

The Myth of Military Myopia

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Democracy, Small Wars, and Vietnam

Powerful democracies have often experienced frustration in fighting small wars, particularly against opponents employing unconventional strategies. The explanation for their limited success is well known: wealthy, industrialized democracies tend to pursue capital- and firepower-intensive strategies. The real puzzle is the problem's venerability. Given the ample opportunities for learning, why then have democracies not adopted a more effective means of counterinsurgency (COIN) in small wars? If domestic constraints prevent democracies from spending blood rather than treasure to fight insurgencies, why fight them in the first place?

In almost every investigation of this puzzle, the Vietnam War looms large as a pivotal case.¹ The U.S. failure in Vietnam, according to these accounts, epitomizes the inability of democratic militaries, in general, and the U.S. military, in particular, to adopt an effective approach to overcoming an insurgency. The Vietnam War is especially significant for two generations of American military intellectuals, who regard it as the paradigmatic case of organizational and cultural inertia within the military. John Nagl describes the U.S. failure as "the triumph of the institutional culture" in the U.S. military, which counterproductively relied on "firepower and technological superiority."² Others use the

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1. Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (January 1975), pp. 175–200; Stephen Peter Rosen, "Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War," *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Fall 1982), pp. 83–113; Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Ivan Arreguín-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Summer 2001), pp. 93–128.

2. John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 115; Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); and Larry E. Cable, *Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1986). Historical accounts that blame military bureaucracy and culture

Vietnam case to exemplify a more widespread apolitical and “machine-minded” culture pervading all of American society.³ A less culturally oriented explanation identifies simple democratic cost aversion in Vietnam as the root cause of U.S. failure to pursue an effective COIN strategy.⁴

The current unconventional conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have spurred a renaissance of military-intellectual thought on both COIN and the myopia of the U.S. military that prevents its successful application. Works in academia, the military’s professional journals, and the popular press employ the Vietnam War not simply for theory development but as an analogy for these two conflicts.⁵ This approach raises more questions than it answers. Why has the U.S. experience in Vietnam, sufficiently searing to have a “syndrome” attributed to it, failed to inform the subsequent conduct of counterinsurgency? If the U.S. military is predisposed toward ineffective COIN, why does the civilian leadership not step in or avoid such wars altogether? Why do voters fixate on reducing costs, while ignoring the reduced benefits that result from such a strategy? Why would democracies, supposedly the most prudent of regime types, choose these risky wars and fight them in such an unconstructive manner?

This article answers these questions by arguing that to reduce the costs of conflict for the relatively less wealthy voter, democratic leaders shift the burden of providing for the nation’s defense onto the rich by employing capital as a substitute for military labor. Because the costs of fighting an insurgency with firepower are relatively low for the median voter compared to a more effective but labor-intensive COIN approach, she will favor its use despite the diminished prospects of victory. This condition of moral hazard makes supporting a capital-intensive military doctrine and small wars of choice rational policies for the average voter.

In shedding light on why a democracy would enter a small war with the in-

for poor counterinsurgency doctrine but do not generalize to other small wars include Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999).

3. Colin S. Gray, *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy: Can the American Way of War Adapt?* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, March 1, 2006), p. 37.

4. Rosen, “Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War.”

5. Gray, *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy*, p. 19; Douglas A. Ollivant, “Review of the New U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (June 2008), pp. 357–360; and Lt. Col. John A. Nagl, “A Better War in Iraq,” *Armed Forces Journal*, August 2006, <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2006/08/1931298/>. For a more popular example, see Tom Bowman, “‘Clear and Hold’ Showing Results 40 Years Later,” *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, October 13, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96350333>.

tention of choosing a suboptimal strategy, this article challenges the dominant explanation for flawed counterinsurgency in the Vietnam War, which blames a myopic military bureaucracy and culture for failing to adapt its conventional doctrine to the conditions in Vietnam. Employing a variety of primary and secondary sources, the article reveals both military myopia's limitations and its need to be nested within a theory of civilian leaders and the public that elects them. In doing so, the article marshals evidence that, contrary to much of the conflict's historiography, Lyndon Johnson's administration played a crucial role in rejecting a more labor-intensive COIN approach in favor of a capital-intensive strategy that it understood to be less effective but reflective of the cost preferences of the average voter.

The article's next section reviews previous attempts to explain democratic counterinsurgency practices. It then lays out a competing theory of the median voter and the cost distribution of conflict. The article then reviews the problematic counterinsurgency strategy that the United States pursued in Vietnam. The subsequent section employs public opinion data to show that the public preferences for the conduct of the war, as well as for the costs and benefits, are consistent with cost distribution theory. The next section examines the role of civilian leaders in setting the U.S. strategy in Vietnam, particularly their efforts to substitute treasure for blood through airpower, anti-infiltration barriers, and a fixation on the main force war. The concluding section suggests that the theory has implications beyond the case of Vietnam.

How to Lose a Small War

The venerable U.S. Marine Corps' *Small Wars Manual* defines a small war as one "undertaken under executive authority, wherein military force is combined with diplomatic pressure in the internal or external affairs of another state whose government is unstable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory for the preservation of life and of such interests as are determined by the foreign policy of our Nation."⁶ As the first phrase implies, small wars do not require the mobilization of the country, although this does not obviate the need for public support. They are fought by a powerful state against a weaker state or nonstate actor ("weak actor" for simplicity). A small war is one of choice; it may be consistent with the strong state's grand strategy but not essential to it. The strong state's aims are limited or political, and success often requires the weak actor's compliance.

6. United States Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940), p. 1, <http://www.smallwars.quantico.usmc.mil/SWM/1215.pdf>.

Because strong states tend to enjoy overwhelming conventional military superiority, weak actors will likely resort to unconventional strategies such as insurgency or terrorism.⁷ Fighting an unconventional war is a daunting task even for powerful states. Usually it demands tremendous investments in intelligence gathering and a deep understanding of a foreign culture. Success requires gaining the allegiance, or at least acquiescence, of local noncombatants by providing personal security and economic stability. Firepower, when not used with the utmost discrimination, will likely have counterproductive effects. In general, no substitute exists for boots on the ground; the ratio of personnel to population required for nation building has stayed roughly stable at 20 per 1,000 since the end of World War II.⁸

These principles of a successful COIN strategy have remained largely consistent over at least the past half century.⁹ Indeed, a remarkable amount of agreement exists on how states lose small wars. Ivan Arreguín-Toft demonstrates how a conventional offensive campaign against a guerrilla warfare strategy will likely result in a win (or at least a “non-loss”) for the guerrillas.¹⁰ Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson systematically test and find support for the proposition that mechanized militaries are less effective in small wars because of attendant collateral damage, a poor intelligence-gathering ability, and an inability to secure the population.¹¹

WHY FOCUS ON DEMOCRACIES?

Democracies do not appear as successful at fighting insurgencies relative to their track record in conventional wars. The mosaic plots in figures 1 and 2 use two data sets to compare the performance of democracies and nondemocracies in major wars (battle deaths exceeding 1,000) to outcomes of conflicts where a

7. Arreguín-Toft, “How the Weak Win Wars.”

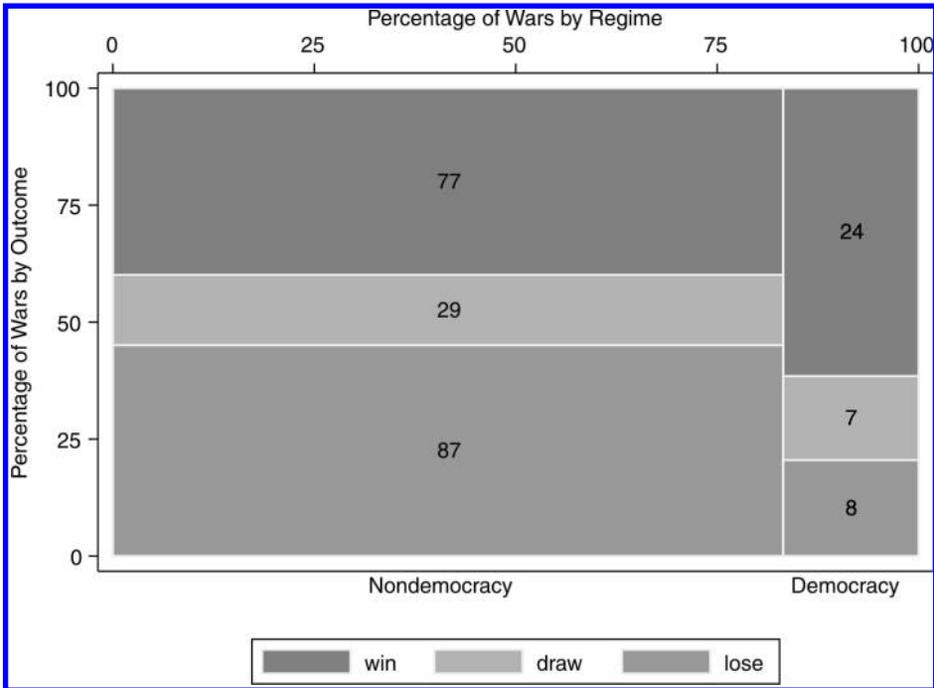
8. James T. Quinlivan, “Burden of Victory: The Painful Arithmetic of Stability Operations,” *RAND Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Summer 2003), p. 28.

9. Classic works on COIN include David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006); and Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (St. Petersburg, Fla.: Hailer, 1966). More recent versions with similar recommendations include David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Kalev I. Sepp, “Best Practices in Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review*, Vol. 85, No. 3 (May/June 2005), pp. 8–12. For the remainder of the article, I use “COIN” to denote this effective, labor-intensive form of stopping an insurgency; “counterinsurgency” refers to any strategy used against insurgents including the firepower-intensive U.S. version in Vietnam.

10. Arreguín-Toft, “How the Weak Win Wars.”

11. 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. For a remarkable demonstration of bombing’s ineffectiveness in the Vietnam War counterinsurgency, see Matthew Adam Kocher, Thomas B. Pepinsky, and Stathis N. Kalyvas, “Aerial Bombardment, Indiscriminate Violence, and Territorial Control in Insurgencies: Evidence from Vietnam,” Working Paper (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009).

Figure 1. Comparison of Outcomes of Wars (more than 1,000 battle deaths) by Regime, 1816–1990



SOURCE: Alexander B. Downes, “How Smart and Tough Are Democracies? Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War,” *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Spring 2009), pp. 9–51.

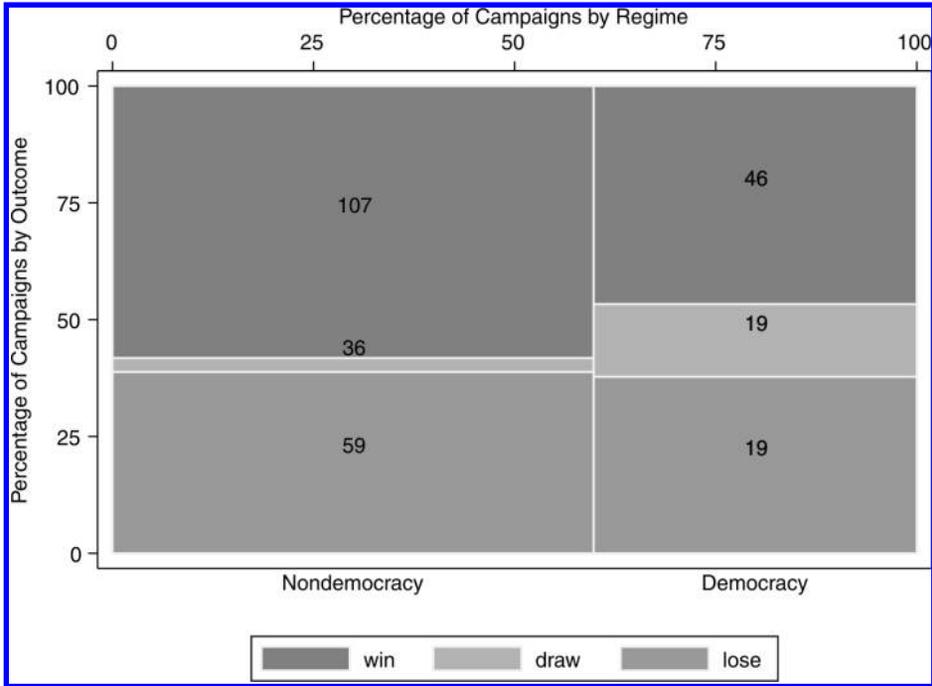
state fights an insurgency outside of the state’s territory. Whereas democracies win 62 percent of the larger, generally conventional wars, they win only 47 percent of the counterinsurgencies (nondemocracies win 40 and 58 percent, respectively).¹² Figure 2 shows that democracies are no more likely than nondemocracies to win against an insurgency, and are considerably more likely to fight to a draw.¹³

While arguing that regime type does not affect overall performance against insurgencies, Lyall notes that democratic counterinsurgency efforts are more

12. Figure 1’s data are from a source skeptical of democracies’ performance in these wars. Alexander B. Downes, “How Smart and Tough Are Democracies? Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War,” *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Spring 2009), pp. 9–51. Other sources claim that democracies win as much as 93 percent of such conflicts. Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

13. A multinomial logit analysis of “democracy” on war outcome shows that democracies are just as likely to lose to an insurgency as nondemocracies and significantly more likely to fight to a draw (with a coefficient for democracy of 1.872 and a standard error of 0.85). Data from Lyall and Wilson, “Rage against the Machines.”

Figure 2. Comparison of Outcomes of Third-Party Interventions against Insurgencies by Regime, 1808–2002



SOURCE: 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.

likely to be wars of choice abroad and tend to employ heavily capitalized militaries.¹⁴ Once these and other factors are controlled for, democracy has little independent effect on war outcome. But if democracies are more likely to select challenging third-party conflicts, and are more likely to use a capital-intensive doctrine while doing so, then regime type may well play a role. Even if regime type makes little difference, this in itself is a puzzle given the large body of research claiming that democracies pick unfair fights that they tend to win.

THE PUZZLE FOR DEMOCRATIC EXCEPTIONALISM

Democracies’ poor track record in small wars challenges the liberal consensus that democratic states tend to pursue exceptionally moderate and successful

14. Jason Lyall, “Do Democracies Make Inferior Counterinsurgents? Reassessing Democracy’s Impact on War Outcomes and Duration,” *International Organization*, forthcoming.

foreign policies.¹⁵ Many of this research program's findings rest on the assumption that in democracies the costs of war are internalized; all costs and benefits of a decision are accounted for by the actor responsible for setting policy. Fred Chernoff describes the difference between democracies and other kinds of regimes in this regard: "Citizens and subjects—rather than presidents and monarchs—fight in wars, die in wars, and pay taxes to finance wars. In most cases, it is not in the citizen's self-interest for the state to go to war."¹⁶ Conversely, shielding the decisionmaker from the costs of war can lead to aggressive behavior. The most comprehensive statement of this cost-internalization mechanism suggests that democratic leaders respond to the voters' cost-benefit calculation by providing public goods, including security and military victory, both efficiently and in abundance.¹⁷

Although the logic of exceptionalism suggests that democracies pursue superior foreign policies, many studies focusing on small wars claim that democratic cost aversion leads to flawed warfighting.¹⁸ Stephen Rosen argues that

15. Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?" lays out a general empirical critique of this program, including an examination of the Vietnam War as a deviant case.

16. Fred Chernoff, "The Study of Democratic Peace and Progress in International Relations," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Spring 2004), p. 54. See also Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 121; and Randolph M. Siverson, "Democracies and War Participation: In Defense of the Institutional Constraints Argument," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (December 1995), p. 483. This mechanism is used to explain why democracies, first, fight shorter wars—see D. Scott Bennett and Allan C. Stam III, "The Declining Advantages of Democracy: A Combined Model of War Outcomes and Duration," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (June 1998), pp. 344–366; and Branislav L. Slantchev, "How Initiators End Their Wars: The Duration of Warfare and the Terms of Peace," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (October 2004), pp. 813–829—second, prefer to negotiate—see Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003); and Darren Filson and Suzanne Werner, "Bargaining and Fighting: The Impact of Regime Type on War Onset, Duration, and Outcomes," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (April 2004), pp. 296–313—third, win the wars they do initiate—see Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*, chap. 6; Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*; and Siverson, "Democracies and War Participation"—and, fourth, spend less money on defense in peacetime but devote more to the effort in wartime—see Benjamin O. Fordham and Thomas C. Walker, "Kantian Liberalism, Regime Type, and Military Resource Allocation: Do Democracies Spend Less?" *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (March 2005), pp. 141–157; and Benjamin E. Goldsmith, "Defense Effort and Institutional Theories of Democratic Peace and Victory: Why Try Harder?" *Security Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (April–June 2007), pp. 189–222.

17. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and George W. Downs, "Intervention and Democracy," *International Organization*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (Summer 2006), pp. 627–649; and Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*. See also David A. Lake, "Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (March 1992), pp. 24–37.

18. Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars"; Zeev Maoz, "Power, Capabilities, and Paradoxical Conflict Outcomes," *World Politics*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (January 1989), pp. 239–266; John E. Mueller, "The Search for the 'Breaking Point' in Vietnam: The Statistics in a Deadly Quarrel," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (December 1980), pp. 497–519; and Patricia L. Sullivan, "War Aims and War Outcomes: Why Powerful States Lose Limited Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (June 2007), pp. 496–524.

the Johnson administration chose a futile signaling strategy in the Vietnam War to minimize losses. Gil Merom identifies a catch-22: democracies build firepower-intensive, low-manpower militaries to reduce “the number and/or exposure to risks of soldiers,” but consequently they must rely on “higher and less discriminating levels of violence,” a policy that leads to criticism from the “educated middle class.” This cost aversion results in a “post-heroic warfare” employed by “Western democracies conducting non-existential wars in which their readiness to sacrifice is relatively low.”¹⁹

These explanations clarify why democracies may prefer a military doctrine poorly suited for small wars, but they cannot account for their insistence on fighting them anyway. Surely a pragmatic state would rather not fight a war at all than fight one it is likely to lose. Patricia Sullivan identifies the problem: “Extant theories cannot explain why militarily preponderant states regularly make poor strategic choices,” but Sullivan’s argument that the aims associated with small wars can lead to increased uncertainty over the likely costs does not fill this void; a strategic actor should recognize this and adjust for the larger downside risk before entering a conflict.²⁰

MILITARY MYOPIA AND OTHER SOURCES OF NONSTRATEGIC BEHAVIOR

Organizational and cultural theories about the military’s role in strategy development claim to fill this explanatory breach. These theories argue that without sufficient pressure from political leaders, elements of the national security structure, particularly the military, will pursue their own ends with little regard for grand strategy. Barry Posen and Jack Snyder focus on bureaucratic forces pushing militaries toward adopting offensive doctrines, whereas Elizabeth Kier argues that military culture is of greater importance and not simply limited to a preference for the offense.²¹ A focus on military culture is prominent in work addressing U.S. conduct of small wars; Eliot Cohen, for example, states that “the most substantial constraints on America’s ability to conduct small wars result from the resistance of the American defense estab-

19. Rosen, “Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War”; Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars*, pp. 21–22; Avi Kober, “The Israel Defense Forces in the Second Lebanon War: Why the Poor Performance?” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (February 2008), pp. 3–40; and Edward N. Luttwak, “A Post-Heroic Military Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (July/August 1996), pp. 33–44.

20. Sullivan, “War Aims and War Outcomes,” p. 497.

21. Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984); Jack L. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984); and Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine between the Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

lishment to the very notion of engaging in such conflicts, and from the unsuitability of that establishment for fighting such wars.”²²

These approaches support the argument of Robert Komer, President Johnson’s principal counterinsurgency adviser, that allowing the military to “do its thing” during wartime is a mistake.²³ The Vietnam War is often described as the poster child for this pathology. Military myopia arguments claim that the U.S. military, particularly the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) commander, Gen. William Westmoreland, displayed “an utter obliviousness to the political nature of the war” by rejecting an alternative COIN or pacification strategy that was simultaneously more effective and less casualty intensive.²⁴

Whereas military myopia requires a civil-military disconnect, an alternative suggests that the U.S. military simply reflects the cultural preferences of the people it serves. Colin Gray describes the United States’ “public, strategic, and military culture” as “not friendly to the means and methods necessary for the waging of warfare against irregular enemies.”²⁵ Americans, Gray claims, are profoundly apolitical when it comes to war.²⁶ Apart from its tautological nature, a theory based on the premise that “America is what it is” cannot explain why the difficulty that democracies face in fighting small wars is not isolated to the United States.²⁷

A Theory of Redistribution and Military Doctrine

This section offers a theory of how a rational actor, the average voter in a democracy, can favor what appears to be a nonstrategic policy. To do so, it uses the core logic of a research program claiming that this sort of behavior should rarely happen in democracies. The theory presented here shares three important assumptions with the cost-internalization logic of democratic exceptionalism: the distribution of costs within the state affects its pursuit of security; a democratic government’s provision of security is a public good; and voters

22. Eliot A. Cohen, “Constraints on America’s Conduct of Small Wars,” *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Fall 1984), p. 165.

23. Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1973).

24. Jeffrey Record, *Beating Goliath: Why Insurgencies Win* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac, 2007), p. 121; and Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, p. 21. Krepinevich challenges what many consider the U.S. Army’s received wisdom embodied by Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2007). This article agrees with Summers that civilians set much of the ground strategy, but it disagrees that these civilians pushed the army toward COIN.

25. Gray, *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy*, p. vi.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 7; and Record, *Beating Goliath*.

“take a reasonably level-headed cost-benefit approach in forming attitudes towards military missions.”²⁸ I relax the claim that costs are always internalized within democracies, however, arguing that the average voter’s share may be much lower than the state’s per capita costs.

Even in democracies, wealth is not distributed equally within any given state; the person with median income is less well off than someone possessing the mean. A political-economic approach, the Meltzer-Richard hypothesis, suggests that if the median voter can set a tax rate and spend the revenue on a service available to all citizens, she will take advantage of the potential for redistribution.²⁹ Even with a flat tax on income, the wealthy will pay a larger portion of the costs for a public good enjoyed by all. For example, in 2005 the fifth of the population with the highest incomes paid 69 percent of all U.S. federal tax revenue, and the middle fifth paid only 9 percent.³⁰ Similarly, the median voter will prefer to tax capital more heavily than labor, because labor income is distributed more equally than capital income.³¹

How these taxes are spent plays a most important role in establishing the redistributive nature of the public good of defense. Military doctrine, the means by which military power is developed and exercised, can be stylized as a production function consisting of two factors—capital (e.g., tanks, planes, ammunition, and even training) and labor (soldiers, sailors, etc.)—as well as the technology that allows one factor of production to serve as a substitute for another.³² Capital and labor are imperfect replacements and show diminishing returns; given a hundred tanks and ten soldiers, adding another tank will not produce as much capability as adding another soldier. The type of conflict affects substitutions as well; it is much harder to substitute capital for labor when fighting an unconventional opponent.

28. On the last assumption, see Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 2.

29. Allan H. Meltzer and Scott F. Richard, “A Rational Theory of the Size of Government,” *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 89, No. 5 (October 1981), pp. 914–927; Alberto Alesina and Dani Rodrik, “Distributive Politics and Economic Growth,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 109, No. 2 (May 1994), pp. 465–490; and Torsten Persson and Guido Tabellini, *Political Economics: Explaining Economic Policy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000). For a recent use of median voter theory and redistribution, see Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

30. Edward Harris, *Historical Effective Federal Tax Rates: 1979 to 2005* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Budget Office, December 2007), <http://www.cbo.gov/doc.cfm?index=8885>.

31. Persson and Tabellini, *Political Economics*, pp. 117–122.

32. This article does not distinguish among strategy, operations, and tactics; substitution of capital for labor occurs at all levels. I have settled on the term “doctrine,” defined by the U.S. Defense Department as “fundamental principles by which the military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives,” as the appropriate catch-all phrase. See <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/d/01744.html>.

Tax revenue can pay for both the capital and labor inputs. Personnel also can be supplied through conscription, a tax on a citizen's labor rather than income. Even if the odds of being conscripted are equally distributed, the median voter will demand that a larger amount of the military budget go toward the purchase of capital to reduce the risk of conscription. In cases where existing threats do not currently justify resorting to conscription, military capitalization will still to a large degree determine a draft's future likelihood. The median voter normally will be happy with an expensive, all-volunteer military; but once the level of threat creates a demand for labor that reaches into the middle class, the voter will support a conscripted military where draftees are protected by large amounts of capital.³³

Casualties are also a public bad: no one wants to see their fellow citizens die. The less wealthy are more likely to be drafted and to join an all-volunteer force; they may gain jobs from domestic weapons manufacturing; and they often regard military service as a means of acquiring human capital. Conscription is therefore an important, but not the only, reason why militaries with large amounts of labor can be a public bad. The median voter will accept a higher tax, what the British socialist Sidney Webb called the "conscription of riches," to build highly capitalized militaries both in peace and in war, because such militaries redistribute money and skills through jobs and training as well as reduce the risk of conscription and casualties.

The median voter theory outlined above does not claim to perfectly capture how policy is made in a democracy, nor does it argue that one's relative income determines one's position on foreign policy. Rather, this simple theory suggests an equally simple insight: a military doctrine that privileges capital over labor will reduce the costs of conflict for an important swath of voters. A capitalized military not only results in many voters doing less of the fighting themselves, but also allows someone else's resources to fund the costs of war. Politicians should respond accordingly. This distribution of costs explains how a state's seemingly nonstrategic behavior may be in the interests of important rational actors within a democracy.

Because of its redistributive nature, a capitalized military doctrine can lead to moral hazard, which arises when perverse incentives encourage actors to pursue risky behavior. For example, drivers with auto theft coverage are more likely to park on the street than pay for secure parking. Many domestic government programs merge moral hazard with the Meltzer-Richard effect dis-

33. Joseph Paul Vasquez III, "Shouldering the Soldiering: Democracy, Conscription, and Military Casualties," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 49, No. 6 (December 2005), pp. 849–873. If conscription falls more heavily on the less wealthy, then capital will be further favored.

cussed above. Deposit insurance uses government backing to insure bank deposits up to a certain limit, a redistributive public good. Because the insurance applies regardless of the bank (subject to government regulations), an individual has little motivation to consider the bank's solvency. Indeed, she is likely to choose the higher interest provided by a bank making risky investments.

Regarding defense provision, a lack of cost internalization creates an incentive for the median voter to support risky behavior: that is, using a capital-intensive military in conflicts where substitutability is low because the decreased likelihood of winning is outweighed by the lower costs of fighting in such a manner. If the median voter's risky behavior is in effect being subsidized by the wealthy, democratic leaders sensitive to this voter's costs will pursue strategies that make success less likely. I argue that this is what happened in Vietnam.³⁴

Why Did the United States Fight Poorly in Vietnam?

This article examines the U.S. military's counterinsurgency practices in Vietnam during the Johnson administration, when nearly all major escalation and warfighting decisions were made. It also briefly visits Richard Nixon's administration to illustrate the essential continuity of U.S. military strategy in Vietnam. Consensus exists on the reasons why the choice of strategies contributed to failure. First, the United States pursued a skewed balance of effort between fighting the enemy's main and insurgent forces. Although throughout the war the United States had to face both an insurgency and a conventional, "main force" threat, it focused disproportionately on finding, fixing, and destroying conventional enemy units. "Pacification"—that is, securing noncombatants from predation by Vietcong (VC) guerrillas and ensuring some economic stability—was arguably the more important task from the major U.S. escalations of 1966 onward and yet was given short shrift.

Second, the United States employed the few resources it devoted to combatting the insurgency ineffectively. Rather than rooting out guerrilla elements from populated areas, establishing secure spaces for South Vietnamese civilians, and engaging in civil development, the United States sought to use firepower to interdict supplies for the insurgency, engage in strategic bombing

34. Many factors besides redistributive preferences—labor productivity, wealth, population age, level of education, and geography—both influence military doctrine and correlate with democracy. The United States and its allies built high-quality militaries to counteract the Soviet Union's quantitative advantage. By concentrating on warfighting across a long conflict, I essentially hold these other factors constant.

to make North Vietnam pay costs for its support, and pursue search-and-destroy missions to kill enemy personnel at a rate exceeding the reinforcement rate. U.S. forces were for the most part excluded from pacification efforts, leaving these tasks to a South Vietnamese military and government clearly not competent in these missions. This article explains why airpower, physical barriers, and a main force-oriented attrition strategy were employed by the United States against Vietnamese guerrillas (rather than as a necessary component of combating enemy conventional forces), as well as why the counterinsurgency received less attention relative to the main force war. In doing so, this article tests its theory against its rivals by presenting evidence that cost distribution theory explains more aspects of the war than do other theories. This approach also helps to illustrate the theory's causal chain, inspiring confidence that the cost distribution mechanism was a necessary cause for the Johnson administration's poor military strategy in the Vietnam War.

A successful test of cost distribution theory's causal logic requires empirical support for three propositions. First, the public must back a capital-intensive approach to limited war. This does not preclude support for sending soldiers into harm's way, nor does cost distribution theory require comprehensive thinking on counterinsurgency doctrine by the electorate. Rather, the theory suggests that broad sections of the public will assess the costs of the conflict in blood and treasure and will favor the latter. Second, government officials must acknowledge the public (not necessarily an explicitly named "median voter") as the source of pressure to fight a capital-intensive campaign. Unlike the electorate, policymakers should understand the hazards of applying such an approach to counterinsurgency and recommend it anyway. Third, government officials must explicitly direct the military to fight accordingly.

Evidence that the Johnson administration, important members of Congress, the U.S. military, and even the American public shared a realistic assessment of the limited nature, stakes, and prospects for success in Vietnam supports cost distribution theory over other explanations. Showing that the administration understood the superiority of a COIN approach and rejected it on domestic political grounds also undermines the strategic culture arguments. Evidence that General Westmoreland and other military experts recommended a more COIN-oriented strategy only to see this recommendation rejected by President Johnson and his advisers would undermine the military myopia case in favor of cost distribution. Finally, unlike the alternatives, cost distribution theory suggests that the choice to pursue counterinsurgency with conventional forces and tactics should be consistent, despite feedback that the approach is not working. Democratic exceptionalism, military myopia, and even strategic culture explanations suggest that a democracy eventually adjusts in the face of

harsh wartime lessons. Cost distribution theory argues that, short of reducing the average voter's influence, a democracy is unlikely to "learn" to conduct effective COIN.³⁵

Public Opinion on the Vietnam War

Polling data show that a large portion of the American public remained vaguely hawkish, if poorly informed, about the Vietnam War, through the Tet offensive of 1968.³⁶ Afterward, even though a five-to-three majority of the public viewed the decision to go to war as a mistake, the same ratio wanted to win the war by escalating U.S. efforts.³⁷ Once this hawkish consensus began to break down in 1968, the role of income in public opinion of the war grew significant, with poorer people being more likely to support the war.³⁸ A closer look at the polling data reveals a public relatively realistic about the prospects for limited success in Vietnam and the means they were willing to employ to achieve it.

PUBLIC RECOGNITION AND SUPPORT FOR LIMITED WAR

Critics describe U.S. strategic culture as suffering from an "apolitical view of war, which encourages the pursuit of military victory for its own sake"; polling data, however, do not support this claim.³⁹ At the time of the 1965 U.S. escalation of the Vietnam War, 64 percent of Gallup poll respondents supported greater involvement, yet only 29 percent thought that victory was likely. Another 30 percent predicted a stalemate.⁴⁰ Across several identical polls from January 1966 through the end of 1972, large majorities (ranging from 53 to 77 percent) agreed that the war was likely to end in a "compromise peace settlement."⁴¹

35. Within space constraints, this article includes representative citations on war strategy and domestic politics from every major adviser to Lyndon Johnson from 1964 to 1968: the national security advisers, secretaries of state and defense, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, personal advisers such as Maxwell Taylor and Robert Komer, as well as the most pivotal deputies: William Bundy, Nicholas Katzenbach, and John McNaughton. Vice President Hubert Humphrey wrote a prescient analysis of the insurgency and was subsequently marginalized by Johnson. William C. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships*, Part 4: *July 1965–January 1968* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 20.

36. John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1987), p. 54.

37. Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1979), p. 172.

38. Scott Sigmund Gartner and Gary M. Segura, "Race, Casualties, and Opinion in the Vietnam War," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (February 2000), pp. 115–146.

39. Record, *Beating Goliath*, p. x.

40. Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, pp. 129–130.

41. Survey by Gallup Organization, January 1–5, May 19–24, 1966; May 11–16, November 16–21, 1967; February 2–6, March 2–7, 1968; March 1971; and November 10–13, 1972 (hereafter "Gallup"), iPOLL Databank, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

In addition to maintaining a realistic assessment of the outcome, the largest group in most surveys supported the pursuit of limited U.S. aims in Vietnam. A Harris poll in December 1964 found that 40 percent of the American public approved of “continuing support for the anti-Communist government,” and roughly equal portions supported withdrawal or “bombing North Vietnam.”⁴² In a November 1966 poll, only 7 percent preferred to pull troops out, and another 5 percent supported a “neutralist South Vietnam.” Fifty-seven percent supported both sides withdrawing “under the United Nations,” and 31 percent advocated the pursuit of “total military victory.” In February 1967 the same question gained similarly meager levels of support for the first two options (6 and 7 percent, respectively), whereas 44 percent supported the UN option, and a striking 43 percent supported total victory. The same question in May 1967 produced nearly identical results.⁴³

PUBLIC PREFERENCE FOR CAPITAL OVER LABOR

Although many poll respondents were unsure about the strategy and tactics being pursued by the U.S. military in Vietnam, those expressing an opinion appeared realistic in assessing their efficacy. Public opinion was hawkish on the issue of bombing, far less so on the role of ground forces.

Figures 3a to 3d present poll data from June 1965, taken at the cusp of accelerated U.S. involvement in Vietnam. About 80 percent of respondents were either unsure or skeptical that airpower alone could stop North Vietnamese infiltration of the South (figure 3a), yet a large majority (58 percent) favored continued bombing of the North in retaliation (3b). The results are far more mixed when ground operations are covered. The percentage favoring a troop increase is also large (62 percent, figure 3c), but only under limited circumstances; respondents were told that the troops would be defending the South “this summer” against a communist “land offensive to drive the Americans out of South Vietnam.” Figure 3d shows that only 23 percent favored “carry[ing] the ground war into North Vietnam”; a plurality (46 percent) wanted the U.S. military to “hold the line”; and more respondents preferred negotiations over escalation.⁴⁴

A poll taken six months later (figure 4a) shows that 52 percent of respondents supported the Johnson administration’s decision to end the second “Christmas” bombing pause (22 percent opposed). While a smaller plurality

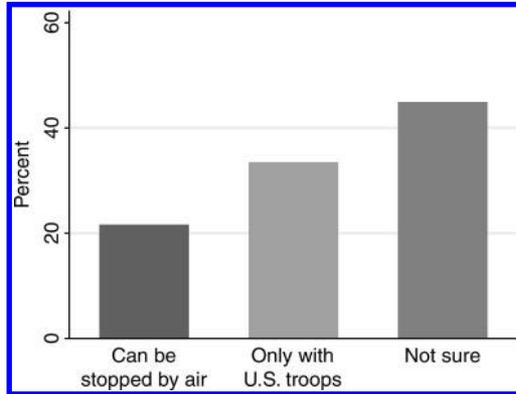
42. John D. Stempel, “Policy/Decision Making in the Department of State: The Vietnamese Problem, 1961–1965,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1966, pp. 249–250.

43. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, p. 87.

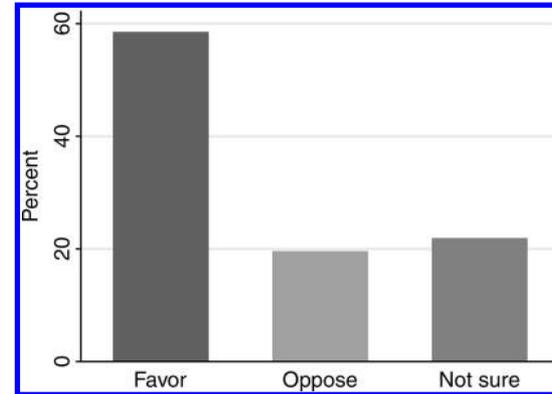
44. Survey by Louis Harris and Associates, “Harris 1966 Survey, Nos. 1522 and 1531,” in Harris Collection, Odum Institute, Louis Harris Data Center, University of North Carolina, <http://arc.irss.unc.edu/dvn/dv/odvn/faces/StudyListingPage.xhtml?mode=1&collectionId=4>.

Figure 3. American Public Opinion on U.S. Bombing and Ground Forces, June 1965

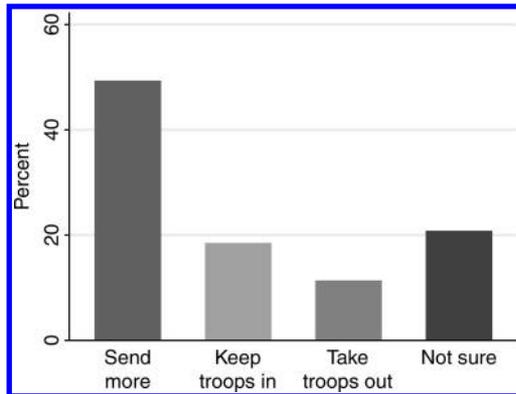
(a) Can infiltration of South Vietnam be stopped by air raids on North or only by sending more U.S. troops to fight them?



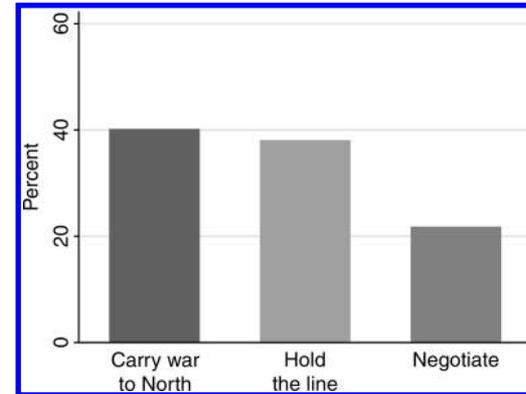
(b) Favor continued bombings in North in retaliation for Communist raids in South?



(c) Communists have said they will mount a land offensive to drive the Americans out of South Vietnam. Favor the U.S. sending in more troops to defend South Vietnam this summer?



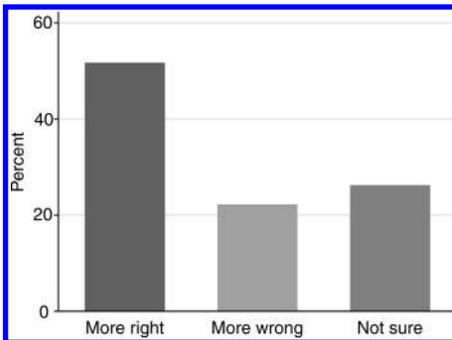
(d) Carry ground war into North, negotiate, or hold the line to prevent Communists taking over South Vietnam?



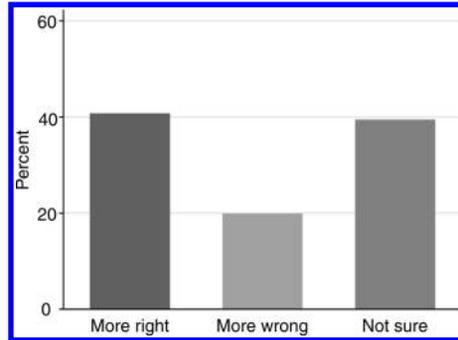
SOURCE: Survey by Louis Harris and Associates, "Harris 1966 Survey, No. 1522," in Harris Collection, Odum Institute, Louis Harris Data Center, University of North Carolina, <http://arc.irss.unc.edu/dvn/dv/odvn/faces/StudyListingPage.xhtml?mode=1&collectionId=4>.

Figure 4. American Public Opinion on U.S. Bombing Pause and Enclave Strategies, June 1966

(a) Administration more right or wrong?
Not continuing bombing pause.



(b) Administration more right or wrong?
Not limiting U.S. ground action to a few strong coastal areas (enclaves).



SOURCE: Survey by Louis Harris and Associates, "Harris 1966 Survey, No. 1623," in Harris Collection, Odum Institute, Louis Harris Data Center, University of North Carolina, <http://arc.irss.unc.edu/dvn/dv/odvn/faces/StudyListingPage.xhtml?mode=1&collectionId=4>.

supported doing more than "limiting U.S. ground action to a few strong coastal areas (enclaves)," a much larger percentage of respondents was unsure compared with those who supported a return to bombing (figure 4b). Regarding the effects of bombing, figures 5a and 5b (which depict 1967 poll results) show that while slim majorities believed it hampered the North Vietnamese war effort, a stunning 86 percent (with very few "not sure" responses) believed that the bombing "backed up our troops in the field."⁴⁵

SHIELDING THE PUBLIC FROM THE COSTS IT CARED ABOUT MOST

Cost distribution theory suggests that one reason for public hawkishness in the face of limited success was the war's relatively low cost for the average voter. This phenomenon is demonstrated by two sets of polls that distinguish between war costs that the American people cared about (manpower and casualties) and those they experienced directly (inflation and taxes). If the government is sensitive to voter preferences, responses in these two areas should diverge as leaders choose strategies that minimize the costs that most concern voters in favor of those that do not.

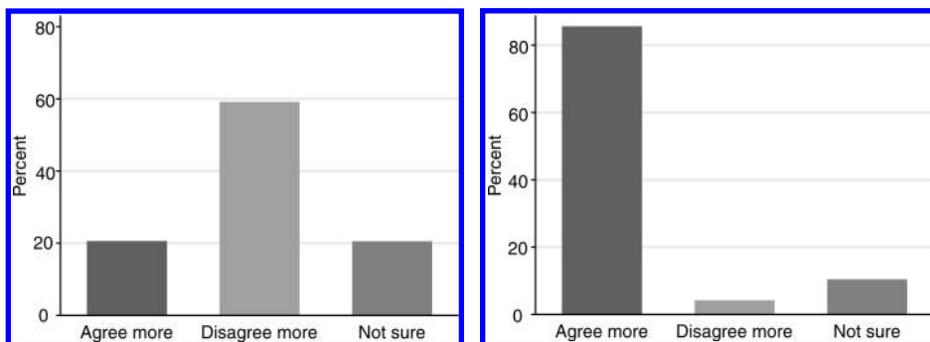
Questions in a 1967 poll distinguished between what "troubled" and what "affected" respondents, showing that only 44 percent of respondents felt that

45. Harris Collection, No. 1623, June 1966; and Harris Collection, No. 1702, January 1967.

Figure 5. American Public Opinion on U.S. Bombing Effects, January 1967

(a) Agree or disagree? Bombings don't hurt North Vietnamese war effort.

(b) Agree or disagree? Bombings back up our troops in the field.



SOURCE: Survey by Louis Harris and Associates, "Harris 1967 Survey, No. 1702," in Harris Collection, Odum Institute, Louis Harris Data Center, University of North Carolina, <http://arc.irss.unc.edu/dvn/dv/odvn/faces/StudyListingPage.xhtml?mode=1&collectionId=4>.

their personal lives had been "affected" by the war. Among those affected, more respondents (32 percent) cited inflation than casualties (25 percent) as the source. However, responding to the question, "What two or three things about the war in Vietnam most trouble you personally?" 31 percent said the equivalent of casualties or killing; 12 percent said lack of progress; and only 7 percent said rising cost. The same questions were asked in March 1968, immediately after the high U.S. casualty rates resulting from the Tet offensive. More than half of the respondents thought that the war had affected them personally, and half of these identified inflation and taxes as the principal source. Although only 9 percent knew someone who had been killed in Vietnam, "concern" over the drafting of a son or husband had risen to 37 percent. As for the war's other "troubling aspects," 44 percent cited U.S. casualties, and 7 percent cited financial costs.⁴⁶

Although there was little difference among income groups regarding approval of U.S. strategy choices in Vietnam, some survey questions allow for testing the war effort's distributive elements. Cost distribution theory suggests that lower-income groups should be less sensitive to the costs of war when ex-

46. Harris Collection, No. 1734, July 1967; and Harris Collection, No. 1813, March 1968, quoted in Mark Lorell and Charles Kelley Jr., "Casualties, Public Opinion, and Presidential Policy during the Vietnam War," No. R-3060-AF (Santa Monica, Calif.: Project Air Force, RAND, March 1985), pp. 23-28.

pressed in the form of higher taxes than in the form of higher labor costs (i.e., conscription). Although few respondents to a January 1967 poll supported an income tax increase, majorities among those initially opposed became more supportive if “convinced it would help pay for the war.”⁴⁷ Moreover, one’s income appears to have affected this support, as illustrated in figure 6.⁴⁸ Wealthier respondents were more likely to remain opposed to raising taxes. The relationship to income changes in figure 7, when respondents were asked if they favored shifting the selection of conscription to a lottery system without deferments. Opposition to a lottery grew with income, suggesting a belief by many that the deferment system favored the wealthy. This suggests that the conscription “tax” was considered regressive, making the use of capital that much more appealing to relatively poor voters.⁴⁹ Thus, relative income appears to have played a role in public support for the Johnson administration’s Vietnam policy when costs are made explicit.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSIVENESS TO THE PUBLIC

Public opinion polls occasionally directly influenced the choice of military strategy in Vietnam; National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, for example, cited one poll in figure 3 in analyzing the differences between the U.S. and French experiences in Vietnam.⁵⁰ But often the Johnson administration’s decisions were made in anticipation of public responses. Cost distribution theory does not require the public to express strong military doctrine preferences. Rather, it suggests that the government assesses military doctrine in light of public preferences over outcomes (in the case of Vietnam, a negotiated settlement without full withdrawal) and the costs in blood and treasure.

From the outset, administration officials reiterated the focus on enemy main

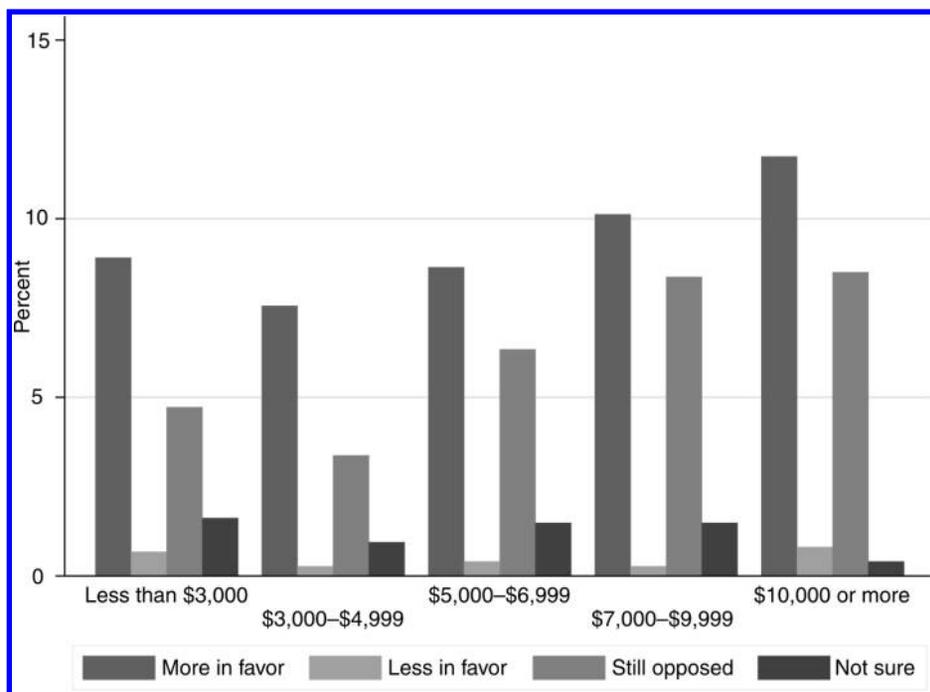
47. Harris Collection, No. 1702, January 1967.

48. *Ibid.* A multinomial logistic regression of respondent’s income on support for the tax increase among those initially opposed shows that wealthier respondents are more likely to remain so (with a coefficient of 0.086 and standard error of 0.05). The wealthier are less likely to answer “not sure” as well (–0.229, standard error of 0.10). Wealthier respondents are less likely to change their initial opposition to the income tax, answering “more in favor” or “not sure” (with a coefficient of –0.107, standard error of 0.05). In the publicly available polling data sets, there are surprisingly few questions linking the war and raising taxes. Generally, polls that addressed income taxes also asked about a variety of alternate measures, such as price controls, which relatively less wealthy people tended to favor. See, for example, Gallup Poll, October 21–26, 1966.

49. A multinomial logistic regression of respondent’s income on support for the lottery gives a coefficient of –0.087 and standard error of 0.047; that is, the wealthier appear less likely to support switching to a lottery system. The wealthy were much less likely to answer “not sure” as well (coefficient of –0.417, standard error of 0.069).

50. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1964–1968, Johnson Administration*, Vol. 3, Doc. 33, http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_iii/index.html. For the poll, see Harris Collection, No. 1331, June 1965.

Figure 6. U.S. Support for Income Tax Increase “if you were convinced it would help pay for the war in Vietnam,” by Total Family Income for 1966

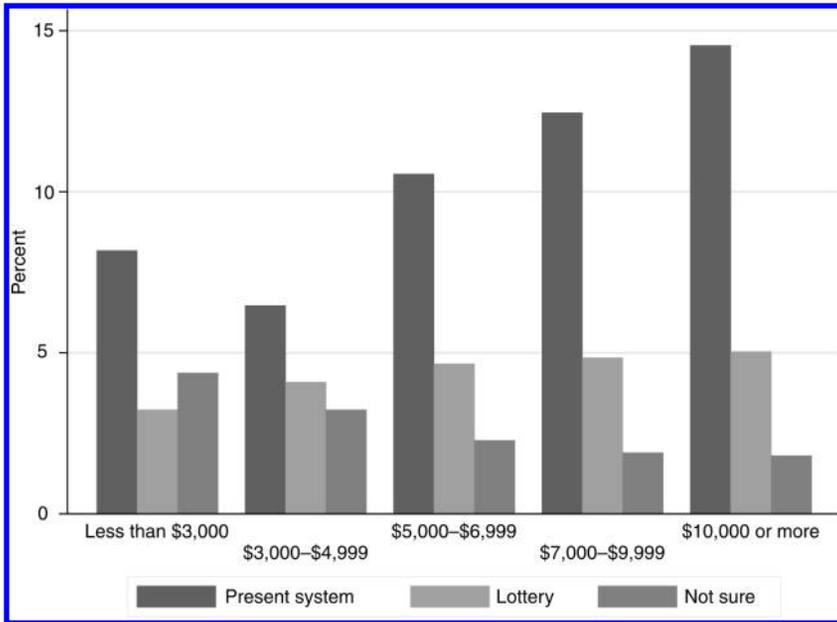


SOURCE: Survey by Louis Harris and Associates, “Harris 1967 Survey, No. 1702,” in Harris Collection, Odum Institute, Louis Harris Data Center, University of North Carolina, <http://arc.irss.unc.edu/dvn/dv/odvn/faces/StudyListingPage.xhtml?mode=1&collectionId=4>.

force units and explicitly rejected the use of personnel (especially U.S. forces) to pursue pacification. Recently sworn in and already preparing for the 1964 election, President Johnson convened an ad hoc committee on the conflict, chaired by diplomat William Sullivan, who had been told in advance that the policy would be a “slow, very slow, escalation” of bombing pressures against North Vietnam. Sullivan briefed the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) that a military “presence” without “heavy forces” would maintain public support indefinitely.⁵¹ One contemporary analysis based on anonymous interviews of State Department officials assessed that the president was “more inclined to listen” to advocates of “selective bombing of North Vietnamese targets and clandes-

51. H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 68.

Figure 7. Responses to “Would you have the present draft system or a lottery system for the draft?” by Total Family Income for 1966



SOURCE: Survey by Louis Harris and Associates, “Harris 1967 Survey, No. 1702,” in Harris Collection, Odum Institute, Louis Harris Data Center, University of North Carolina, <http://arc.irss.unc.edu/dvn/dv/odvn/faces/StudyListingPage.xhtml?mode=1&collectionId=4>.

tine naval raids along the coast” because 1964 was an election year, and Johnson knew he had to “take some action soon to show that his administration was on top of the situation.”⁵² This article shows that throughout this period, the Johnson administration perceived strong constraints from the public and responded with a conventional military approach to an insurgency, epitomized in a January 1966 phone call between Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and President Johnson, in which McNamara reported that Vietcong defectors “indicate that the pressure that is being applied to them by air and by constant offensive probing by the [South Vietnam] government and U.S. forces is beginning to appear in morale.” The defense secretary warned that “the longer you extend the pause [in strategic bombing of the North], the more dangerous a [midterm election] campaign issue it becomes.”⁵³

52. Stempel, “Policy/Decision Making in the Department of State,” p. 221.

53. *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 4, Doc. 26.

U.S. Strategy in Vietnam: "Expensive in Dollars, but Cheap in Life"

In the following empirical sections, I discuss why the U.S. government continued to pursue its counterinsurgency strategy despite information that it was failing. First, I show the overarching philosophy of the war's prosecution: the inefficient substitution of capital for labor. I then show how the Johnson administration chose airpower, barrier construction, and a search-and-destroy/attrition strategy as its preferred means of fighting the insurgent component of the war. Using evidence from internal deliberations and public statements, I support the claim that civilians made these decisions with domestic politics in mind.

Toward the end of 1966, Secretary of Defense McNamara told General Westmoreland that "he would approve whatever related requirements were developed to ensure that RVN [Republic of Vietnam, also referred to in primary documents as GVN and SVN] manpower and U.S. money substitute for U.S. blood."⁵⁴ Despite obvious evidence of a failing strategy, the *Pentagon Papers* (the Defense Department analysis of the war's conduct) describes further attempts to de-emphasize labor, "certain 'oblique alternatives,' those which were not directly substitutable options" and were "designed to relieve pressure on U.S. resources, especially manpower."⁵⁵ The Johnson administration and its uniformed subordinates highlighted this substitution for the public. Robert Komer, Johnson's principal counterinsurgency adviser, recalled the political exchange rate in 1982: "What it costs you in blood is much more politically visible than what it costs you in treasures."⁵⁶ JCS Chairman Gen. Earle Wheeler told members of a Rotary Club, "The United States policy is to expend money and firepower, not manpower, in accomplishing the purpose of the nation."⁵⁷ Early in the war, McNamara refused to answer directly a *New York Times* writer's question, "How large a commitment of men is the United States prepared to make at the end of 1965?" The defense secretary instead replied that "the thing we prize most deeply is not money but men. . . . It's expensive in dollars, but cheap in life."⁵⁸ Responding in a televised congressional hearing to a question on the economic costs of strategic bombing, McNamara stated that financial comparisons do not "have great value in affecting the de-

54. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, Vol. 4, pp. 106–107.

55. Mike Gravel, ed., *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, Vol. 4 (Boston: Beacon, 1971), p. 385.

56. Lorell and Kelley, "Casualties, Public Opinion, and Presidential Policy during the Vietnam War," p. 80.

57. Quoted in Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, p. 198.

58. Henry F. Graff, *The Tuesday Cabinet: Deliberation and Decision on Peace and War under Lyndon B. Johnson* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 81–82.

cisions as to whether to bomb or not bomb specific facilities." Rather, "one of the standards I use in recommending targets for attack on the North [is comparing] the value of facilities destroyed in the North with the number of U.S. lives lost in the process of destroying them."⁵⁹

The principal means of substituting capital for labor was the employment of air- and artillery-delivered ordnance to a degree that counterinsurgency expert Robert Thompson observed, "All ground operations were designed to achieve a fix on an enemy unit so that every modern weapon could be brought to bear."⁶⁰ Ordnance was expended routinely, even when it was likely to have only a marginal effect; 70 percent of artillery fire was employed in situations of light or inactive combat intensity.⁶¹ Upon hearing McNamara's "reluctant" endorsement of Westmoreland's initial request to deploy ground forces in 1965, Johnson desperately sought alternatives, asking McNamara if "there's any way, Bob, that through your small planes or helicopters . . . you could spot these people and then radio back and let the planes come in and bomb the hell out of them?" The president even suggested getting "every damn admiral that we've got that want some practice," to bring the U.S. Navy to bear on the conflict.⁶²

AIRPOWER AS COUNTERINSURGENCY STRATEGY

The Johnson administration designed both the strategic bombing of North Vietnam and the more tactically oriented air operations in the South with the insurgency in mind.⁶³ A pivotal memo on "sustained reprisal," written by National Security Adviser Bundy in February 1965, argued that strategic bombing was a "new norm in counter-insurgency," because "to stop it [the bombing] the Communists would have to stop enough of their activity in the South to permit the probable success of a determined pacification effort."⁶⁴ Later that year, Bundy noted the importance of population security and "the civil side of the war," but then described how it should be "fought in the shelter of sea and air power."⁶⁵ Walt Rostow, Bundy's successor as national secu-

59. Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, Armed Services Committee, U.S. Senate, *Air War against North Vietnam*, 90th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), p. 283.

60. Robert G.K. Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam* (New York: D. McKay, 1969), p. 135.

61. Thomas C. Thayer, *War without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1985), p. 57.

62. Quoted in Michael Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), pp. 194-195.

63. Kocher, Pepinsky, and Kalyvas, "Aerial Bombardment, Indiscriminate Violence, and Territorial Control."

64. *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 2, Doc. 84.

65. Graff, *The Tuesday Cabinet*, p. 94.

rity adviser in 1966, agreed, describing airpower as “the equivalent of guerilla warfare.”⁶⁶

The administration understood that bombing was unlikely to be effective, even as it ordered its use. In a late-1964 memo to Maxwell Taylor, the U.S. ambassador to Vietnam and a key presidential military adviser, Johnson observed, “I have never felt that this war will be won from the air,” making the point more colorfully in a March 1965 phone conversation with Senator Richard Russell, “Airplanes ain’t worth a *damn* Dick!”⁶⁷

The United States nonetheless embarked on a massive air campaign and continued it long after sufficient evidence existed that it had little, if any, effect on the insurgency. The near one-to-one ratio of combat sorties in the theater to personnel in Vietnam is shown in figure 8. In 1966 the number of sorties overtook the number of personnel, rose more steeply to the peak deployment of 1968, and then declined less sharply. Before the ratio increased by an order of magnitude in 1972, the largest sorties-to-personnel ratio occurred during 1969, when the U.S. military had supposedly shifted to a less firepower-intensive pacification strategy. Administration officials set daily requirements for ordnance expenditure and air strikes, causing Westmoreland to complain in an eyes-only cable to Pacific Forces commander Adm. Ulysses Sharp that McNamara “manifested uncommon interest” about reports that these quotas were not met by available in-country resources. McNamara “voiced concern that ‘policy’ concerning use of in-country and carrier based air in support of operations in SVN [was] not being adhered to,” stressing the “relative ease” of obtaining “additional carriers if needed.”⁶⁸

President Johnson was much less worried about revealing to the public the extent of the bombing campaign than he was the ground escalation.⁶⁹ National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 328, authorizing expansion of the ground and air campaign in April 1965, infamously noted the president’s desire to “minimize any appearance of sudden changes in policy,” but this admonition applied only to the additional personnel deployments and the “more active use” of Marines in Vietnam. Other actions, in particular “the present

66. Walt Rostow to Averell Harriman, January 28, 1966, Box 13, Papers of Walt Rostow, Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) Library, quoted in David Milne, “‘Our Equivalent of Guerilla Warfare’: Walt Rostow and the Bombing of North Vietnam, 1961–1968,” *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (January 2007), pp. 169–203.

67. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 1, Doc. 477; and Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory*, p. 212 (emphasis in original).

68. Westmoreland to Sharp, July 17, 1965, Eyes Only Message File (EOMF), Box 34, LBJ Library. McNamara was constantly pushing Wheeler and Westmoreland to improve the close air support provided to army ground forces. Wheeler to Sharp, December 22, 1965, EOMF, Box 30.

69. Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 61.

slowly ascending tempo of ROLLING THUNDER operations [i.e., strategic bombing of North Vietnam],” were not subject to this restriction.⁷⁰ When McNamara advised extending by three days the May 1965 pause in bombing to “satisfy the *New York Times* editorial board,” Johnson responded, “If we hold off bombing any longer, people are going to say ‘What in the world is happening?’ My judgment is the public never wanted us to stop the bombing.”⁷¹

In an October 1965 memo, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs William Bundy linked strategic bombing, U.S. casualties, and public opinion: “We are faced with the pressures from various quarters . . . to hit the North substantially harder. The degree to which this will rise during the next 3–6 months will depend heavily on actual casualty experience.” Bundy tied support for increased bombing to the “Phase II” ground force deployment anticipated for 1966 in light of “US domestic reaction.” Bundy cautioned, “There would be a lot of rumbling below decks and among the harder-action school of critics,” and “pressures would be enormous thereafter [a bombing pause] to ‘really clobber’ the North.”⁷² In the November 1967 deliberation over McNamara’s proposal to level off ROLLING THUNDER sorties, Rostow observed that “acknowledging my limitations as a judge of domestic politics, I am extremely skeptical of any change in strategy that would take you away from your present middle position.” Rostow argued, “If we shift unilaterally to de-escalation, the Republicans will move in and crystallize a majority toward a stronger policy.”⁷³ Taylor attached a note to Rostow’s analysis concurring that the curtailment of U.S. bombing would mobilize “the large majority of our citizens who believe in the bombing but who thus far have been silent.”⁷⁴

The popularity of airpower, its linkage to troop levels and casualties in the minds of the American public and policymakers, and the limits of military influence on the administration are well illustrated by a rare instance of successful military subversion of presidential policy. Given the opportunity in the summer of 1967 to testify publicly before John Stennis’s hawkish Military Preparedness Subcommittee, the JCS pushed for an expansion of U.S. strategic bombing even as the defense secretary, convinced by then of ROLLING THUNDER’s futility, resisted. McNamara gave a masterful brief on bombing’s

70. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 2, Doc. 242.

71. May 16, 1965, NSC Meeting Notes, Box 1, LBJ Library, quoted in McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, pp. 284–285.

72. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 3, Doc. 181. For similar sentiments from Rostow and McNamara, see *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 4, Doc. 232, which refers to the November elections.

73. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 5, Doc. 381.

74. Quoted in Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, p. 887.

limitations, but he was contradicted by both the generals and the senators, who suggested that “we probably would have suffered fewer casualties in the south if the air campaign against the north had not been burdened with restrictions and prohibited targets.”⁷⁵

As but one example, Senator Stuart Symington highlighted the substitution logic: “If instead of diminishing the bombing effort you increased it, you could do as good a job or a better job, with less troops in South Vietnam could you not?”⁷⁶ But Symington also revealed an awareness of the bombing’s ineffectiveness—“Why is it that we are putting out this gigantic effort, but getting so little, so terribly little results? It is what everybody wants to talk about when I go back to Missouri”—and an unwillingness to consider another strategy—“The people are now beginning to realize that we have shackled our seapower and shackled our airpower.”⁷⁷ Despite his dismay over JCS maneuvering, President Johnson began to abandon his civilian advisers’ recommendations in favor of the military’s more politically palatable ones.⁷⁸

COUNTERINSURGENCY BY BARRIER

Even when the air war’s shortcomings became clear, the Johnson administration chose neither to increase the number of ground forces nor to reconsider U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Instead it attempted to build one of the *Pentagon Papers*’ “oblique strategies”: a collection of electronic surveillance equipment, mines, and physical barriers to prevent infiltration into the South. Various named “Practice Nine,” “Muscle Shoals,” and “Igloo White,” its colloquial name became the “McNamara Line,” reflecting the defense secretary’s enthusiastic support. Designed partly to head off an army request for four more divisions to block incursions from the North, its development was championed by McNamara and other politically oriented officials in the face of objections from military experts. The Joint Chiefs generally agreed with Admiral Sharp’s assessment: “an inefficient use of resources with small likelihood of achieving U.S. objectives in Vietnam.”⁷⁹

Despite these objections, McNamara approved the plan in September 1966, including it in a presidential memo as one of the five principal means of reversing the war’s course, estimating that construction would cost \$1 billion with an annual operating cost of \$800 million.⁸⁰ In early 1967, NSAM 358 as-

75. Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, *Air War against North Vietnam*, p. 208.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 420.

78. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, p. 61.

79. Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 4, p. 114.

80. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 4, Docs. 233 and 268.

signed the “highest national priority category” to the program.⁸¹ Faced with JCS foot-dragging, McNamara shouted, “Get on with it for God’s sakes, it’s only money!”⁸²

Not only was the barrier given near-limitless resources, but its development was designed with public opinion in mind. In a May 19, 1967, memo on finding a way to reduce bombing in a manner “acceptable to our own people,” National Security Adviser Rostow mooted, “Surfacing the concept of the barrier may be critical to that turnaround [in public opinion].”⁸³ Polls backed up this assessment; when respondents were asked to evaluate ways “to step up our military effort in Vietnam,” the most popular option (60 percent in support vs. 18 percent opposed) was “building a military barrier across all entrance routes into South Vietnam.”⁸⁴ A *Washington Post* column trumpeted the (leaked) project as “a revolutionary new approach” that could “conceivably transform the Vietnamese war.”⁸⁵ Originally proposed by the Pentagon’s JASON advisory group as a substitute for the ineffective air campaign, the barrier simply supplemented it.⁸⁶

MAIN FORCE FOCUS AS COUNTERINSURGENCY STRATEGY

One of the Vietnam War’s most puzzling aspects, and an important component of the military myopia case, is the leeway the Johnson administration apparently gave to the military in pursuing an ultimately unsuccessful ground strategy.⁸⁷ Given civilian micromanagement elsewhere, Occam’s razor suggests a simple explanation: the commander in the field was doing precisely what the president wanted him to do.⁸⁸ Johnson understood what type of war would be fought, and throughout the conflict he and his advisers reinforced the pursuit of this strategy.

Both civilian and military leaders regarded the setting of ceilings on troop numbers as sufficient to preclude a COIN approach.⁸⁹ A senior deputy’s eyes-only message to General Westmoreland observed that it seemed, “the smaller

81. Walt Rostow, “NSAM 358: Assignment of Highest National Priority to the Mk 84, Mod 1 2000 lb. Bomb and to Project PRACTICE NINE,” LBJ Library, <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/NSAMs/nsam358.asp>.

82. Quoted in David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), p. 630.

83. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 5, Doc. 162. See also Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 4, p. 385.

84. Harris Collection, No. 1735, May 1967.

85. Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “Inside Report . . . The Vietnam Wall,” *Washington Post*, August 1, 1966.

86. Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 4, pp. 115–123.

87. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, p. 165.

88. I am grateful to John Nagl for making this point.

89. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, p. 272.

the number of maneuver battalions the more B-52's we need."⁹⁰ Yet the U.S. Army adapted to the constraints in ways inconsistent with the military myopia story, deploying dismounted infantry units in 1965 rather than armored brigades and divisions, so as to field as many soldiers as possible given personnel caps.⁹¹ Moreover, the generals understood that heavy forces were inappropriate for the terrain and the type of war being fought; Westmoreland insisted to his Pentagon-based colleagues that "Vietnam is no place for either tank or mechanized infantry units." Army Chief of Staff Gen. Harold Johnson agreed: "The presence of tank formations tends to create a psychological atmosphere of conventional combat."⁹² The army's shift to armor occurred gradually over 1966 only as the need to substitute for labor became more apparent.⁹³

ADMINISTRATION UNDERSTANDING AND REJECTION OF COIN. Few summations of effective COIN strategy improve on McNamara's memo to Johnson in March 1964, which expresses "the basic theory now fully accepted both on the Vietnamese and U.S. sides . . . concentrating on the more secure areas and working out from these through military operations to provide security, followed by necessary civil and economic actions to make the presence of the government felt and to provide economic improvements."⁹⁴ The administration understood the limitations of fighting an insurgency conventionally; McNamara briefed the president in July 1965, arguing that "success against the larger, more conventional, VC/PAVN [People's Army of North Vietnam] forces could merely drive the VC back into the trees and back to their 1960–64 pattern—a pattern against which U.S. troops and aircraft would be of limited value."⁹⁵ "The large-unit operations war," McNamara briefed Johnson in October 1966, "is largely irrelevant to pacification as long as we do not lose it." Yet the president summarily rejected the COIN option on multiple occasions. The ground campaign was confined to using ordnance for main force attrition; the president constantly exhorted his chiefs to "kill more VC."⁹⁶ Despite information suggesting that this approach was not working well, Johnson stuck with it.

More accurately, the administration's pacification strategy was the main

90. Deputy to Westmoreland, January 31, 1966, EOMF, Box 35.

91. Westmoreland to H. Johnson, July 5, 1965, and July 7, 1965; and Westmoreland to Waters, August 11, 1965, EOMF, Box 34.

92. H. Johnson to Westmoreland, July 3, 1965, EOMF, Box 34.

93. Donn A. Starry, *Armored Combat in Vietnam* (New York: Arno, 1980), p. 56.

94. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 1, Doc. 84.

95. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 3, Doc. 67.

96. Jack Valenti (one of Johnson's most loyal aides) observed in an eyes-only memo to the president that "you are rightly judging the trends of the war from . . . numbers of VC killed" and that "the kill rate is vital to you judging the amount of punishment being meted to the enemy." Valenti to Johnson, March 24, 1966, Box 9, White House Central Files, Confidential File, LBJ Library.

force war. During a briefing on ground force employment on July 21, 1965, Johnson expressed concern about putting “U.S. forces in those red areas.” McNamara replied, “You’re right. We’re placing our people with their backs to the sea—for protection. Our mission would be to seek out the VC in large-scale units.”⁹⁷ In a September 1965 memo to Johnson, National Security Adviser Bundy summed up the challenge facing the president: deciding “how we use our substantial ground and air strength effectively against small-scale harassment-type action, whether we should engage in pacification as opposed to patrolling actively, and whether, indeed, we should taper off our ground force build-up.” Bundy reported that “we asked [Ambassador Henry Cabot] Lodge to develop a specific plan for our joint consideration which would involve the concentration of GVN forces on pacification and the reliance on U.S. forces to handle large-scale VC actions.”⁹⁸

In November 1965 deliberations over how best to pursue pacification, Ambassador Lodge forcefully argued that the “crux of the problem” in the U.S. pacification effort “is security. To meet this need we must make more U.S. troops available to help out in pacification operations as we move to concentrate ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] effort in this work.”⁹⁹ The reaction could not have been stronger or clearer: a joint telegram from Rusk, McNamara, and Komer stated that beyond Westmoreland’s planned “use of limited number U.S. forces in buddy system principle to guide and motivate ARVN . . . there should be no thought of U.S. taking on substantial share of pacification.” Rusk later emphasized to Lodge that the strategy was discussed “at highest levels [i.e., the president], who wished to emphasize that this represents final and considered decision.”¹⁰⁰ At this time, McNamara not only recommended troop increases without revising the ground strategy—“The principal task of U.S. military forces in SVN must be to eliminate the offensive capability of the regular units”—but gave Johnson a choice between two versions of search and destroy. The first would be “to increase friendly forces as rapidly as possible, and without limit, and employ them primarily in large-scale ‘seek out and destroy’ operations to destroy the main force VC/NVA

97. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 3, Doc. 71.

98. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 3, Doc. 151. Taylor, writing to the president at the end of 1965, not only recommended that “the role of our U.S. ground forces in this campaign for increased population security should be primarily the destruction of mainline Viet Cong/North Vietnamese units,” but criticized the “inclination to turn over all or most of the heavy fighting to U.S. forces and allow the bulk of the Vietnamese forces to retire behind a screen of U.S. provided protection to perform clearing jobs and local defense. . . . At least half of the South Vietnamese regular units should be used in mobile combat roles.” *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 3, Doc. 250.

99. The telegram is found in Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, pp. 602–605, and footnoted in *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 4, Doc. 290.

100. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 4, Doc. 304

[North Vietnamese Army] units." The second was "a similarly aggressive strategy of 'seek out and destroy' but to build friendly forces only to that level required to neutralize the large enemy units." McNamara advocated a shift to the second option in part because "an endless escalation of U.S. deployments is not likely to be acceptable in the U.S."¹⁰¹

When Westmoreland requested additional personnel in April 1967, Komer noted that the enemy main force strength had leveled off and that half of the U.S. maneuver battalions were already supporting pacification "by dealing with the middle war, the VC main force provincial battalions." Johnson's pacification expert warned that a "major U.S. force commitment to pacification also basically challenges the nature of our presence in Vietnam and might force U.S. to stay indefinitely in strength." Observing the political reality that "another major U.S. force increase raises so many other issues," Komer recommended more Vietnamese involvement, coupled with "a minor force increase . . . accelerated emphasis on a barrier, and some increased bombing."¹⁰² Even administration officials favoring escalation evinced modest expectations for the reinforcements' effectiveness, concern for the domestic implications, and no change in strategy. In a May 1967 memo explicitly addressing public responses to escalation strategies, Rostow established the goal of freeing up "additional allied forces to permit Westy to get on with our limited but real role in pacification, notably with the defense of I Corps in the North and the hounding of provincial main force units."¹⁰³ Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach believed the time had come to "change" the war strategy and "use the great bulk of U.S. forces for search and destroy." A "small number" of troops could be used for pacification but "targeted primarily on enemy provincial main force units."¹⁰⁴ During a July 1967 meeting, Johnson agreed with McNamara's recommendation that "U.S. units will continue to destroy the enemy's main force units," while ordering his subordinates to "shave [any additional troops requests] the best we can."¹⁰⁵

Johnson administration officials clearly based their rejection of COIN on an anticipation of massive troop requirements and casualties. Responding to junior army officers recommending increased attention to pacification, General Johnson (Army chief and pacification proponent) cautioned, "We are not going to be able to respond to the public outcry in the United States about [the]

101. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 4, Doc. 312.

102. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 5, Doc. 147.

103. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 5, Doc. 162.

104. Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 4, p. 508.

105. "Notes from Meeting of the President with Secretary McNamara to Review the Secretary's Findings during Vietnam Trip," July 12, 1967, Tom Johnson Papers, Box 1, LBJ Library.

casualties that might result.”¹⁰⁶ In a July 1965 memo to President Johnson, McNamara noted the differences in manpower requirements between main force and counterinsurgency operations: “The number of U.S. troops is too small to make a significant difference in the traditional 10-to-1 government-guerrilla formula.”¹⁰⁷ According to Katzenbach, “Pacification is not the ultimate answer—we have neither the time nor the manpower.”¹⁰⁸

CIVILIANS OVERRIDING MILITARY COIN RECOMMENDATIONS. The military myopia interpretation of Vietnam is based on the U.S. armed forces pushing a flawed strategy up the chain of command or the existence of an environment of neglect allowing the U.S. military to pursue its problematic aims. The record does not support this interpretation.

Not only did U.S. military leaders generally give in to Johnson’s demands, but they also calibrated their recommendations to make them as politically palatable as possible.¹⁰⁹ Asked if domestic opposition was a factor in JCS decisions, General Wheeler replied, “Not directly . . . [but] the Chiefs are well aware of the problems engendered for the President by the minority dissent to his course of action,” citing the need not to “put a club in the hands of dissenters.”¹¹⁰ When the JCS were deemed unlikely to support the president’s strategy, they were excluded from deliberations. Many of the most important military policies—the escalation decisions of June and July 1965, the establishment of the principal war aim of “killing more VC,” the emphasis on B-52 bombing of Vietcong sanctuaries—were made with little strategic input from the JCS, to the point of lying to Wheeler about the purposes of meetings to which he was not invited.¹¹¹ Only when McNamara and other civilian officials turned against the prevailing (and politically popular) airpower strategy did the Joint Chiefs find a more receptive presidential audience.

Indeed, General Westmoreland was one of the few in 1964 to recommend continuing the advisory effort—“Option A” of the famous three-option framework that led to the ROLLING THUNDER bombings.¹¹² In a January 6, 1965, cable to Johnson via Ambassador Taylor, Westmoreland asserted that “if [the U.S. advisory] effort has not succeeded there is less reason to think that

106. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, p. 172.

107. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 3, Doc. 67.

108. Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 4, p. 508.

109. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, especially chap. 15.

110. Graff, *The Tuesday Cabinet*, pp. 125–126.

111. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, p. 301.

112. For a description of this strategy’s development, see Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 3, pp. 205–251. On Westmoreland’s understanding of the importance and proper conduct of pacification, see Andrew J. Birtle, “PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal,” *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (October 2008), pp. 1213–1247.

U.S. combat forces would have the desired effect. . . . Intervention with ground combat forces would at best buy time and would lead to ever increasing commitments." Westmoreland argued that instances from 1963 to 1964 where U.S. ground forces would have been helpful were "few and far between. . . . In balance, they do not seem to justify the presence of U.S. units."¹¹³ In an eyes-only message to Wheeler, Westmoreland was even more emphatic, recommending the "present policy" until "some positive momentum in pacification" was made. "Expanded and concerted U.S. attacks" on North Vietnam were inadvisable until justified by "a firmer RVN base and prospects for victory." He continued that South Vietnam's government "may become unhealthily preoccupied with external operations to the detriment of pacification."¹¹⁴

In September 1965 National Security Adviser Bundy reported to Johnson that "Lodge and Westmoreland feel VC 'lie-low' tactics will become increasingly a police-social action problem" and summarized Westmoreland's strategy before recommending its rejection: "Destroy VC units where they can be found and pacify selected high priority areas, restore progressively the entire country to GVN control, support 'rural reconstruction' with comprehensive attention to the pacification process."¹¹⁵ Admiral Sharp, in an eyes-only message to Wheeler, complained that the Department of State "is somehow hopeful pacification may be achieved by the Vietnamese themselves while being aided by little if any U.S. participation." Sharp continued, "We will do far better in pacification if we too press forward setting the example in performance and results. . . . The GVN cannot do the pacification alone, this would prolong the struggle beyond foreseeable limits. If the Viet Cong go underground and revert to small-scale actions, we should employ U.S. forces in coordination with the ARVN and proceed with securing and pacifying areas as fast as we can."¹¹⁶

Contradicting both McNamara's recommendations and the claims of the military myopia argument, Westmoreland proposed a new concept of operations in August 1966 that devoted "a significant number of the U.S./Free World Maneuver Battalions" to pacification missions, which "encompass base security and at the same time support revolutionary development by spreading security radially from the bases to protect more of the population. Saturation patrolling, civic action, and close association with ARVN, regional and popular forces to bolster their combat effectiveness are among the tasks of the ground force elements." In an accompanying memo to President Johnson,

113. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 2, Doc. 13.

114. Westmoreland to Wheeler, "Future U.S. Actions in RVN," November 26, 1964, EOMF, Box 30.

115. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 3, Doc. 151.

116. Sharp to Wheeler, September 22, 1965, EOMF, Box 34.

endorsed by Rostow, Ambassador Taylor acknowledged that Westmoreland's strategy could result in "speeding up the termination of hostilities," but he cautioned that "there will be a cost to pay for this progress in a rise in the U.S. casualty rate." After noting the likely negative reaction domestically, he concluded that if pacification became the strategy, "General Westmoreland will be justified in asking for almost any figure in terms of future reinforcements." A handwritten note on a follow-up memo cites Johnson's instructions to "get something to Westy so that he will not assume that we have approved."¹¹⁷

Civilian objections to military recommendations continued into the next year. In a May 1967 memo arguing that "the 'philosophy' of the war should be fought out now," John McNaughton, assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs and an important adviser on U.S. strategy in Vietnam, counseled the rejection of Westmoreland's March 1967 request for 200,000 more soldiers, because Westmoreland intended to use the reinforcements "to relieve the Marines to work with ARVN on pacification" and for similar missions in the Mekong Delta and Quang Ngai Province. Referring to pacification as a "less essential mission," McNaughton suggested avoiding escalation by "making more efficient use of presently approved U.S. manpower (e.g., by removing them from the Delta, by stopping their being used for pacification work in I Corps, by transferring some combat and logistics jobs to Vietnamese or additional third-country personnel)."¹¹⁸ McNamara agreed with McNaughton's recommendation in a memo to Johnson that reveals the sensitivity to troop deployment and a continued main force focus: "We will soon have in Vietnam 200,000 more U.S. troops than there are in enemy main force units. We should therefore, without added deployments, be able to maintain the military initiative, especially if U.S. troops in less-essential missions (such as in the Delta and in pacification duty) are considered strategic reserves." McNamara justified the rejection in part by noting that Westmoreland intended to use the bulk of the first 100,000 troops for pacification.¹¹⁹ The focus on conventional combat was not limited to the Pentagon; Westmoreland complained to Wheeler and Sharp in August 1967 that "Secretary Rusk is thinking in terms of the more conventional type warfare where our forces could launch such an all-out offensive from a reasonably secure area of departure, leaving behind a pacified rear area, and against identified enemy formations disposed along a recognizable front. Such is not the case in SVN."¹²⁰

117. *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 4, Docs. 220-223. Taylor's analysis in document 221 explicitly describes and rejects every aspect of COIN recommended by Westmoreland.

118. *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 5, Doc. 161.

119. *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 5, Doc. 177.

120. Westmoreland to Wheeler and Sharp, August 26, 1967, EOMF, Box 37.

CIVILIAN REJECTION OF THE MARINES' COMBINED ACTION PROGRAM. Military myopia claims largely rest on the counterfactual that an extension of the Marines' innovative Combined Action Program (CAP), the conflict's best example of American COIN, could have employed the same number of soldiers stationed in Vietnam while minimizing casualties and enhancing population security.¹²¹ Obviously, this argument cannot be tested, but it is also irrelevant if civilian as well as military leaders did not hold this position at the time.¹²² Andrew Krepinevich's claim that a force of 167,000 U.S. soldiers was sufficient to blanket South Vietnam with CAP teams is based on the reports of the Pentagon's Systems Analysis Office (the "SEA reports").¹²³ These reports did lambaste the prevailing attrition strategy and acknowledged CAP's excellence, but they were also skeptical of CAP's wider viability.

According to the SEA reports, broadening CAP required 279,000 additional Popular Forces (PF) militia members, and thus "the reluctance of the [South Vietnam government] to assign PF personnel to CAPS is a serious problem in considering any expansion." Between July 1967 and November 1968, the PF-to-Marine ratio had declined from 1.7 to 1.4.¹²⁴ As of mid-1967, SEA assessed that a CAP Marine had a 75 to 80 percent chance of being wounded and a 16 to 18 percent chance of being killed.¹²⁵ Finally, a November 1968 SEA report observed, "In over three years of operations no evidence exists that U.S. Marines have been able to withdraw from a CAP solely because their Vietnamese counterparts were able to take over."¹²⁶

Although Krepinevich dismisses as "lip service" Westmoreland's objection to CAP—"I simply had not enough numbers to put a squad of Americans in every village and hamlet"—this assessment was shared by an administration determined to hold down deployments and casualties. Indeed, Ambassador Taylor found Westmoreland too receptive to "the 'oil spot' concept as the

121. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, p. 176; Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*; and Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam*, p. 198. A CAP team consisted of a thirteen-man Marine rifle squad assigned to a local thirty-five-man Vietnamese militia platoon living among the people to provide both security and civil assistance.

122. As I emphasize throughout this article, determining the circumstances under which a solid COIN approach results in fewer casualties remains an important policy question.

123. A more modest estimate in early 1969 suggested that given the number of troops deployed, the CAP concept could be extended to 2,500 (of 12,000) hamlets. Hugh Hanning, ed., *Lessons from the Vietnam War* (London: Royal United Service Institution, 1969), p. 18.

124. Thomas C. Thayer, ed., *Pacification and Civil Affairs: A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War, 1965-1972*, Vol. 10 (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Defense [Systems Analysis], 1975), pp. 26-27; and Jack Schulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: 1968, The Defining Year* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 1997), p. 628.

125. Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1989), pp. 87-88.

126. Thayer, *Pacification and Civil Affairs*, p. 13.

Marines have been doing in the I Corps area (and other U.S. forces elsewhere to a lesser degree).¹²⁷ Seeking ways to trim personnel in 1967, McNaughton noted, “Other ground-force requirements could be eliminated if the U.S. Marines ceased grass-roots pacification activities.”¹²⁸ Interviewed in 1976, Komer assessed that CAP demanded “an enormous requirement for American infantry which we did not have.”¹²⁹ Written in mid-to-late 1968, the *Pentagon Papers* acknowledges CAP’s unquestioned success relative to any other approach but warns that the Marine strategy “requires vast numbers of troops,” and should only be “undertaken with full awareness by the highest levels of the [U.S. government] of its potential costs in manpower and time.”¹³⁰ It is unrealistic to think that the Johnson administration would have supported such a program given the political limitations on personnel and casualties and the easy availability of matériel. A competent COIN strategy along the lines of CAP might have been more effective and reduced casualties, but the civilian leadership was unwilling to take that chance. William Bundy wrote to Katzenbach that pacification of the Mekong Delta region should be avoided, as “apart from the military merits, any force increase that reaches the ‘Plimsoll Line’—calling up the Reserves—. . . might also lead to pressures to go beyond what is wise in the North, specifically mining Haiphong.”¹³¹

DID NIXON AND ABRAMS FIGHT A BETTER WAR?

Some accounts claim that once Gen. Creighton Abrams replaced Westmoreland as MACV commander in mid-1968, the war began to be fought successfully.¹³² Yet any changes in tactics on the ground, such as Vietnamization, were driven by the decisions of Presidents Johnson and Nixon to freeze and then lower the level of U.S. troop deployments. Indeed, U.S. military doctrine remained consistent, and control of the military remained firmly in the hands of administration officials.

Although reductions in U.S. military personnel transferred much responsibility for the fighting to the Vietnamese, the U.S. contribution to counterinsurgency retained its firepower-intensive emphasis. Figure 8 shows that the gap between sorties and personnel reached its maximum in the first two years of Abrams’s command, after the U.S. “shift” to a pacification strategy. Consump-

127. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 4, Doc. 221.

128. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 5, Doc. 161.

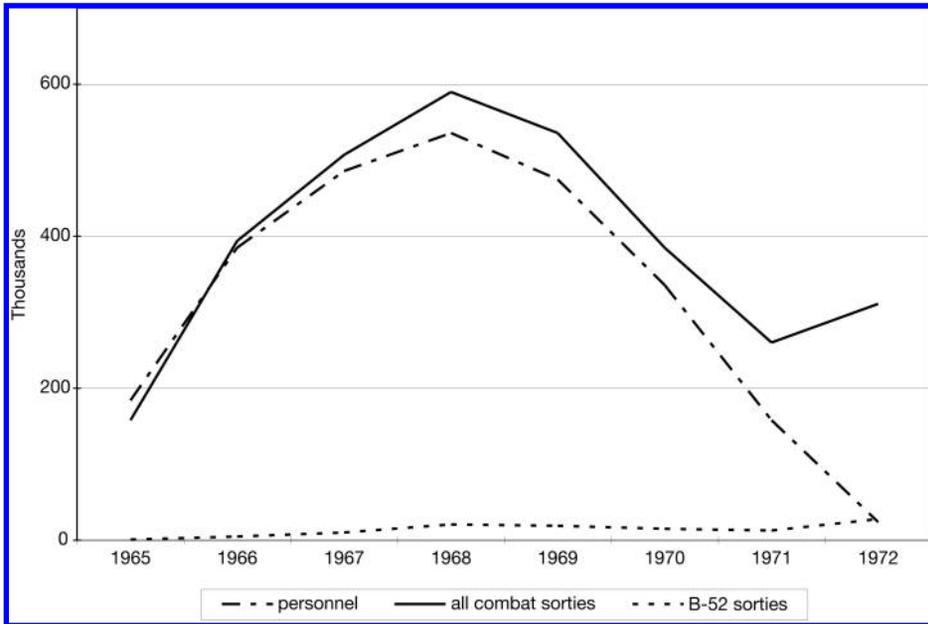
129. Quoted in Schulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 620.

130. Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, p. 535.

131. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 5, Doc. 154.

132. Sorley, *A Better War*. See also Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, pp. 168–174; and Gray, *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy*, pp. 17–18.

Figure 8. Numbers of U.S. Personnel/Aircraft Sorties in Vietnam/Southeast Asia, 1965–72



SOURCE: Thomas C. Thayer, *War without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1985), p. 32.

tion of artillery rounds remained constant from June 1967 to June 1970, even as 200,000 troops were drawn down.¹³³ General Abrams kept his air cavalry units in theater until 1972 to provide “a maximum of firepower and mobility with a minimum of U.S. troops.” By the end of 1971, armored units represented more than half of the U.S. maneuver battalions still in Vietnam.¹³⁴ Removing infantry first lowered casualty rates but at the cost of diminished COIN effectiveness.¹³⁵ Komer did not believe that the new commander altered Westmoreland’s strategy: “There was no change in strategy whatsoever. In fact [Abrams] said he didn’t intend to make any changes unless he saw that some were necessary.” Instead, the strategy “didn’t really change until we began withdrawing.”¹³⁶

133. Thayer, *War without Fronts*, p. 57.

134. Starry, *Armored Combat in Vietnam*, pp. 164–165.

135. Thayer, *War without Fronts*, p. 122.

136. W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, eds., *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1977), pp. 79–93. In this conference report, several veteran Vietnam counterinsurgency

This is not to blame Abrams; he had little control over numbers set by the president and Congress, whose priorities are clear from budget and deployment figures. Of the \$21.5 billion spent in fiscal year 1969, only 5 percent went toward pacification and civil operations; this ratio remained the same through 1971. Thomas Thayer, in charge of the SEA reports for this period, describes the U.S. war effort of 1969–71 as “first and foremost an air war although Vietnam was billed as a land war in Asia, and second, a ground attrition campaign against communist regular units. Pacification was a very poor third.”¹³⁷

Conclusion

This article shows that, contrary to the consensus regarding U.S. military intransigence in the face of unconventional warfare, civilian officials in Lyndon Johnson’s administration—and ultimately the American public—played an essential role in the selection of a capital-intensive strategy to fight insurgents in the Vietnam War. President Johnson was convinced that the American public would punish any administration that “lost” South Vietnam to communism, but he was equally certain that public preferences constrained the number of U.S. forces to be deployed and lives to be lost far more than the amount of money to be spent and ordnance to be consumed. In response, he and his subordinates instructed the military to fight what they themselves acknowledged to be an ineffective, capital- and firepower-intensive strategy. The article explains this seemingly nonstrategic behavior using a theory, generalizable beyond this specific case, of the distribution of the costs of war within the electorate.¹³⁸

Israel’s experience in its 2006 war against Hezbollah suggests that this phenomenon is not limited to the Vietnam War or to U.S. strategic culture.¹³⁹ Israel expended 170,000 artillery shells, twice the number fired in the conven-

proponents (including Komer, Robert Thompson, and Francis “Bing” West) criticized the strategy of attrition, but only one identified significant differences between the Westmoreland and Abrams approaches.

137. Thayer, *War without Fronts*, pp. 23–26.

138. This article focuses on democracies, but nondemocracies may also be subject to this pressure. According to the theory, a state in which the very wealthy controlled policy would pursue a labor-intensive doctrine. The more the government must take the average citizen’s preferences into account, the more it will conform to the theory’s predictions.

139. As another example suggesting that the theory is more widely applicable, consider the tremendous public attention paid to the 2007 “surge” of 30,000 U.S. military personnel in Iraq, representing a 20 percent increase in deployed personnel. Less attention has been given to the fivefold increase in coalition airstrikes in 2007 over 2006. Anthony H. Cordesman, “Air Combat Trends in the Afghan and Iraq Wars” (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008).

tional 1973 Arab-Israeli War, in a month.¹⁴⁰ The Israel Defense Force's (IDF's) initial campaign plan—a rapid air and small-unit ground assault that relied on firepower to control territory—was designed to minimize the number of ground forces and casualties. The Israeli cabinet rejected it; the transportation minister objected to “exposing 40,000 troops to the Lebanese reality.”¹⁴¹ Four days into the conflict, the IDF deputy chief of staff recommended stopping the campaign: “We have exhausted the [aerial] effort; we have reached the peak; from now on we can only descend.”¹⁴² Nonetheless, despite its intention to avoid a ground war, the Israeli government announced ambitious goals far beyond releasing hostages and deterring further rocket attacks.¹⁴³ A report written by a subsequent government commission describing the strategic conundrum evokes the constraints faced by Johnson in Vietnam: “Declared goals were too ambitious, and it was publicly stated that fighting will continue till they are achieved. But the authorized military operations did not enable their achievement.” The report acknowledges the government's bind: no “other effective military response to such missile attacks than an extensive and prolonged ground operation” existed, but this “would have a high ‘cost’ and did not enjoy broad support.”¹⁴⁴

Cost distribution theory makes such behavior explicable. From four major assumptions—security is a public good; voters weigh security benefits against taxes, conscription, and casualties; median wealth is less than mean wealth in every state; and the preferences of the median voter are heeded in a democracy—I derive a voter preference for a capitalized military. Like the democratic exceptionalist research program, this article finds evidence that the American public weighs the benefits of limited war against the costs. Although one recent study of American public opinion assigns expectations of success as the most important factor in the public's support for a conflict, it also points out that the public more generally carries out relatively competent cost-benefit analysis.¹⁴⁵ This article extends this logic by arguing that when the ability to substitute matériel for personnel is low, as it is against unconventional opponents, democracies may still prosecute wars using an ill-suited military doctrine (and thus a lower chance of success), because the costs remain modest for this pivotal voter.

Democratic exceptionalism's cost-internalization mechanism provides an

140. Kober, “The Israel Defense Forces in the Second Lebanon War,” p. 24.

141. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

142. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

143. Ehud Olmert, “Israel Will Not Be Held Hostage—Olmert's Address to the Knesset,” *Jerusalem Post*, July 18, 2006.

144. “The Winograd Report: The Main Findings of the Winograd Partial Report on the Second Lebanon War,” *Haaretz*, January 5, 2007, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/854051.html>.

145. Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War*, p. 20.

overly optimistic assessment of democracies' discretion in how and even when they fight small wars. Neither an apolitical public, nor a dysfunctional military culture, nor a military doctrine divorced from grand strategy causes a flawed warfighting strategy. Rather, it results from political leaders' assessment of the average voter's preferences. Although claiming that democracies substitute capital for labor to reduce the costs of war for voters is not news, tying the pursuit of such a strategy to a rational voter has two novel and important implications.

First, many observers argue that most wars of the twenty-first century will be hybrid conflicts involving unconventional opponents; finding the root cause of poor counterinsurgency is an essential task. This article argues that fixating on reforming the armed services (or even the civilian tools of foreign policy) in an effort to improve democratic performance in small wars is its own form of myopia. My theory gives reason to be skeptical of how much the U.S. military will be allowed to shift by future administrations and the public to which they are held accountable. Dysfunctional organizations can eventually learn and adapt. If the public suffers from foolish preconceptions, it may be dissuaded through public education and the marketplace of ideas. Even positing a powerful strategic culture underpinning U.S. doctrine suggests that "it is at least possible that by deconstructing the standard American 'way' . . . some pathways to improved performance may be identified."¹⁴⁶ But if a rational, fully informed electorate views such a military doctrine as its best option, the prospects for change are less clear.

Second, the distribution of costs and benefits affects not only how a state should fight a small war, but whether it enters such conflicts in the first place. Although this article has focused on one apparent element of nonstrategic behavior—poor counterinsurgency—linking doctrine to the voter's cost-benefit analysis holds potential for understanding why democracies select into these fights. The moral hazard resulting from turning war into an exercise in fiscal rather than social mobilization may encourage the average voter to support an aggressive grand strategy as well as a military doctrine that fights the resulting conflicts ineffectively. Because of the heavily capitalized nature of its armed forces, the United States is likely to fight small wars badly, but continue to fight them all the same. For a democracy's average voter, building a military to fight these wars of choice inefficiently but often is not a bug in the program but a feature.

146. Gray, *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy*, p. 30.

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