abroad—that he viewed military force as an ineffective and, for the most part, illegitimate political instrument. It is therefore quite plausible that more conservative Soviet officials were inclined to intervene militarily in Eastern Europe but refrained from recommending such a course because they realized that such advocacy would incur the ire of the general secretary. Particularly since Gorbachev had already promoted quite a number of progressive new thinkers, the acolytes of the old guard might well have sensed that clamoring for the use of military force would constitute an exercise in futility, which would jeopardize their career prospects.

If an impulse to reassert Soviet power and resolve had lurked in the shadows of the political establishment, however, one would expect that the sentiment would have won expression in the years that followed Gorbachev's ouster. For in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, a small army of detractors emerged, who criticized Gorbachev for all manner of sins: for implementing perestroika too quickly; for implementing perestroika too slowly; for acquiescing

⁸⁵ Bennett, “The Guns That Didn't Smoke,” 103–104.

too complacently in the unification of Germany; for failing to extract economic concessions from the West as recompense for the Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe; for bringing Soviet troops home too hastily without appropriate provisions for their reintegration into Soviet society. Yet nobody of any consequence has suggested that the Soviet Union should have forcibly suppressed the reform movements that ultimately catalyzed the disintegration of the Soviet empire.⁸⁶ Some, such as Vladimir Kryuchkov, criticized Gorbachev for allowing the ferment in Eastern Europe to materialize in the first place. Yet even participants in the August 1991 putsch, which foreshadowed Gorbachev's demise, have expressed skepticism that military force would have been of much use in 1989. As Yazov has argued, the reform movements had gained such momentum that "even if Gorbachev had wanted to use force, it is not likely that it would have been expedient."⁸⁷

Of course, such views might not have commanded such consensus if not for the political whirlwind that Gorbachev had unleashed. The dramatic political and economic reforms that Gorbachev introduced almost certainly focused Soviet attention on domestic affairs. In the spring of 1989, most Soviet citizens (particularly political elites) were much more focused on the elections for the Congress of People's Deputies than on the progress of the reform movements in Eastern Europe. In addition, the severe economic crisis, which resulted from Gorbachev's implementation of perestroika, certainly bolstered the perception that the fraternal countries in Eastern Europe constituted an economic burden, irrespective of their value as a strategic buffer. If Andropov or Chernenko had survived, and the Soviet Union had not been preoccupied with

⁸⁶ For debate over former Soviet officials' incentives to continue to conceal their opposition to Gorbachev's policies, see: English, "Power, Ideas, and New Evidence on the Cold War's End," 77–78; Brooks and Wohlforth, "From Old Thinking to New Thinking in Qualitative Research," 109–110; and Bennett, "The Guns That Didn't Smoke," 104–105.

⁸⁷ Oleg Skvortsov's interviews with Kryuchkov and Yazov are cited in Bennett, "The Guns That Didn't Smoke," 104.

the political/economic crisis that grew out of Gorbachev's implementation of perestroika, it is conceivable that more conservative officials would have been inclined to reassert the Soviet Union's determination to defend its interests in the wake of Afghanistan by cracking down on the reform movement that materialized in Poland in 1989. As history actually unfolded, however, the Afghanistan quagmire did not compel Soviet officials to reassert their determination to combat threats to their interests.

Conclusion

The Soviet decision against forcibly suppressing the reform movements that swept through Eastern Europe in 1988/1989 ultimately provides little validation for either the reassertion hypothesis or war-weariness theory. The ignominious Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan clearly did not compel Gorbachev (or more conservative officials) to reassert their determination to defend their interests by intervening in Eastern Europe. Yet there is also little compelling evidence suggesting that the Soviet-Afghan War was a crucial determinant of Gorbachev's decision against using military force. Soviet decision-makers rarely invoked the lessons of Afghanistan in their deliberations on Eastern Europe. That is probably due to the fact that Gorbachev had renounced military force as an instrument of foreign policy before those events had come to a head. Yet the ideas that motivated Gorbachev to reject the Brezhnev Doctrine—new thinking—had germinated prior to the Soviet-Afghan War. Ultimately, economic considerations probably encouraged Gorbachev to embrace those ideas to a much greater extent than the Afghanistan quagmire.

It appears that economic factors reinforced, through a sort of positive feedback loop, Gorbachev's internalization of a core set of foreign policy beliefs, which were fundamentally

different than those that had guided his predecessors—particularly with regard to the utility and legitimacy of military force. To Gorbachev (and the new thinkers around him) military force was an immoral and ineffective means of resolving political disputes. To be sure, Gorbachev had gravitated toward more progressive ideas long before he became general secretary; he was a child of the 20th Party Congress. Those ideas almost certainly informed his perception of Soviet economic stagnation as symptomatic of fundamental flaws within the communist socio-economic system. As economic and political crises intensified throughout Eastern Europe—to some extent as the result of Gorbachev’s own policies—the general secretary grew more and more convinced that the success of perestroika at home required new thinking abroad. In the end, the implementation of new thinking in foreign policy evolved into an end in itself.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Stein, “Political Learning by Doing,” 179.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The record of U.S. and Soviet foreign policy-making in the wake of the Korean, Vietnam, and Soviet-Afghan wars demonstrates that states can indeed learn from military quagmires, and that new international crises will often evoke analogical parallels to such conflicts. That is not to say, however, that foreign policy learning, analogical reasoning, or sheer war-weariness will typically diminish a great power's *general* propensity to employ military force. Quagmires are likely to exert marginal influence over states' subsequent propensities to use military force—at least in the short-term. But that influence is unlikely to be unidirectional.

The foregoing case studies suggest that previous statistical analyses may have failed to identify any systematic effect not because the war-weariness and reassertion hypotheses are invalid, but because they are context-dependent. The Korean, Vietnam wars generated competing impulses within the United States: a desire to avoid getting entangled in any new foreign adventures; and an inclination to reassert national power and resolve in order to deter rival nations from attempting to exploit any perceived war-weariness. Moreover, the two cases suggest that which of those impulses is likely to predominate depends upon the nature of the threat and the strategic stakes that inhere in specific crises. In peripheral conflicts in which vital interests are not at stake, wariness of becoming embroiled in another quagmire will prove salient. But acts of international aggression will typically motivate great powers to demonstrate their continuing determination to honor their international commitments and defend vital strategic interests, despite recent involvement in a quagmire.

Even in circumstances in which states are compelled to reassert their resolve, however, a recent quagmire will likely influence *how* they employ military force. Such traumatic experiences will, most notably, encourage leaders to employ standoff strike capabilities in lieu of

ground troops. That preference will generally prompt them to scale back the strategic objectives that they seek to achieve through the application of military force.

Learning from Quagmires

The three cases suggest that for many individuals, a costly military quagmire is insufficient to catalyze “complex learning”—the fundamental reconceptualization of foreign policy goals and objectives and the means for achieving them. Quagmires are more likely to catalyze less comprehensive “simple learning;” such conflicts will prompt many individuals to tweak their tactical approaches toward the achievement of existing foreign policy goals.¹

The Korean and Vietnam wars both elicited a great deal of such tactical learning. The Korean War prompted very few Americans to question the fundamental validity of the United States’ containment strategy. Instead, people extrapolated different tactical lessons that would facilitate the more effective implementation of that strategy: that the U.S. should enunciate explicit deterrence commitments; that it was imperative to negotiate more alliance agreements so that in future conflicts the United States could shift more of the burden onto allies; that future presidents should resist the temptation to escalate military objectives in the midst of a conflict, and avoid fighting too close to other great powers’ borders.

Likewise, Vietnam did not prompt Nixon, Kissinger, Ford, or Brzezinski to revise their core foreign policy beliefs. Their fundamental mistrust of the Soviet Union persisted, and they continued to view international politics through the lens of East-West competition. Kissinger, in

¹ As I noted in the introduction, the distinctions between simple and complex learning are elaborated in William W. Jarosz and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “The Shadow of the Past: Learning from History in National Security Decision Making,” in *Behavior, Society, and International Conflict*, vol. 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 130–131; and Joseph S. Nye, “Nuclear Learning and U.S.–Soviet Security Regimes,” *International Organization* 41, no. 03 (1987): 371–402. And for discussion of people’s inclination to tinker with tactics: Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 275.

particular, remained convinced that the United States' approach to international relations must remain founded upon *realpolitik*. That is what the Nixon Doctrine was really all about—the perpetuation of the United States' containment strategy. Fearful that Americans would be inclined to renounce their international responsibilities in the wake of Vietnam, Nixon and Kissinger sought to reassure them that in future the United States' allies would bear the primary responsibility for containing communist expansion.

Even in the wake of Vietnam, Ford, Kissinger, and Brzezinski were all compelled to check what they perceived as Soviet adventurism. Kissinger was determined to deny the Soviets a victory in Angola. Likewise, Brzezinski resolved to make sure that Moscow's intervention in Afghanistan turned into a Soviet Vietnam. Granted, neither Kissinger nor Brzezinski contemplated introducing U.S. military forces to those conflicts. But it seems doubtful that they would have been any more inclined to do so without having endured the bitter experience of Vietnam. Moreover, their handling of the *Mayaguez* and Iranian hostage crises clearly indicates that the two national security advisors remained willing to employ military force to combat aggression. Moreover, quite a number of Americans shared that inclination. For many, Vietnam did not prove that military force was an ineffective, counterproductive policy instrument; it simply demonstrated the folly of incrementalism—that is, of gradual escalation. The primary lesson they extrapolated from the quagmire was that in future conflicts the United States needed to employ force overwhelmingly and decisively. The upshot of all this is that there appears to be much truth to Tetlock's suggestion that “most learning takes place at the level of tinkering with tactics.”²

² George W. Breslauer and Philip E. Tetlock, eds., *Learning in U.S. and Soviet Foreign Policy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 28.

Carter and Gorbachev certainly did strive to redefine the fundamental tenets that guided their states' foreign policies. In the wake of Vietnam, Carter attempted to imbue U.S. foreign policy with greater morality. In his view, national security should not be secured at the expense of individuals' inherent human rights. Along similar lines, Gorbachev emphasized the primacy of universal values over more narrow class interests. Both leaders were convinced that international challenges could be resolved more profitably through negotiation and compromise rather than through intimidation and deterrence. Unfortunately, since there is little record of either leader's foreign policy beliefs prior to assuming leadership, it is difficult to determine whether their beliefs shifted significantly, or if they possessed more progressive, cooperative beliefs all along. As I have documented, however, it seems doubtful that the Soviet-Afghan War contributed significantly to Gorbachev's foreign policy revolution. Many of the ideas that constituted *new thinking* had sprouted within a number of different Soviet research institutes long before the ill-fated intervention in Afghanistan. Moreover, economic considerations motivated Gorbachev to internalize, and implement those ideas to a much greater extent than did the Afghanistan quagmire. Gorbachev's overriding objective was to reinvigorate the Soviet economy; and he grew convinced that ending the counterproductive arms race and achieving a modus vivendi with the United States was crucial to the realization of that objective.

As I noted in the introduction, however, the transformation of leaders' fundamental foreign policy beliefs is by no means a necessary condition for significant foreign policy change. Quagmires could quite conceivably diminish states' propensities to use military force by catalyzing leadership turnover. But the three cases included in this study provide scant evidence of such dynamics. To be sure, not one of the leaders who led his country into quagmire survived in office to witness the conclusion of the conflict for which he was responsible. Truman and

Johnson both abandoned their re-election campaigns after poor showings in Democratic primary elections—results that were clearly indicative of widespread public disapproval of their handling of the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. In neither case, however, did the American public ultimately elect a leader any more committed to exercising greater restraint in the conduct of foreign policy. Eisenhower was no shrinking violet. His administration seriously considered using nuclear weapons; and the new look strategy contributed quite significantly to the militarization of the Cold War.³ For his part, Nixon was more pragmatic than his reputation as an uncompromising cold warrior suggested. Yet he was certainly no less inclined than his predecessor to wield American military might—a fact exemplified most tragically by his expansion of the conflict in Vietnam. Nixon’s divisive handling of Vietnam probably did contribute to Carter’s eventual election. Yet the Watergate scandal, which cast a pall over Gerald Ford’s brief tenure, may have been even more important; Carter’s pledge to end the “imperial presidency” certainly appealed to voters.

It seems even more doubtful that the Soviet-Afghan War played a significant role in Gorbachev’s ascension to power. As I explained in the previous chapter, death presented the Politburo three opportunities to select a new leader during the course of that conflict. By the time of Brezhnev’s death in 1982, it was already clear that the intervention had been a grave mistake. Yet the Politburo selected Yuri Andropov, one of the few men who bore direct responsibility for the decision to invade, to replace Brezhnev. Moreover, following Andropov’s death after only 15 months in office, the Politburo promoted an even more conservative old guard stalwart, Konstantin Chernenko, as his replacement. Those selections certainly did not

³ See, for example: Marc Trachtenberg, “A ‘Wasting Asset’: American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949-1954,” *International Security* 13:3 (1988): 5–49; Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); and John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

constitute any sort of mandate to reformulate Soviet foreign policy. Nor, however, did the subsequent selection of Gorbachev. If disapproval of the policies that had resulted in the Afghanistan quagmire had been an important factor in Gorbachev's promotion, one would expect that he would have acted decisively to end the conflict once he ascended to power. Yet even though Gorbachev clearly wanted to wash his hands of the "bleeding wound," he instead escalated the conflict. Only after consolidating his authority within the Politburo was he able to accomplish the withdrawal of Soviet forces. It therefore seems likely that Gorbachev's selection was due more to generational turnover than any specific policy issue. After almost a decade of stagnation under an incompetent gerontocracy, the Politburo recognized that the Soviet Union needed a (relatively) young, vigorous leader—particularly if they hoped to reinvigorate the Soviet economy.

There is therefore little reason to expect that quagmires will typically produce any dramatic transformation in leaders' foreign policy beliefs—either through learning or turnover. The conflicts surveyed in this study did not elicit any fundamental reconceptualization of foreign policy beliefs amongst the leaders who led their countries into quagmire. Moreover, although politicians who lead their states into quagmires are unlikely to hold onto the reins of power—particularly in democratic polities—the foregoing analysis provides little reason to expect that such conflicts will invariably facilitate the ascension to power of more pacifist leaders.

Analogical Reasoning

As I noted in the introduction, even in circumstances in which a quagmire does not precipitate a fundamental transformation of people's foreign policy beliefs, it could certainly influence subsequent conflict decisions through the process of analogical reasoning. Yet the

three cases included in this study suggest that the analogical “lessons” of a recent quagmire are unlikely to diminish (or augment) decision-makers’ general propensity to use military force.

The cases do confirm that people have little difficulty invoking a recent quagmire as a source analog in the face of new challenges. Quite a number of individuals—in both official and unofficial positions—invoked the Korea and Vietnam analogs during the policy debates regarding Dienbienphu, the Ogaden conflict, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Yet the simple fact that recent quagmires are easily retrievable as source analogs does not mean that they will invariably guide decision-makers. For international crises will often be devoid of structural similarities to recent quagmires; in those cases, people are likely to reference more similar alternative source analogs.

In coming to grips with the turmoil that spread throughout Eastern Europe in 1988/89, Soviet decision-makers invoked the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and the Prague Spring more frequently than they did the Soviet-Afghan War. The previous uprisings in the Eastern bloc clearly bore greater superficial and structural similarities to the burgeoning crisis than did the Afghanistan quagmire. Not only did they occur in the same geographic and political region; the political grievances that inspired protesters in the late-1980s were quite similar to those that lay at the heart of the earlier uprisings. In many ways, the democracy movements of the 1980s were the inheritors of the earlier Hungarian and Czechs uprisings. By contrast, the political and religious cleavages that plagued Afghanistan—a tribal society perched in the mountains of Central Asia—were largely incomparable to the unrest in Eastern Europe.

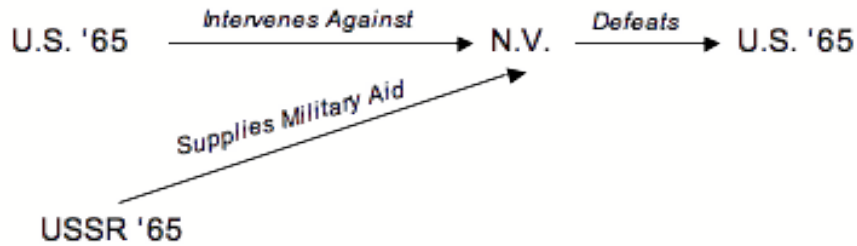
Likewise, the *Mayaguez* and Iran hostage crises did not evoke analogical parallels to Vietnam in the minds of U.S. decision-makers. The *Mayaguez* incident certainly shared superficial similarities to the recent quagmire—it occurred off the coast of Cambodia, and the air

strikes that Ford authorized against the Cambodian mainland hearkened back to the bombing campaign that the Nixon administration had pursued in the latter stages of the Vietnam War. Yet in coming to grips with the two incidents, administration officials invoked previous hostage crises—the Angus Ward incident, the *Pueblo* Incident, Israel’s Entebbe raid—rather than the lessons of Vietnam. They focused on source analogs that bore the greatest structural resemblance to the hostage situations they faced.⁴

Quagmires are thus most likely to influence how decision-makers deal with crises that share key structural similarities to such experiences. Even in those situations, however, mapping a new crisis onto a previous quagmire will not invariably yield analogical inferences that counsel against intervention. The foregoing case studies demonstrate that individuals can draw different inferences depending on how they map the target analog onto the source. Mapping the Angolan Civil War onto the Vietnam analog, for instance, could have yielded different policy prescriptions depending on how one aligned the different elements in the source and target analogs. One plausible source narrative, depicted in Figure 5.1, was that: the United States (U.S. ’65) intervened against the North Vietnamese (N.V.); the USSR (USSR ’65) supplied military aid to the North Vietnamese; and the North Vietnamese subsequently defeated the United States.

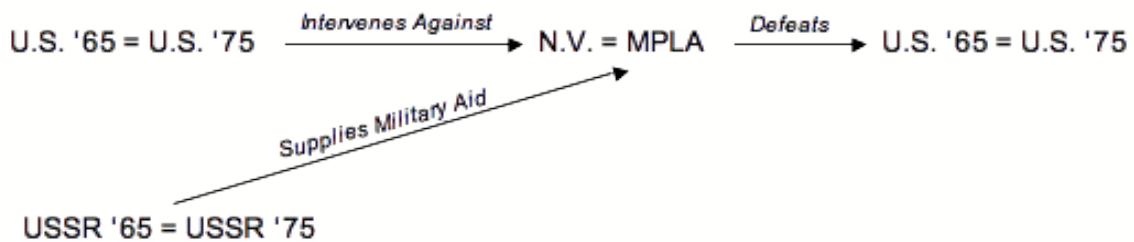
⁴ Likewise, previous analyses of analogical reasoning in foreign policy-making have noted that Vietnam and World War II both served as source analogs in the lead up to the 1991 Persian Gulf War. One might have expected that the Vietnam analog—due to its relative recency—would have exerted greater influence. But it appears that for many of the key decision-makers, the World War II analog was more salient due to its greater structural similarity to the target crisis. Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait bore greater resemblance to Hitler’s invasion of Poland than it did to the internecine nationalist conflict that dragged the United States into war in Southeast Asia. As Spellman and Holyoak have explained, “Once the analogous role system was established (in particular, with Iraq identified as an expansionist dictatorship like Germany, Kuwait as its first victim, Saudi Arabia as the next potential victim, and the United States as the main defender), analogical transfer readily yielded the inference that it was right for the United States to intervene militarily.” See Barbara A. Spellman and Keith J. Holyoak, “If Saddam Is Hitler Then Who Is George Bush? Analogical Mapping between Systems of Social Roles,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 62, no. 6 (1992): 925.

Figure 5.1



Decision-makers could have mapped the Angola conflict onto the Vietnam analog in two plausible ways. They could have aligned the United States' role in Angola to U.S. '65. On the basis of that alignment: the Soviet Union's role in Angola crisis would align to USSR '65; and the MPLA would align to the North Vietnamese. That mapping, depicted in Figure 5.2, produces the analogical inference that if the United States were to intervene in Angola, the Soviet Union would supply military aid to the MPLA, which would lead to an American defeat.

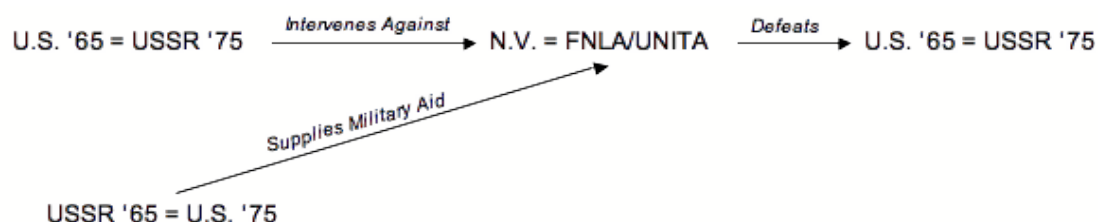
Figure 5.2



Since the United States and Soviet Union both figured prominently in the Vietnam and Angola conflicts, people might be naturally inclined to align U.S. '65 with U.S. '75 and USSR '65 with USSR '75. Yet one could argue that the Soviet/Cuban role in Angola aligned more

closely with that of the United States in Vietnam. After all, Cuban ground troops were actively engaged in combat in Angola, and Moscow was providing significantly more military aid to the MPLA than the United States was providing to the FNLA and UNITA. One could therefore quite plausibly have aligned USSR '75 with U.S. '65. On the basis of that alignment: the United States would correspond to USSR '65; and the FNLA and UNITA would correspond to the North Vietnamese. That mapping, depicted in Figure 5.3, produces a quite different analogical prescription for U.S. policy in Angola: that in response to Soviet/Cuban intervention in Angola, the United States should provide military assistance to the FNLA and UNITA. For just as Soviet and Chinese military aid enabled the North Vietnamese to defeat the United States, the provision of U.S. military aid would likely enable the FNLA and UNITA to defeat the communist invaders in Angola.

Figure 5.3



In 1975, the opponents of U.S. involvement in Angola apparently adopted an analogical mapping similar to that depicted in Figure 5.2. But as I explained in chapter three, key decision-makers mapped the Soviet “invasion” of Afghanistan onto Vietnam quite differently. Brzezinski, in particular, equated the Soviet invasion to the United States’ intervention in Vietnam, and the Mujahidin resistance to that of the North Vietnamese. Those alignments

yielded the analogical inference that the Soviets would be defeated *if* the United States reprised the role that the Soviets had performed in Vietnam—that is, if the United States supplied military aid to the Mujahidin. The fact that the Vietnam analogy thus encouraged the adoption of the same types of policies in Afghanistan which it had counseled against in Angola highlights that even in circumstances in which there is broad agreement on the structure of a source analog, new situations can be mapped onto that source in different ways, which yield quite different analogical inferences.

State Conflict Behavior

The crucial question is: if military quagmires generate competing impulses amongst different individuals, how are such conflicts likely to influence *state* behavior? One might reasonably expect that leaders' beliefs are the crucial determinant of states' use of military force: when a quagmire undermines a leader's belief in the efficacy of military force, that state's propensity to use military force should diminish; when a quagmire motivates a leader to reassert power and resolve, that propensity should increase. Things are not that straightforward, however. Even though state leaders typically enjoy greater authority in foreign policy-making than in domestic affairs, decisions to use military force are still political processes, which involve substantial disagreement, debate, and competition. In many cases, individual learning is therefore insufficient to facilitate state foreign policy change.⁵

Quagmires are most likely to diminish the general propensity to use military force of authoritarian states in which leaders' core foreign policy beliefs—beliefs pertaining to the competitive nature of international politics, the efficacy of military force, or the intentions of

⁵ Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition?: The Rise, Fall, and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Military Interventionism, 1973-1996* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 83.

rival powers—shift quite fundamentally, either through learning or turnover. Authoritarian leaders by no means enjoy a free hand in foreign policymaking. There is often intense political competition within the upper echelons of authoritarian regimes. Moreover, even firmly entrenched dictators must rely upon large bureaucracies to implement their policies. (Indeed, it can be hazardous to one's health to attempt to override the interests of the military.)

Nevertheless, authoritarian rulers are certainly subject to comparatively fewer checks on their foreign policymaking power than their democratic counterparts. If a military quagmire alerts an authoritarian leader to the necessity of dramatic foreign policy change, he is therefore more likely to be able to impose his preferred policy innovations. For such leaders have more power to subvert domestic opposition. They can install like-minded subordinates in place of officials who remain committed to the types of policies that resulted in previous quagmires. They can capitalize on their control of the media to silence proponents of intervention in new international crises. Because of those powers, the transformation of an authoritarian ruler's fundamental foreign policy beliefs is more likely to precipitate significant policy change than is the similar conversion of a democratic leader.

Although the Afghanistan quagmire probably contributed marginally to the Gorbachev foreign policy revolution, the case is nonetheless illustrative. After becoming general secretary, Gorbachev gradually installed a team of high-ranking officials who shared his commitment to reorienting Soviet foreign policy. He seized on the infamous Rust affair, in particular, as an opportunity to cull the senior ranks of the military establishment of old guard opponents of new thinking. By 1988, when turmoil began simmering throughout the Eastern bloc, Gorbachev had thus consolidated authority in the hands of progressive officials who shared his aversion to upholding communist rule in Eastern Europe with military force. As a result, the general

secretary felt almost no domestic pressure to intervene. The ascension of a leader with fundamentally different foreign policy beliefs consequently diminished, quite directly, the Soviet Union's propensity to use military force.

Although authoritarian leaders are more capable of dramatically altering their states' foreign policies, however, quagmires are probably no more likely to catalyze fundamental belief change at the highest levels of authoritarian governments. As I have already explained, the Soviet-Afghan War did not catalyze either the formation or implementation of new thinking. Nor did it contribute significantly to Gorbachev's ascension to power. The Gorbachev revolution, which transformed Soviet foreign policy, should therefore not be viewed as a guide to how military quagmires are likely to influence authoritarian states. There is no compelling reason to expect that authoritarian leaders are systematically any more capable of fundamental belief change than their democratic counterparts. Moreover, quagmires are probably less likely to precipitate leadership changes in authoritarian states than in democracies. Authoritarian rulers are not vulnerable to being voted out of office, and through their firm control of the media can mitigate the extent to which quagmires generate dissatisfaction amongst the general populace. Of course, although authoritarian leaders are immune from ballot box coups, they are always vulnerable to traditional palace or military coups. Yet in authoritarian states that have achieved great power status, such dramatic turnover is fairly rare. Fundamental belief change is thus unlikely to occur.

In the absence of such belief change, quagmires may very well increase authoritarian states' propensity to employ military force. Leaders who adhere to beliefs in the competitive nature of international politics, the utility of military force, and the malign intentions of adversaries will often be compelled to intervene in new crises to prove to rival nations that they remain willing to defend their interests. Moreover, the controls that permit authoritarian leaders to demur from

new conflicts likewise enable them to launch new interventions. They can promote officials who share their inclination to reassert their nation's power and resolve. They can cut anti-interventionists—individuals and organizations alike—out of the decision-making process. They can suppress dissent throughout civil society and employ the media to propagandize the virtue and necessity of new military operations. In short, they can “bottle up” learning.⁶

Although democratic leaders enjoy significantly more autonomy in the realm of foreign policy than in the domestic arena, their freedom of action is certainly more circumscribed than that of their authoritarian counterparts. Democratic leaders are much less capable of stifling opposition to their preferred policies. They may be able to install like-minded subordinates in key executive positions. But they cannot quash the dissenting views of either opposition legislators or the fourth estate.

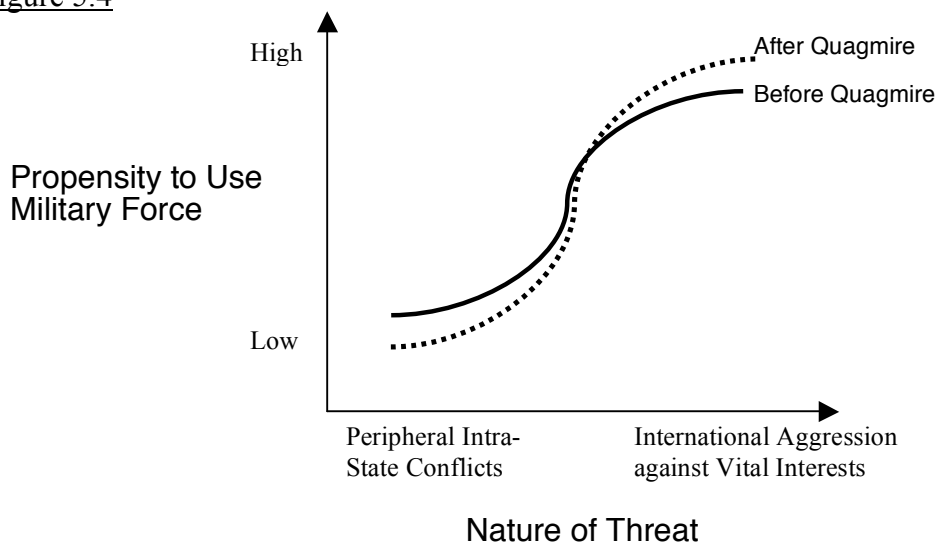
President Carter, for instance, encountered significant resistance in attempting to reorient U.S. foreign policy. Like Gorbachev, he was able to appoint senior officials, such as Cyrus Vance, who largely shared his worldview. Somewhat surprisingly, however, Carter appointed a national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, whose foreign policy views were, in many ways, more similar to those of his predecessor, Henry Kissinger, than they were to those of the president he served—the president who was intent on abandoning the Realpolitik practiced by Kissinger. If Brzezinski's appointment was designed to shield the president from being soft, it failed miserably. For Carter faced mounting criticism from conservative opposition—in Congress, think tanks, and the media—throughout his tenure. They pilloried him for signing the Panama Canal Treaty. They criticized his negotiation of the SALT II agreement. Most significantly, they pressured him to assert U.S. resolve in the face of international provocation.

⁶ The term “bottled up learning” is taken from *ibid.*, 109–110.

During the Iranian hostage crisis, myriad critics urged the president to do something. Although Carter resisted the urge to retaliate against Iran, he ultimately succumbed to the temptation to launch the half-baked rescue mission that imploded his presidency. Moreover, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Carter felt compelled to get tough with the Soviets.

Regardless of their personal inclinations, democratic leaders are thus likely to face competing pressures in the aftermath of a quagmire. Many of their constituents will surely insist on avoiding any repetition of the mistakes that led to the recent military debacle. Others, however, will likely be more interested in reasserting their enduring power and determination to protect their interests. Which of those pressures predominates is likely to depend upon the strategic and political characteristics of specific international crises. **In other words, a quagmire is unlikely to alter a state’s *general* propensity to employ military force. Such a conflict is likely to diminish, to a marginal extent, a state’s propensity to intervene in peripheral intra-state conflicts. At the same time, however, it will increase that state’s propensity to combat acts international aggression—particularly those that threaten vital strategic interests (Figure 5.4).**

Figure 5.4



As detailed in the preceding section, peripheral conflicts in which vital interests are not at stake will often evoke analogical mappings onto a previous quagmire—particularly crises that share superficial similarities to that quagmire. Those mappings will typically highlight the challenges and risks of military action. Leaders who have grown skeptical of the utility of military force in solving international problems should therefore be able to garner fairly widespread support for diplomatic policies of non-intervention. By invoking analogical parallels to their predecessors' misadventures, those leaders should be able to discredit and deflect any hawkish minority arguments in favor of military action.

Furthermore, by attuning political elites, journalists, and the general public to the risks of engaging in such conflicts, quagmires are also likely to diminish more hawkish leaders' inclination to intervene in such conflicts. For shrewd politicians will typically anticipate their constituents' apprehensions—particularly the attitudes of elites whose confidence in the utility of military force was shaken by a recent quagmire. Even leaders who continue to believe in the utility of military force, leaders bent upon reasserting their resolve, will therefore be more likely to shy away from employing military force in peripheral conflicts. By increasing the political obstacles to military action, a quagmire will likely increase those leaders' inclination to influence peripheral conflicts more indirectly or covertly through measures that will not arouse the concerns of anti-interventionists. They may attempt to foist the combat burden onto allies or proxy forces. They may restrict their role to one of supplying allies with the financial and military resources necessary to fend off rival forces. Even in playing the role of benefactor, they may often choose to funnel military aid covertly in order to avoid engendering public apprehension that such assistance could mark the first step down a slippery slope toward full-blown combat.

The Ford administration's approach to the conflict in Angola exemplifies this point. Even though Ford and Kissinger were determined to demonstrate the United States' determination to oppose Soviet adventurism, they opted to funnel arms to the FNLA and UNITA covertly through the CIA. Even after the exposure of the United States' role in the conflict, they strived to allay concerns that there was any possibility that Angola could become another Vietnam. At first, the administration banished any talk of ground troops from their public discourse. Subsequently, as opposition mounted, the president offered assurances that there was no possibility that U.S. troops would be deployed to Angola. Of course, it is doubtful that Ford and Kissinger would have been champing at the bit to intervene in Angola even if the United States had not endured the trauma of Vietnam. Yet Ford and Kissinger were quite sensitive to the fact that Vietnam had rendered many Americans—both in and outside Congress—more wary of foreign “adventures.” Those concerns for the political ramifications of Vietnam definitely appear to have motivated the administration to approach the Angolan conflict with greater circumspection than they otherwise might have done.

Although a quagmire is thus likely to diminish a democratic state's inclination to intervene in peripheral intra-state conflicts, the experience might very well increase its propensity to combat acts of international aggression. Such acts will often arouse concern that rival states are determined to exploit their chastened adversary's war-weariness by adopting a more aggressive foreign policy. For the many individuals who remain convinced that international politics is inherently competitive, and that military force is a legitimate and useful foreign policy tool, those concerns are likely to trigger an impulse to reassert their determination to resist rival aggression. As I noted above, that impulse will frequently prompt the invocation of source analogs and mappings that encourage intervention. In such circumstances, leaders intent upon reasserting

their country's power and resolve are unlikely to be deterred from intervening by more dovish constituents' concerns about the utility of military force or the dangers of becoming embroiled in another quagmire. A quagmire is unlikely to diminish their confidence that they can rally broad public support for fighting in defense of important strategic interests.

Indeed, as I explained in the preceding chapters, the shelling of Quemoy and Matsu and the seizure of the *Mayaguez* both aroused a strong impulse amongst administration officials to reassert the power and resolve of the United States. That impulse was by no means overpowering. Eisenhower did resist the temptation to combat China's seizure of the Tachen islands. But it seems unlikely that he would have tolerated much further aggression. Moreover, both Eisenhower and Ford sensed what Bruce Jentleson later demonstrated: even in the aftermath of a military quagmire, they could still count on the American public to support using military force to combat aggression.⁷ They were not restrained by any fear that a Korea syndrome or a Vietnam syndrome had rendered either the Congress or the American public gun shy.

Moreover, even leaders who *have* grown gun shy, leaders more inclined to resolve international disputes through diplomacy, will likely have difficulty resisting the temptation to employ military force in the face of international aggression. In such situations, political opponents intent upon reasserting national resolve will typically be able to rally broad enthusiasm for military action. That pressure—or perhaps even the anticipation of such pressure—will often compel leaders to prove their mettle by getting tough with rival states. In democratic states, domestic political exigencies may often trump leaders' predilection for resolving international disputes through negotiation and compromise. Carter's abortive rescue mission is certainly testament to that.

⁷ Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1992): 49–73.

Although a quagmire is thus likely to increase a democratic state's propensity to combat acts of international aggression, such an experience will, for a number of reasons, restrict the form of military action. First of all, even in circumstances in which civilian leaders are confident that they can garner broad support for employing military force, they will remain wary of arousing fears that such action could result in another quagmire. Leaders will therefore seek to minimize the risk—and allay concerns—that new military operations could produce the same disastrous consequences as a previous conflict. Quagmires are therefore likely to foster leaders' inclination to employ standoff strike capabilities in lieu of ground troops—or in some cases, in support of allied ground troops. For particularly since the end of the Second World War, the period under examination in this study, standoff strike capabilities have offered decision-makers a tempting tool for satisfying competing interests: a means for influencing foreign conflicts and projecting toughness without putting troops in harm's way or over-burdening war-weary military units.

Even in circumstances in which leaders are compelled to employ ground forces, however, quagmires are likely to influence how those forces are used. The tactical lessons that leaders derive from a quagmire will likely influence how they approach new conflicts. Such conflicts are particularly likely to cause leaders to scale back the political and strategic objectives that they seek to achieve through military action. Perhaps more consequentially, the armed forces at those leaders' disposal are likely to devote a great deal of attention to incorporating the lessons of that quagmire into military doctrine. In other words, organizational learning is likely to occur.

Yet the depth and intensity of such learning will vary from organization to organization. In the wake of Vietnam for instance, NSC staffers had come to the conclusion that “considering how long the war lasted and how intensely it was reported and commented...there are really not very many lessons from our experience in Vietnam that can be usefully applied elsewhere

despite the obvious temptation to try.”⁸ In stark contrast, the Army wasted little time in employing the lessons of Vietnam to develop new doctrine, training requirements, and procurement priorities.⁹

Since militaries devote the most sustained effort to institutionalizing lessons from military quagmires, organizational learning is likely to influence *how* states intervene abroad to a much greater extent than *whether* they choose to do so. Particularly in states in which civilian leaders exercise firm control of the armed forces, military services focus not on questions of when to use military force but on how to employ force most effectively when called upon to do so. Of course, militaries are by no means agnostic on questions regarding their appropriate roles and responsibilities. Guidelines for how to use force can generate precepts governing the circumstances in which force should (and should not) be used. The Weinberger Doctrine is a perfect example. The Pentagon’s efforts to learn from Vietnam contributed quite directly to Weinberger’s promulgation of six criteria governing when the United States should (and should not) commit combat troops to foreign military engagements. The extent to which those criteria actually influenced subsequent intervention decisions remains an open question, beyond the scope of this study. Yet as more documentary evidence becomes available, that question certainly deserves thorough investigation.

What we can already glean from the Weinberger Doctrine, however, is that organizational learning takes time. Many of the ideas that eventually comprised Weinberger’s force criteria

⁸ Smyser to Kissinger, May 12, 1975. Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Vietnam (23), Box 20, National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific.

⁹ See George C. Herring, “Preparing Not to Refight the Last War: The Impact of the Vietnam War on the U.S. Military,” in *After Vietnam: Legacies of a Lost War*, ed. Charles E. Neu (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 56–84; and Richard Lock-Pullan, *US Intervention Policy and Army Innovation: From Vietnam to Iraq* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

started floating around the Pentagon almost immediately after the final American withdrawal from Vietnam. Yet those criteria were only promulgated as “doctrine” toward the end of 1984—almost a decade after U.S. forces withdrew from Southeast Asia. That delay highlights the fact that the process of institutionalizing the lessons of a military quagmire is an analytical *and* political process—a process that entails debate and compromise. For that reason, quagmires are likely to exert greater influence over how states employ military force over the medium term, as lessons are incorporated into military training, doctrine, and weapons procurement.

The arguments that I have elaborated in this chapter hardly constitute a single parsimonious theory. As I explained in the introduction, however, the purpose of this study is to improve our understanding of both how and under what conditions a military quagmire is likely to influence states’ subsequent conflict behavior. Achieving those objectives necessarily involves sacrificing a certain degree of theoretical parsimony. Yet I do not intend or expect that this study will constitute the last word on this subject. I have borrowed from and built upon some quite excellent research on war-weariness and foreign policy learning. It is my hope that other scholars will build upon this analysis to further improve our understanding of the strategic consequences of military quagmires; for as I have noted, there are certainly limitations inherent in this study.

To begin, it would be useful for future researchers to expand upon the case studies presented in this analysis. I have focused on how quagmires influenced conflict decisions in the few years immediately following the Korean, Vietnam, and Soviet-Afghan wars. As I explained in the introduction, that decision is based on the assumption that war-weariness or the lessons of an unsuccessful war are likely to be most potent in the immediate aftermath of such a conflict. Yet

it is no less important to understand how military quagmires influence states' conflict behavior over the medium term—ten, fifteen, perhaps even twenty years. Does that influence gradually fade? Or does it persist, or even intensify, as lessons become institutionalized? The Vietnam War, in particular, is purported to have exerted quite strong influence over a long succession of American conflict decisions: Reagan's decision to withdraw American troops from Lebanon; the manner in which George H.W. Bush chose to intervene in Iraq; Clinton's decision to withdraw from Somalia and his reluctance to intervene in the Balkans. As more documentary evidence becomes available, those claims should certainly be subjected to careful scrutiny.

In addition, the arguments that I have developed in this study should be tested against additional cases—particularly quagmires such as the Second Boer War or the Franco-Mexican War, which occurred prior the Cold War. Although focusing on three cases from the Cold War has lent this study a measure of analytical control, it might also limit the extent to which my findings can be generalized to contemporary and future cases. It is quite conceivable, for instance, that the bipolar power distribution or the superpowers' perception of international politics as a zero-sum competition were key determinants of how the Korean, Vietnam, and Soviet-Afghan wars subsequently influenced U.S. and Soviet conflict decisions. If, however, additional case studies reveal that similar dynamics operated in the aftermath of quagmires that occurred prior to the half century of superpower competition, we could be more confident that those consequences were not simply artifacts of the Cold War.

Nevertheless, the foregoing analysis provides a strong empirical basis for skepticism that an Iraq/Afghanistan syndrome will prevent the United States from fighting new wars in the years to

come.¹⁰ The wars do appear to have induced significant wariness of ground operations amongst the American public—and amongst decision-makers. According to Robert Gates, President Obama’s first Pentagon chief, “any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should ‘have his head examined.’”¹¹ But such an aversion to ground combat is unlikely to prompt the Obama administration, or its successor, to abjure employing the U.S. military to address future security challenges.

For although some Americans may now be convinced of the folly of war, others will surely remain unchastened. A number of analysts have already begun clamoring to bomb Iran to forestall their development of nuclear weapons.¹² Some may even believe that such an attack is necessary to impress upon Tehran—indeed upon all of America’s adversaries—that war-weariness will not inhibit U.S. foreign policy; that the United States remains prepared to back up its words with deeds. In fact, such pressures apparently pushed President Obama to the brink of launching air strikes against Syria in order to enforce the “red line” he had promulgated against the use of chemical weapons.

It thus seems unwarranted to expect that the recent wars have diminished the United States’ propensity to combat burgeoning threats to vital U.S. interests. For American presidents will surely find themselves in the same unenviable position as Eisenhower, caught between “the

¹⁰ These conclusions accord with the more policy-oriented analysis provided in: Miller, “The Iraq Experiment and US National Security.”

¹¹ The quotation is reported in Thom Shanker, “Gates Warns Against More Wars Like Iraq and Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 2011. Full text of the speech can be found at <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1539>

¹² Perhaps the most notable argument in favor of launching a surgical air strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities is Matthew Kroenig, “Time to Attack Iran,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 1 (2012): 76–86.

truculent and the timid, the jingoists and the pacifists.”¹³ The United States’ extraordinary standoff strike capabilities, which are now considerably more potent and accurate than those at Eisenhower’s disposal, will offer a tempting means for reconciling those competing impulses: a tool for combating the nation’s adversaries without risking more soldiers’ lives. So even though the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have probably spoiled the United States’ appetite for ground warfare, those hoping that the quagmires will humble or pacify the staggering superpower may very well be sorely disappointed.

¹³ Eisenhower to Gruenther, February 1, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, 2(1):190.

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