

Transformative Choices

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Leaders and the Origins of Intervention Strategy

One of the most contentious issues in U.S. foreign policy has been the use of military force to intervene in the domestic affairs of other states. U.S. military interventions since 1945 have varied significantly, however, in how deeply they intrude on the domestic institutions of target states. Some interventions involved significant interference in other states' domestic affairs (from the Vietnam War to the operations in Haiti and the Balkans in the 1990s); in other cases, the United States rejected such interference (as in the 1991 Persian Gulf War). More generally, some great power military interventions explicitly try to transform the domestic institutions of the states they target, whereas others do not, attempting only to reverse foreign policies or resolve disputes without trying to reshape the internal landscape of the target state.

The choice of intervention strategy is crucial not only for the target state but also for the intervening state itself. Choosing a strategy ill-suited to the conflict or for which the intervening state is ill-prepared can have disastrous consequences for both intervener and target. The choice of strategy is likely to remain central to future intervention debates, even after Iraq. Indeed, Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, asserts that choices such as whether to pursue democracy or stability—one manifestation of the debate over intervention strategy—lie along the “single most important fault line in American foreign policy today.”¹

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1. Quoted in David E. Sanger, “Tug of War over Foreign Policy Approach,” *New York Times*, September 5, 2008.

This article argues that it is impossible to fully understand both when and how states intervene without exploring a crucial but often-overlooked factor in international relations: the role of individual leaders. Even among U.S. interventions, successive American presidents have approached the same conflict differently. For example, George H.W. Bush limited the U.S. intervention in Somalia to humanitarian aid, whereas Bill Clinton at least initially allowed the mission to expand to address underlying internal problems. Although leaders frequently profess otherwise, most great power military interventions in smaller powers are “wars of choice”—that is, they do not result from a direct or existential threat to the state. Leaders play a critical role in choosing where and how states respond to other, more indirect threats with intervention.² Furthermore, theories relying on relatively stable or slow-changing factors such as the structure of the international system or regime type cannot fully account for changes in a state’s intervention choices over time. Moving the focus of the analysis to individual leaders can help to address this variation.

In the last few decades, however, international relations theorists—with the notable exception of those who take a psychological approach—have rarely focused on leaders. Some scholars do not expect leaders to play a significant role independent of the domestic or international setting; others recognize that leaders matter, but despair of making parsimonious, generalizable predictions about individuals.³

This article charts a middle course between the two extremes of studying leaders as a series of “great men,” on the one hand, and excluding them by assuming that they respond to domestic or international conditions in similar ways, on the other. The article contributes to a recent revival of interest in the role of leaders in international relations by providing a simple but powerful typology of leaders that addresses changes in how states intervene over time.⁴ The critical variable centers on how leaders perceive threats: Do they believe

2. On the importance of leaders in making intervention decisions, see, for example, James N. Rosenau, “Intervention as a Scientific Concept,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (June 1969), pp. 166–167.

3. For a summary of these arguments and a strong rebuttal, see Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, “Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Spring 2001), pp. 110–114. The neglect of leaders can be traced partly to Kenneth N. Waltz’s dismissal of individual-level explanations based on human nature. See Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 33.

4. While this article concentrates on leaders’ beliefs, scholars have recently focused on other characteristics of leaders, such as age or the manner of losing office. See, for example, Michael Horowitz, Rose McDermott, and Allan C. Stam, “Leader Age, Regime Type, and Violent International Relations,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 49, No. 5 (October 2005), pp. 661–685; and Henk Giacomo Chiozza, “Introducing Archigos: A Dataset of Political Leaders,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (March 2009), pp. 269–283.

that the internal characteristics of other states are the ultimate source of threats? This variation in leaders' causal beliefs about the origin of threats yields two ideal-typical ways to assess and prioritize the many threats states confront. "Internally focused" leaders see a causal connection between threatening foreign and security policies and the internal organization of states, and thus are more willing to undertake "transformative" interventions, in which the intervening state is deeply involved in the building or rebuilding of domestic institutions in the target state. In contrast, "externally focused" leaders diagnose threats directly from the foreign and security policies of other states, and thus are more likely to pursue "nontransformative" strategies that aim only to resolve a given conflict with minimal involvement in domestic affairs.

These different causal beliefs about the origin of threats shape the cost-benefit calculation leaders make when they confront intervention decisions, in two ways. First, causal beliefs influence the value leaders place on transforming target states. Second, causal beliefs affect how leaders allocate scarce resources that influence preparedness for different intervention strategies. Although this article focuses on the choice of strategy, the question of strategy also influences the decision to intervene at all: if a leader estimates that the strategy most likely to secure the intervention outcome he prioritizes is not feasible or applicable, or that it will be particularly costly, he may be dissuaded from intervening in that conflict in the first place. Thus leaders' causal beliefs about the origin of threats have profound consequences for the decision to intervene and for the choice of intervention strategy, as well as implications for the probability of intervention success.⁵

Intuitively leaders seem crucial to understanding the choice of intervention strategy. Yet demonstrating how their beliefs act as an independent influence on the way states intervene is a challenge. To isolate the effect of leaders, I examine two U.S. presidents during the Cold War—John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson—allowing me to hold constant domestic institutions, great power status, and the structure of the international system. The Kennedy-Johnson comparison provides strong analytical leverage. To avoid several problems in studying beliefs, I measure leaders' causal beliefs in the period before they arrive in office, using archival and historical sources. As Henry Kissinger put it, "The convictions that leaders have formed before reaching high office are the intellectual capital they will consume as long as they con-

5. The theory does not address the likelihood of long-term intervention success or the durability of settlements. The role of leaders' causal beliefs in the initial decision to intervene (including decisions against intervention) is discussed in Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Wars of Choice: How Leaders Shape Military Interventions," unpublished manuscript, George Washington University, 2009.

tinue in office.”⁶ The empirical discussion illustrates one manifestation of the argument: leaders confronting the same conflict may arrive at different diagnoses of threat, and thus choose different strategies. I examine how Kennedy and Johnson approached Vietnam, a difficult case for the theory. Kennedy chose a transformative strategy of deep interference in South Vietnamese affairs, whereas Johnson pursued a nontransformative strategy that concentrated on defeating aggression from the North. Illustrating that leaders differed on a question as fundamental as the nature of a threat to national security, and that this difference affected how they intervened, helps to demonstrate that leaders systematically influence how states use force.

The next two sections define the universe of cases and the dependent variable. In subsequent sections, I review alternative explanations, and develop the two ideal-typical leaders and the two causal mechanisms through which their threat perceptions influence intervention decisions. I then turn to establishing the prepresidential beliefs of Kennedy and Johnson. Next I trace how their beliefs influenced the way they intervened in Vietnam. I conclude by discussing the implications of the argument and how it applies to the recent war in Iraq.

What Is Military Intervention?

Many definitions of military intervention assume that it involves interference in the domestic institutions of target states.⁷ But as Martha Finnemore argues, these definitions obscure variation in how states intervene.⁸ Even interventions inside a single state may not attempt to determine or change domestic institutions. In 1958, for example, U.S. forces landed in Lebanon but stopped short of direct interference in Lebanese institutions, aiming mainly to demonstrate the credibility of U.S. security guarantees in the Cold War context.⁹

To allow the depth of internal interference to vary, I thus define military intervention as an overt, short-term deployment of at least 1,000 combat-ready ground troops across international boundaries to influence an outcome in an-

6. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 54. See also Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 146–147.

7. See, for example, Rosenau, “Intervention as a Scientific Concept,” p. 161; and Stanley Hoffmann, “The Problem of Intervention,” in Hedley Bull, ed., *Intervention in World Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), p. 10.

8. Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 9–10.

9. See, for example, Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 224.

other state or an interstate dispute; it may or may not interfere in another state's domestic institutions. "Short-term" may encompass a wide range of time frames, but it excludes conquest or colonialism. Interventions into both interstate and intrastate conflicts or crises are included in the universe of cases; both can vary in the degree of internal interference. Wars such as the 1991 Gulf War are also included, because they involved an outside power intervening in a conflict between other states. Furthermore, intervention may support or oppose an existing government. Even a transformative strategy can aid an existing government (e.g., through institutional reform or creation).

To ensure comparability, I exclude covert operations because they do not risk extensive military losses, prestige, or audience costs to the same degree as overt actions. Leaders of all types may be tempted by covert operations, which they may see as potentially quick and low cost. The process that governs decisions to intervene covertly may be theoretically different from that leading to a decision to intervene overtly; lumping them together would risk comparing apples and oranges.¹⁰ Additionally, because ground troops are likely required for transformative strategies, operations involving only air or naval power are excluded.¹¹ Covert, air, or naval operations may be relevant, however, when they are part of ongoing overt interventions.

Transformative versus Nontransformative Strategies

Intervention strategy here means the initial, intended strategy. The actual intervention strategy may be the product of other factors that interact with intentions, such as the preferences and performance of the military. But even when leaders do not get their way (or change the strategy later), the intended policy choice may have important consequences as the intervention unfolds.

I distinguish between two ideal-typical strategies. A transformative strategy explicitly aims to interfere in or actively determine the target state's domestic institutions (most notably political institutions but also economic, social, or

10. Other scholars likewise focus on overt military interventions. See, for example, Bruce W. Jentleson and Ariel E. Levite, "The Analysis of Protracted Foreign Military Intervention," in Levite, Jentleson, and Larry Berman, eds., *Foreign Military Intervention: The Dynamics of Protracted Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 8–9.

11. For a similar restriction, see Jeffrey Pickering and Mark Peceny, "Forging Democracy at Gunpoint," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (September 2006), p. 546. Theoretically, air or naval power could be used in support of either a nontransformative or a transformative operation. For example, air power could be used to enforce no-fly zones in a peacemaking operation. Leaders may alternatively choose air-only operations as part of an explicit choice to undertake a nontransformative strategy. But it is also possible that the decision to initiate an air-only operation is governed by a different causal process than the decision to deploy ground troops, since leaders may choose air-only operations in the hope of minimizing casualties or political debate.

military institutions). National-level institutions are an obvious source of change, but transformation may occur through local-level institutions, either in tandem with national-level change or as a way to spur national-level change or bolster an existing regime. As John Owen points out, changing institutions is distinct from changing only the leader (or a small group of elites),¹² and thus the distinction between transformative and nontransformative strategies holds even at the level of regime change. Leadership change that occurs along with institutional change would qualify as transformative. But interventions that result in regime change might change only the leadership of the target state (in what might be termed a “decapitation”) without fundamentally altering its domestic institutions. Similarly, interventions to shore up existing governments may interfere with domestic institutions or attempt to stop institutional change that would otherwise occur, but they may also try to protect the status quo with limited or no institutional interference.

A transformative strategy may also aim to change local-level institutions, usually as a means of achieving national-level change, but with most of the institution building occurring at the local level. Examples of local-level transformative strategies include nation building and postconflict reconstruction. Some forms of counterinsurgency, particularly population-centered counterinsurgency, explicitly incorporate institution building into the warfighting strategy, and thus can also be considered transformative.¹³ In such a strategy, counterinsurgency forces must not only drive away guerrillas but also build local security institutions to protect the population, and then, ideally, political and civic institutions that build loyalty to the government. Conventional force using regular units can be counterproductive against a guerrilla strategy.¹⁴

The indicators I use to assess institutional change are measured in terms of the goals of the intervention and the intended strategy. At the national level, I examine how deeply the intervening state intended any leadership change to extend; whether the intervention aimed at national-level institutional reform or construction; whether the military strategy explicitly sought to change domestic institutions, rather than simply defeating enemy forces; and whether nonmilitary issues were well integrated with and considered part of the overall military strategy. Indicators for intended local-level change in-

12. John M. Owen IV, “The Foreign Imposition of Domestic Institutions,” *International Organization*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Spring 2002), p. 377.

13. For a useful summary of this approach to counterinsurgency, see Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 7–16.

14. See Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chap. 2; and Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, “Rage against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars,” *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Winter 2009), pp. 67–106.

clude whether the overall strategy aimed to build or reform local-level institutions; whether troops sought to interact with the local population; and the integration of local-level nonmilitary issues with the overall military strategy.

In contrast, a nontransformative strategy seeks to resolve an international or civil conflict or crisis, or restrain or roll back a foreign policy action, without the explicit intention to alter domestic institutions at any level. Examples include interventions designed to liberate territory or protect local allies from outside aggression (as in the 1991 Gulf War). Leaders can also choose a nontransformative strategy in humanitarian interventions, as in George H.W. Bush's limited approach in Somalia. For a civil conflict, a nontransformative strategy would focus on stopping the fighting or preventing international consequences such as conflict spillover, but without nation building. Of course, a nontransformative strategy may have a dramatic effect on civilians and institutions, and it is possible that internal change may occur as a by-product. Furthermore, nontransformative interventions, particularly in internal crises, usually involve some treading on the state's internal affairs. But the coding is intended to distinguish limited or collateral involvement (which may even be brutal or highly destructive) from deliberate institutional interference. For example, in 1904, faced with a crisis over the collection of debt amid instability in the Dominican Republic, President Theodore Roosevelt declared, "If I possibly can, I want to do nothing to them. If it is absolutely necessary to do something, then I want to do as little as possible."¹⁵ When he intervened, Roosevelt ensured that the United States defended the Dominican customhouses. As Lester Langley summarizes, "After that, if their political house was in disorder—and it usually was—it was *their* house." In contrast, Woodrow Wilson took a far more transformative approach when he occupied the country from 1916 until 1924.¹⁶

Notwithstanding gradations within each class of intervention, it makes sense to treat the distinction between transformative and nontransformative strategies as dichotomous. Actively involving the military in the internal affairs of the target is fundamentally different from a more conventional battle that seeks no such interference.¹⁷

15. Quoted in Lester D. Langley, *The Banana Wars: United States Intervention in the Caribbean, 1898–1934*, 2d rev. ed. (Wilmington: SR Books, 2002), p. 23.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 115 (emphasis in original). On Wilson's intervention in the Dominican Republic, see *ibid.*, chaps. 10–12.

17. Bruce Jentleson finds that the U.S. public makes a similar distinction. See Jentleson, "The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (March 1992), pp. 49–73.

Explaining Intervention Strategy

This section formulates potential alternative explanations drawn from the existing literature on intervention, and argues for a focus on the individual level.

POTENTIAL ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

The existing literature on military intervention has focused primarily on when and why states initiate intervention,¹⁸ or the utility or successful implementation of particular forms of intervention (such as democratization or peacekeeping).¹⁹ Most existing approaches do not address how states choose among different intervention strategies, or the specific issue of how deeply intervention interferes in the domestic institutions of target states.²⁰

Several theories could potentially be extended to address the choice of intervention strategy. Many formulations, however, are not well suited to explaining variation in intervention choices within states over time because they rely on international or domestic factors that are either stable or slow to change. Furthermore, although they differ widely on the specifics, many explanations suggest that states with given international or domestic characteristics respond to intervention opportunities in similar ways, leaving no independent role for leaders. For example, most realist theories share the assumption that states respond to threats in the international system—the structure of which changes rarely—in ways that depend primarily on power, regardless of who is in charge.²¹ At the domestic level, many theories, including some that do address intervention strategy, also focus on cross-national trends or the continuity of national intervention tendencies, rather than on changes in strategy within a given domestic setting. For example, Owen argues that states try to

18. This tendency spans a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches. See, for example, Paul K. Huth, "Major Power Intervention in International Crises, 1918–1988," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 6 (December 1998), pp. 744–770; Alastair Smith, "To Intervene or Not to Intervene: A Biased Decision," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (March 1996), pp. 16–40; and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), chap. 1.

19. See, for example, Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Virginia Page Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work? Shaping Belligerents' Choices after Civil War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

20. Exceptions include studies examining the conditions under which states promote democracy. See, for example, Mark Peceny, "Two Paths to the Promotion of Democracy during U.S. Military Interventions," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (September 1995), pp. 371–401. Additionally, Owen provides a valuable study of the forcible promotion of domestic political institutions, but does not include interventions that did not involve institutional promotions. See Owen, "The Foreign Imposition of Domestic Institutions."

21. Such logic underpins structural realist approaches such as that of Kenneth N. Waltz, although this approach is not a theory of foreign policy. See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

promote their own institutions; others have noted the tendency for the United States to promote liberal democratic institutions.²² Bureaucratic perspectives posit that organizations favor particular doctrines: for example, the U.S. Army has traditionally disliked transformative operations.²³ But these approaches also stress the continuity of strategy. Constructivists often emphasize the social or shared nature of ideas, and thus also tend to focus on long-term trends. Finnemore, for example, details how shared understandings of the purpose of intervention have evolved. But within a given time period such as the Cold War, most states share one understanding of the purpose of intervention.²⁴ Thus, while many of these analysts highlight important tendencies and continuities, there remain short-term changes in the way states use intervention that can provoke fierce debate.

Certain variants of existing approaches are better suited to addressing changes in intervention strategy over time, and thus form the principal alternative explanations I explore. One simple explanation is that states choose intervention strategies through a cost-benefit analysis that is independent of individual leaders.²⁵ Under this structural/material conditions hypothesis, all leaders should make the same cost-benefit calculation in the face of similar situations and existing capabilities. Leaders determine strategy based on factors such as available capabilities in the intervening state or the characteristics of a given intervention opportunity (e.g., terrain).

Another set of alternative explanations involves competition among domestic actors. Here, domestic political actors, including leaders, may vary in the way they view the benefits of intervening with a given strategy. But under this domestic competition hypothesis, it is the political struggle among these actors that accounts for variation in intervention decisions. A model that focuses on how leaders vary in their interactions with bureaucracies, or how much they

22. Owen, "The Foreign Imposition of Domestic Institutions," p. 396. In the U.S. context, see Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chap. 1. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and George W. Downs argue that democracies are more likely to promote autocracies in target states, because autocrats will more reliably provide favorable foreign policies. See Bueno de Mesquita and Downs, "Intervention and Democracy," *International Organization*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (Summer 2006), pp. 627–649.

23. See, for example, Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, pp. 4–7.

24. Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, pp. 124–129. Scholars have also explored the role of shared ideas among domestic elites. See D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 34.

25. For a related argument that addresses why states choose between multilateral versus unilateral interventions, see Sarah Kreps, "When Does the Mission Determine the Coalition? The Logic of Multilateral Intervention and the Case of Afghanistan," *Security Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (July 2008), pp. 531–567.

defer to or override organizations such as the military, could account for variation over time.²⁶ Intervention decisions might also result from interactions or logrolling among advisers, other elites, or domestic groups.²⁷ Examining the behavior of different leaders who confront similar bureaucratic preferences or interact with similar advisory groups can help to sort out the relative role of leaders.

THREAT PERCEPTION AND THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

In addition to these two potential explanations, a logical hypothesis for when and how states intervene is that states respond to perceived threats. Yet many explanations that connect intervention to a perception of threat make oversimplified or ambiguous predictions. Realists, for example, often argue that leaders intervene to protect vital national interests or in response to threats, but provide little guidance in studying how states define national interests or assess threats.²⁸ An alternative is to look to the individual level, where scholars have recently taken renewed interest. One strand of research explores how a leader's desire to stay in office affects his policy choices.²⁹ In these theories, however, domestic political institutions or electoral incentives, rather than the attributes of individual leaders, drive policy choice. Another strand examines leaders' reputations (e.g., for toughness or competence).³⁰ But these arguments leave much variation among individual leaders unexplored. If leaders have an incentive to demonstrate resolve, for example, where and how will they choose to make a stand?

There is also a rich tradition drawing on psychological theories, highlighting factors that produce error or bias in decisionmaking, as well as differences in leadership style and personality.³¹ I focus on how beliefs shape conceptions

26. In the context of U.S. intervention policy, see James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 7–13. See also Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2d ed. (New York: Longman, 1999), chap. 5.

27. See Jon Western, *Selling Intervention and War: The Presidency, the Media, and the American Public* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. 4–14. See also Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), chap. 7.

28. See, for example, Hans J. Morgenthau, "To Intervene or Not to Intervene," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (April 1967), p. 430. In the context of alliances, see also Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 21–26.

29. See, for example, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).

30. See, for example, Giacomo Chiozza and Ajin Choi, "Guess Who Did What: Political Leaders and the Management of Territorial Disputes, 1950–1990," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (June 2003), pp. 251–278.

31. The literature is vast. On error and bias, see, for example, Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. On leadership style, see James M. Goldgeier, *Leadership Style and Soviet Foreign Policy: Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Gorbachev* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994);

of threat, rather than bias in decisionmaking or policy execution. But the argument could be extended to include psychological factors. For example, Yuen Foong Khong shows that the use of different analogies influenced how Kennedy and Johnson intervened in Vietnam.³² The typology I develop suggests that certain leaders will be disposed to invoke certain analogies.

Causal Beliefs: Two Paths to Threat Perception

Causal beliefs, or “beliefs about cause-effect relationships,” guide leaders’ understandings of the origin of threats.³³ The military interventions I am concerned with here involve great powers intervening in smaller powers. There are many more potential threats from smaller powers than leaders can confront directly, however. Within a polity, there might be a broad consensus about overall goals. For example, all U.S. presidents during the Cold War were anticommunist. But leaders need some way to prioritize the many possible intervention opportunities they confront.

In this framework, two different ideal-typical causal beliefs lead to perceptions of threat. One belief—held by internally focused leaders—is that the smaller power’s foreign and security policies, including its alliances, are intimately connected to its internal institutions. Leaders who hold this causal belief care about threatening foreign and security policies or outcomes, but they also view the smaller power’s domestic order as a genuine source of threat, in several ways. Internally focused leaders are concerned about the risk that a regional ally or friendly state will be attacked, or in the Cold War context, that a client state will fall under the other superpower’s sphere of influence. But an internally focused leader would blame the smaller power’s internal institutions for leaving it vulnerable to either external attack or takeover from within. Internally focused leaders may see another state’s domestic institutions as more directly threatening, linking aggressive behavior to internal institutions.

and Margaret G. Hermann and Charles W. Kegley Jr., “Rethinking Democracy and International Peace: Perspectives from Political Psychology,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (December 1995), pp. 521–529. On personality, see Byman and Pollack, “Let Us Now Praise Great Men,” pp. 136–140.

32. See Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), chaps. 4–7.

33. Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, “Ideas and Foreign Policy: An Analytical Framework,” in Goldstein and Keohane, eds., *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 10. I make no assumptions about how widely beliefs are shared, however. In this sense, my argument is more akin to the “operational code.” See Alexander L. George, “The ‘Operational Code’: A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (June 1969), pp. 190–222.

Institutions themselves may also be sufficient to trigger threat perception. In a democracy, for example, internally focused leaders might subscribe to the liberal proposition that nondemocracies are inherently threatening.³⁴ Alternatively, leaders may affirmatively prefer autocracy, although it is important to distinguish such a preference from viewing autocrats as a short-term expedient to solve a foreign policy problem. Conditions conducive to revolution or instability within a smaller power could also be seen as threats. “Demonstration effects” from alternative authority structures in other states may cause leaders to perceive a threat to their power (as when the Soviets saw West Berlin as a dangerous alternative that had to be sealed off).³⁵

In contrast, externally focused leaders diagnose threats from other states’ foreign and security policies or international orientation, and do not see a causal connection between these outcomes and the domestic institutions of smaller powers. When externally focused leaders consider threats to a smaller power’s security or alignment, they do not connect such threats to the smaller power’s internal institutions. In terms of more direct threats to the great power’s interests—such as the seizure of a strategic asset, the expropriation of natural resources, or the initiation of regional or civil aggression—externally focused leaders treat smaller powers relatively similarly, because in this view, any state might engage in such behavior regardless of its internal organization. Any concern an externally focused leader has about domestic crises within other states centers on the international dimensions of those crises, such as whether civil strife results in conflict spillover, produces a change in the state’s alliances, or threatens a state’s ability to meet its international economic obligations (as in Roosevelt’s concern about the Dominican customhouses). The form of the smaller state’s internal institutions is less important to these leaders, though they may still have a preference for those institutions.

In this framework leaders may hold either causal belief. It is important to note that both leader types are usually concerned with other states’ foreign and security policies and position in the international system; the difference arises from how the two types diagnose the source of those policies and outcomes. Internally focused leaders, while concerned with international behavior and outcomes, pay additional attention to domestic organization. Internally focused leaders may have a longer time horizon, perhaps expecting that over time, a government with a favorable internal order will moderate

34. See, for example, Michael W. Doyle, “Liberalism and World Politics,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (December 1986), p. 1161.

35. Suzanne Werner, “Absolute and Limited War: The Possibility of Foreign-Imposed Regime Change,” *International Interactions*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (July 1996), pp. 71–72.

any unacceptable foreign policies. Internally focused leaders might also see more total potential threats, given that the very nature of a smaller power's domestic order could be considered an embryonic threat. These two leader types are, of course, ideal types; in reality, leaders may have a more complex understanding of the nature of threats.

Although there are important connections between the two types and the realist and liberal traditions, the categories developed here are more general. Some realists have considered internal processes such as revolutions to be sources of threat.³⁶ Furthermore, although in its general form liberal theory focuses on domestic and societal factors in international politics, liberalism is often concerned with the effects of democracy and economic interdependence.³⁷ The theory developed here could be applied in nondemocratic settings (for example, Soviet leaders could be more or less internally focused, perhaps accepting less thoroughly communist regimes if they were strong allies).

Leaders form these causal beliefs before they arrive in office. The theory is agnostic about how leaders acquire beliefs. The varied pathways—which may include psychological mechanisms (such as learning from past experience), work on policy issues, self-education, or contact with groups that hold shared beliefs—show that causal beliefs are not reducible to a single alternative explanation.

This argument raises the question of whether beliefs change over time, perhaps through learning (defined as “changes in belief systems . . . as the result of experience or study,” following Andrew Bennett).³⁸ Although empirically I look for evidence that leaders' beliefs changed through learning, in practice I find little evidence of changes in causal beliefs, consistent with research showing that people assimilate new information through the framework of existing beliefs.³⁹ It is especially difficult to assess learning in an ongoing intervention because changes in strategy may be driven by reluctant adjustments in the face of battlefield or political realities, rather than changes in core beliefs about the nature of threats; the distinction is important because if beliefs do not change,

36. See Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace, 1812–1822* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964); and Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996). Neither addresses why some leaders within the same state might perceive revolution as threatening while others do not, however.

37. For a general statement of liberal theory, see Andrew Moravcsik, “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics,” *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Fall 1997), pp. 513–553. On the effects of democracy and trade on conflict, see Bruce Russett and John R. Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

38. Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition? The Rise, Fall, and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Military Interventionism, 1973–1996* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), p. 3.

39. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, chap. 4.

leaders may modify existing approaches in an ad hoc way or make subsequent decisions using their original beliefs. The theory thus has more to say about the initial choice of strategy than about changes in strategy as the intervention unfolds. Leaders must still live with their policy investments, however, and may find it difficult to shift policy on short notice. The initial choice of strategy may therefore have important consequences over a significant period even if it evolves later.

How Causal Beliefs Influence Intervention Decisions

There are two mechanisms through which causal beliefs shape the way leaders confront intervention decisions. The leader's type directly shapes the cost-benefit calculus of intervention decisions by influencing how the leader values the benefits of successfully transforming target states. Externally focused leaders place relatively more weight on the international aspects of crisis outcomes. If forced to choose, they rank obtaining favorable foreign and security policies from the target state over achieving the "right" domestic institutions. U.S. presidents, for example, frequently have tolerated "friendly dictators." As Franklin Roosevelt (apocryphally) said of Nicaragua's Anastasio Somoza, "He may be a son-of-a-bitch, but he is our son-of-a-bitch."⁴⁰

In contrast, when considering conflict or crisis outcomes, internally focused leaders prioritize favorable domestic outcomes within target states. For example, a smaller power might have democratic institutions after a crisis, but democratic elections could produce a government that is hostile to the great power or does not pursue the great power's preferred policies (as many worried would occur if a democratic Iraq elected an anti-American government).⁴¹ Of course, internally focused leaders would also welcome friendly foreign and security policies from the smaller state. But knowing that it may take time for policies to evolve, internally focused leaders may be willing to sacrifice favorable foreign policies in the short term in exchange for long-term institutional success. Thus internally focused leaders see greater benefits from achieving internally successful outcomes, which in turn contribute more to these leaders' expected utility calculation for a transformative intervention.

40. Quoted (apocryphally) in David F. Schmitz, *Thank God They're on Our Side: The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921–1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 3–4.

41. Bueno de Mesquita and Downs argue that democratic interveners are more likely to install autocracies to avoid this outcome (see Bueno de Mesquita and Downs, "Intervention and Democracy"). But while their theory assumes that all leaders share this logic, another instrumental view is to see democratizing the target state as providing direct security benefits, perhaps because the leader sees democracies as more stable and predictable in the long run.

Leaders' causal beliefs also influence the cost-benefit calculus of interventions through a second, indirect mechanism: by influencing how leaders allocate scarce resources to confront threats. Before specific crises arise, leaders transmit their causal beliefs through the policy process by making policy investments in capabilities suitable for different intervention strategies. Policy investments also provide an observable implication of beliefs, because leaders in effect declare in advance what threats they believe are most important. Policy investments occur through several mechanisms, including changes in staffing, overall strategy and the defense posture, budgetary allocations, institutional creation and change (particularly within the bureaucracy), and contingency planning. These mechanisms affect the distribution of resources—including not only material capabilities but also bureaucratic and intellectual capabilities—available for transformative and nontransformative strategies. For example, military forces, military and civilian bureaucratic institutions, and nonmilitary factors such as foreign aid programs can all place more or less weight on transformative or nontransformative strategies.

The distribution of intervention capabilities, in turn, affects preparedness for different intervention strategies. All military interventions carry inherent risk (stemming from factors arising outside the theory and related to the conflict itself, such as terrain). But another form of risk (what might be termed "induced risk") stems from preparedness for different intervention strategies, which may raise the estimated probability of success or reduce the estimated cost of a particular strategy.

The relationship between investments and preparedness is not linear. The distribution of intervention capabilities reflects many relatively static factors, such as the structure of the military. Bureaucratic resistance may also hamper investments, as many have argued about Kennedy's attempts to institutionalize a counterinsurgency capability within the U.S. military. Furthermore, investments may not take effect quickly enough to influence intervention outcomes. But even if leaders are not completely successful or if changes in capabilities lag, policy investments are evidence of how a leader intended to organize capabilities to meet threats, and they may affect his perception of what means are available when crises arise.

When leaders face a decision to intervene, they must evaluate the expected utility of the strategy they may employ (as well as the expected utility of not intervening at all). The theory does not predict that leaders blindly follow their beliefs; rather, it argues that structural and material factors and domestic competition are not sufficient to explain the choice of strategy, and that leaders' causal beliefs have an effect on decisions independent of structural and material conditions or domestic competition. The most direct way that causal be-

iefs influence the expected utility of a given intervention strategy is through the valuation of benefits. The effect of causal beliefs is also channeled indirectly through policy investments, which affect estimates of both costs and the probability of success through the mechanism of preparedness. Thus internally focused leaders are more likely to pursue transformative strategies, whereas externally focused leaders are more likely to pursue nontransformative strategies.

Leaders do not have the luxury of choosing which crises break out, however. They may feel pressure (perhaps from international or domestic audiences) to act even when they do not perceive a direct threat, raising the expected costs of doing nothing. As Jon Western details, toward the end of his term, George H.W. Bush faced mounting pressure to do something about the crises in Somalia and Bosnia, which he did not perceive as threats. He initiated a non-transformative intervention in Somalia partly because he believed his successor, Bill Clinton, would intervene in Bosnia, and the military argued that Somalia would be the more limited task.⁴² In such cases, causal beliefs may still affect how leaders intervene.

Overall, there are several scenarios reflecting the influence of leaders' causal beliefs about the origin of threats on intervention decisions, both within and across the tenures of different individuals. In this article I focus on differences across leaders. Two leaders may disagree that a given crisis or conflict represents a threat, for example. Leaders may agree that a threat exists but may disagree about the source of the threat, especially because many crises or conflicts have both an international and a domestic dimension. In such cases, both leader types might perceive threats from aggressive behavior by another state or from the potential loss of territory within their sphere of influence. But an internally focused leader would focus on the domestic dimension of the crisis, whereas an externally focused leader would concentrate on the international aspects of the crisis, leading to different intervention strategies. Finally, both leader types might conclude that a crisis or conflict merits intervention, but not because they agree it represents a threat. For example, an externally focused leader may feel domestic or international pressure to intervene in an internal crisis. He might gamble on a transformative strategy (for which he is less prepared), or he might follow Bush's action in Somalia and stick with a nontransformative strategy, for which he is better prepared. In the latter case, the strategy might be ill-suited to the nature of the conflict, a result that might be called a "mismatched" intervention.

42. Western, *Selling Intervention and War*, chap. 5. On the expected utility of nonintervention, see Patrick M. Regan, "Choosing to Intervene: Outside Interventions in Internal Conflicts," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (August 1998), pp. 759–765.

Research Design: Isolating and Measuring Causal Beliefs

This section outlines the research design I use to examine two U.S. presidents—Kennedy and Johnson—who agreed that the conflict in Vietnam merited intervention, but viewed the nature of the threat differently and thus chose different intervention strategies. To isolate the effect of leaders' beliefs, I concentrate on a single state within a single international system: the United States during the Cold War. Holding constant not only the bipolar structure of the international environment but also the democratic institutions of the United States helps to show that neither regime type nor a consistent tendency within American foreign policy fully determines the choice of intervention strategy. Examining the United States provides a hard test for the role of leaders, who might be expected to play a greater role in autocracies; furthermore, the public and elite groups have more access to policymaking than in other systems. Additionally, one might expect a strong "threat consensus" during the Cold War. Yet despite a shared commitment to fighting communism, Cold War presidents varied in how they viewed the threat and in how they pursued containment, especially in the third world.⁴³ Some presidents (such as Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan) focused on preventing third world states from "going communist" from within because of weak or illiberal institutions that left them vulnerable to the appeal of communism, whereas others (such as Eisenhower, Johnson, and Richard Nixon) concentrated on outside aggression against third world states or subversion of institutions from the outside. The threat of "communism" could thus represent merely the threat of further communist bloc advances on the world map, or take on the additional meaning of a threat from the domestic institutions of third world states that might go communist as a result of internal weakness.

Even with the advantages of this research design, there are pitfalls in tracing the effect of beliefs on behavior. Leaders may say and do things under the pressure of crisis decisionmaking that may not reflect their actual beliefs. Furthermore, stated beliefs may be merely post hoc justifications for action. Thus one cannot infer beliefs merely by observing leaders in crises. I therefore shift my primary measurement of causal beliefs to the prepresidential period, to show that presidents arrived in office with causal beliefs already in place.

To measure causal beliefs, I investigate the future president's views on the nature of threats; how the future president viewed states in the third world (where most Cold War military interventions occurred), especially whether he

43. See John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, rev. and exp. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also Khong, *Analogies at War*, pp. 71–73.

focused on third world states' internal institutions or their external alignment; and the nature and purpose of foreign aid, a useful measure of how the future president saw the nature of threats that is not necessarily correlated with an intervention strategy. These indicators probe threat perception (independent of intervention decisions), and not simply a belief in the efficacy of a particular strategy, which would risk a tautological explanation. I also examine any views the future president expressed on strategy and policy investments. Understanding how a leader's causal beliefs translated into positions on strategy and the use of force in his prepresidential years is helpful evidence because it is separated in time from the future leader's intervention decisions, and it helps establish whether his views changed over time. Finally, I examine policy investments made early in each administration.

The Kennedy-Johnson comparison is particularly useful. Given that Johnson shared Kennedy's party affiliation, served as Kennedy's vice president, inherited much of Kennedy's national security apparatus, and stressed continuity to the public in the wake of Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, the differences Johnson had with Kennedy are even more striking. In Congress, both men commented on many of the same issues and crises before taking office. In terms of other domestic actors, Kennedy and Johnson faced similar bureaucratic constraints as president and relied on many of the same advisers. Kennedy's assassination also meant that changes in strategy did not arise from voters electing a president with particular intervention preferences.

The Vietnam War is arguably a difficult case for the theory. Conflicts such as Vietnam attracted American interest in part because the nature of the government was at stake amid the superpower struggle; all presidents who confronted the conflict hoped to keep South Vietnam noncommunist. Successive presidents also feared that the loss of Vietnam would damage U.S. credibility. Given this consensus, any differences in how presidents viewed the nature of the conflict are particularly instructive; furthermore, in the particular case of Vietnam, Johnson felt pressure to continue Kennedy's policies. Yet even if one assumes that presidents agreed that the loss of Vietnam would harm U.S. interests in the Cold War, the theory still implies that leaders might view a conflict such as Vietnam differently. The theory expects an internally focused leader to identify the domestic institutions of states such as South Vietnam as the source of their vulnerability to a communist takeover, and thus focus on building up those institutions as part of his intervention strategy. In contrast, an externally focused leader would be expected to limit his concern primarily to ensuring a noncommunist government, paying less attention to the nature of that government and concentrating more on the international or outside sources of vulnerability.

Vietnam is also a difficult case for my theory because circumstances within

the war changed over time. Thus a simple explanation, following the structural/material conditions hypothesis, is that any differences in strategy resulted from changing circumstances. In this view, Kennedy had the luxury of trying a transformative counterinsurgency strategy because the situation in South Vietnam was not as bad as it ultimately would become during Johnson's tenure.⁴⁴ Yet both Kennedy and Johnson confronted proposals from within their administrations to try alternatives to their favored strategy. Furthermore, although scholars cannot know what Kennedy might have done in 1964 and 1965, we have the record of Johnson's vice presidency, as well as Johnson's views in the early portion of his presidency. These years allow an assessment of the two men's approaches under relatively comparable circumstances. Given that Vietnam is a difficult case for the theory, and that the theory identifies ideal types that, by definition, cannot perfectly match reality, I make a limited claim: that Kennedy and Johnson approached the conflict in Vietnam through different prisms that reflected their different causal beliefs, and these different approaches left a discernible imprint on their choices.

John F. Kennedy: Beliefs and Policy Investments

John F. Kennedy arrived in office with a strong interest in transformative strategies, the product of a consistent focus on the developing world's internal problems throughout his congressional career. Like most U.S. politicians during the Cold War, Kennedy was concerned about the advance of communism in the third world, and he was not immune from the tendency to see the Kremlin's hand everywhere. But he also believed that the domestic conditions of third world states were an important risk factor for communist takeovers, and thus directly affected U.S. national security. While he undoubtedly aimed to build his foreign policy credentials, advocating his call for more U.S. involvement in the third world, especially after Korea, was hardly the most politically obvious move. In the fall of 1951, for example, Kennedy embarked on a seven-week tour of the Middle East and Asia that informed his views about the origin of threats. But at home, as Robert Dallek notes, Kennedy's "journey of discovery evoked more indifference and hostility than encouragement or praise."⁴⁵ Yet during his years in Congress, Kennedy devoted considerable time to domestic conditions in the third world.

Kennedy displayed an early tendency to diagnose crises and threats in

44. For a similar argument, see Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington: Brookings, 1979), pp. 94–95.

45. Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2003), p. 167.

terms of other states' domestic problems. For example, in a speech discussing the 1951 crisis over British oil interests in Iran, Kennedy argued that the crisis was "not over oil alone," citing a litany of internal problems in countries such as Iran, including "corrupt and inefficient bureaucrac[ies]." He argued, "Of equal importance to military action is the development of techniques by which we might adjust the internal instability that creates a special threat to the security of the [M]iddle East, and which can result in action such as the [nationalization] of the oil of Iran." He pressed the case for a more active U.S. policy, arguing, "We have been anti-communist. We have been 'Pro' nothing. . . . That puts us in partnership with the corrupt and reactionary groups whose policies breed the discontent on which Soviet Communism feeds and prospers."⁴⁶

Kennedy also displayed an internal focus in his approach to the problem of building and maintaining the United States' alliances and sphere of influence. Kennedy emphasized the priority of internal issues over short-term external alignment, and stressed that the United States should not require new nations to pick sides in the superpower contest. He was therefore tolerant of neutral states such as India: as long as other states' institutions developed along favorable lines, foreign policies might follow. On his 1951 tour, he talked with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru about nonalignment and the problems of newly independent nations and came away with a more sympathetic view of neutralism.⁴⁷ He also criticized Eisenhower's drive to build third world military alliances, arguing that they would not address the internal problems that caused conflicts. In 1958 he wrote to an Arizona voter that the Eisenhower administration's drive for a Middle East defense pact would be ineffective without "an economic program which embraces the Middle East regionally," because "the danger of external aggression is not the chief one in the Middle East at the present time."⁴⁸

Kennedy saw foreign aid as an important tool for defending U.S. interests. In contrast to Eisenhower, and later Johnson, Kennedy emphasized the form that aid should take and the necessity of responding to each country's needs,⁴⁹ with an eye toward investing in long-term institutional development. In a ma-

46. JFK, speech to Massachusetts Federation of Taxpayers Associations, April 21, 1951, John F. Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers, House Files, Box 95, "Middle East, Mass. Federation of Taxpayers, 4/21/51" folder, John F. Kennedy Library (JFKL), pp. 3-6.

47. See, for example, JFK, speech to Boston Chamber of Commerce, November 19, 1951, Pre-Presidential Papers, Campaign Files, Box 102, "Speeches—Middle & Far East Trip" folder, JFKL, pp. 4-5.

48. JFK to Maurice Mordka, March 18, 1958, Pre-Presidential Papers, Senate Files (PPP-SF), Box 691, "Foreign Policy: General, 3/14/58-3/30/58" folder, JFKL.

49. See, for example, JFK to Dean Erwin N. Griswold of Harvard Law School, June 7, 1957, PPP-SF, Box 667, "Foreign Aid, 5/3/57-6/7/57" folder, JFKL.

jour speech on India in March 1958, he argued that only through “programs of real economic improvement” could developing states “find the political balance and social stability which provide the true defense against Communist penetration.”⁵⁰ Kennedy also advocated moving away from Eisenhower’s emphasis on military aid and toward internal political and economic aid, while using the military for local development programs.⁵¹

Finally, Kennedy’s views on strategy and the use of force in his prepresidential career show how his internal diagnosis of threats translated into policy prescriptions in these years. One of the most striking and well documented aspects of Kennedy’s prepresidential views on strategy was his deep interest in guerrilla warfare. Kennedy was exposed to the brand of counterinsurgency theory that emphasized transformative elements such as modernization and institution building. On his 1951 trip, he saw up close the British counterinsurgency strategy in Malaya, known as the “Briggs plan,” which involved a large-scale population resettlement program and institution building.⁵² Although at the time Kennedy visited Malaya he recorded in his travel journal that the “Briggs plan [was] not a success” and was behind schedule, he seemed to understand the local nature of the conflict, noting that much of the Chinese population was “sitting on [the] fence as [they] don’t want to pick [the] wrong side,” and was “subject to threats and intimidation” by guerrillas.⁵³ Later, he accused the Eisenhower administration of ignoring guerrilla warfare, saying as early as February 1954, “We must ask how the new . . . policy and its dependence on the threat of atomic retaliation will fare in these areas of guerrilla warfare.”⁵⁴ At the same time, Kennedy also believed the United States had to build up conventional forces to deal with “brush fire” or limited wars.

Kennedy also expressed views on the conflict in Indochina. He connected the nature of the communist threat to domestic issues. During his visit to Vietnam on his 1951 trip, he recorded in his travel journal that the communists

50. JFK, “The Choice in Asia—Democratic Development in India,” March 25, 1958, in John Fitzgerald Kennedy, *A Compilation of Statements and Speeches Made during His Service in the United States Senate and House of Representatives* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), p. 607.

51. See JFK, “Remarks to the Fifth National Conference on International Economic and Social Development,” February 26, 1958, PPP-SF, Box 561, “Foreign Aid, 10/20/57-2/24/59” folder, JFKL, pp. 4–5.

52. The institution building aspects of the British approach are emphasized in the writings of Sir Robert G.K. Thompson, who worked on the Briggs Plan and later served as an adviser in Vietnam. See Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1966), pp. 50–55, chap. 6.

53. JFK Travel Journal, Personal Papers, Box 11, “1951 Travel Journal Book 2, October–November, 1951” folders (four folders in total), JFKL, pp. 137–140.

54. JFK, remarks to the Cathedral Club, Brooklyn, N.Y., January 21, 1954, in Kennedy, *Compilation of Statements and Speeches*, p. 994.

were “preaching” issues such as independence, reform, and development, and thus “we will lose if all we offer is merely a defense of [the] status quo.”⁵⁵ During the 1954 debate over whether to intervene in Indochina to save the collapsing French position at Dien Bien Phu, Kennedy argued that “the war in Indo-China is an internal one . . . military guarantees of assistance from surrounding countries in case of outright aggression by the Chinese will be of little value in a war that is primarily civil.”⁵⁶ He was even willing to risk relations with allies. In his 1951 travel diary, Kennedy argued that “our policy must be true” to issues such as land reform and independence “regardless of ties to France” and Britain, and that “we must do what we can as our aid gets more important to force [the] French to liberalize political conditions.”⁵⁷

Kennedy carried these views to the White House. He recruited many academic theorists of development as advisers, though they largely confirmed his preexisting views.⁵⁸ His overall strategy gave significant weight to internal threats within other states, and he invested heavily in programs designed to shape the internal order of other states. A major focus of his policy investments was a top-down effort to increase counterinsurgency capabilities, to which he devoted considerable personal attention.⁵⁹ The effort contained a transformative emphasis: to take but one example, in December 1961 he issued National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 119, pushing for more attention to “civic action,” defined as “using military forces on projects useful to the populace at all levels.”⁶⁰

Kennedy also worked to institutionalize his strategy within the bureaucracy. He created a White House–based monitoring committee, the “Special Group (CI),” to oversee interagency efforts on counterinsurgency.⁶¹ In addition to the Agency for International Development and the Peace Corps, he launched the Alliance for Progress. Despite their limitations, all had a transformative character.⁶² He also began to shift the emphasis of U.S. aid away from military

55. JFK Travel Journal, pp. 133–134.

56. JFK, Speech Materials for Speech to Cook County Democrats, Chicago, April 20, 1954 (labeled “KS-3 1954” in the “Doodles” series), Personal Papers, Box 40, “1954—KS3” folder, JFKL, p. 9.

57. JFK Travel Journal, pp. 123, 130–131.

58. On the role of social scientists in the Kennedy administration, see Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 57–59.

59. For a discussion, see Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, pp. 27–33.

60. NSAM No. 119, December 18, 1961, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1961–1963*, Vol. 8, Doc. 65 (FRUS documents cited in this article are available online at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus>).

61. In practice, however, the participants were too senior to be effective. See Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1977), pp. 69, 86.

62. See Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, chaps. 3–4.

aid and toward economic development assistance. He told Congress in 1961 that failing to meet the United States' moral, economic, and political obligations in the world would be, "in the long run, more expensive," because it risked a "collapse of existing political and social structures which would inevitably invite the advance of totalitarianism into every weak and unstable area. Thus our own security would be endangered."⁶³ Many of Kennedy's efforts to promote political and economic development were not particularly successful. Furthermore, the U.S. Army heavily resisted counterinsurgency, and Kennedy did not do enough to encourage a real shift in doctrine.⁶⁴ For my purposes, however, it is Kennedy's perception of his policy investments that matters.

Lyndon B. Johnson: Beliefs and Policy Investments

Although he was less interested in or experienced with international issues than Kennedy, Johnson was not a neophyte on national security and foreign policy, especially given his service on several defense-related committees in Congress.⁶⁵ Johnson is a particularly difficult figure to classify, partly because he is so closely associated with transformative programs such as the Great Society at home, and he had genuine concern for the poor abroad. But his domestic beliefs did not necessarily translate directly to his views of the international sphere. In his prepresidential years he demonstrated an external focus, with little of Kennedy's tendency to connect national security threats to the domestic affairs of other states.

Johnson's view of threats in the international environment homed in on the risk that the communist bloc would engage in aggression, either directly through an attack or through subversion that was still directed from the outside. He therefore emphasized drawing lines against aggressors, but unlike Kennedy, he paid little attention to exactly where the line was drawn or whether the domestic characteristics of the states on the front line might make them less vulnerable to communism. Amid the 1947 debate on the Truman Doctrine, for example, Johnson wrote one of his mentors that he thought

63. JFK, "Special Message to the Congress on Foreign Aid," March 22, 1961, in John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* (Santa Barbara: University of California), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid?8545>.

64. See Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, chap. 2; and Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 100–104.

65. While noting Johnson's political motivations in gaining defense policy experience, Robert Dallek argues for greater attention to Johnson's "role in the rise of the national security state." Dallek, *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1908–1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 9.

Truman should say, "'This is it. We will not tolerate prima donna, high-handed, sulking, thieving forces who seek to gobble up helpless peoples in order to become the dominant power and rule the world.' As you well said, Truman chose to say that the place is Greece, the time is now."⁶⁶ Whether Greece was the right place to draw the line mattered less than the line itself. In the 1954 Guatemala crisis, Johnson introduced a resolution (over the objections of his adviser George Reedy) to reaffirm the Monroe Doctrine and stop external interference in the Western Hemisphere. But as for Guatemala itself, he wrote a constituent that he did not "know the names and the characters of the rebels in Guatemala."⁶⁷

Johnson's somewhat complex views on foreign aid also displayed a tendency to separate the domestic institutions of third world states from their place in the Cold War struggle.⁶⁸ He had genuine concern for the world's poor; indeed, some scholars see a connection between Johnson's transformative vision for the United States (through his commitment to the New Deal and, later, the Great Society) and his view of the developing world.⁶⁹ But for Johnson, internal problems were largely separate from Cold War threats, whereas for Kennedy, they were intertwined. Johnson wrote a constituent in June 1958 that he was "uncertain as to how far we should go in spending money for this program," but that foreign aid might help "as a means of battling for the cooperation of the one-third of the world's population that is not at present committed to the United States or Russia."⁷⁰ But his version of a "hearts and minds" campaign did not have much depth with regard to its long-term commitment to the development of other states' institutions. As the Senate Democratic leader, he helped shepherd Eisenhower's foreign aid bills through Congress. But he

66. LBJ to Alvin J. Wirtz, April 29, 1947, Lyndon B. Johnson Pre-Presidential Papers, LBJA Selected Names File, Box 37, "Wirtz, A.J., 1944—" folder, Lyndon B. Johnson Library (LBJL).

67. LBJ to Charles L. Scarborough, June 28, 1954, Pre-Presidential Papers, Senate Papers (PPP-SP), Box 297, "Leg. F.R. (S. Con. Res. 91) Guatemala, 2 of 2" folder, LBJL. For the resolution, see S. Con. Res. 91, June 25, 1954, *Congressional Record*, 83d Congress, 2d sess., p. 8927. The resolution passed 69 to 1—and Kennedy voted for it—but Johnson was its main sponsor. For Reedy's objections, see Reedy to LBJ, May 28, 1954, PPP-SP, Box 413, "Reedy: Memos, January–November 1954, 2 of 3" folder, LBJL.

68. For a similar argument about Johnson's view of aid, see Burton I. Kaufman, "Foreign Aid and the Balance-of-Payments Problem: Vietnam and Johnson's Foreign Economic Policy," in Robert A. Divine, ed., *The Johnson Years*, Vol. 2: *Vietnam, the Environment, and Science* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987), pp. 80–81.

69. See, for example, Randall B. Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (New York: Free Press, 2006). Additionally, Lloyd C. Gardner argues that there was an important substantive connection between the War on Poverty and Vietnam. See Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), chap. 6.

70. LBJ to William G. Goodrich Jr., March 28, 1958, PPP-SP, Box 601, "Foreign Relations, Aid [4 of 6]" folder, LBJL.

also expressed skepticism, writing in March 1958 that he sometimes “felt that we should eliminate foreign aid completely.”⁷¹ As vice president, he deemed the Alliance for Progress a “thoroughgoing mess.”⁷²

These externally oriented views translated into a nontransformative view of strategy and a focus on conventional preparedness in Johnson’s prepresidential years. In 1948, for example, he peppered his staff with inquiries about the U.S. military’s manpower strength, the stockpiling of raw materials, and particularly air power.⁷³ In July 1950 Johnson persuaded his colleagues to name him chairman of a new watchdog subcommittee for preparedness. Over the next few years, the subcommittee investigated many of the same themes of conventional preparedness that Johnson raised in 1948, with no discernible interest in unconventional warfare.⁷⁴ As Lawrence Freedman argues, “Johnson was less inclined to the political theory behind counterinsurgency strategy.”⁷⁵ In his statements on the 1954 crisis in Indochina, Johnson emphasized international concerns. In a newsletter for his constituents, for example, he invoked the domino theory, and his only discussion of the internal situation in Indochina was to note that the “French have refused to grant full independence.”⁷⁶ Thus in the period when Kennedy began to focus on the third world’s internal problems as a source of threat, Johnson simply saw territory that might be grabbed by the Soviets and prepared to defend it accordingly.

Kennedy’s assassination, as well as Johnson’s desire to convey a sense of continuity, meant that Johnson had less flexibility than most new presidents to make policy investments. Nonetheless, his choices are illuminating. Although there was much continuity in the advisory circle, there were shifts: in particular, midlevel officials who favored a politically oriented approach to third world conflicts became increasingly peripheral. In terms of policy, Johnson de-emphasized development-oriented aid and demanded support for U.S. anti-communist goals in return for aid. Although he promised to continue the Alliance for Progress—which Kennedy himself, by the time of his death, recognized as problematic—Johnson shifted the program’s emphasis away from

71. LBJ to Mrs. Robert Fitch, March 28, 1958, PPP-SP, Box 601, “Foreign Relations, Aid [4 of 6]” folder, LBJL.

72. Eric F. Goldman, *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 76.

73. See the memos to Johnson (which reference his queries) in Pre-Presidential Papers, House of Representatives Papers, Box 329, “Memos to Johnson” folder, LBJL.

74. See “Summary of First Thirty-Six Reports of the Senate Preparedness Subcommittee,” undated, PPP-SP, Box 346, “[Continuance of the Preparedness Subcommittee]” folder, LBJL.

75. Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 405.

76. LBJ, “Washington News Letter,” April 24, 1954, PPP-LBJA Subject File, “Publicity, Newsletter, January–May 1954—Record Copy” folder, LBJL, p. 1 (emphasis omitted).

gradually transforming Latin American countries.⁷⁷ Johnson also did not sustain the top-down pressure to build counterinsurgency forces. He allowed the Special Group (CI) to wither, for example.⁷⁸ Johnson prioritized externally successful outcomes, which meant stable, anticommunist regimes and little else. He would take a different approach to military intervention when he succeeded the slain Kennedy.

Kennedy, Johnson, and Vietnam

This section discusses how Presidents Kennedy and Johnson intervened in Vietnam, focusing on the choice of strategy. I also discuss possible alternative explanations. Scholars continue to debate the differences—if any—between the Kennedy and Johnson approaches to Vietnam, as well as whether Johnson was constrained by circumstance or had freedom to maneuver.⁷⁹ To be sure, there was continuity between the two administrations (such as concern about the international and political implications of losing Vietnam); Johnson also faced different circumstances (such as political instability in the wake of the assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem and a stepped-up effort by North Vietnam that led to deteriorating conditions in the South). The two presidents' threat perceptions do not account for all aspects of the Vietnam intervention. But this section illustrates that even when two leaders agree that a crisis merits intervention, they may differ in whether they see the nature of the crisis as arising from domestic institutions, and this difference can have important consequences for initial intervention choices.

KENNEDY AND VIETNAM

Kennedy's approach to Vietnam reflected the tight link he saw between the political situation within South Vietnam and the war effort. In a January 1961 meeting, for example, he "asked whether the situation was not basically one of

77. On Johnson's reorientation of the Alliance, see Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961–1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 92–97.

78. CIA Director John McCone noted in March 1965 that the Special Group's "position had eroded away," and it was abolished a year later. See Memorandum for the Record (dictated by McCone), March 18, 1965, *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 33, Doc. 30; and NSAM No. 341, March 2, 1966, *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 33, Doc. 56.

79. For an argument that emphasizes continuity between Kennedy and Johnson and the constraints each president faced, see Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*. For an account arguing that Johnson had real choice and was the critical force behind the escalation, see Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). On Vietnam as a war of choice for Johnson, see also Alexander B. Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?" *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Spring 2009), pp. 9–51.

politics and morale.”⁸⁰ At a November 1961 National Security Council (NSC) meeting, the president noted that whereas Korea had been a “case of clear aggression,” the “conflict in Viet Nam is more obscure and less flagrant.” Kennedy “described it as being more a political issue, of different magnitude and (again) less defined than the Korean War.”⁸¹ Although he often referred to the problem of insurgency as “Communist-directed” or a form of “indirect aggression,”⁸² Kennedy located the source of the conflict within Vietnam.

Given this view, Kennedy devoted considerable attention not only to whether to intervene, but how. As Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts note, the debate within the Kennedy administration “was not whether one was for or against force, but rather what *form* force should take,” conventional operations or politically oriented counterinsurgency.⁸³ From the early days of his tenure, Kennedy repeatedly resisted recommendations for a conventional deployment in Vietnam and instead asked for more counterinsurgency options that would address underlying internal issues. In February 1961, for example, he asked Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Chairman Lyman Lemnitzer whether troops in South Vietnam could be redistributed for “anti-guerilla activities,” even if it meant taking troops away from defending the border.⁸⁴ In May 1961 he resisted a JCS recommendation for a deployment intended, among other purposes, to deter a potential invasion from North Vietnam or China, and to signal “firmness.”⁸⁵ In the fall of 1961, Kennedy sent Deputy National Security Adviser Walt Rostow and Gen. Maxwell Taylor to Vietnam, specifically instructing Taylor to examine political, social, and economic issues as closely as military considerations.⁸⁶

Despite repeated recommendations from his advisers (including Rostow and Taylor) to send troops, however, Kennedy opposed a conventional deployment and pushed for a counterinsurgency alternative. He expressed not only skepticism about intervening at all but also displeasure with his advisers’ strategy for intervention. Invoking the analogy to U.S. action in Greece, he wrote to Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara to “get our ducks in a row,” asking “to have someone look into

80. Rostow to Bundy (summarizing White House meeting of January 28, 1961), January 30, 1961, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, Vol. 1, Doc. 4.

81. Notes on the National Security Council Meeting, November 15, 1961, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, Vol. 1, Doc. 254.

82. For an example of Kennedy using the “Communist-directed” and “indirect aggression” language, see JFK to McNamara, January 11, 1962, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, Vol. 8, Doc. 67.

83. Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, p. 81 (emphasis in original).

84. NSAM No. 12, February 6, 1961, *FRUS 1961–1963*, Vol. 1, Doc. 9.

85. Senator Mike Gravel, ed., *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, Vol. 2 (Boston: Beacon, 1971), p. 49.

86. David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2000), p. 102.

what we did in Greece. . . . How much money was used for guerrilla warfare?" He thought "there should be a group specially trained for guerrilla warfare. I understand that the guns that have been used have been too heavy. Would carbines be better? Wonder if someone could make sure we are moving ahead to improve this."⁸⁷ Kennedy authorized an increase in the U.S. advisory role with expanded rules of engagement. But by January 1962 an unhappy Kennedy had written McNamara that he was "not satisfied" that the Pentagon was devoting sufficient attention to counterinsurgency issues, "although it is clear that these constitute a major form of politico-military conflict for which we must carefully prepare. The effort devoted to this challenge should be comparable in importance to preparations for conventional warfare."⁸⁸

Finally, in early 1962 such a strategy began to come together. Passing over many of his top advisers, Kennedy relied on the State Department's Roger Hilsman, who had experience with guerrilla warfare. After going to Vietnam at Kennedy's request, Hilsman wrote a report drawing on the ideas of Robert Thompson, leader of the British advisory group in Vietnam, who had worked on the Briggs plan in Malaya that Kennedy had witnessed up close in 1951 and whose counterinsurgency thinking emphasized civic action and institution building. The Hilsman-Thompson strategy had become the basis for U.S. policy in South Vietnam by March 1962.⁸⁹

At the heart of this policy was the "Strategic Hamlet Program," which, on paper at least, aimed at local-level transformation through civic action designed to change the national government's relationship to its people. The Hilsman report's "Strategic Concept" section listed as its first principle that the "problem presented by the Viet Cong is a political and not a military problem." In addition to the physical creation of strategic hamlets for the purpose of providing security to the population (a key to the population-centered counterinsurgency approach), the plan called for civic action teams "to assist locals in the construction of strategic villages and to build the essential socio-political base. . . . The public administration members will set up village government and tie it into the district and national levels assuring the flow of information on village needs and problems upward and the flow of government services downward."⁹⁰

87. JFK to Rusk and McNamara, November 14, 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, Vol. 1, Doc. 252. On Kennedy's fondness for the Greek analogy, see Khong, *Analogies at War*, pp. 87-89.

88. JFK to McNamara, January 11, 1962.

89. While officially the U.S. commitment remained "advisory," the "operational collaboration" with the South Vietnamese made it an overt military intervention (which the public could follow through media coverage). See NSAM No. 111, November 22, 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Vol. 1, Doc. 272. The Kennedy commitments peaked at 16,000 U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam.

90. Hilsman, "A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam," February 2, 1962, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Vol. 2,

Thus the intended U.S. strategy—which is of primary interest here—was transformative, in the sense that the aim was to build local-level institutions, interact with the population, and integrate nonmilitary issues with the overall military strategy. The Strategic Hamlet Program itself was ultimately a failure, for complex reasons, including flawed assumptions, poor implementation on the U.S. side, and the refusal of President Diem, a leader aiming to retain power, to reform his corrupt regime. The rural population suffered terrible dislocation, further diminishing support for the government (which used the program to increase Diem’s power).⁹¹ Kennedy also ignored critical differences between the characteristics of the Vietnamese and Malayan conflicts.⁹² But in terms of the president’s intended choice of strategy, rather than opting for a deterrent force or airstrikes, Kennedy—who was no dove—chose a counterinsurgency strategy that involved deep interference in the internal affairs of South Vietnam, in the hope of creating a stable, noncommunist bulwark.

By 1963, however, Kennedy had to confront Diem’s increasingly weak popular support. In the fall of 1963, Kennedy’s linking of the political and military aspects of the war led him to consider removing Diem, whom he perceived as an obstacle to reform. The complex decisionmaking surrounding the coup partly reflected a lack of consensus within the administration, which was engaged in an ongoing debate over how much and how best to push Diem to reform. In August 1963 some administration officials saw the conflict in Vietnam as political and thus favored a coup against Diem, whereas others saw it in military terms and opposed a coup.⁹³ Kennedy vacillated on the coup—to a large extent out of concern that the coup itself might fail—but as Freedman notes, “his indecision had the same effect as an anti-Diem choice.”⁹⁴

Although he vacillated, Kennedy sympathized with the view that the problem in Vietnam was political and that Diem was an obstacle to military progress. In instructions to McNamara before a mission to Saigon in September 1963, for example, Kennedy wrote that “events in South Vietnam since May

Doc. 42. As Michael Latham notes, despite abuses in the program, its supporters believed “that civic action and the organization of a new political culture could provide the institutional framework and activist values to win the allegiance of a dislocated population.” Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, pp. 185–186.

91. Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1972), pp. 155–158. On the problems with the Strategic Hamlet Program, see also Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, pp. 85–86; and Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, chap. 6.

92. Khong, *Analogies at War*, pp. 91–95.

93. On these divisions, see Robert L. Gallucci, *Neither Peace nor Honor: The Politics of American Military Policy in Viet-Nam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 25. On the debate over how to deal with Diem and the coup itself, see, for example, Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, chap. 40.

94. *Ibid.*, p. 397. On concerns that the coup would fail, see also Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, pp. 265, 270–271.

have now raised serious questions . . . about the future effectiveness of this effort unless there can be important political improvement in the country." He went on to argue, "It is obvious that the overall political situation and the military and paramilitary effort are closely interconnected in all sorts of ways."⁹⁵ Kennedy was under no illusions that there was a logical, much less desirable, successor to Diem. The president's willingness to entertain a change in government in South Vietnam is even more surprising in the face of such potential uncertainty and instability.

The move against Diem was motivated neither by moral outrage against Diem's repressive policies nor by the impulse to democratize Vietnam for its own sake, but rather by the link many in the administration saw between the political situation and the war effort. Indeed, at the NSC meeting on October 2, 1963, Kennedy explicitly argued that U.S. policy should be based "on the harm which Diem's political actions are causing to the effort against the Viet Cong rather than on our moral opposition to the kind of government Diem is running."⁹⁶ The goal was not necessarily a democratic government in South Vietnam, but rather a government that at least had a broader base of support. One need not assume, therefore, that Kennedy was motivated by an idealist impulse to conclude that he connected military success with some form of political change.⁹⁷ For its proponents, at least, the coup was a component of a transformative strategy, rather than an operation that would simply swap one leader for another. Despite his awareness of the hazards of removing Diem—a U.S. ally—Kennedy was willing to risk destabilizing Vietnam to transform it. Ironically, the fears of those who opposed the coup proved correct: Diem's death on November 2, 1963 (a surprise to Kennedy, who thought Diem would go into exile), left internal instability in South Vietnam that would preoccupy Johnson.

Thus Kennedy chose a transformative strategy to combat what he viewed as a fundamentally political problem within South Vietnam. To be sure, Kennedy held a Cold War mind-set and worried about the international (and political) ramifications of losing Vietnam. Furthermore, a politically oriented strategy faced many obstacles, from difficulty in convincing the South Vietnamese to reform to the U.S. Army's resistance to counterinsurgency. But my aim here is

95. JFK to McNamara, September 21, 1963, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, Vol. 4, Doc. 142.

96. Summary record of the 519th Meeting of the National Security Council, October 2, 1963, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, Vol. 4, Doc. 169.

97. Kaiser makes a similar point, arguing that the controversial August 24, 1963, telegram that marked the beginning of serious presidential-level consideration of a coup "reflected a generally held belief . . . that South Vietnam could not survive without fundamental changes." Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 231.

only to explain the strategy Kennedy intended to use. Even if Kennedy accepted the international or political imperatives to save Vietnam, he saw Vietnam's internal strength as bound up with how to fight the war.

JOHNSON AND VIETNAM

Johnson faced different and arguably more difficult circumstances in Vietnam, in addition to the burden of taking over for Kennedy. But as Dallek summarizes, Johnson was a "different man facing different circumstances" and "charted his own course."⁹⁸ Many factors influenced his escalation decisions; this discussion focuses on the nature of the escalation strategy. Although he struggled with the instability in South Vietnam after Diem's death, he did not connect internal Vietnamese problems to the international and military dimensions of the war to the same degree as Kennedy, and thus he limited his concern primarily to ensuring a noncommunist government, with only limited attention to the nature of that government.

One way to disentangle the effect of Kennedy's and Johnson's threat perceptions from that of the evolving circumstances within Vietnam is to look at periods in which they confronted the same or relatively similar circumstances. As vice president, for example, Johnson sat in on many Kennedy administration meetings, and had exposure to debates about the nature of the war and the counterinsurgency approach that Kennedy favored.⁹⁹ Yet Johnson fit more naturally with those who placed less emphasis on the political aspects of the war, and thus opposed a coup against Diem, or even pushing Diem to reform. After traveling—very reluctantly—to Vietnam as vice president in 1961, Johnson told the House Foreign Affairs Committee, "This certainly is no time for nit-picking where Diem is concerned." He argued, "We either decide that we are going to support him and support him zealously or that we are going to let South Vietnam fall."¹⁰⁰ In August 1963, amid the debate over the coup against Diem, Johnson argued in a high-level meeting that he "recognized the evils of Diem but has seen no alternative to him. Certainly we can't pull out. We must reestablish ourselves and stop playing cops and robbers."¹⁰¹ Another ac-

98. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, p. 99. See also Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 78.

99. In addition to his participation in meetings, Johnson received memos from his aide Howard Burris that discussed the village-level approach to counterinsurgency advocated by Sir Robert Thompson. See, for example, Burris to LBJ, "Viet Cong Activity," March 20, 1962, Vice Presidential Security File (VPSF), Box 5, "Memos to the Vice President from Colonel Burris, Jan. 1961–June 1962 [2 of 2]" folder, LBJL.

100. LBJ, Statement before House Foreign Affairs Committee, June 5, 1961, VPSF, Box 11, "Proposed Statement of VP Before House Foreign Affairs Committee, June 5, 1961" folder, LBJL, p. 14.

101. Memorandum of Conversation (drafted by Hilsman), August 31, 1963, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, Vol. 4, Doc. 37.

count of the meeting notes that Johnson said he “had never been sympathetic” to a coup and “thought that we ought to reestablish ties to the Diem government as quickly as possible and get forward with the war against the Viet Cong.”¹⁰² For Johnson, internal reform was distinct from moving “forward with the war.”

When Johnson assumed the presidency, he publicly pledged to continue Kennedy’s policies. But behind the scenes, he quickly demonstrated a key difference on Vietnam policy: he was less interested in domestic issues within Vietnam or in nation building. According to Central Intelligence Agency Director John McCone, in his first group meeting with advisers on Vietnam on November 24, 1963, Johnson said “he wanted to make it abundantly clear that he did not think we had to reform every Asian into our own image. He said that he felt all too often when we engaged in the affairs of a foreign country we wanted to immediately transform that country into our image and this, in his opinion, was a mistake. He was anxious to get along, win the war—he didn’t want as much effort placed on so-called social reforms.” McCone detected a difference between the “President Johnson tone” and the “Kennedy tone,” and noted that “Johnson definitely feels that we place too much emphasis on social reforms; he has very little tolerance with our spending so much time being ‘do-gooders.’”¹⁰³ Yet there remained important voices advocating sticking with the hamlet program or at least retaining a transformative strategy. As National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy put it early on the morning of November 22, 1963, even after Diem’s death, “everyone recognized that the strategic hamlets . . . had to remain the center of the war effort.”¹⁰⁴

In late 1964 and early 1965, Johnson wrestled with governance problems in South Vietnam, and did show a persistent interest in finding stability. During this period, Johnson (like Kennedy before him) rejected several military suggestions for escalating the U.S. response in Vietnam using conventional force, including options to take the war to the North.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, he gave some significant attention to bolstering South Vietnam’s internal strength. For example, in a May 1964 telephone conversation with Bundy, Johnson asserted, “I think that if we can furnish the military government people that are trained in civil administration, the mayors, and the councilmen, and folks of that type . . .

102. *Ibid.*, n. 7, which quotes from Bromley Smith’s summary of the meeting.

103. Memorandum for the Record of Meeting (drafted by McCone), November 24, 1963, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, Vol. 4, Doc. 330.

104. Memorandum for the Record of Discussion at the Daily White House Staff Meeting, November 22, 1963, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, Vol. 4, Doc. 322. See also Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 3, pp. 43–44.

105. On Johnson’s rejection of military options in this period, see Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, chap. 10.

get enough of them where one good American can run a hamlet . . . I think that'll improve that situation a good deal."¹⁰⁶ On December 30, 1964, Johnson cabled Taylor (then serving as ambassador in Saigon): I have never felt that this war will be won from the air, and it seems to me that what is much more needed and would be more effective is a larger and stronger use of Rangers and Special Forces and Marines. . . . I am ready to look with great favor on that kind of increased American effort, directed at the guerrillas and aimed to stiffen the aggressiveness of Vietnamese military units up and down the line."¹⁰⁷ In early March 1965 (even as he considered escalation), Johnson "expressed concern and understandable frustration" about the pacification effort, and "[kept] wondering if we are doing all we can."¹⁰⁸ In mid-March Johnson directed several departments and agencies to craft a nonmilitary program including "close control of the population," "land reform operations," and "intensified housing and agricultural programs"; by April the president had approved a forty-one-point program of nonmilitary measures.¹⁰⁹

This attention to South Vietnam's internal affairs, however, must be seen in light of several considerations, as well as the larger sweep of the evidence. Johnson was hoping to keep Vietnam on the back burner until after the 1964 U.S. presidential election.¹¹⁰ Additionally, arguably any U.S. president taking over from Kennedy and pledging to maintain the commitment to South Vietnam would have had to confront the internal instability left in the wake of the coup against Diem.

More significantly, in this same period, even as Johnson discussed political and other nonmilitary measures to shore up the South, his analysis of the problem in Vietnam was consistent with an external focus. Johnson diagnosed the source of South Vietnam's vulnerability to a communist takeover in terms of external aggression from the North. On November 2, 1964, the day before his landslide general election victory, Johnson ordered a new NSC working group to study options in Vietnam, setting the escalation in motion in earnest and culminating in the choice of a limited bombing campaign against the North. In his analysis of Johnson's decisionmaking, Khong argues that the president found the analogy with the Korean War persuasive and thus saw the problem in terms of external aggression, a key factor in his acceptance

106. Transcript of telephone conversation, LBJ with Bundy, May 20, 1964, in Guian A. McKee, ed., *The Presidential Recordings: Lyndon B. Johnson*, Vol. 6 (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), pp. 781–782.

107. LBJ to Taylor, December 30, 1964, *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 1, Doc. 477.

108. See Cooper to Bundy, March 1, 1965, *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 2, Doc. 173.

109. Bundy Memorandum, March 16, 1965, *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 2, Doc. 200; and McCone to Carter, April 1, 1965, *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 2, Doc. 230.

110. See, for example, George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 3d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), p. 121.

of a limited bombing campaign (the so-called Option C).¹¹¹ The salience of the Korean analogy in Johnson's thinking, in turn, may have arisen from his causal beliefs. In contrast, as Khong notes, Kennedy rejected the Korean analogy, and had been far more inclined to draw on the Greek and Malayan analogies.

In this period Johnson also displayed a tendency to separate the military aspects of the war from Vietnamese domestic issues. In April 1965, on the same day he approved the forty-one-point nonmilitary program, Johnson was, according to Bundy's notes, "full of determination—we have set our hand to [the] wheel. . . . we got to find em & kill em."¹¹² His April 1965 speech at Johns Hopkins University, in which he offered to invest \$1 billion to develop the Mekong Delta region, appeared on the U.S. agenda suddenly, in March, and disappeared quickly, after the North Vietnamese emphatically rejected it.¹¹³ In the speech itself, the discussion of the development proposal came in a separate section and was not connected to the nature of the conflict or the military strategy.

Furthermore, even in 1964 Johnson's focus began to shift to North Vietnam. On May 13, 1964, in a call with Bundy, he argued that "we've got to have some program out there from the Joint Chiefs, to start stepping that thing up and do some winning and do a little stuff up in the North some way or other. We just can't sit idly by and do nothing there."¹¹⁴ As Fredrik Logevall points out, there was "a kind of logic" to the shift to an emphasis on the North, given how badly the war in the South was going, and yet Johnson's own analysts predicted that bombing the North would not work, because "the problems were political and in the South, not military and in the North."¹¹⁵

In late 1964 and early 1965, there were indications that Johnson might not necessarily insist on a stable government in South Vietnam as a prerequisite for escalating. In one rationale, as expressed by Assistant Secretary of State John McNaughton, "However badly [Southeast Asia] may go over the next 2–4 years," it was critical for the United States to "emerge as a 'good doctor.' We must have kept promises, been tough, taken risks, gotten bloodied, and hurt

111. Khong, *Analogies at War*, pp. 99–111, 138–143.

112. Personal notes of a meeting with President Johnson (drafted by Bundy), April 1, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 2, Doc. 229.

113. Many see the speech as an effort to placate critics: see, for example, Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 371–372; and Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, pp. 423–427. For a contrary view, see Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, p. xiv. For the speech itself, see LBJ, "Address at Johns Hopkins University: 'Peace without Conquest,'" April 7, 1965, in Woolley and Peters, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid?26877>.

114. Transcript of telephone call, LBJ with Bundy, May 13, 1964, in McKee, *The Presidential Recordings*, p. 684. On Johnson's focus on the North in this period, see Herring, *America's Longest War*, p. 131.

115. Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 122–123.

the enemy very badly.”¹¹⁶ In this view, just doing something in Vietnam was enough. By January 27, 1965, Johnson himself stated that “stable govt or no stable govt,” “we’ll do what we oughta do. I’m prepared to do that. We will move strongly.”¹¹⁷ To be sure, some in the administration hoped that going North would stiffen the South’s morale and possibly help stabilize the government. But concern centered on stability rather than on reform or institutional change, consistent with the view that the main source of the war was external. Logevall concludes that the “documentary record leaves no doubt as to Johnson’s determination. His seeming insistence on securing a stable Saigon government before proceeding to escalation pales in importance next to his insistence on preventing defeat.”¹¹⁸

In the fateful escalation decisions from February through July 1965, Johnson focused primarily on hurting the North and stopping the Vietcong using conventional force, with few connections between the military strategy and changing the internal situation in the South. In the debate over ground strategy, for example, one option was to deploy troops along the coast in “enclaves,” with a primary focus on defense and local security—not necessarily transformative, but with some of the spirit of population-oriented counterinsurgency. The alternative was to use U.S. troops to seek and kill insurgents in what would become the “search and destroy” strategy, which the army favored. This preference long preceded Johnson, but unlike Kennedy, Johnson showed little inclination to challenge the conventional attrition strategy (which was not inevitable).¹¹⁹ In a March 15 meeting with the JCS, Johnson said he wanted “the killing of Viet Cong intensified.”¹²⁰ In two meetings on July 21, 1965, which marked the culmination of the debate over escalation, he focused on credibility; only at the end of the second meeting did he discuss nonmilitary measures, stressing the need to “constantly remind the people that we are doing other things besides bombing.”¹²¹ He showed little interest in integrating these measures with the military program. Even after these meetings, some in the administration continued to highlight the inapplicability of conventional force and the need for nonmilitary efforts in combating the insur-

116. McNaughton draft memo, “Aims and Options in Southeast Asia,” October 13, 1964, in Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 3, p. 582.

117. Bundy handwritten meeting notes, January 27, 1965, Papers of McGeorge Bundy, Box 1, “January 27, 1965” folder, LBJL (emphasis omitted). See also Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 318–319.

118. Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 314.

119. On the alternative pacification strategy developed by the Marines, see, for example, Deborah D. Avant, *Political Institutions and Military Change: Lessons from Peripheral Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 84–87. On the debate over strategy, see Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, pp. 133–135.

120. Quoted in Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 414.

121. Notes of Meeting (drafted by Jack Valenti), July 21, 1965, *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 3, Doc. 71.

gency. In a memo to McGeorge Bundy, for example, the NSC's Chester Cooper argued that the insurgency would have to be tackled head-on eventually, and thus the military plan might not lead to "a favorable outcome" without "a political-economic-psychwar program as carefully developed and as massive in its way as the military effort."¹²²

I do not claim that Johnson bears sole responsibility for choosing the attrition strategy, although many studies emphasize the dominance of Johnson himself, rather than his advisers, in the Vietnam deliberations.¹²³ The key point is that he was exposed to arguments for an alternative strategy, yet did not question the nature of the war. Despite his attention to South Vietnam's internal problems, his decisions after the election fit more naturally with the pattern of his prepresidential beliefs, the way those beliefs translated into views about strategy in his prepresidential career (including his vice presidential years), and his early pronouncements about "do-gooding" in the immediate aftermath of Kennedy's death. Yet the administration officials who advocated concentration on reforming South Vietnam or on pacification highlight the alternative thinking on precisely how to escalate in Vietnam.¹²⁴

Thus Johnson employed what can be considered a nontransformative strategy in Vietnam. To be sure, the mere presence of half a million troops was deeply and destructively transformative, and the U.S. strategy sometimes involved deliberately devastating effects on villages and civilians.¹²⁵ But in the sense that the strategy did not integrate military and nonmilitary measures or focus on local institution building—U.S. soldiers rarely stayed long enough in an area even to provide security—it was nontransformative. Larry Berman concludes that the United States "sought no military victory of its own, no territory, nothing except the goal of convincing Hanoi it could not unify Vietnam by force."¹²⁶ Johnson's external focus led him to apply a nontransformative strategy to a conflict with internal roots, soon miring the United States in a mismatched intervention.¹²⁷

122. Cooper to Bundy, July 21, 1965, *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 3, Doc. 73. Additionally, General Wallace Greene, Commandant of the Marine Corps, argued in a July 22 meeting with Johnson that the "enclave concept will work." Notes of Meeting (drafted by Valenti), July 22, 1965, *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 3, Doc. 76.

123. See, among others, Logevall, *Choosing War*. See also Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 3, p. 475; and Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), p. 145.

124. As Gelb and Betts note, members of the "reformer group" were not doves; rather, "they were actually hawks who wanted to do it a different way by pressuring for reforms before deepening the American involvement." Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, p. 278.

125. Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, chap. 12.

126. Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, p. 146.

127. See, for example, Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, p. 268; and Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak*

Finally, given that aspects of the U.S. strategy evolved as the war dragged on, one can ask whether Johnson learned from experience. It is difficult to separate learning—in the sense of changes in underlying beliefs—from adjustment in the face of a failing strategy in the midst of an ongoing intervention. Still, there is only limited evidence that Johnson learned. Consider the reemphasis, from late 1965, on nonmilitary programs and pacification in what came to be known as the “other war.”¹²⁸ Despite this push, the resulting effort, including the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program, was not well integrated into the overall military strategy. Indeed, though it was incorporated into the U.S. military structure in Vietnam, CORDS—and therefore pacification—still remained separate within that structure, although counterinsurgency theorists called for a unified overall effort.¹²⁹ Thus CORDS could only perpetuate pacification’s status as the “other war,” just as for Johnson, internal and external issues were largely separate. Furthermore, an attempt to regain the momentum on pacification well after the escalation was under way suffered as a result of Johnson’s lack of transformative policy investments and the initial choice of strategy. In contrast, Kennedy had pushed for a more integrated politico-military strategy from the outset.

DISCUSSION

Under difficult circumstances for the theory, Johnson’s approach to Vietnam revealed a different emphasis that had consequences for the way the Vietnam intervention unfolded. Logevall, who emphasizes the role of individuals in understanding Vietnam, concludes that “Kennedy was more cognizant than Johnson of the need for genuine political reforms in South Vietnam if there were to be long-term success in the war effort.”¹³⁰ Other factors, of course, played a role in the Vietnam decisions. But while this discussion is not the place to disentangle the puzzle of Vietnam, it illustrates that other factors, though important, are insufficient to explain the choice of strategy.

The evolving circumstances within South Vietnam undoubtedly affected Johnson’s decisionmaking, but they are not sufficient to explain the evolution of U.S. strategy. Thanks to Johnson’s service as vice president, scholars have a record of Johnson’s views of Kennedy’s transformative policies, which as dis-

Win Wars, pp. 155–156. For an alternative argument, see Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell, 1982).

128. See Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam’s Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1995).

129. George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), pp. 87–88. See also Avant, *Political Institutions and Military Change*, p. 101.

130. Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 398.

cussed, were not favorable. Furthermore, even as the circumstances evolved, many of the debates over how to fight the war remained similar. For example, one issue during the decisionmaking concerned whether or not the Vietcong had moved on to the so-called third phase of guerrilla warfare, in which the insurgents shift from decentralized attacks to form main-force units that engage enemy forces. Leaving aside the debate over precisely when the Vietcong formed these main-force units, the issue of the "third phase" concerned both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. For example, Hilsman's original report in February 1962 advocating the Strategic Hamlet Program noted that the Vietcong were transitioning to conventional warfare.¹³¹ Furthermore, at least in the early stage of the Johnson escalation decisions, some form of politically oriented counterinsurgency remained on the table. As late as July 1965, some officials took issue with the assumption that the Vietcong had actually entered the "third phase"; others noted that even if the "third phase" had arrived, the Vietcong might avoid head-on confrontation with U.S. units or simply fall back on guerrilla tactics in the face of a conventional U.S. strategy, necessitating some form of counterinsurgency eventually.¹³²

Other structural and material conditions are also insufficient to explain the choice of strategy. Internationally, both presidents faced pressure to compete with Moscow in the third world and to signal resolve. Yet the prepresidential record shows that Kennedy's attention to guerrilla warfare long predated Nikita Khrushchev's 1961 "Wars of National Liberation" speech declaring Soviet support for third world revolutions. Credibility concerns weighed on both presidents, but are insufficient to explain how they intervened. Kennedy was willing to wait for what he perceived to be the more favorable confrontation, declining to intervene in Laos in 1961, despite advice that backing down in Laos would only make standing firm in Southeast Asia more difficult. He also passed up a conventional demonstration of strength in Vietnam. Johnson was perhaps more concerned with credibility. In a long conversation with Bundy in May 1964, he mused, "What the hell is Vietnam worth to me? . . . What is it worth to this country?" But, he argued, "Of course if you start running from the communists, they may just chase you right into your own kitchen."¹³³ Yet the way he tried to demonstrate credibility differed from Kennedy's more transformative approach.

131. Hilsman, "A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam."

132. Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, pp. 83–84, 135–138; and Cooper to Bundy, July 21, 1965. See also Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, pp. 140, 268. Even McNamara acknowledged during the deliberations that conventional success "could merely drive the VC back into the trees." LBJ, July 20, 1965, *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 3, Doc. 67.

133. Transcript of telcon, LBJ with Bundy, May 27, 1964, in Michael R. Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963–1964* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 370.

In terms of capabilities, as John Lewis Gaddis argues, Kennedy and Johnson spent liberally on defense; the increased capabilities may have made them more likely to see areas such as Southeast Asia as vital.¹³⁴ But their choices in terms of resource allocation and strategy differed. As vice president, Johnson was dismissive of Kennedy's efforts to alter the distribution of capabilities; as president, he might have channeled spending into alternative capabilities but did not, at least until the escalation was well under way.

It is possible to argue that domestic and international politics shaped the form of both Kennedy's and Johnson's strategies, because each chose a middle course that would not invite Soviet or Chinese counterintervention, overwhelm the U.S. public, or endanger domestic programs (in Johnson's case, the Great Society).¹³⁵ Yet these arguments say more about the speed and size of the escalation—gradual and, while large, ultimately limited by Johnson's refusal to call up reserves. Even though both presidents hoped to do just enough in Vietnam to avoid defeat, they still approached the conflict differently and faced advisers advocating different strategies, suggesting there was no single, obvious middle way. Kennedy, for example, might have followed the recommendations of many of his advisers and chosen a limited conventional deployment as a middle course. It is true that a large-scale population-centered counterinsurgency strategy might have required even more troops than Johnson ultimately committed, a move with potentially prohibitive political consequences.¹³⁶ The theory does not make predictions about the size of the intervention, but rather only about the effect of leaders' causal beliefs on the cost-benefit calculation they make at a given time. But regardless of whether a transformative counterinsurgency strategy would have worked with the (still large and politically significant) troop levels Johnson deployed, one can ask why he showed little interest in using such a strategy as president or even vice president, given Kennedy's willingness to use this strategy at even lower troop levels, the calls for considering some form of such a strategy from within Johnson's administration, and Johnson's own knowledge that the escalation he did choose would be long and costly, and possibly end in failure.¹³⁷

Turning to the domestic competition hypothesis, both Kennedy and Johnson

134. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 259.

135. For the argument that each president aimed to do what was "minimally necessary" in Vietnam, see Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, p. 25. On Johnson's concern about protecting the Great Society, see Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, pp. 145–153.

136. On this point, see Jonathan D. Caverley, "Democracies Will Continue to Fight Small Wars . . . Poorly," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, New York, New York, February 2009.

137. For a discussion of the latter point, see Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?" pp. 34–43.

faced electoral pressures and (particularly in Johnson's case) feared looking weak, yet chose different strategies. Both presidents also faced a military that preferred conventional warfare, a significant factor in the ultimate outcome of the Vietnam intervention. But both presidents were willing to override the military, and they confronted the military's specific preference for conventional warfare differently. Kennedy consistently questioned the conventional approach (although his failure to ensure that the military carried out his wishes for more emphasis on counterinsurgency left a gap between the intended strategy and the actual policy), whereas Johnson did not question the nature of the war.¹³⁸ Both presidents were also willing to overrule their advisers (most of whom, in turn, owed their influence to the president himself), suggesting that executive leadership, rather than shared ideas, is crucial.

Finally, one might object that the Vietnam case does not provide a complete picture of Kennedy's and Johnson's intervention choices. Indeed, Kennedy used covert operations to try to undermine or even "decapitate" regimes. But the theory identifies ideal types and outlines their preferences over different intervention outcomes. These preferences are only one aspect of the cost-benefit calculus of intervention, and thus threat perceptions will not perfectly correlate with intervention choices. Kennedy's well-known statement about the Dominican Republic, after the assassination of the dictator Rafael Trujillo in May 1961, was framed as a preference ordering: he argued that there were "three possibilities . . . in descending order of preference: a decent democratic regime, a continuation of the Trujillo regime or a Castro regime." He followed this list not with a definitive policy prescription, but with a conditional argument: "We ought to aim at the first, but we really can't renounce the second until we are sure that we can avoid the third."¹³⁹ Sometimes leaders will settle for a suboptimal outcome, as when Kennedy chose the second course: continuing reliance on "friendly dictators." But these cases do not undermine the validity of his preference ordering. He also spent far more time trying to ensure a "decent democratic regime" than Johnson. Indeed, Johnson's own statement about the Dominican Republic when he confronted a crisis there in 1965 yielded a different vision: "We will have one of 3 dictators: 1) U.S., 2) Moderate dictator, 3) Castro dictator."¹⁴⁰

138. Kaiser makes a similar argument that emphasizes the differences between Kennedy and Johnson. See Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, pp. 2–5. Kaiser also goes so far as to argue that Kennedy questioned whether Vietnam was really a vital interest to the United States. See *ibid.*, p. 247.

139. Quoted in Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York: Fawcett Premier, 1965), pp. 704–705. On Kennedy's policies in Latin America, see Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

140. Notes on a White House meeting (drafted by Valenti), April 30, 1965, quoted in Editorial Note, *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 32, Doc. 42.

Conclusion

This article provides a simple typology of leaders that helps explain how states use military intervention. At least in terms of threat perception, leaders do not come in infinite varieties, but rather can be usefully categorized into one of two ideal types. Of course, by definition ideal types cannot capture all the nuances that differentiate individual leaders. But while leaders' causal beliefs about the origin of threats do not explain all aspects of their intervention choices, they systematically influence decisions to intervene, by altering the cost-benefit calculus of the intervention itself, and by shaping the tools available to states when they intervene.

For international relations theory, the article helps to show that variation in the attributes of individual leaders cannot be left out of explanations for how states use military force, and that it is possible to make arguments about leaders that yield generalizable propositions about how leaders matter and rely on variables that are measurable *ex ante*. For scholarship on intervention, the theory helps identify conditions under which leaders are likely to pursue different intervention strategies, as well as a link between the leader's threat perception and preparedness for intervention. For the study of U.S. foreign policy, the theory suggests that despite broad trends in how the United States intervenes, the threat perceptions of American leaders are critical in determining when and how the United States uses military force to try to transform other states. The theory can also be applied to other time periods, as illustrated by the different approaches Roosevelt and Wilson took in the Dominican Republic.

The argument also has implications for understanding the Iraq War, although it remains too soon to fully evaluate the nature of George W. Bush's beliefs without a complete archival record. On one point, however, there is considerable preliminary evidence: prior to taking office, Bush was externally focused and was accordingly averse to strategies such as nation building. In 1999, for example, he sounded what seemed like an externally focused note, arguing, "We value the elegant structures of our own democracy but realize that, in other societies, the architecture will vary. We propose our principles but we must not impose our culture."¹⁴¹ By the second presidential debate in October 2000, in response to a question about the intervention in Somalia, Bush argued that it "started off as a humanitarian mission and it changed into a nation-building mission, and that's where the mission went wrong. . . . I think our troops ought to be used to fight and win war. I think our troops

141. Quoted in R.W. Apple Jr., "Bush Questions Aid to Moscow in a Policy Talk," *New York Times*, November 20, 1999.

ought to be used to help overthrow the dictator when it's in our best interests. But in this case it was a nation-building exercise, and same with Haiti. I wouldn't have supported either."¹⁴² Thus Bush even drew a distinction between overthrowing dictators and nation building.

There is some evidence that prior to September 11, 2001, the Bush administration de-emphasized investments in capabilities for nation building and other transformative strategies. For example, as George Packer notes, shortly after his inauguration, Bush rescinded a Clinton-era directive designed to institutionalize lessons from peace operations, downgrading a relevant inter-agency group to "a bureaucratic level where it was bound to languish—and it did."¹⁴³

Two sets of questions flow from this initial position. First, did Bush's beliefs change after September 11? With respect to Iraq, did Bush perceive the threat in Iraq to be Saddam Hussein's international behavior (with the risk that he might acquire weapons of mass destruction), or did he perceive the domestic structure of Iraq to be the source of the threat? And second, was the original goal of the Iraq War to thoroughly transform Iraq, or was it instead to make a more limited demonstration of American strength involving a "decapitation" of Saddam Hussein's regime, without necessarily undertaking transformation of Iraq's domestic institutions?

Assuming, for the moment, that on the basis of his prepresidential statements and initial period in office prior to September 11, Bush was externally focused, then there are at least two possibilities. First, he may have had a true change in beliefs after September 11 and become an internally focused leader. A direct attack such as that of September 11 might be the kind of moment that induces such a change in beliefs. Alternatively, he may have responded to September 11 using his existing beliefs, and thus viewed Saddam Hussein and his foreign and security policies as the primary source of threat. Under this alternative, one might expect that the invasion was intended to be a "decapitation." There are still other possibilities: for example, the goal may have been transformation but with a limited strategy based on the assumption that removing Saddam would be enough to trigger full internal change.

There remains much debate on the question of whether Bush's beliefs changed, as well as the motivation for the Iraq War. Regardless of these issues, however, one implication of the theory concerns the effects on preparedness of the administration's early policy investments and its emphasis on nontrans-

142. Second Gore-Bush Presidential Debate, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, October 11, 2000, in Woolley and Peters, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showdebate.php?debateid?21>.

143. George Packer, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), p. 110. See also James Fallows, "Bush's Lost Year," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 2004, pp. 68–84.

formative, conventional warfighting. Many available accounts suggest that the initial, intended U.S. strategy (prior to the arrival of L. Paul Bremer in Iraq in May 2003) was effectively nontransformative, in the sense that it did not envision U.S. troops undertaking significant roles in Iraqi domestic institutions and did not involve extensive postwar planning. Instead, the strategy built on the assumption that Iraqi institutions would be left largely intact and would not be rebuilt by a lengthy occupation. As Condoleezza Rice put it, the “concept was that we would defeat the army, but the institutions would hold, everything from ministries to police forces. . . . You would be able to bring new leadership but we were going to keep the body in place.”¹⁴⁴ Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor see the reliance on Iraqi institutions as “in keeping with the Bush administration’s antipathy toward Clinton-style nation-building.”¹⁴⁵ Such an operational strategy would be consistent with either a “decapitation” or a deliberately minimal footprint that left transformation up to the Iraqis. There is also the possibility that the intention was transformation but with overly optimistic assumptions about the postwar phase. But under any of these scenarios, the United States was still not well prepared when the post-invasion institutional vacuum and the insurgency emerged, and the strategy proved difficult to shift quickly. Even after the United States shifted to a more transformative strategy with the arrival of Bremer in May 2003,¹⁴⁶ Bush’s initial position and policy investments on taking office left the United States with catching up to do and hampered efforts to undertake nation building. Furthermore, until 2007 the United States still lacked a comprehensive, Iraq-wide politico-military strategy to address reconstruction and the insurgency in both military and nonmilitary terms. Even if the new strategy was the result of learning, however, the administration’s initial choices had significant consequences for the course of the war.

Future analysis of military interventions must do more than pay lip service to the role of leaders. Leaders have fundamentally—but systematically—different views about the nature of threats. These beliefs, as well as the choices leaders make at the outset of their tenure, are an independent source of variation in how states define and confront threats, and ultimately choose where and how to use force.

144. Quoted in Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), p. 142. See also James Fallows, “Blind into Baghdad,” *Atlantic Monthly*, January/February 2004, pp. 52–74. The war plan itself was also focused on a conventional attack with the “narrow goal” of removing Saddam Hussein’s regime. See Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 116.

145. Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, p. 73.

146. On Bremer’s arrival signaling a “fundamental shift” in the U.S. approach, see Nora Bensahel, “Mission Not Accomplished: What Went Wrong with Iraqi Reconstruction,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (June 2006), p. 462. See also Packer, *The Assassin’s Gate*, p. 186.