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H-Diplo/ISSF Editors: **James McAllister** and **Diane Labrosse**

H-Diplo/ISSF Web and Production Editor: **George Fujii**

Commissioned for H-Diplo/ISSF by **James McAllister**

Introduction by **James McAllister**

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Introduction by James McAllister, Williams College

H-Diplo/ISSF is honored to publish a very special forum on “Audience Costs and the Vietnam War.” The foundation for the forum is two original essays on the topic by Marc Trachtenberg and Bronwyn Lewis. Richard Betts, Robert Jervis, Fredrik Logevall, and John Mearsheimer then offer their own thoughts on both the theoretical and historical issues raised by the authors. We believe these essays, as well as the commentaries, will be of great interest to both political scientists and historians.

Most historians are probably unfamiliar with the concept of ‘audience costs’ despite its increasing importance to the field of international relations theory. Originally developed by James Fearon in a 1994 article in the *American Political Science Review*, and expanded upon by many other theorists over the last decades, audience costs became a central component in the political science literature on international crises and bargaining.¹ The basic insight of this literature is that democracies have a distinct advantage over autocracies in international crises because of the fact that democratic political leaders cannot avoid paying a serious domestic cost if they fail to back up their threats or commitments. Since democratic states must pay a serious cost with their own public for backing down in a crisis, their threats to stand firm, unlike those of autocratic regimes, are much more credible and send a more powerful signal to their adversaries.

Does the concept of audience costs help us account for the foreign-policy decisions of American policymakers at crucial moments in the Vietnam War? This forum builds on earlier work by Trachtenberg on the historical relevance of the concept.² His essay examines the historical debates and evidence surrounding President John F. Kennedy’s often debated intentions regarding deepening the American involvement in Vietnam. Many of these historical arguments, as Trachtenberg notes, are directly relevant to political science debates over the importance of audience costs. While it is by no means certain that Kennedy was intent on withdrawing from Vietnam after he would have been reelected in 1964, Trachtenberg argues that despite his strong public rhetoric, Kennedy was not and did not perceive himself to be locked into a policy of preventing the defeat of South Vietnam at any cost. Other officials might have been willing to ‘pay any price,’ but President Kennedy did not share this view.

¹ James Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (September 1994), 577-92. For a small sample of research drawing on the concept of audience costs, see Kenneth Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Matthew Baum, “Going Private: Public Opinion, Presidential Rhetoric, and the Domestic Politics of Audience Costs in U.S. Foreign Policy Crises,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 5 (October 2004), 603-631; and Alastair Smith, “International Crises and Domestic Politics,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 92, No. 3, 623-638.

² Marc Trachtenberg, “Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (January 2012), 3-42. The entire issue of the journal is devoted to commentaries on Trachtenberg’s article.

Bronwyn Lewis's essay examines the strategy of President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger for ending the Vietnam War. Like Kennedy before him, Nixon made frequent public pronouncements that suggested his willingness to do what was necessary to preserve the independence of South Vietnam. While some historians, most notably Larry Berman, believe that Nixon and Kissinger were sincere about using American military power to indefinitely preserve South Vietnam, many historians are more convinced that Nixon and Kissinger merely sought a 'decent interval' before the inevitable collapse of the Thieu regime.³ Lewis concludes that the preponderance of the evidence strongly supports the latter interpretation. In the end, both Lewis and Trachtenberg argue that both cases provide scant support for the explanatory power of audience costs.

All the commentators believe that Trachtenberg and Lewis have effectively made the case for skepticism about the relevance of audience costs to understanding the Vietnam policies of Kennedy and Nixon. John Mearsheimer argues that both essays further undermine the merits of the theoretical literature based on the importance of audience costs. Richard Betts believes that both authors have made effective arguments, but he is only "half convinced" that "Kennedy and Nixon were ready to accept defeat in Vietnam despite their staunch public rhetoric to the contrary." In his view, both essays tend to obscure what he believes is an important distinction between plans for a U.S. withdrawal without victory and plans to accept defeat in South Vietnam. While quite sympathetic to the idea that domestic political considerations were of central importance to Kennedy and other American policymakers, Fredrik Logevall agrees with the contention that the concept of audience costs can be overstated. Domestic concerns were certainly confining, according to Logevall, but he agrees with Trachtenberg that they were not akin to a "straitjacket" depriving Kennedy of all flexibility on Vietnam policy. Robert Jervis adopts a position quite similar to Logevall in his commentary. Domestic politics and public opinion were indeed important to both Kennedy and Nixon, but their concerns about both were far more complicated and broader in scope than is suggested by the concept of audience costs.

H-Diplo/ISSF thanks Marc Trachtenberg and Bronwyn Lewis for allowing us to publish their important essays on audience costs and the Vietnam War. We hope other scholars will follow their lead and consider publishing original research with H-Diplo/ISSF. We are also grateful to Richard Betts, Robert Jervis, Frederik Logevall, and John Mearsheimer for their incisive commentaries on both of the essays.

Participants:

Marc Trachtenberg, an historian by training, is now a professor of political science at UCLA. He is the author of a number of books and articles dealing mostly with twentieth century international politics. His book on historical method, *The Craft of International History*, was published in 2006. His most recent book—a collection of his articles called *The Cold War and After*—was also concerned in large part with issues of method. One of his

³ Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 2001).

main goals nowadays is to show political scientists how historical analysis can shed light on many of the issues that interest them; an article of his dealing with the audience costs theory was published in *Security Studies* in March 2012.

Bronwyn Lewis is a fourth-year Ph.D. student in political science and second-year M.S. student in statistics at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her research interests include diplomacy, conflict resolution, and international environmental politics, and her methodological interests range from in-depth archival work to cutting-edge statistical methods. She received her M.Sc. in comparative politics from The London School of Economics and Political Science in 2011 and her B.A. in political science from Duke University in 2008.

Richard K. Betts is the Arnold A. Saltzman Professor of War and Peace Studies in the political science department, Director of the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies, and Director of the International Security Policy program in the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University. His first book, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises* (Harvard University Press, 1977) was issued in a second edition by Columbia University Press in 1991. He is author of two other Columbia University Press books: *Enemies of Intelligence* (2007) and *American Force* (2012); three books published by the Brookings Institution: *Surprise Attack* (1982), *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (1987), and *Military Readiness* (1995); coauthor and editor of three other Brookings books: *The Irony of Vietnam* (1979), *Nonproliferation and U.S. Foreign Policy* (1980), and *Cruise Missiles* (1981); editor of *Conflict After the Cold War*, Fourth Edition (Pearson, 2013); and coeditor of *Paradoxes of Strategic Intelligence* (Cass, 2003).

Robert Jervis is the Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Politics and has been a member of the Columbia political science department since 1980. He has also held professorial appointments at the University of California at Los Angeles (1974-1980) and Harvard University (1968-1974). In 2000-2001, he served as President of the American Political Science Association. Professor Jervis is co-editor of the "Cornell Studies in Security Affairs," a series published by Cornell University Press, and a member of numerous editorial review boards for scholarly journals. His publications include *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life*, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era*, and *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Fall of the Shah and Iraqi WMD*, and several edited volumes and numerous articles in scholarly journals.

Fredrik Logevall joined the Department of History at Cornell University in 2004. He previously taught at UC Santa Barbara, where he co-founded the Center for Cold War Studies. A specialist on U.S. foreign relations, Logevall teaches a range of courses covering the history of U.S. diplomacy and foreign policy, as well as the international history of the Cold War and the Vietnam Wars. He currently serves as Vice Provost for International Affairs and as Director of the Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies. His most recent book, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (Random House, 2012), received the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for History and the 2013 Francis

Parkman Prize from the Society of American Historians, among other awards. He is president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations.

John J. Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science and the co-director of the Program on International Security Policy at the University of Chicago, where he has taught since 1982. Professor Mearsheimer has written extensively about security issues and international politics more generally. He has published five books: *Conventional Deterrence* (1983), which won the Edgar S. Furniss, Jr., Book Award; *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (1988); *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001), which won the Joseph Lepgold Book Prize and has been translated into eight different languages; *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (with Stephen M. Walt, 2007), which made the *New York Times* best seller list and has been translated into twenty-one different languages; and *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth about Lying in International Politics* (2011), which has been translated into ten different languages.

“Kennedy, Vietnam, and Audience Costs”

Essay by Marc Trachtenberg, Department of Political Science, University of California, Los Angeles

Why do countries go to war with each other? Why can't rival powers just work out an arrangement that would be better than an armed conflict for both of them? It is commonly assumed nowadays that if states were able to understand how far their adversaries were prepared to go to achieve their aims, bargains could be struck relatively easily and wars could be avoided. The problem, the argument runs, is that governments have “incentives to misrepresent” how tough they are in order to improve their bargaining positions, and for this reason even rational states can easily misjudge how strongly their rivals feel about a particular issue. Whether war can be avoided might therefore depend on how well states are able to deal with that problem—that is, on how well they are able to make their real preferences clear to their opponents.¹

And a number of theorists have emphasized one particular way this can be done. The ‘audience costs’ mechanism, they argue, allows states to make their real preferences known. If a government would pay a political price with its ‘audience’ at home if it backed down in a crisis, its rival would be more inclined to take what it says seriously than if it could bluff with impunity. By taking a tough line in public, the leadership would in effect be ‘tying its hands’: the prospect of having to pay a price at home would tend to keep it from backing down, and the adversary, knowing this, would see that tough public statements could not be dismissed as ‘cheap talk.’ It is often taken for granted, moreover, that this audience costs effect is stronger in democracies than in other kinds of regimes, and that this gives democratic states a real advantage in international bargaining.

The audience costs argument is of particular interest because the phenomenon it focuses on is something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, by enabling the adversary to see more clearly how far a state is willing to go—that is, by enabling it to distinguish between serious threats and empty posturing—the audience costs mechanism can play a real role in the process through which a bargain is reached and war is avoided. On the other hand, states might try to exploit the audience costs mechanism by making public threats and locking themselves into hard-line policies in the hope that this would lead their adversaries to back down; the upshot might be a war that would not have occurred if they had not used that tactic.² Thus the audience costs theory might help us understand why crises get resolved and wars are averted, but it also might help us see why crises escalate

¹ James Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (September 1995), 381, 391 ([link](#)). See also Kenneth Schultz, “Domestic Opposition and Signaling in International Crises,” *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 4 (December 1998), 829 ([link](#)), and Kenneth Schultz, “Do Democratic Institutions Constrain or Inform? Contrasting Two Institutional Perspectives on Democracy and War,” *International Organization* 53, no. 2 (Spring 1999), 236.

² See James Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (September 1994), 585 ([link](#)).

and wars break out. This, however, creates a certain problem of indeterminacy: the ability of the theory to generate unambiguous predictions is more limited than one might think. One could argue, for example, that democracies are better able than authoritarian regimes to avoid war because it is easier for them to make their threats credible. But one could also argue that they are more likely to go to war, because their ability to use the audience costs mechanism to gain a bargaining advantage gives them an incentive to dig in their heels, making it harder for them to make the concessions needed to settle a crisis.

How then should one go about seeing if there is any substance to the theory? A number of scholars have tried to get at the issue by using statistical methods, but since audience costs are not directly measurable, this has not been easy to do. (They, in fact, would not be observed at all if, as the theory suggests, a government's ability to tie its hands in this way would lead the adversary to back down.³) One therefore had to find something that could serve as a proxy, and the most common assumption here was that audience costs are a function of how democratic a state is.⁴ That assumption, however, is somewhat problematic and has by no means been universally accepted.⁵ But even if it were valid, a statistical analysis based on the assumption that a country's democracy score can serve as a proxy for audience costs might not tell us much about the issue scholars are really concerned with. Such an analysis might suggest that democratic political structures are important, but it cannot show they are important "because of their ability to generate domestic political audience costs," and not for some other reason.⁶

Given these problems, a number of scholars have concluded that there is really only one way to proceed: one has to study particular cases.⁷ But how exactly are those cases to be selected? They obviously cannot be chosen in a purely arbitrary or random way. There has to be a compelling reason for thinking a particular case will tell you something important

³ On this point, see especially Kenneth Schultz, "Looking for Audience Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 1 (February 2001), 33, 35 ([link](#)).

⁴ See, for example, Joe Eyerman and Robert Hart, "An Empirical Test of the Audience Cost Proposition: Democracy Speaks Louder than Words," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40, no. 4 (December 1996), 603 ([link](#)); Christopher Gelpi and Michael Griesdorf, "Winners or Losers? Democracies in International Crisis, 1918-94," *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 3 (September 2001), 638 ([link](#)); and Joe Clare, "Domestic Audiences and Strategic Interest," *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 3 (August 2007), 735 ([link](#)).

⁵ Note, for example, Jessica Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve," *International Organization* 62 (Winter 2008) ([link](#)).

⁶ The phrase quoted is from the abstract for Gelpi and Griesdorf, "Winners or Losers?" ([link](#)). Emphasis added.

⁷ See Jack Snyder and Erica Borghard, "The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound," *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 3 (August 2011) ([link](#)); Marc Trachtenberg, "Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis," *Security Studies* 21:1 (March 2012) ([link](#)); Marc Trachtenberg, "Audience Costs in 1954?" H-Diplo/ISSF, September 6, 2013 ([link](#)); and Bronwyn Lewis, "Nixon, Vietnam, and Audience Costs" (also appearing in this roundtable).

about the general issue. And for nearly forty years the standard assumption has been that two sorts of cases are of particular interest in this context: ‘easy’ or ‘most-likely’ cases, where one would expect the theory to apply if it had any validity to it at all, and ‘tough’ or ‘least-likely’ cases, where one would be surprised if the sort of thing the theory emphasized turned out to be important. If the theory is not supported even by the ‘easy cases,’ then you would have to wonder whether it really helps you understand anything; but if a theory passed a tough test, then that would be important evidence of its power.⁸ That kind of guidance, however, can only take you so far. It does not tell you much about how, in practice, you would go about selecting the particular cases to be studied.

There are a number of ways to do this, but in this article I want to talk about one that has not been widely used, but which can be quite effective in certain contexts. This particular method is based on work historians have already done. One can scour the historical literature and look for historical interpretations that have a certain resonance in terms of the theory one is interested in (and the audience costs theory is of course what we are interested in here). One can ask historians whether they can think of any examples of the sort of mechanism one has in mind; one can even post a query on one of their email discussion groups, H-Diplo for example. Political scientists may argue about theoretical issues among themselves, but historians, by and large, have no dog in those fights—as a rule they are scarcely aware of them—and it can generally be taken for granted that in developing their interpretations they have no interest in supporting any particular political science theory. So if, for example, they come up independently with arguments about specific historical cases that have a certain audience costs flavor, those cases should be of particular interest to people looking for some way to test the audience costs theory. If one is trying to see how much the mechanism emphasized by that theory actually counts for in the real world, these are cases one would especially want to examine.

So suppose you identify an interpretation of this sort. What do you do next? Your goal is to assess a particular historical claim, but doing that is not quite as easy as it might seem. Relatively narrow questions are generally bound up with much broader issues, so to assess a specific claim, you often need to go into those broader issues of historical interpretation in some depth. And to get to the bottom of those interpretive issues, you cannot simply rely on what particular historians say; the simple fact that historians often disagree among themselves on those issues means that no particular interpretation can be accepted on faith. But few political scientists have the time needed to go into the sources on their own and work out an interpretation that makes sense to them. In such circumstances, the best way to proceed is to analyze the historiographical debate on the issue—that is, to assess historical arguments in terms both of their internal logic and of the adequacy of the

⁸ See Harry Eckstein, “Case Study and Theory in Political Science,” in Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby, eds., *Strategies of Inquiry*, vol. 7 of the *Handbook of Political Science* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975), esp. 99, 118-20. See also Jack Levy, “Case Studies: Types, Designs, and Logics of Inference,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 25, no. 1 (2008) ([link](#)). “The inferential logic of least likely case design,” Levy writes, “is based on the ‘Sinatra inference’—if I can make it there I can make it anywhere. The logic of most likely case design is based on the inverse Sinatra inference—if I cannot make it there, I cannot make it anywhere” (12).

evidence put forth to support them. And in analyzing those historical debates, you can often reach some fairly solid conclusions not just about how the episodes in question are to be interpreted, but also about how specific claims linked to those basic interpretations—claims that have a particular importance in the context of some theory—are to be assessed.

All this is very general and my main goal here is to show how this method works in practice by looking at how it can be applied to the case of the audience costs theory. One key claim associated with that theory is the idea that political leaders are to some extent locked into a particular policy by the tough public statements they make. Can one think of any historical case where this was so—or, more precisely, can one think of any historical case where a scholar claimed this was so?

There are not many such cases one can point to, but there is one very important argument of this sort—an argument that supports a more general interpretation of U.S. policy on Vietnam during the early 1960s. A number of scholars have claimed that President John F. Kennedy was locked into a policy of doing whatever was necessary to prevent South Vietnam from falling to the Communists because of the tough public statements to that effect which he had made. If true, this would be strong evidence supporting one major part of the audience costs argument—or at least strong evidence showing that the sort of mechanism audience costs theorists have in mind can play an important role in the real world. Other scholars, however, have denied that one can infer from the fact that strong statements were made that Kennedy was determined to ‘pay any price’ to prevent the loss of South Vietnam. Some of them go so far as to argue that the President had actually decided to withdraw from Vietnam by 1965 even if that would result in a Communist takeover of that country. If true, that would mean that Kennedy did not believe that tough public statements limited his freedom of action to anything like the extent that the audience costs theory would lead you to think—and no one was in a better position to judge how much freedom of action he had than the President himself. That in turn would suggest that one key element in the audience costs theory—the idea that by issuing strong public statements, a political leader is burning his bridges—is weaker than many people believe.

What this means is that one can get at the issue not directly, by just looking at the historical evidence and treating historical works as repositories of facts, but rather indirectly, by analyzing historical debates. One can look at those historical arguments about Kennedy and Vietnam—arguments in which an audience costs-related claim often plays a key role—and try to see how well they stand up in the light of the evidence, and especially the evidence that the scholars who make those arguments put forward to support their claims. What does this analysis show, and what in particular does it tell us about the audience costs theory?

Locked into a Policy?

It used to be taken for granted that American policy during much of the Cold War period, and in particular U.S. policy on southeast Asia in the early 1960s, was to be understood in mainly ideological terms. The “containment of communism,” as two distinguished analysts

wrote in a well-known work on America's Vietnam policy, was the "core consensual goal of postwar foreign policy"; the key decision, from which all else essentially followed, was that South Vietnam could not be allowed to fall into Communist hands.⁹ And for years it was commonly argued that this basic point applied in particular to the Kennedy period (1961-63). Only after the war had turned sour in the late 1960s, the argument ran, were the basic assumptions underpinning America's postwar policy seriously challenged; in the early 1960s those assumptions were still strong enough to essentially determine policy.

In the last couple of decades, however, many historians have come to take a rather different view. Most scholars today no longer view Kennedy as a simple Cold Warrior. People used to quote the famous passage from Kennedy's inaugural address about how America would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty" as though this told us something fundamental about the sort of policy he was to pursue.¹⁰ But the prevailing view among historians nowadays is that this was not the real Kennedy at all—that the real Kennedy was much cooler, less ideological, and more power-politically oriented than that sort of rhetoric might suggest. Even Kennedy's Vietnam policy is often interpreted in those terms; one writer, John Newman, went so far as to argue twenty years ago that Kennedy was determined to withdraw from that country "come what may" after the 1964 election.¹¹

Newman's thesis received a good deal of attention when his book *JFK and Vietnam* came out in 1992, in large part because Oliver Stone used some of Newman's arguments at that time in his well-known film *JFK*; Newman had, in fact, worked with Stone on the movie.¹² Indeed, as Stone himself noted, the movie suggested "that it was Vietnam that led to the assassination of John Kennedy"—that people within the government conspired to murder him because he was determined to change the course of American policy and actually withdraw from that country.¹³ That theme struck a chord with certain sections of the left, but some prominent left-wing intellectuals strongly objected to the picture Stone had painted. Noam Chomsky in particular was so disturbed by the fact that so many people accepted the view of Kennedy as a "shining knight promising peace, foiled only by assassins

⁹ Leslie Gelb with Richard Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1979), 2; see also 25, 181, 240, and 353 ([link](#)).

¹⁰ John F. Kennedy, Inaugural address, January 20, 1961, *Public Papers of the Presidents: John F. Kennedy* [PPP], 1961, 1.

¹¹ John Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 322, 455-56.

¹² See Robert Anson, "The Shooting of JFK," *Esquire*, November 1991, and reprinted in Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar, *JFK: The Documented Screenplay* (New York: Applause Books, 1992), 208-229, esp. 224-26.

¹³ Oliver Stone, "Speech to the National Press Club," January 15, 1992, in Stone and Sklar, *JFK: The Documented Screenplay*, 406-407.

bent on stopping this lone hero who would have unilaterally withdrawn from Vietnam had he lived” that he wrote a book that sought to refute the idea that Kennedy wanted to withdraw from Vietnam unconditionally.¹⁴ In that book, *Rethinking Camelot*, Chomsky maintained that for Kennedy there could “be no withdrawal without victory.”¹⁵ The country could not be allowed to fall to the Communists; the war simply had to be won; America had to “stay the course.”¹⁶

And one of the key arguments Chomsky made to support that interpretation had a certain audience costs flavor. He quoted a number of the public statements Kennedy made, especially in 1963, insisting that America was not going to withdraw from South Vietnam and allow the country to be taken over by its enemies. “If the United States were to falter,” the President said at one point, “the whole world, in my opinion, would begin to move toward the Communist bloc.”¹⁷ This sort of “inflammatory rhetoric,” Chomsky writes, “could only serve to undermine withdrawal.” A President who really wanted to pull out would never have used that kind of language. The argument that some people make that Kennedy intended to withdraw after the 1964 elections—that it would be easier to deal with a right-wing backlash then, after he was reelected, than in his first term, when a withdrawal might compromise his ability to remain in office—was simply not credible. “Nothing would have been better calculated to fan right-wing hysteria,” he writes, “than inflammatory rhetoric about the cosmic issues at stake, public commitment to stay the course combined with withdrawal from that commitment as the client regime collapsed in 1964, election on the solemn promise to stand firm come what may, and then completion of the withdrawal and betrayal. That plan would have been sheer stupidity.”¹⁸

This book was taken quite seriously when it came out, even by writers who did not share Chomsky’s political views. Tom Wicker, who for many years had worked for the *New York Times*, first as a political reporter and then as a columnist, reviewed the book for *Diplomatic History*, the main journal published by the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR). So exhaustive was Chomsky’s study of the sources, Wicker wrote, “that his conclusion can hardly be disputed by a fair-minded reader: ‘President Kennedy was firmly committed to the policy of victory [in Vietnam] that he inherited and transmitted to his successor, and to the doctrinal framework that assigned enormous significance to that

¹⁴ Noam Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot: JFK, the Vietnam War, and U.S. Political Culture* (Boston: South End Press, 1993), back cover ([link to text](#)).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48 (for the quotation), 73, 103, 135.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 117, 123.

outcome; he had *no plan or intention to withdraw without victory.*”¹⁹ That conclusion was based in large part on a study of what Kennedy actually said: his public remarks, in particular, expressed “nothing but determination to win.” Wicker was clearly convinced by the inference Chomsky drew from his survey of what Kennedy was saying in public. It could be argued, Wicker wrote, that “these public statements were a smokescreen to conceal Kennedy’s real plans; but if so, Chomsky asks, why would such a ‘political animal’ as JFK make a sudden withdrawal more difficult for the public to accept by repeated claims for the importance of victory?”²⁰

The distinguished historian Robert Dallek also referred approvingly to the Chomsky book in his SHAFR presidential address in 1996, and he too emphasized what we would now call this point about audience costs. There was good reason to think, Dallek wrote, that had he lived, Kennedy would have escalated the war just as his successor Lyndon Johnson did. He thought that Chomsky’s book made a “convincing case” that Kennedy did not intend to withdraw from South Vietnam “without a greater test of the Communist drive for control.” And the use that book made of Kennedy’s public utterances was particularly worth noting. “Chomsky points out,” Dallek said, “that had Kennedy intended to withdraw, it is hard to understand why he so consistently spoke publicly about holding the line in Vietnam. JFK was too astute a politician to have created a public expectation that he intended to abandon after reelection in 1964.”²¹ And indeed many other scholars have made arguments of this sort over the years.²²

What then is to be made of the Chomsky argument? If there was a significant gap between Kennedy’s real policy and the sort of rhetoric he used—that is, if he was much less committed to avoiding the loss of Vietnam than his public statements might lead one to think—that would shed some light on the issue we are concerned with here. It would suggest that he was not as locked in by his public pronouncements as the audience costs theory might lead one to suppose. So how convincing is the Chomsky argument? Is it really impossible for a “fair-minded reader” to dispute his conclusions?

The answers turn, of course, on what the evidence shows. Chomsky thinks the sources are absolutely unambiguous. “There is no hint in the record,” he says, that Kennedy intended

¹⁹ Tom Wicker, “Committed to a Quagmire,” *Diplomatic History* 19, no. 1 (January 1995), 168 ([link](#)). Emphasis added by Wicker.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Robert Dallek, “Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam: The Making of a Tragedy,” *Diplomatic History* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1996), 148 ([link](#)).

²² Note, most recently, a comment made in this connection by John Prados in his book *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009): “Apart from anything else, for President Kennedy to convey these messages and then change course and approve withdrawal would have meant significantly increasing his political costs,” 80.

to withdraw without victory.²³ The President, one official wrote, was determined to win the war, and there was “not a phrase in the internal record to suggest that this judgment” by one of Kennedy’s closest advisers “should be qualified in any way.”²⁴ Arguments to the contrary, in Chomsky’s view, are to be understood essentially as exercises in myth-making. After the Tet offensive in January 1968 many people turned against the war, and since Kennedy was the great hero of the liberal intellectuals, he now had to be portrayed as a kind of secret dove.²⁵ But that interpretation, as he sees it, was baseless. Arguments to that effect, as laid out in the Newman book and in Arthur Schlesinger’s 1978 biography of Robert Kennedy—were “concocted without a shred of evidence.”²⁶

So Chomsky certainly gives the impression that there is not much to back up the idea that Kennedy’s support for the policy of keeping South Vietnam out of Communist hands was anything less than whole-hearted. To be sure, he was aware of the fact that a few stories suggested that Kennedy, in the final analysis, would have accepted the ‘loss’ of Vietnam. In a 1972 memoir, Kennedy’s aide Kenneth O’Donnell said the President had told Senator Mike Mansfield that he agreed with him on the need for a withdrawal, but for domestic political reasons could not pursue that policy until after the 1964 elections.²⁷ O’Donnell also claimed that after Mansfield had left, the President said that after he was reelected, he intended to bite the bullet and withdraw from Vietnam, no matter how much of a right-wing backlash there was at home. But O’Donnell’s testimony, Chomsky feels—and most historians agree with him on this point—should not carry much weight.²⁸ It is not just that the accounts published by Kennedy’s acolytes after people had soured on the war are inherently suspect, or that Mansfield’s accounts of his meeting with Kennedy varied.²⁹ Even if the story about Mansfield were essentially correct, it would not tell us much about

²³ Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot*, 97; see also 85.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 110-27, esp. 114-15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 127. The Schlesinger book in question is: Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).

²⁷ Kenneth O’Donnell and David Powers, *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), 16.

²⁸ Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot*, 115-18. Note also the analysis in Edwin Moïse, “JFK and the Myth of Withdrawal,” in Marilyn Young and Robert Buzzanco, eds., *A Companion to the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 167-69.

²⁹ See Don Oberdorfer, *Senator Mansfield: The Extraordinary Life of a Great American Statesman and Diplomat* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 195-96. In one letter, Mansfield specifically denied that in his conversation with Kennedy the 1964 election was “even mentioned or thought of.”

what Kennedy really felt. As Chomsky points out, the President might simply have been telling Mansfield what he thought the Senator wanted to hear.³⁰

The problem is that whereas Chomsky leads the reader to think that the idea that Kennedy was not fully committed to winning the war in Vietnam is supported only by very questionable ‘post-Tet reconstructions’ of this sort, the evidence is much more abundant than he suggests.³¹ To be sure, some of it can be dismissed with the same sort of argument Chomsky uses to dismiss the Mansfield story. Senator Wayne Morse, for example, from the start a leading dove on Vietnam, later said that Kennedy told him shortly before he was assassinated that he fully agreed with Morse’s criticism of the administration’s Vietnam policy.³² But this can certainly be written off with the argument that Kennedy was just telling Morse what he wanted to hear. And a number of accounts that took the line that the President intended to withdraw without victory could easily be written off as post-Tet myth-making, if they were all we had. The accounts by Robert McNamara, Kennedy’s Secretary of Defense, by Theodore Sorensen, one of Kennedy’s closest advisers, and by the historian Arthur Schlesinger, who worked in the White House during that period, can certainly be put in that category.³³ But to dismiss similar stories told by a whole series of other former officials would be more of a stretch. The later accounts given by McNamara’s deputy Roswell Gilpatric, by Roger Hilsman, a State Department official who played a key role in making policy in this area at the time, and by Michael Forrestal, who had been responsible for Vietnam policy at the Kennedy White House, fall into this category.³⁴ Hilsman’s claim, in particular, was quite categorical: “What Kennedy told Hilsman in private was that he did not expect victory, and that he intended to withdraw anyway.”³⁵ As

³⁰ Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot*, 116.

³¹ For Chomsky’s claim that Newman relied “in the end, almost exclusively” on O’Donnell’s account and “Mansfield’s later comments,” see *ibid.*, 131-32; see also 127.

³² See David Nyhan, “We’ve Been a Police State a Long Time,” *Boston Globe*, June 24, 1973, quoted in Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, 423-24.

³³ On McNamara, see Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston: Little Brown, 1993), 262-63. On Sorensen and Schlesinger, see their op-ed piece, “What Would J.F.K. Have Done?” *New York Times*, December 4, 2005 ([link](#)).

³⁴ On Gilpatric, see Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth, McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy, Brothers in Arms: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 259 and 442 n.6. On Hilsman, see Moïse, “JFK and the Myth of Withdrawal,” 69-71; see also the sources cited in Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 330 n.107, and in Gordon Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 2008), 283 n.37 and n.38.

³⁵ Moïse, “JFK and the Myth of Withdrawal,” 170. Moïse’s account was based on his personal communications with Hilsman. Hilsman took this line in many other places. Moïse’s summary of what Hilsman told him is particularly striking. “Hilsman states very firmly,” Moïse writes, “that if faced with the choice Lyndon Johnson faced in 1965—withdraw and let the Communists take Vietnam, or else make

for Forrestal, he told an interviewer in 1971 about a meeting he had with the President the day before he was shot. The two men should meet again, Kennedy said, when Forrestal got back from a trip to Indochina he was about to make:

because we have to start to plan for what we are going to do now in South Vietnam. He said, "I want to start a complete and very profound review of how we got into this country, what we thought we were doing and what we now think we can do." He said, "I even want to think about whether or not we should be there." He said, because this was of course in the context of an election campaign, that he didn't think we could consider drastic changes of policy quickly. But that what he wanted to consider when I returned and when people were ready to think about this more clearly was how could some kind of a gradual shift in our presence in South Vietnam occur."³⁶

Robert Kennedy's account is also worth noting in this context. In October 1967, Daniel Ellsberg was working on the Defense Department history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam—the study which, after Ellsberg leaked it a few years later, would become known as the Pentagon Papers—and he asked Robert Kennedy about his brother's Vietnam policy. The President, Robert said, "had been absolutely determined not to send combat troops to Vietnam." Ellsberg pressed him on this point. Did that mean he was "prepared to see the country go Communist rather than send combat troops?" In domestic political terms, could he have actually done that? If the situation deteriorated to the point where he had to decide whether to send troops or allow the Communists to take over, what did he plan to do? President Kennedy, his brother thought, would in such a case have arranged "some form of coalition government with people who would ask us to leave—which would hold together for some period of time and sort of paper over our withdrawal."³⁷

Ellsberg also recalled that his boss at the Pentagon, John McNaughton, told him in 1964 that "McNamara had told him of an understanding with President Kennedy that they would close out Vietnam by '65, no matter what happened, whether it was in good shape or bad."³⁸ This, of course, is third-hand information, but it is still of some interest, especially considering the source. And a whole series of other accounts point in the same direction: a

Vietnam an American war . . . Kennedy certainly would have chosen to withdraw, because he did not believe the use of direct American force would be capable of winning the war there" (171).

³⁶ *NBC News White Paper: Vietnam Hindsight, Part II: The Death of Diem*, broadcast December 22, 1971 (script), Act XI, 20-21, quoted, in part, in Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 722, and more extensively in Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, 427. Note also Forrestal's recollections about Kennedy's pessimism about the war in his oral history at the Johnson Library, 5-7 ([link](#)); see also Henry Brandon, *Anatomy of Error: The Inside Story of the Asian War on the Potomac, 1954-1969* (Boston: Gambit, 1969), 30, which is another source Schlesinger had cited in his biography of Robert Kennedy (722).

³⁷ Jann Wenner, "Dan Ellsberg: The Rolling Stone Interview," Part II, *Rolling Stone*, December 6, 1973, 42 ([link](#)). See also Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: Viking, 2002), 194-96.

³⁸ Wenner, "Dan Ellsberg: The Rolling Stone Interview," 42 ([link](#)).

1968 account by former Army general James Gavin, who had served as Kennedy's Ambassador to France; an assessment given in 1988 by John McCone, the CIA director in the early 1960s (and no great admirer of Kennedy's); a number of accounts by journalists (Jack Anderson and Arthur Krock, both very prominent columnists, as well as Kennedy's friend Charles Bartlett); and some comments made in 1964 by Kennedy's national security advisor McGeorge Bundy.³⁹

Most but not all of those accounts were available at the time Chomsky wrote his book; indeed Newman and Schlesinger had cited many of them. But for our purposes here, the Krock and Bundy accounts are of particular interest. The actual record Krock made at the time of his October 11, 1961, meeting with the President is available in the Krock Papers at Princeton. Kennedy, according to those notes, told Krock that he "still believes" what he had "told the Senate several years ago," namely that U.S. troops "should not be involved on the Asian mainland," especially in countries inhabited by people who did not care about east-west issues. The United States, he added, could not "interfere in civil disturbances created by guerrillas, and it was hard to prove that this wasn't largely the situation in Vietnam."⁴⁰ Kennedy in fact had told the Senate during the 1954 Indochina crisis that it would be "dangerously futile and self-destructive" to "pour money, materiel, and men into the jungles of Indochina without at least a remote prospect of victory"; he clearly thought at that time that a guerrilla war of the sort the country was being asked to help fight would be very hard to win. "I am frankly of the belief," he said in that 1954 speech, "that no amount of American military assistance in Indochina can conquer an enemy which is everywhere and at the same time nowhere, 'an enemy of the people' which has the sympathy and covert support of the people." The line he took with Krock was thus not new. As the President himself noted, he had been thinking along those lines for years.⁴¹

³⁹ James M. Gavin, "We Can Get Out of Vietnam," *Saturday Evening Post*, Feb. 24, 1968, cited in Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 722-23. On McCone, see Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy 1917-1963* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2003), 801. On Bartlett, see Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 38-39; Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 237; and Seymour Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1997), 417-18. Jack Anderson, "The Roots of Our Vietnam Involvement," *Washington Post*, May 4, 1975, 39 ([link](#)) (based on notes of Anderson's meetings with Kennedy which he had taken at the time; Anderson's notes of such meetings are in the Anderson Papers at the Gelman Library at George Washington University, but are in a version of Gregg shorthand and, in the words of the guide to this source, are "not legible to the untrained reader"). Arthur Krock, *Memoirs: Sixty Years on the Firing Line* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968), 332-33, quoted in Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 235-36, and also Krock's original notes of that meeting as cited in the next footnote. Schlesinger had also quoted from the Krock memoir in his biography of Robert Kennedy (704).

⁴⁰ Krock interview with Kennedy, October 11, 1963, Krock Papers, box 1, vol. 3, item 343, Mudd Library, Princeton ([link](#)).

⁴¹ John F. Kennedy, "The War in Indochina," *Congressional Record* 100, pt. 4, April 6, 1954, 4672-74 ([link](#)). In that speech, Kennedy also quoted himself making a similar argument about the hopelessness of existing policy in Indochina upon his return from the Far East in November 1951 (4673). The 1954 speech is also of interest for another reason: it showed that Kennedy already understood that the assurances top

As for Bundy, his comments were made in two oral history interviews conducted in the spring of 1964 and only recently made available. According to Bundy, Kennedy was not sure in the months before his death what he wanted to do in Vietnam, but his commitment to victory was far from absolute. He thought that “if you had poked President Kennedy very hard,” he would have said America was doing what it was “because it’s the best we can do and because it’s certainly essential to have made a determined effort and because we mustn’t be the ones who lost this war, someone else has to lose this war. But I don’t think he would have said to you that *he* saw any persuasive reason to believe that this was certainly going to succeed.” The implication was that he had by no means decided to stay the course no matter what, in large part because “he was deeply aware of the fact that this place was in fact X thousand miles away in terms both of American interest and American politics.”⁴²

It is thus impossible to dismiss all these accounts as ‘post-Tet reconstructions,’ since some of the key records were created well before 1968. Given how many people with different perspectives and different interests remembered Kennedy expressing views of this sort, it is very hard not to think that Kennedy was not nearly as committed to winning in Vietnam as Chomsky claimed.

But this is not the only kind of evidence that should be considered. Chomsky himself notes the importance of the “internal record”—notes of meetings, planning documents, correspondence with U.S. officials in the field, and so on—but thought it unambiguously supported his interpretation of the Kennedy policy.⁴³ It turns out, however, that a good portion of the declassified material points strongly in the opposite direction—that is, to the conclusion that although Kennedy certainly did not want to lose in Vietnam, the U.S. commitment there was far from absolute. Yes, the American government could send military personnel to South Vietnam to help the South Vietnamese learn how to defend themselves—and indeed the U.S. military presence there increased dramatically during the Kennedy period—but the President seemed to draw the line at the introduction of combat troops (“in the generally understood sense” of that term, as he was careful to point out).⁴⁴

military and political figures had been giving about how well the war was going could not be taken at face value; a good part of the speech was devoted to this point.

⁴² McGeorge Bundy, interview conducted by Richard Neustadt, March and May 1964, 139, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program ([link](#)). According to the archivists at the Kennedy Library, the March 1964 interview was opened in 2009 and the May 1964 section was released in early 2012, but the key material from the May section was quoted from in Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 230. For Bundy’s later views on these issues, see *ibid.*, 30-31, 67-68, 231-33, and 248.

⁴³ Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot*, 48-49, 75-76, 103, 127, 135.

⁴⁴ The number of American officers and enlisted men in South Vietnam increased from less than 700 to about 16,000 at the end of the Kennedy period. For the qualifying phrase, see Kennedy press conference, February 14, 1962, *PPP* 1962, 137 ([link](#)). The phrase was used because U.S. servicemen were in fact engaged in combat on a limited scale.

In late 1961, for example, as many scholars point out, key U.S. officials tried to get Kennedy to agree to sending an American combat force into that country, but he refused to go along with what his subordinates wanted. The documents relating to this issue are quite revealing. General Maxwell Taylor, Kennedy's most important military advisor, noted, for example, that the President was "instinctively against introduction of US forces."⁴⁵ General Lyman Lemnitzer, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recorded Kennedy taking that same position in another meeting a few days later.⁴⁶ There is other documentary material supporting this general view, but the key piece of evidence is the record of a National Security Council meeting held on November 15, 1961.⁴⁷ At that meeting, the President argued against going too far in Vietnam. He noted that whereas Korea in 1950 was a case of clear aggression, the situation in Vietnam, where the government was dealing with guerrilla forces, was "more obscure and less flagrant." He said he could "even make a rather strong case against intervening in an area 10,000 miles away against 16,000 guerrillas with a native army of 200,000, where millions have been spent for years with no success."⁴⁸ All of this came as quite a surprise to the first people who tried to make sense of the Kennedy policy on the basis of the documents—people who perhaps had originally taken the soaring rhetoric about how America would "bear any burden" a bit too seriously.⁴⁹

So the bulk of the evidence suggests that Kennedy was *not* determined to do whatever he had to to win the war—that for him withdrawal without victory was *not* simply out of the question.

A Decision to Withdraw?

⁴⁵ Taylor notes of meeting on Vietnam, November 6, 1961, United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS]*, 1961-63 series, 1:532 ([link](#)).

⁴⁶ Lemnitzer notes of meeting at the White House, November 11, 1961, *FRUS* 1961-63, 1:577 ([link](#)).

⁴⁷ Additional evidence relating to this episode is presented in Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, chaps. 3-7; Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 53-68; and David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), chap. 4. It is important to note, moreover, that the November 1961 NSC meeting was not the last time Kennedy expressed views of this sort. At a meeting with the JCS held at the start of 1962, for example, "the President reemphasized the importance of the U.S. not becoming further involved militarily in [South Vietnam]. The President also emphasized the importance of playing down the number of U.S. military personnel involved in Vietnam and that the U.S. military role there was for advice, training and support of the Vietnamese Armed Forces and not combat." Gilpatric notes, January 3, 1962, *FRUS* 1961-63, 2:4 ([link](#)).

⁴⁸ Notes of NSC meeting, November 15, 1961, *FRUS* 1961-63, 1:607-608 ([link](#)).

⁴⁹ See especially Dan Ellsberg's reference to the "very surprising discovery" he made about Kennedy when working on the Pentagon Papers project in 1967, in the "Rolling Stone Interview," 42; see also Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 188-96.

It thus seems quite clear that there was a huge gap between what Kennedy was saying in public and what his real thinking was. But how is that gap to be explained? According to John Newman, Kennedy had come to realize by early 1963 that the war was being lost—that the “success story” the military had been pushing “was a deception”—and had apparently decided at that time “to get out of Vietnam even if it meant the war would be lost.” But he could not reveal his true intentions. He could not risk triggering a right-wing backlash before he had won re-election. He therefore had to engage in a counter-deception of his own. He needed to keep “his opponents off guard by talking only of withdrawal in the context of victory.” He sought to use their optimistic accounts of how the war was going, which he knew were baseless, to justify the withdrawal policy. He had to pretend that he believed those accounts, for “otherwise his willingness to withdraw while losing would become obvious.” He had to make it seem, even in internal discussions, that his withdrawal plans were premised on the assumption that the war was going well, and this applied in particular to the October 2, 1963, White House statement which endorsed the McNamara-Taylor view that the task could by and large be completed by the end of 1965, and that 1,000 U.S. servicemen could be withdrawn from Vietnam within the next three months. This tactic would allow him to shift responsibility for whatever happened to those who had provided him with those rosy assessments. “If and when the battlefield deterioration could no longer be hidden,” Newman writes, Kennedy “could claim he had been misled by incorrect reports on the war.”⁵⁰

The idea that Kennedy, despite his strong public statements, had decided to withdraw from Vietnam regardless of consequence was adopted to one degree or another by a number of other writers. Robert Dallek, for example, after going into the issue in some depth, had by 2003 reached the conclusion that Kennedy had “made up his mind” by November 1963: Dallek thinks he would not, in a second term, have escalated the war the way Johnson did and would probably have found some way to manage a withdrawal. The optimistic line Kennedy took in public, he now felt, would not have prevented Kennedy from pursuing that policy. That line instead served a “useful political purpose: If he was going to get out of Vietnam, it was essential to encourage the idea that there was progress in the war and that the United States could soon reduce its role in the fighting.”⁵¹ This sort of interpretation was very different from the one that Dallek had laid out in his SHAFR presidential address a decade earlier—and indeed is of particular interest for that very reason.

Two other works that came out that same year took the argument a bit further. One was an article written by the economist James K. Galbraith: “Exit Strategy: In 1963, JFK Ordered a

⁵⁰ Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, 319-325, 360, 410, 455-56; 320, 321, 325, 360 for the quotations. On the 1000-man withdrawal: 359-66, 402-411. The October 2 statement was published in *PPP* 1963, 759-60 ([link](#)).

⁵¹ Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 666 (for the second quotation), 672, 684 (for the first quotation), 709-710, and Robert Dallek, “JFK’s Second Term,” *The Atlantic* 291, no. 5 (June 2003), 58-66 ([link](#)).

Complete Withdrawal from Vietnam.”⁵² The second and far more important work was the historian Howard Jones’s book *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War*, which one reviewer called “by far the finest book to date on the Kennedy administration’s policies in Vietnam.”⁵³ Galbraith’s thesis is clear enough from the subtitle of the article. As for Jones, he too took the view that the withdrawal plan was not “contingent on military victory; it was unconditional.”⁵⁴ And those two contributions were followed a couple of years later by the publication of Gareth Porter’s *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam*—according to Andrew Bacevich, “the most important contribution to the history of US national security policy to appear in the past decade.”⁵⁵ Porter also took the view that Kennedy was behind a withdrawal plan that “would apply whether the war went well or not.”⁵⁶ Kennedy’s public statements, Porter acknowledges, gave a very different impression, but one really cannot, in his opinion, infer very much from the fact that the rhetoric was so tough. “Read in light of everything we know now about the broader pattern of Kennedy’s Vietnam policy,” Porter argues, those statements “simply show that he was conveying to the public a different course of policy from the one he was pursuing behind the scenes.”⁵⁷

If valid, this general interpretation would have a major bearing on the audience costs theory. If Kennedy had decided to withdraw come what may, while at the same time telling the public that his government would not allow the Communists to come to power in South Vietnam, then that could only mean that he did not think those official statements had tied his hands in any major way. And given that he was in a good position to assess the political situation he had to work within, given also that he had a very strong incentive to assess that situation accurately, and given the fact that he owed his political success in large measure to the fact that he was quite talented in this area, this would suggest that the audience costs his statements generated were not nearly as high as one might have thought. But does the interpretation one finds in these recent works really stand up in the light of the evidence, and especially the evidence presented in those works?

The evidence supporting this kind of argument is in fact quite weak. Some of these authors write as though the mere fact that the military authorities were asked to work out a plan

⁵² James K. Galbraith, “Exit Strategy: In 1963, JFK Ordered a Complete Withdrawal from Vietnam,” *Boston Review*, October-November 2003 ([link](#)).

⁵³ Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). The quotation is from Ralph Levering’s review of the book in the *International History Review* 27, no. 4 (December 2005), 902 ([link](#)).

⁵⁴ Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 383.

⁵⁵ Porter, *Perils of Dominance*; Andrew Bacevich, “Tug of War,” *The Nation*, June 16, 2005 ([link](#)).

⁵⁶ Porter, *Perils of Dominance*, 175.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

that would permit the bulk of American forces to leave Vietnam by the end of 1965 proves that Kennedy had decided to withdraw by that point, regardless of consequence. The President's "decision to withdraw was unconditional," Jones writes, "for he approved a calendar of events that did not necessitate a victory."⁵⁸ And for James Galbraith, the fact that the military authorities were instructed that "all planning" was to be directed toward the objective of preparing the South Vietnamese government forces to take over the burden of dealing with the insurgency so as to enable the Americans to pull out by the end of 1965 proves that "the withdrawal decided on was unconditional, and did not depend on military progress or lack of it."⁵⁹ But it was one thing to tell the military authorities what the goal was and to instruct them to do their planning on that basis, and quite another to assume that once worked out, a plan would lock the U.S. government into a particular timetable for withdrawal, even if it were to become clear that the South Vietnamese could not deal with the insurgency on their own—and Kennedy, one should note, said at one point that if the job could not be finished by late 1965, "we'll get a new date."⁶⁰ It is also important to bear in mind that a plan of this sort, even if it were not taken seriously as a blueprint for action, could serve certain important political objectives, both at home and abroad, as key U.S. officials in fact recognized at the time.⁶¹

Or consider Dallek's comment that the plan approved in October 1963 to withdraw a thousand advisors by the end of the year "fit perfectly with Kennedy's apparent eagerness either to seize upon battlefield gains to announce reduced U.S. commitments or to declare an American withdrawal in response to Saigon's political instability and failure to fight effectively."⁶² There is no doubt that the President would have been happy to reduce the American presence if he had thought the South Vietnamese government was winning the war. But Dallek never shows Kennedy "eagerly" pointing to bad news about South Vietnam to justify a withdrawal. And in fact it is hard to find any evidence in the relevant documents or in the tapes of the meetings at which these issues were discussed that supports that interpretation. Quite the contrary: one comes away from that material with the distinct impression that the withdrawal plan was predicated on the assumption that the South Vietnamese army would eventually be able essentially to stand on its own. The President, in particular, seemed to think that a deteriorating military situation would make

⁵⁸ Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 377.

⁵⁹ Galbraith, "Exit Strategy" ([link](#)).

⁶⁰ From the tape of a meeting held on October 2, 1963, quoted in Marc Selverstone, "It's a Date: Kennedy and the Timetable for a Vietnam Troop Withdrawal," *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 3 (June 2010), 486 ([link](#)). All the Kennedy tapes are now available online. For information on the tapes and related sources, see my *Guide to the Kennedy Tapes and Other Source Material Available Online Relating to U.S. policy on Vietnam, 1961-63* ([link](#)).

⁶¹ See the extract from the tape of a May 1963 meeting between Kennedy and McNamara quoted in Selverstone, "It's a Date," 493 ([link](#)).

⁶² Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 672.

even the plan for a 1000-man withdrawal look foolish.⁶³ As John Prados notes, referring to the tape of one of the key meetings at which the plan was discussed, “JFK’s tone and inflection clearly show that he was doubtful and questioning, not affirmatively approving.”⁶⁴

But people like Newman and Porter did not feel that evidence of this sort undermined their basic thesis. The key point for them was that Kennedy was engaged in a deception not just of the public but even of his own government. The Kennedy tapes might well have shown the President frequently taking his distance from the withdrawal plan and wondering whether, given the military realities in Vietnam, it would actually be possible to carry it out. But for Porter, whose account is of particular interest because it was written after many of the tapes were released, none of this was to be taken at face value. Kennedy, he writes, “concealed his real policy not only from the public but from most of his own national security bureaucracy.” His “apparent skepticism about the withdrawal,” he writes, “was political theater,” designed to make it seem that he was going along reluctantly with an initiative proposed by his chief subordinates.⁶⁵

The problem, however, was that according to Porter, Secretary of Defense McNamara was privy to what the President was trying to do, and, as Marc Selverstone has pointed out, that means that we should not expect to see Kennedy engaging in this kind of “political theater” when he was meeting one-on-one with McNamara. We should expect to see him favoring the withdrawal unconditionally—that is, even if it were to lead to a Communist take-over in Saigon. But, as Selverstone notes, when McNamara and Kennedy met with no one else present earlier in the year (but well after the plan to withdraw unconditionally had supposedly been decided on), the President clearly assumed that the plan could only be put into effect if the South Vietnamese government could essentially deal with the insurgency on its own. This, Selverstone points out, is something of a “smoking gun”: “it suggests that Kennedy’s reluctance to cut troop levels in the face of a worsening military situation was a position he held sincerely, not a piece of ‘political theater’ he would later conjure up for the benefit of more hawkish administration officials.”⁶⁶

And as though this were not enough, the argument that Kennedy had decided to withdraw regardless of the consequences, as a number of scholars have argued, is simply not plausible. Why, for example, was the President so irritated with certain elements in the

⁶³ The key meetings were held October 2 and 5, 1963. Clips (with synchronized transcripts) are on the Miller Center Presidential Recordings Project [MCPRP] website ([link](#)); the full tapes of those meetings can also be downloaded from the MCPRP website ([link](#)).

⁶⁴ Prados, *Vietnam*, 79.

⁶⁵ Porter, *Perils of Dominance*, 143, 166, 176.

⁶⁶ Selverstone, “It’s a Date,” 494 ([link](#)).

press for raising questions about the war?⁶⁷ Wouldn't it have been to his interest, if he wanted to withdraw, to make sure that people did not take too optimistic a view of what was going on in South Vietnam? There were some indications that the South Vietnamese government might ask the Americans to leave the country, perhaps as part of a deal with North Vietnam, but why didn't Kennedy try to take advantage of that situation?⁶⁸ The Kennedy administration viewed this possibility as a danger to be avoided, but if the President had really wanted to withdraw, wouldn't he have viewed it as a possible way out and framed his policy accordingly?⁶⁹ And why would he have allowed America to get so involved in South Vietnamese politics if he had really wanted America to be able to pull out in the near future? After all, wasn't it the case that he gave what amounted to a green light for the coup that overthrew the government headed by Ngo Dinh Diem at the beginning of November 1963? Wouldn't it have made more sense to keep Diem in power? Wouldn't the kind of situation that existed under Diem have given him a perfect excuse for an unconditional withdrawal?⁷⁰

The prevailing assumption among scholars, in fact, is that U.S. complicity in the coup that overthrew Diem made it much harder than it would otherwise have been for the administration to write off South Vietnam. The basic premise here is quite simple: the

⁶⁷ See Kennedy-Hilsman phone conversations, September 5 and 6, 1963; White House staff meeting, September 11, 1963; and Kennedy meeting with top advisors, September 23, 1963; in *FRUS* 4:111-12 ([link](#)), 116 ([link](#)), 175 ([link](#)), 281 ([link](#)). Note also the president's comments in his meeting with Ambassador Lodge, August 15, 1963, tape 104, fourth segment, available on John F. Kennedy Library website ([link](#)), especially at 9 minutes, 23 seconds. Henceforth these tape segments will be cited in the following form: tape 104, fourth segment, JFKL, 9:23. See also a clip (with synchronized transcript) from the tape recording of Kennedy's meeting with his top advisors on the morning of October 2, 1963, on the MCPRP website ([link](#)). But this does not necessarily mean he was determined not to withdraw without victory. Some scholars in fact argue that Kennedy's dislike for the way the press was covering the conflict can be understood in terms of his desire to keep the war off the front pages and play down the problems with how the war was going. The goal of the "news management" policy, the argument runs, was to minimize right-wing pressure for deeper U.S. involvement and to limit the degree of perceived American commitment so as to make it easier for Kennedy to disengage if he chose to do so at some point in the future. See Dallek, *Unfinished Life*; esp. 457, 666, 668, 710. But the problem with that interpretation is that Kennedy, when he was talking about these issues, never made that point about negative press coverage provoking the right to demand escalation; one has the sense that he simply would have liked a free hand to pursue his policy without undue pressure from either the right or the left—a point that has a certain bearing on the audience costs theory. For more information on the Kennedy administration's news management policy, especially as it related to Vietnam, see appendix 1, "Kennedy, Vietnam, and the Press" (available online only; [link](#)).

⁶⁸ See, for example, Logevall, *Choosing War*, 40-41, and Fredrik Logevall, "Vietnam and the Question of What Might Have Been," in Mark White, ed., *Kennedy: The New Frontier Revisited* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 32-33 ([link](#)).

⁶⁹ See Lodge to State Department, September 13, 1963; McCone phone conversation with Harriman, September 13, 1963; memorandum for McCone, September 26, 1963; president's meetings with top advisors, October 29, 1963; in *FRUS* 4:203 ([link](#)), 204 ([link](#)), 295-97 ([link](#)), 470 (Robert Kennedy's view) ([link](#)), 472 (president's fears) ([link](#)).

⁷⁰ Logevall, "What Might Have Been," 31 ([link](#)); Logevall, *Choosing War*, 39, 72.

more deeply you get involved in something, the harder it is to get out, and America had gotten very deeply involved in South Vietnamese politics by late 1963. But two of the main writers in the “incipient withdrawal” school (as Fredrik Logevall calls it) meet this objection head on.⁷¹ Both Newman and Porter say that Kennedy *opposed* a coup. “Such an act,” Newman writes, “would only force the United States into assuming more responsibility for South Vietnam’s fate.”⁷² And Porter says that Kennedy’s withdrawal strategy was based “on the premise that the Diem regime would not be overthrown by a military coup, and that its repressive character and political weakness probably would provide a convenient rationale for early withdrawal.”⁷³ The rational thing, as a number of writers have argued, would have been to use the crisis in South Vietnam as an opportunity—even a “pretext”—for withdrawal.⁷⁴ But here you have Newman and Porter arguing, in effect, that that was Kennedy’s policy. What are we to make of that claim?

To anyone familiar with the events that led to the fall of Diem, that line of argument comes across as very odd. “The documentary record,” as Prados writes, “is replete with evidence that President Kennedy and his advisers, both individually and collectively, had a considerable role in the coup overall,” and most scholars would agree with that assessment.⁷⁵ Even Newman and Porter recognize that U.S. policy played a key role in the events leading to the coup.⁷⁶ So one might think that little more needs to be said on the subject. But one cannot just leave it at that. This issue of American involvement in the coup has to be examined a bit more closely because of its bearing on the key question of how the withdrawal plan is to be interpreted.

The basic story here is quite familiar.⁷⁷ In May 1963, South Vietnamese forces fired on Buddhist demonstrators in the northern city of Hue, killing eight people. This triggered a strong protest movement, which the government tried to put down with force. The

⁷¹ See Logevall, “What Might Have Been,” 24.

⁷² Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, 401.

⁷³ Porter, *Perils of Dominance*, 178; see also *ibid.*, 172-73. For an analysis of Porter’s argument on this point, see appendix 2 (available online only; [link](#))

⁷⁴ Gelb and Betts, *Irony of Vietnam*, 92. See also Ralph Levering’s review of Jones’s *Death of a Generation*, *International History Review* 27, no. 4 (December 2005), 903 ([link](#)).

⁷⁵ John Prados, “JFK and the Diem Coup,” National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book 101 (posted November 2003) ([link](#)). Given Howard Jones’s view that Kennedy had decided to withdraw no matter what, his analysis of the U.S. role in these events is particularly worth noting in this context; see Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 338-39, 350, 354, 391, 405-406.

⁷⁶ Porter, *Perils of Dominance*, 178; Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, 414.

⁷⁷ The best account is in Jones, *Death of a Generation*, chaps 13-14, 17. See also Prados, “JFK and the Diem Coup” ([link](#)); and John Prados, “Kennedy Considered Supporting Coup in South Vietnam, August 1963,” National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 302, December 2009 ([link](#)).

pagodas were raided in August; hundreds of Buddhists were arrested and many died. The U.S. government was worried about the effect all this would have on the war against the Communists and made it clear that it did not support what the Diem government was doing. The Diem regime was being discredited in the eyes of its own people, and without popular support it was hard to see how it could win the war. What that implied to a number of key officials was that either the Diem government had to change its ways or be replaced. That conclusion—and the President leaned toward that view, although never as wholeheartedly as some of his advisors—was of course based on the assumption that it was important to defeat the Communist insurgency.

But Diem was intransigent and refused in particular to get rid of his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, who was widely seen as responsible for the raids on the pagodas. A number of leading generals in South Vietnam, worried that the government was alienating the great mass of the population, and worried also that the Americans were being alienated, began to work out plans for a coup, but it was important for them to know whether the U.S. government would support them if they overthrew the Diem regime. They were initially given the green light, but it soon became clear that the Americans were having ‘second thoughts.’ The generals then drew back, putting their plans for a coup on hold.⁷⁸ Kennedy, however, was not pleased by this turn of events. “We want to be clear,” he told his advisors on September 3, “that it was the generals who decided not to do anything, and that it was not the United States backing down.”⁷⁹

But the fact that the generals had gotten cold feet meant that the U.S. government felt it had little choice but to work through Diem, and began to escalate the pressure on him (eventually in a very public way) to get him to change his ways, and in particular to get rid of his brother.⁸⁰ Kennedy hoped that those pressures would work and that the U.S. government could arrive at an understanding with Diem.⁸¹ But the South Vietnamese leader would not give way, and the actions the Americans took in response suggested that the U.S. government no longer supported him and would look with favor on a change of government. Certain forms of assistance—especially the funding for the security forces under Nhu’s direct control—were suspended in October. This was particularly important

⁷⁸ Taylor to Harkins, August 28, 1963, *FRUS* 1961-63, 3:675 ([link](#)). See also Logevall, *Choosing War*, 43; Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 336, 342, 346; and especially Thomas Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954-63* (CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2000; declassified February 2009), 179-80 ([link](#)).

⁷⁹ Tape of Kennedy meeting with key advisors, September 3, 1963, tape 108, segment 4, JFKL, 22:22 ([link](#)). Note also the extract from Krulak’s record of this meeting, cited in *FRUS* 1961-63, 4:102 n.10 ([link](#)).

⁸⁰ See, for example, Tad Szulc, “Vietnam Victory by the End of ’65 Envisaged by U.S.,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1963, 1, 4 ([link](#)).

⁸¹ Conference with the President, October 5, 1963, *FRUS* 1961-63, 4:369 ([link](#)).

because the generals had earlier made it clear that a suspension of aid would be interpreted as indicating U.S. support for a coup.⁸²

As far as direct measures were concerned, the basic policy adopted in early October was not “to encourage actively a change in government” but to “build contacts with an alternative leadership if and when it appears.”⁸³ The U.S. government would not “thwart a change in government or deny economic and military assistance to a new regime” if it appeared more able to win the war; that basic policy was explained to the generals directly by their CIA contact.⁸⁴ To be sure, U.S. leaders, including Kennedy, had certain misgivings about encouraging a coup, but mainly because they were worried about whether the generals could pull it off. A coup might fail and Diem might respond by demanding that the Americans leave the country; the U.S. government was also worried that a coup attempt, even if it did not totally fail, might lead to a civil war. Given those concerns, U.S. leaders wanted to learn what they could about the coup plans so they could judge for themselves how much of a chance the generals had of overthrowing Diem quickly. To that end they maintained contact with the generals (mainly through a well-known CIA agent in Saigon); the implication was that the generals would have U.S. backing if they pulled off a successful and relatively bloodless coup—which they in fact did at the beginning of November 1963. And U.S. involvement was scarcely secret.⁸⁵ McNamara, for one, was amazed at the way the

⁸² See Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, 180 ([link](#)). See also Office of the Secretary of Defense, Vietnam Task Force, “United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967” [henceforth cited as “Pentagon Papers”], IV.B.5 (“The Overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem”), xvi, 20. This important study, together with a large number of supporting documents, is now available in its entirety on the National Archives website ([link](#)). The Pentagon Papers analysts noted that “the senior South Vietnamese generals, predictably, interpreted the new policy as a green light for the coup” (41), but remarked that U.S. leaders had not thought of it in those terms (34, 36). Other analysts, however, think U.S. leaders did know what they were doing; see, for example, William Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), Part II, 189. And there is much evidence to support that latter view. It was clear to the president and his closest advisors from August 29 on—the day the generals had told their CIA contact that this was the signal they were looking for—that an aid suspension was tantamount to a green light for the coup. See Lodge to State Department, August 29, 1963; Kennedy meeting with key advisors, August 29, 1963; Lodge to State Department, September 11, 1963; Bundy phone call to Rusk, September 11, 1963 (for the president’s positive reaction to the Lodge cable); Lodge to Kennedy, September 19, 1963, and (after the selective aid suspension measures were put into effect), Lodge to Kennedy, October 23, 1963 (where the ambassador noted that “experienced observers believe that our actions are creating favorable conditions for a coup”); in *FRUS* 1961-63, 4:21 ([link](#)), 28-30 ([link](#)), 171-74 ([link](#)), 176 ([link](#)), 261 ([link](#)), 423 ([link](#)). Note also the judgment that was made, immediately after the coup, about the role those measures had played in triggering it. White House Staff meeting, November 4, 1963, *ibid.*, 556 ([link](#)).

⁸³ Taylor and McNamara to Kennedy, October 2, 1963, *FRUS* 1961-63, 4:339 ([link](#)). Approved by the president three days later; see Forrestal memorandum, October 5, 1963, *ibid.*, 370 ([link](#)).

⁸⁴ CIA to Lodge (reporting president’s views), October 6, 1963, and editorial note, *FRUS* 4:393 ([link](#)), 427 ([link](#)).

⁸⁵ See Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 422, and Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 240. See also David Halberstam, “U.S. Policy Clash with Diem Hinted,” *New York Times*, August 31, 1963, 1 (“Highly informed diplomatic sources say . . . the United States is ready to initiate action that might lead to the overthrow of the Government”) ([link](#)); Chalmers Roberts, “Viet-Nam Coup That Never Came Off Leaves Old Regime on Top,

policy was being managed: “This was a very, very unsophisticated approach to overthrowing a government,” he complained. “I think it’s cost us a lot already.” It was astonishing how overt America’s involvement was. “It all leaked to the press, it’s all known,” he said, referring to the first coup attempt in late August. “It’s taken as gospel now that this government tried to overthrow Diem’s government.” He could scarcely believe the way things were being done: “It’s almost as though we’re announcing it over the radio. To continue this type of activity just strikes me as *absurd*.”⁸⁶

So no one had any doubt as to the part the U.S. government had played in this affair. Looking back a few days after the coup, U.S. leaders were clear in their own minds about the key role the United States had played in setting the stage for what had happened. It was quite evident, as Henry Cabot Lodge, the U.S. ambassador in Saigon, pointed out, “that the ground in which the coup seed grew into a robust plant was prepared by us and that the coup would not have happened [when] it did without our preparation”; one of the coup leaders had admitted as much to him. The President agreed: the Vietnamese might have overthrown Diem, but “our own actions made it clear that we wanted improvements, and when these were not forthcoming from the Diem Government, we necessarily faced and accepted the possibility that our position might encourage a change of government.”⁸⁷

This issue is important because the withdrawal plan was announced in early October just as the problem with Diem was coming to a head. Indeed, that plan and the whole question of how to deal with Diem, and especially what sorts of pressures to apply, were discussed at the same meetings.⁸⁸ So from the start people have wondered whether the withdrawal

U.S. in Box,” *Washington Post*, September 6, 1963, A14 ([link](#)); Warren Unna, “U.S. Expected and Desired Viet Revolt,” *Washington Post*, November 2, 1963, A1 ([link](#)). President Kennedy’s reference, in a televised interview on September 2, to the possible need for changes “in personnel” in South Vietnam, was often cited in this context. Interview with Walter Cronkite, *PPP1963*, 652 ([link](#)).

⁸⁶ Kennedy meeting with key advisors, October 8, 1963, tape 114/A50, final segment, JFKL, 56:00 ([link](#)). Two weeks later, McNamara was still complaining about Lucien Conein, the CIA agent in question, and the “very amateurish” way U.S. policy in Vietnam was being carried out. See Kennedy meeting with key advisors, October 25, 1963, tape 117.a53.3, 41:55, MCPRP ([link](#)). (In this and all other MCPRP tapes cited, the times refer to the FLAC version; the timing for the MP3 version is slightly different.) The October 25 tape is also available on the JFKL website: tape 117/A53, fourth segment ([link](#)).

⁸⁷ Lodge to Kennedy, and Kennedy to Lodge, both November 6, 1963, *FRUS* 1961-63, 4:577 ([link](#)), 580 ([link](#)). Note also Kennedy’s comments in November 2, 1963, meeting on Vietnam, tape 119.a55.1, 16:44 to 19:07, MCPRP ([link](#)). A number of officials noted in meetings with the president that the generals would not move unless the U.S. government gave them the green light. See, for example, Hilsman’s comments in an August 26, 1963, meeting, tape 107, fourth segment, JFKL, at 10:08 and 28:10 ([link](#)), and Rufus Phillips’s remarks, in Kennedy’s meeting with key advisors, September 10, 1963, tape 109, fourth segment, JFKL, 15:58 ([link](#)).

⁸⁸ Kennedy meeting with key advisors, October 2, 1963 (morning), tape 114/A49, third segment (Vietnam discussion begins at 11:00), JFKL ([link](#)); National Security Council meeting, October 2, 1963 (evening), tape 114/A49, fourth segment, JFKL ([link](#)), and *FRUS* 1961-63, 4:350-52 ([link](#)); Kennedy meeting

plan was to be interpreted in essentially instrumental terms—that is, as a way to scare Diem and get him to take a more accommodating line, or perhaps even to frighten the generals and get them to overthrow the government.⁸⁹ But is that view correct? The way that question is answered has a major bearing on how the withdrawal plan should be interpreted. Those who think that the plan was genuine naturally tend to deny that it was to be understood mainly as a lever. Newman, for example, says flatly that “Kennedy’s 1,000-man withdrawal was not intended as leverage to be used against Diem,” and Galbraith and Dallek make much the same point.⁹⁰ If they are wrong about this, and if the withdrawal plan, at the time it was announced, is to be seen essentially as a way of exerting pressure, that would tend to undermine the basic claim that not only was the plan genuine, but that its adoption shows that Kennedy was determined to pull out of Vietnam no matter what. What light, then, does the evidence throw on this question?

The first point is that there is one area in which Newman and other scholars who follow his lead were essentially right, and this has to do with Newman’s claim that Kennedy had at some point reached the conclusion that the war was not going well—that he had figured out that the “success story” being peddled by the military “was a deception.”⁹¹ This is important because it used to be argued that the withdrawal plan had all along been based on the assumption that the war was going well. Leslie Gelb, for example, in an article in the *New York Times* published the same year as the Newman book, said that the decision in October 1963 to go ahead with the withdrawal plan—and in particular to pull out a thousand men by the end of the year—“was grounded in one of the few periods of genuine optimism about the war.”⁹² But there is a good deal of evidence that points in the opposite direction.

with key advisors, October 5, 1963, tape 114/A50, second segment, JFKL ([link](#)), and *FRUS* 1961-63, 4:368-70 ([link](#))

⁸⁹ The Pentagon Papers analysts assumed that the phased withdrawal policy had that goal. See Pentagon Papers IV.B.5, 35 and IV.B.4, iii ([link](#)). But the Pentagon analysts had simply misread the main document they quoted to support that claim, the October 5 instructions to ambassador Lodge (the full document is in *FRUS* 1961-63, 4:371-79 ([link](#))). The key phrase about how the measures were designed “to create significant uncertainty” in the minds of the Diem government and “key Vietnamese groups as to future intentions of the United States” applied only to the selected aid suspensions; the troop withdrawal plans were not even mentioned in this document. For speculation at the time that the withdrawal plan was a pressure tactic, see Max Frankel, “View in Washington: Tougher Line Is Needed to End Saigon’s Political Repressions,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1963 ([link](#)). Note also Maxwell Taylor’s later account, quoted in Porter, *Perils of Dominance*, 174, and also Maxwell Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares: A Memoir* (New York: Norton, 1972), 299 ([link](#)).

⁹⁰ Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, 390, 406; Dallek, *Unfinished Life*, 680; and Galbraith, “Exit Strategy” ([link](#)).

⁹¹ Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, 320.

⁹² Leslie Gelb, “Kennedy and Vietnam,” *New York Times*, January 6, 1992, A17 ([link](#)). The Pentagon Papers analysts took the same basic line, and seemed to assume that the reports about how the war was going being received in Washington could be taken at face value. “The situation may not have been too bad until December 1963,” they wrote. “Honest and trained men in Vietnam looking at the problems were

Even in July 1962, when the formal planning for a phased withdrawal began, key officials like McNamara and CIA Director John McCone felt they had no real sense for how the war was going. McNamara, in a meeting with McCone at the beginning of that month, “discussed at length the absence of meaningful intelligence on progress or lack of progress in Southeast Asia.” McCone agreed, and noted that while both the CIA and the military had taken steps to correct the problem, “no meaningful intelligence could be expected for a few months.”⁹³ To be sure, the military authorities in 1962 and 1963 tended to paint a very rosy picture of what was going on in South Vietnam, but as Newman shows—and this, I think, is one of his main contributions to our understanding of America’s Vietnam policy during the Kennedy period—this reporting was not very honest.⁹⁴ An attempt by professional officers in the CIA to give an accurate assessment in early 1963 was also

reporting what they believed reality to be.” Pentagon Papers, IV.B.4, vii; see also 11 ([link](#)). (Gelb, it should be noted, had played a leading role in the Pentagon Papers project.) The idea that people genuinely believed, even at the end of the Kennedy period, that the war was going well is surprisingly widespread. In the debate that followed the release of the movie *JFK*, various people on the left argued that Kennedy was contemplating withdrawal only because he thought the war was being won. See, for example, Alexander Cockburn, “Cockburn Replies,” *The Nation*, March 9, 1992, in Stone and Sklar, *JFK: The Documented Screenplay*, 479. But serious scholars have sometimes made the same argument. Even Logevall said (in the late 1990s) that the 1000-man withdrawal announced in October 1963 “came about only because of a desire to counter the growing impression that Washington might be taking over the fighting, and because of confidence that the war ultimately would be won.” He says the withdrawal plan was announced “at a time of general military optimism (or at least nonpessimism) in the war.” Logevall, “What Might Have Been,” 25 ([link](#)); Logevall, *Choosing War*, 69. But in his new book *Embers of War* he takes a very different, and to my mind more accurate, view. “By the early months of 1963, if not before,” he writes, “a bleak realism permeated much U.S. official analysis about the war’s prospects, at least behind closed doors.” Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), 708.

⁹³ John McCone, Summary of meeting with Secretary McNamara and Secretary Gilpatric, General Carter and Mr. McCone on July 5, 1962 (document dated July 6), available on CIA’s CREST system ([link](#)). Note that McNamara went on to complain that “he had absolutely no knowledge as to the success of the strategic hamlet project, whether advancing or standing still or going backward; whether accepted by the [South Vietnamese] population; and expressed uncertainty concerning the effectiveness of strategic hamlets against Viet Cong actions.” This did not prevent McNamara, noting the “tremendous progress” that had been made in South Vietnam, from putting the planning process for a withdrawal in motion at an important conference held in Honolulu later in the month. See the *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.B.4, “Phased Withdrawal of U.S. Forces, 1962-1964,” iv, 2-5 ([link](#)). On this general subject, see also William Colby, “Optimistic Reporting by U.S. Military Advisors in Vietnam during the Kennedy Administration,” n.d., William Colby Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University ([link](#)).

⁹⁴ See Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, esp. chaps. 10, 12, 13, 15 and 16; Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 267-386, esp. 323-28, 336-42; Prados, , *Vietnam*, 72-74; and George W. Allen, *None So Blind: A Personal Account of the Intelligence Failure in Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2001), 142-68. Newman, one should note, was an active-duty Army intelligence officer when he wrote the book, and Allen had also been an intelligence officer. Compare also the account General Maxwell Taylor gave the president on October 2, 1963, about how well the war was going (a clip containing his account, with synchronized transcript, is available on the MCFRP website ([link](#)) with William Bundy’s story about what Taylor was actually told at one point during his visit to Vietnam by some of the Army officers he met advising the Vietnamese forces in Bird, *Color of Truth*, 257.

frustrated; McCone himself made sure that the official estimate would be much more optimistic.⁹⁵ And in late 1963 McNamara tried to prevent State Department intelligence officers from taking what he viewed as an excessively pessimistic view.⁹⁶

But Kennedy had other sources of information. What he was reading in the press was bound to raise major questions in his mind.⁹⁷ He heard directly from a number of officials, some with a good deal of experience in Vietnam, who were not happy with the way the war was going.⁹⁸ And he learned other things in passing that suggested that the war in Vietnam

⁹⁵ Harold P. Ford, "CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes 1962-1968," episode 1, "1962-1963: Distortions of Intelligence" (CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998), 1-21, Digital National Security Archive [DNSA], item VW01559 ([link](#)). Also available on the CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence website ([link](#)). On this episode, see also Willard C. Matthias, *America's Strategic Blunders: Intelligence Analysis and National Security Policy, 1936-1991* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 185-90, and John Prados, *William Colby and the CIA: The Secret Wars of a Controversial Spymaster* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 106-107. CIA officers were aware that many of the reports reaching policymakers through official channels were distorted; this, in fact, was one reason why their own appraisals tended to be more realistic. See Harold P. Ford, "Why CIA Analysts Were So Doubtful about Vietnam," *Studies in Intelligence* (1997), 86 ([link](#)). I filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the CIA in April 2012 for eighteen documents relating to the issue of how CIA officers viewed the war and what they told the president. That FOIA request has been posted on my website ([link](#)), and if and when those documents are released they will be posted there as well, linked to the descriptions in that FOIA request.

⁹⁶ See Thomas Hughes, "Experiencing McNamara," *Foreign Policy*, no. 100 (Fall 1995), 160-63 ([link](#)), and Louis Sarris, "McNamara's War—and Mine," *New York Times*, September 5, 1995, A17 ([link](#)). McNamara's reply appeared in that newspaper on September 14, 1995, A26 ([link](#)). For more on this affair, see *FRUS* 1961-63, 4:418-19 ([link](#)), 582-86 ([link](#)), and John Prados, "The Mouse that Roared: State Department Intelligence in the Vietnam War," in National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book 121 ([link](#)). For other examples of McNamara's unwillingness to listen to pessimistic assessments of this sort, see Rufus Phillips oral history, part II, 17-18, 21, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library ([link](#)), and Joseph Mendenhall oral history, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection ([link](#)). In that oral history interview Mendenhall told a story about his report to the president at the September 10, 1963, NSC meeting (see n. 98 below). At that meeting, he said, "I learned subsequently, that I totally alienated the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the point that the next time I went to the White House for an NSC meeting on Vietnam, I went with Alex Johnson, who said, 'Don't open your mouth at this meeting.' Alex was then responsible for liaison with the Department of Defense. I now know he was getting this kind of line from McNamara and Maxwell Taylor. As a matter of fact this had repercussions on me and my assignment and career later which I will get into in just a few minutes. One doesn't alienate some of the great powers in Washington without consequences as you well know" (28).

⁹⁷ The president paid a good deal of attention to negative stories in the elite press, especially the *New York Times*, and it is clear from the way he referred to them that he did not dismiss them out of hand. See, for example, Kennedy-Lodge meeting, August 15, 1963, tape 104, fourth segment, JFKL, esp. 9:23 ([link](#)).

⁹⁸ Note, for example, the comments of Joseph Mendenhall and especially Rufus Phillips, in Kennedy meeting with key advisors, September 10, 1963. Hilsman notes, *FRUS* 1961-63, 4:161-67 ([link](#)); Bromley Smith notes, DNSA item no. VI00968 ([link](#)); and tape 109, fourth segment, JFKL ([link](#)). Phillips reported that the war in the Mekong River Delta, where a large part of the population lived, was "going to pieces," and that the "strategic hamlets are being chewed to pieces by the Viet Cong." U.S. military leaders claimed the war was going well, but Phillips responded with an argument that was bound to resonate with someone like Kennedy: "When someone says that this is a military war, and that this is a military judgment. I don't believe you can

might not be going well. Thus the Army Chief of Staff, General Earle Wheeler, told the President in February 1963 (in the course of an otherwise very optimistic report) that the Vietcong, as the Communist insurgents in South Vietnam were called, were “not bleeding in this war,” that instead it was the government side that was “bleeding,” that the losses it was suffering were sizeable, while “the losses suffered by the Vietcong are negligible.”⁹⁹ The President probably got other information in more informal ways.¹⁰⁰ And he was bound to be impressed by the fact that the CIA had by 1963 become quite pessimistic about the war. In September 1963, for example, McCone told the President that “victory [was] doubtful if not impossible.”¹⁰¹

say this about this war. This is essentially a political war...for men’s minds.” Quoted in JFKL press release, January 12, 2012 ([link](#)). See also Rufus Phillips oral history, part II, 20-23 ([link](#)).

⁹⁹ Kennedy-Wheeler meeting on Vietnam, February 1, 1963, tape 71.1, 53:20, MCPRP ([link](#)). Also quoted in a [press release](#) issued by the Kennedy Library announcing the opening of this and other tapes in 2003.

¹⁰⁰ As John Prados notes, Kennedy “liked to reach down into the bureaucracy for advice on all sorts of subjects,” and he often turned to Hilsman—who was skeptical of what he viewed as excessively optimistic assessments coming from the military—for information, especially on intelligence matters. Prados, “Mouse that Roared” ([link](#)). And there were many people in the bureaucracy involved in the assessment process, some with a good deal of personal experience in Vietnam, who held fairly negative views. See Matthias, *America’s Strategic Blunders*, 186 (George Carver) and 188 (Pentagon representatives). Some negative reports probably also reached the president in fairly haphazard ways. William Bundy, for example, might well have told his brother McGeorge the story about how a number of U.S. advisors in Can Tho had given a very pessimistic account of how the war was going to Taylor and McNamara in their visit to South Vietnam in late September 1963, and McGeorge could easily have passed it on to the president. Bird, *Color of Truth*, 257. McGeorge Bundy also knew about the pessimistic memoranda Lyndon Johnson’s military aide, Col. Howard Burris, was writing even in 1962 based on information Burris was getting from “the boys in the woodwork”; Bundy, out of loyalty to the President, might well have told Kennedy that some well-informed people did not believe the war was going nearly as well as the military leadership claimed. See Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, 225-28.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Ford, “CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers,” 21 ([link](#)). Note also the sources cited in n. 95 above. In “Why CIA Analysts Were So Doubtful About Vietnam” ([link](#)), Ford quotes from an Office of National Estimates memo for CIA director McCone dated May 24, 1962: “Even if the US could defeat the Communists by a massive injection of its own forces,” the author, Sherman Kent, wrote, “the odds are that what it would win would be, not a political victory which created a stable and independent government, but an uneasy and costly colony” (92). This document, titled “The Communist Threat in Southeast Asia,” along with a revised version with the same title dated June 18, 1962, were declassified in 1980; they are listed but (currently at least) are not posted on the CIA’s Electronic Reading Room ([link](#)). They were, however, sent to me as a result of a FOIA request, and it is interesting to compare the two versions. The revised document, not signed by Kent, went on to assert that the policy of helping the Vietnamese government defend itself had “a reasonable prospect of success”—an alteration that should probably be understood in political terms. But such phrases should probably not be taken too seriously, and it is clear that CIA analysts, even during this period, did not take a particularly optimistic view. In August 1963, in fact, one high CIA official, Richard Helms, even confirmed to the *New York Times* that the war was not going well. One assumes that if this information was being given to the public, it might well have also filtered up to the president. See Montague Kern, Patricia Levering, and Ralph Levering, *The Kennedy Crises: The Press, the Presidency, and Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 152. Still, there are many unresolved issues (especially about what the President and other top officials were being told) and in April 2012 I submitted a FOIA request ([link](#)) for eighteen additional documents which, I thought, might shed more light on the subject. I was originally told

So clearly the official line at the time of the October 1963 announcement about a U.S. withdrawal by the end of 1965, to the effect that America could begin to pull out because the South Vietnamese would soon be able to deal with the insurgency on their own, is not to be taken at face value. At least as far as Kennedy was concerned, the real reason this announcement was made must have been different. Could it be that the plan was adopted with an eye to the situation in Saigon—that the aim was to get Diem to be more accommodating in his dealings with the Americans, or maybe even to trigger a coup if he refused to bow to that pressure? Newman says no, but the evidence he gives to support that view is quite thin. He quotes from the record of a meeting Kennedy had with his main advisors on October 5, 1963, in which the President states that the decision to remove the 1,000 U.S. advisors—publicly announced three days earlier—“should not be raised formally with Diem,” and that instead “the action should be carried out routinely as part of our general posture of withdrawing people when they are no longer needed.” “That,” Newman says, “made it unequivocal: the 1,000-man withdrawal was not a device, but a policy objective in its own right.”¹⁰² But this is hardly a smoking gun. The mere fact that it was not to be raised formally with Diem did not mean that it could not serve as an instrument of pressure. The calculation might well have been that it would have a greater impact if it were not so obviously designed to put pressure on him, and if he just learned about what the U.S. government was doing in his own way. And indeed the aid suspensions approved on October 5, which certainly were meant to serve as instruments of pressure, were also not to be announced publicly—but the government was so leaky that the press was able to report almost immediately on what the administration was trying to do.¹⁰³

On the other hand, it is also important to recognize that there is little direct evidence suggesting that the withdrawal plan was essentially a pressure tactic in this sense. That plan was not one of the actions the administration decided to take “to indicate to the Diem Government our displeasure at its political actions and to create significant uncertainty in that government and in key Vietnamese groups as to the future intentions of the US.”¹⁰⁴

that that request would be processed by May 2013; when I didn't receive the documents by that time, I asked again and was given an updated completion date of March 28, 2014. If and when I get any or all of those documents, I will post them on the webpage where I posted that April 2012 FOIA request ([link](#)).

¹⁰² Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, 409. The document he quotes from is in *FRUS* 1961-63, 4:370 ([link](#)). Galbraith, “Exit Strategy” ([link](#)), follows Newman on this point.

¹⁰³ See State Department to Lodge, October 5, 1963, *FRUS* 1961-63, 4:371-78 ([link](#)). Thus Tad Szulc reported on October 3 that the U.S. government was in effect “placing the Diem regime on notice that it might have to reconsider its support for South Vietnam if adequate measures were not taken to redress the political situation”; see the Szulc article cited in n. 80 above ([link](#)). On the aid suspensions themselves and possible U.S. motives in this affair, see David Halberstam, “Some of U.S. Aid to Saigon Halted; Policy Reviewed; Washington Feels Vietnam May Be Easier to Guide if Funds Run Out,” *New York Times*, October 8, 1963, 1, 18.

¹⁰⁴ *FRUS* 4:360 ([link](#)), 372 ([link](#)). By “key Vietnamese groups,” the authors of this document probably had the generals in mind, and there is a good deal of evidence to the effect that the announcement of the withdrawal plan had a major effect on their behavior, and in particular that it was a key element in getting them to move forward with the coup, and also that key U.S. officials understood that it could have this effect.

Those actions and the withdrawal plan were discussed in the same meetings, but in those discussions the plan was not referred to as a means of exerting pressure on either Diem or the generals.¹⁰⁵ The closest Kennedy came, in those meetings, to connecting the withdrawal plan to the effort to put pressure on Diem, was toward the end of the October 5 meeting. He and his advisors were discussing the 1000-man withdrawal and he suggested that the U.S. government might be “doing it to have some impact”—but on what exactly is not very clear.¹⁰⁶

But even though the direct evidence is weak, one can still make a case that the withdrawal plan, at this point at any rate, is to be understood in essentially tactical terms. Kennedy was certainly interested in putting pressure on Diem, and he knew that it would not be easy to get the South Vietnamese President to change course. America’s bargaining power was limited because Diem was convinced that the United States was committed to preventing a Communist takeover in his country.¹⁰⁷ To have any influence at all, it was important, as that key October 5 policy document noted, to take actions that would “create significant uncertainty . . . in the future intentions of the United States.”¹⁰⁸ In such circumstances, was it not plausible that Kennedy would want to use any instrument he could to get Diem to be more accommodating? And was it not obvious, without anyone having to point this out explicitly at those meetings, that the withdrawal plan would help serve that purpose? This was certainly how Taylor viewed the idea.¹⁰⁹ And even at the time key officials like McNamara understood that it could have a certain impact on South Vietnam. In May 1963, for example, when McNamara brought up the idea of withdrawing a thousand men by the end of the year, he told the President that such a move could be made

See Rusk comment in September 6, 1963, meeting with the President; Lodge to Rusk and McNamara, October 7, 1963; Lodge to State Department, October 28 and 29, 1963, *FRUS* 1961-63, 121 ([link](#)), 386 ([link](#)), 449 ([link](#)), 450 ([link](#)).

¹⁰⁵ See the records of the two October 2 meetings and the October 5 meeting (including the tapes) cited in n. 88 above.

¹⁰⁶ Tape of October 5, 1963, meeting, tape 114/A50, second segment, 1:06:15, JFKL ([link](#)); also tape 114.a50.2, 36:55, MCPRP ([link](#)).

¹⁰⁷ This was a major theme in his August 15, 1963, discussion with Lodge. See tape 104, fourth segment, JFKL, at 3:34 ([link](#)), or tape 104.3,13:18, MCPRP ([link](#)). Note also Robert Kennedy’s remarks, Executive Committee meeting, October 4, 1963, *FRUS* 1961-63, 4:359 ([link](#)). The Pentagon Papers analysts also interpreted U.S.-Diem relations in these terms; see *Pentagon Papers*, IV.B.5, 7 ([link](#)).

¹⁰⁸ State Department to Lodge, October 5, 1963, *FRUS* 1961-63, 4:372 ([link](#)).

¹⁰⁹ See Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, 403. Note also Taylor’s remarks in a 1983 oral history interview quoted in Porter, *Perils of Dominance*, 174, and Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, 299 ([link](#)).

in large part “because of the psychological effect it would have in South Vietnam.”¹¹⁰ It is hard to imagine, given what people like McNamara had been saying for some time, that Kennedy did not see that it would have an effect in this area, and if he understood the effect it could have, then that was bound to play a certain role in his calculations. Both he and McNamara, moreover, also understood that the announcement of the withdrawal plan could have a major effect at home: it could serve to assuage the fears of influential Senators that the United States was getting bogged down in Southeast Asia.¹¹¹

One comes away from this analysis with the sense that the withdrawal plan is, in large part, to be understood in instrumental terms: in supporting that plan, Kennedy had by no means committed himself to a ‘genuine withdrawal from Vietnam’ regardless of the consequences.

Striking a Balance

Neither of the two interpretations we have considered so far—that Kennedy was totally committed to victory in South Vietnam, or that Kennedy had decided to withdraw even if it meant that that country would fall into Communist hands—stands up in the light of the evidence. What this suggests is that the truth must lie somewhere in between, and in fact some of the best historians working in this area take a middle view. Logevall, for example, rejects the Newman thesis, but he also thinks that Kennedy was by no means determined to win the war at all costs. “Running through John F. Kennedy’s whole approach to Vietnam,” he writes, “was a fundamental ambivalence about the conflict and about what to do there. . . . The Kennedy record reveals a man who sought victory in Vietnam from day one to the end, who opposed negotiations and who helped overthrow Ngo Dinh Diem, but it also reveals a man who always had deep doubts about the enterprise, and deep determination to keep it from becoming an American war.”¹¹² The President thus put off the hard decisions, and even “on the day of his death” he probably still “had not decided what to do with his Vietnam problem.”¹¹³

The easy thing at this point would have been to just leave it at that and say that no one can really know what Kennedy would have done, but Logevall thinks one can push the analysis a bit further. Strong arguments, he concedes, can be made on both sides of the issue, but on balance he believes that Kennedy would not have opted for a massive escalation of the war

¹¹⁰ See Kennedy-McNamara meeting, May 7, 1963, tape 85.2, 19:25, MCPRP ([link](#)). A clip containing McNamara’s comment, with synchronized transcript, is available on the MCPRP website ([link](#)); also quoted in Selverstone, “It’s a Date,” 493 ([link](#)).

¹¹¹ See the clip from McNamara’s May 7, 1963, meeting with Kennedy cited in n. 110 above, and also the clip from the October 2, 1963, NSC meeting, on the MCPRP website (and especially McNamara’s reference to the “very strong views of [Senator] Fulbright and others” toward the end of that clip) ([link](#)).

¹¹² Logevall, “What Might Have Been,” 40 ([link](#)).

¹¹³ Logevall, *Choosing War*, 73.

and would instead have “chosen some form of disengagement.”¹¹⁴ That conclusion rests in large measure on an assessment of Kennedy’s personal qualities. “Kennedy,” he writes, “though very much a Cold Warrior, was more flexible, more subtle, more capable of seeing the nuances of international problems, less Manichean in his vision,” and it is hard to imagine him “exhibiting the pigheadedness and truculence with respect to Vietnam that Johnson so frequently showed.”¹¹⁵ Other scholars have painted much the same picture. David Kaiser, for example, sees Kennedy as pursuing a kind of limited liability policy: he “wanted to help the South Vietnamese government cope with the Viet Cong but rejected war [meaning a U.S. war] as a way to do so”; unlike many of his advisors, he did not see the preservation of a non-Communist South Vietnam as a “vital” American interest.¹¹⁶

That general view is, I think, essentially correct. By 1963 Kennedy had taken his measure of his advisors, and was much less deferential toward them than he had been in 1961. (His experiences during the Cuban Missile Crisis probably played a key role in this regard.) He had come to the conclusion that on matters of foreign policy his judgment was better than theirs, and was now more prepared to chart his own course—but still in a way that ruffled as few feathers as possible. He was less of an ideologue and more inclined to analyze things in power-political terms than most observers originally thought—although he understood that he could not present his policy in non-ideological terms to the public. Thus when Krock asked him in October 1961 “what he thought of the ‘falling domino’ theory—that is, if Laos and Viet-Nam go Communist, the rest of South East Asia will fall to them in orderly succession,” he “expressed doubts that this theory has much point any more because, he remarked, the Chinese Communists are bound to get nuclear weapons in time, and from that moment on they will dominate South East Asia.”¹¹⁷ But when he was asked in a televised interview whether he “had any reason to doubt this so-called ‘domino theory,’ that if South Viet-Nam falls, the rest of southeast Asia will go behind it,” his answer was unambiguous: “No, I believe it. I believe it.”¹¹⁸ Again, the gap between his real thinking and the sort of rhetoric he used in public is quite striking.

¹¹⁴ Logevall, *Choosing War*, 395; Logevall, “What Might Have Been,” 48-49 ([link](#)).

¹¹⁵ Logevall, “What Might Have Been,” 43-47 ([link](#)).

¹¹⁶ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 3-4, 113, 121, 247, 261-62; note also the title of chapter 5 ([link](#)). “Twice,” Kaiser wrote (in an H-Diplo roundtable on his book), “in November 1961 and in September 1963, [Kennedy] was given draft policy statements declaring the security of South Vietnam an American ‘vital interest’ and twice, as Herbert Parmet originally pointed out, he changed the language to leave an escape hatch.” ([link](#)) (posted July 25, 2000). The point is important because many other scholars have said that Kennedy, like other U.S. presidents, “considered it vital not to lose Vietnam by force to communism”—as Gelb and Betts put it in *The Irony of Vietnam*, 25. See also Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: Norton, 1982), 30, and Lawrence Bassett and Stephen Pelz, “The Failed Search for Victory: Vietnam and the Politics of War,” in Thomas Paterson, ed., *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy 1961-1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 223.

¹¹⁷ Krock interview with Kennedy, October 11, 1961, as cited above ([link](#)).

¹¹⁸ Interview with Chet Huntley and David Brinkley, September 9, 1963, *PPP* 1963, 659 ([link](#)).

That comment to Krock about the implications of a Chinese nuclear capability is also very revealing in this context, in part because it supports the general view that Kennedy was not deeply committed to preventing the “loss” of South Vietnam to the Communists, and in part because it shows the extent to which he tended to think in geostrategic, and not just ideological, terms. And that remark was no mere flash in the pan. There are many documents that reflect Kennedy’s concern with this issue. The record of a talk the President gave to the senior officers of the State Department in 1962, for example, contains the following passage:

Now when the Chinese Communists develop the atomic bomb, which we have to assume they will, and the capacity to deliver it, then of course there’s going to be a change in power balances in Asia which affect us quite seriously and which we should be looking forward to. With their great advantage of manpower and their lines of communication, we’ve really been able to hold our position only through the threat of the use of atomic weapons. When they are able to counter that not with equality of strength, but with sufficient strength to cause us great damage, then we’re going to have to reconsider, it seems to me, or at least consider very carefully what our policy is going to be in those areas [on China’s periphery, like Southeast Asia].¹¹⁹

This comment again reflected the president’s basic view about what a Chinese nuclear capability would mean. Indeed, it reflected his fundamental understanding of how even small nuclear capabilities could affect America’s ability to “hold back” the Communists on the ground.¹²⁰ And it is also important to note that under Johnson the thinking on this issue changed dramatically. A Chinese nuclear capability was no longer seen as a reason for America pulling back from Southeast Asia. The prevailing argument now was that it was important to convince people that the United States was not a ‘paper tiger,’ too afraid to deal with the threat posed by Chinese nuclear force. This, as the British historian Matthew Jones has shown, was a major and under-appreciated factor shaping the Johnson administration’s Vietnam policy.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ “Draft for President’s Revision” (transcript of Kennedy’s talk to senior State Department officers, undated but probably from early 1962), attached (as tab 6) to McGeorge Bundy Memorandum for the President, May 29, 1962, in file “Remarks to the Foreign Service Association, 29 May 1962,” President’s Office Files, Speech Files series, JFKL ([link](#)). The Bundy memo is on page 15 of this 57-page digital file; the passage quoted is on page 42. In the original text, that passage was bracketed, and a note at the beginning of this document says that bracketed passages “should be considered for omission.” This probably meant that Bundy was suggesting the President not include the passage from the transcript of his actual remarks to the senior State Department officials in his talk to the Foreign Service Association. The passage should thus be taken as reflecting Kennedy’s personal views, unedited by any of his advisors.

¹²⁰ See, especially, his comments in National Security Council meetings held on January 18, 1962, and January 22, 1963, *FRUS* 1961-63, 8:239 ([link](#)), 8:462 ([link](#)).

¹²¹ Matthew Jones, *After Hiroshima: The United States, Race, and Nuclear Weapons in Asia, 1945-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 436, 447-48, 462-63.

So when you finish analyzing the historical literature in this area, a certain general picture of the Kennedy Vietnam policy takes shape in your mind. The president in late 1963 was pessimistic about the war, but still not absolutely convinced that the Communists could not be kept at bay; he was not convinced that America had anything like a “vital” interest in preventing Vietnam from falling into Communist hands, but he did feel that the United States had a real interest, less far-reaching in scope, in preventing that from happening. This meant that a certain effort was warranted—that it was still too early to give up entirely on Vietnam—but he was very reluctant to sanction a massive Americanization of the war.¹²²

How does all this relate to the audience costs theory? The basic point here was that Kennedy was not locked into a policy of ‘paying any price’ to prevent a Communist victory in South Vietnam: the tough line he took in his public remarks did not tie his hands to such an extent that he would have been unable to avoid the sort of escalation of the war that took place under Johnson. That was certainly Kennedy’s view at the time—he had agreed to increase the American military presence in that country quite substantially, but in doing so he did not think he was “making an irretrievable commitment”—and the President, of course, was uniquely qualified to judge how much freedom of action he actually had.¹²³ His hands, to be sure, were not totally free. The mere fact that American troops had been sent (and some had died), and the fact also that the American political class would not have been happy if South Vietnam were ‘lost’ to the Communists, tied his hands to a certain extent. But whatever limits there were on his freedom of maneuver can be attributed to factors of that sort. One does not need to talk about his tough public statements to explain why he was not totally free to pursue whatever policy he wanted: on the margin the audience costs effect does not appear to have counted for much in this regard.

¹²² This differs somewhat from Logevall’s view. The President, he writes, was “no profile in courage on Vietnam,” and he seems to think that Kennedy had concluded that the situation in Vietnam was hopeless but took the “safe course” of avoiding “dramatic departures of any kind” until he had won re-election in 1964, at which point he would presumably have a freer hand to deal with the problem. This “could be considered an example of breathtaking callousness and self-serving cynicism, this willingness to prolong a military commitment—and thereby endanger the lives of many Vietnamese and Americans—primarily to serve one’s own political ends. So indeed it was. But it defines, to a considerable degree, Kennedy’s thinking as the summer [of 1963] drew to a close.” And the President did, in fact, in certain moods say things that support this interpretation, most notably in conversations with his friend Charles Bartlett. But it does not seem that he was totally convinced that there was no chance the Communist insurgency could be defeated, even with only limited American help; and much of his policy in late 1963—especially his support for the coup—makes little sense if that were his assumption. As Logevall himself argues, it would have been possible to take advantage of the situation with Diem to extricate the United States from Vietnam without paying much of a political price at home. And if a scholar like Logevall was able to see this years after the event, it can be taken for granted that someone with Kennedy’s highly developed political antennae would have seen it at the time. The fact that he did not go this route thus suggests that he had not totally given up on the policy of trying to preserve a non-Communist South Vietnam, and that his unwillingness to withdraw is not to be attributed essentially to cynical domestic political calculations. Logevall, *Choosing War*, 38-39 (for Bartlett), 39 (for Kennedy not being “hemmed in”), and 41-42 (for the quotations).

¹²³ From John McCloy’s later account of Kennedy’s views in a document quoted in Gelb and Betts, *Irony of Vietnam*, 77 n. 35.

Why exactly was Kennedy not locked in by the tough public statements he made? One reason is that the political situation was more complex than one might think. Kennedy did not have to worry about just one audience when he made his public remarks. There were multiple audiences that he had to be concerned with. There were people at home who felt the United States should do whatever was necessary to prevent Vietnam from falling to the Communists, but there were also people who very reluctant to see America get too involved in the war there. One also had to think about various audiences outside the United States—the Diem government, the South Vietnamese generals, the South Vietnamese people, North Vietnam and the Communist insurgents in the South, China, the Soviet Union, America’s allies in Europe and Asia, even major neutral powers like India.¹²⁴

This had a number of consequences. First of all, some of these concerns tended to cancel each other out. A concern with how the right would react if Vietnam were lost could be offset by a concern with how more cautious types in Congress, in the press, and even in the public at large would feel if America became too involved with the war there.¹²⁵ The net effect might be quite small. But there was an important indirect effect as well: the fact that various audiences had to be taken into account meant that public statements were ambiguous, probably deliberately so. The line Kennedy took in his famous televised interview with Walter Cronkite on September 2, 1963, is a good case in point. “In the final analysis,” he said, it was the people and the government of South Vietnam “who have to win or lose this struggle,” but he also said it would be a “great mistake” for America to withdraw.¹²⁶ What this meant was that if policy changed, the President had a rich palette of past statements to draw on to justify whatever course of action he now proposed to pursue. It also meant that any particular statement could be discounted with the argument that it had been directed at a particular audience and needed to be viewed in strategic and not substantive terms.

And not only was the situation complex, it was also very much in flux. Perhaps the South Vietnamese would pull together and, with America’s help, develop the ability to deal with the Communist insurgency essentially on their own. In that case there would be no problem. But there was also a very good chance that that might not happen. If, despite

¹²⁴ I would like to thank my colleague Arthur Stein for suggesting this point about multiple audiences.

¹²⁵ The evidence in fact shows that Kennedy was quite aware of both sorts of pressures. For Congressional reluctance to see the United States become more deeply involved (and the administration’s sensitivity to this factor), see White House meeting, November 11, 1961, *FRUS* 1961-63, 1:577 ([link](#)); Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 113; the clips from the May 7 and October 2, 1963, meetings cited in notes 105 and 106 above; Lyndon Johnson comments, Johnson meeting with key advisors, November 24, 1963, *FRUS* 1961-63, 4:636; “Where to in Vietnam?” *New York Times*, October 7, 1963, 30 ([link](#)). On the other hand, he also had to worry about pressure from the right. As John Prados notes, for example, he told his inner circle in August 1963 “that while Congress might get ‘mad’ at the U.S. sidling up to the Vietnamese generals, ‘they’ll be madder if Vietnam goes down the drain.” Prados, “Kennedy Considered Supporting Coup in South Vietnam” ([link](#)).

¹²⁶ Interview with Walter Cronkite, September 2, 1963, *PPP* 1963, 652 ([link](#)).

America's efforts, the South Vietnamese were ultimately unable to cope with the insurgency on their own, Kennedy would be in a better position to disengage, presumably by working out some sort of neutralization agreement to cover America's retreat. He was probably quite pessimistic about how the war was going in the last months before his assassination, but he was not absolutely certain that it would go poorly, and in any event was not so sure of his own estimate of the situation that he was prepared to simply impose a policy based on that estimate on his subordinates, many of whom took a more optimistic view.

And it also made sense in domestic political terms to wait until the situation had developed to the point where there was more of a consensus; substantive and domestic political considerations melded together in his mind. Even hawkish types understood that there was a limit to how much America could be expected to do. Logevall quotes a comment that appeared in 1964 in the *Washington Post*, which, as he notes, was "later a staunchly hawkish voice on the war": "The economic and military power of the United States . . . must not be wasted in a futile attempt to save those who do not wish to be saved."¹²⁷ When the balance of opinion had shifted far enough in that direction, he could always rationalize his earlier tough statements with the argument that it would have been wrong to write off South Vietnam prematurely—that tough statements had to be made for their deterrent effect on the other side and to encourage America's allies in that country. Perhaps some people would charge the government with reneging on its commitments, but that charge could be easily rebutted: 'What were we supposed to do? Make it clear from the outset that there was a limit to how far we were willing to go? That we were only half-committed to winning the war? We obviously had to take a tough public line at the time, but we could not allow that public stance to serve as a straitjacket—we had to be able to shift course as the situation became clearer.' A rational public might find that line of argument quite convincing.

And finally it is important to remember that the domestic political context was not just in flux, it was also malleable—that is, manipulable. Given how much public opinion counts for in democratic systems, political leaders have an enormous incentive to develop the skills needed to manage it effectively; indeed, as Bronwyn Lewis points, in democracies the system selects for advancement those politicians who are especially talented in this area.¹²⁸ The Kennedy administration certainly made a great effort to influence the way its policies were portrayed in the press, and the President made a point of personally cultivating the journalistic elite. He was very open with people like Arthur Krock and Jack Anderson about

¹²⁷ Logevall, *Choosing War*, 399. Note also an editorial, "Patron and Client," that appeared in that paper on September 11, 1963 ([link](#)). America, the *Post* argued, could not give a blank check to the client government in Saigon; it made no sense to support a government that could not mobilize its own people and would lose the war no matter what the United States did. It might still be too early to write off South Vietnam in that way, but there was a limit to how much the United States could tolerate, and the question of whether America should stay had to be kept "in a state of day-to-day review."

¹²⁸ She makes this point toward the end of her paper, "Nixon, Vietnam, and Audience Costs," which also appears in this roundtable.

what his basic thinking was, indeed more open than he was with his own Secretary of State. This was not just extremely flattering to the journalists who were treated that way, but it also made them more sympathetic to what the President was doing—more inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt, and probably to support him if and when the line he had taken with them in private later became the basis of a more public policy.¹²⁹ This kind of thing would thus make it easier to shift course when the time came.

And it was not just top journalists like Krock who were prepared to follow the President's lead on matters of foreign policy. The same thing was largely true in those days of the country as a whole. John Mueller gave a remarkable example of this in his book *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*. In a February 1968 public opinion poll, only 24% of the respondents said the United States should “discontinue the struggle and begin to pull out of Vietnam gradually in the near future,” but in a poll conducted a month later, 56% of the respondents said that if the government were to decide that the best thing would be to stop fighting “and gradually withdraw from Vietnam,” they would approve that “government-led withdrawal.” This sort of follower effect, Mueller wrote, means that the President “has more flexibility in foreign policy than might at first appear.”¹³⁰

Kennedy, of course, as a highly skilled professional politician, had a good feel for how much freedom of action he had. He had certainly learned from prior experience that the public would not necessarily hold it against him if he changed course and moderated his position on some issue. To give just one example: Kennedy, as David Coleman points out, did not in the final analysis pay “a political price for his decision to relax his demand for all Soviet combat troops to be withdrawn from Cuba.”¹³¹ And this was by no means the only case

¹²⁹ Thus note, for example, how Krock allowed himself to become a mouthpiece for the President, presenting in his October 12, 1961, column in the *New York Times*, as his own views the opinions the President had expressed in his interview with Krock the previous day. Compare Krock's notes of his October 11, 1961, interview with Kennedy cited above ([link](#)) with Arthur Krock, “In the Nation: When Policy Critics Propose No Substitute,” *New York Times*, October 12, 1961 ([link](#)). For another example of the manipulation of the *Times*, probably by Kennedy himself, see Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, 129-30. See also McGaffin and Knoll, *Anything but the Truth*, 151-52, and Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers*, 32.

¹³⁰ John Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley, 1973), 74, 90. He goes on to say that while this point has been “rarely noted by journalists or politicians,” it has often been made by public opinion analysts, and he gives five examples. One should note, however, that the Tet Offensive had begun at the end of January 1968 and by the time the second poll was taken the lessons of that episode had had more time to sink in; this might explain part of the discrepancy. But only part of it: in a June poll, 42% were in favor of a gradual withdrawal, well above the 24% who had favored it in February but below the 56% who favored a government-led withdrawal. For the June poll, see Bernadette Rigal-Cellard, *La Guerre du Vietnam et la société américaine* (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1991), 202.

¹³¹ David Coleman, “The Missiles of November, December, January, February . . . The Problem of Acceptable Risk in the Cuban Missile Crisis Settlement,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9, no. 3 (Summer 2007), 48 ([link](#)). For the earlier hard line, see for example Tad Szulc, “Rusk Is Insistent Russian Soldiers Get Out of Cuba,” *New York Times*, Dec. 11, 1962, 1 ([link](#)). It should be noted, however, that while the public rhetoric later became more moderate, the U.S. government continued to press the Soviets on this issue behind the scenes; the pressure, it felt, should be “kept low-key” for a while in order to make it easier for Khrushchev to withdraw. See NSC Standing Group meeting, April 30, 1963, *FRUS* 1961-63, 11:doc. 330 ([link](#)) and also doc.

where the president did not pay a political price at home for moderating his policy.¹³² The President's public statements were by no means a straitjacket. The bonds of public rhetoric were looser and weaker than many people think.

That, in any event, is one of the main conclusions to be drawn from an examination of Kennedy's Vietnam policy. To be sure, this was just one case, but it was not chosen at random. It was important because it was one of the few important cases one can point to where at least some historians and other scholars have developed arguments that have a distinct audience costs flavor—arguments that play a key role in supporting major historical interpretations. If even those arguments do not stand up in the light of the evidence, then that tells us something worth noting about the basic issue here. A study of this particular case not only suggests that political leaders are not nearly as constrained by their public statements as one might suppose, it also helps us understand why this is so.

But this exercise is of interest for another reason: it shows how in practice historical analysis can provide some insight into the sorts of issues political scientists are concerned with. A number of years ago Ian Lustick published an article on this very subject. Lustick's argument was that historical interpretations were neither "transparently true" nor "theoretically neutral"; but social scientists looking to test their theories would naturally pay special attention to historical accounts that tended to support their ideas. How then was one to deal with this problem of selection bias? Lustick thought social scientists could be more sensitive to it and more self-aware in their use of historians' writings, but he did not really think they could get very far by trying to figure out for themselves which historians' accounts were the most reliable. Instead, he proposed making a virtue out of necessity and using different historical interpretations as independent "data points": "If we treat our database as 'historiography' or 'histories' and not 'History,'" he argued, "then the actual number of 'cases' expands from the number of episodes to the number of accounts of those episodes," and the theorists would have a lot more grist for their mills.¹³³

323. For evidence of U.S. private pressure along these lines, see *ibid.*, docs. 142, 266, 280, 292, 326, 330. The feeling was that it was not to either side's "interest for it to appear that the Soviet withdrawal was the result of all the noise that had been going on recently about this matter." Thompson-Dobrynin meeting, February 21, 1963, *ibid.*, doc. 286 ([link](#)). And this approach worked. On October 10, 1963, Soviet foreign minister Gromyko informed Kennedy directly that "there were now no Soviet troops in Cuba"; *ibid.*, doc. 371 ([link](#)). This shows why governments might not want to exploit the audience costs mechanism in some cases, but it also suggests that even oblique references to what might happen once the public gets wind of the situation might be an effective way to exert pressure. See, for example, McCloy-Kuznetsov meeting, November 4, 1963, *ibid.*, doc. 142 ([link](#)).

¹³² For other examples, see Marc Trachtenberg, "Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis," *Security Studies* 21, no. 1 (March 2012), 28 ([link](#)), and Logevall, *Choosing War*, 40.

¹³³ Ian Lustick, "History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias," *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 3 (September 1996), 605, 613, 614, 616 ([link](#)).

In our field, the problem Lustick identified is of course very real: what people call ‘cherry-picking’ is quite common in international relations scholarship. And his point about the need for political scientists who use history to pay special attention to the fact that historians disagree among themselves about how particular subjects are to be interpreted is certainly well-taken. But the idea that political scientists are incapable of separating the wheat from the chaff—that they are not able to judge for themselves how historical interpretations stack up against each other, and should just take all of them, no matter how good or bad they are, as equally valid “cases available for the testing of theories”—is far too defeatist. If the goal is to do serious work, those assessments absolutely have to be made, and there is a method that can allow political scientists to make them.

That method is in principle quite simple. You first identify the core arguments in the main historical accounts dealing with the subject you are interested in; you then try to figure out which specific claims those basic arguments rest on; and you then see whether those key claims are adequately supported by the evidence. In assessing those claims, you pay special attention to the evidence presented by the authors who make them, but you are also interested in evidence you find in other works dealing with those issues, especially in works that interpret things differently. In important cases where you need to get to the bottom of a specific issue, you can even do highly targeted research in the primary sources, which today are often much more easily available than they were even ten or twenty years ago.¹³⁴

This approach will allow the political scientist, in effect, to let the historians do the heavy lifting, since one can assume that they themselves will be trying to make the strongest case they can for the interpretations they advance—that if there is powerful evidence to be found in support of a particular claim, they will provide it. And it is much easier to form an opinion by assessing historical arguments in this way than by just going into the primary sources and trying to construct an historical interpretation entirely on your own, for the same reason that it is much easier for a juror to form an opinion by evaluating the arguments the attorneys on both sides make than to be presented with a great mass of undigested evidence and be asked to reach a verdict on that basis alone. One can generally learn a great deal about a particular historical issue by analyzing the historiographical debate in which it is embedded; and that analysis can often shed real light on important issues of international relations theory. This sort of method is not hard to master, and political scientists might want to make more use of it.

¹³⁴ See Marc Trachtenberg, *A Guide to the Kennedy Tapes and Other Source Material Available Online Relating to U.S. Policy on Vietnam, 1961-63* ([link](#)).

For many years it was taken for granted that democracies operated at a distinct disadvantage in foreign affairs. In one particularly colorful rendering, George Kennan went so far as to compare the democratic state to “one of those prehistoric monsters with a body as long as this room and a brain the size of a pin,” so “slow to wrath” that “you practically have to whack his tail off to make him aware that his interests are being disturbed.”¹ In the 1990s, however, it occurred to a number of scholars that democracies might actually enjoy a bargaining advantage in international political life. The basic argument, as developed by James Fearon in an important 1994 article, was that democracies might be “better able to signal intentions and credibly commit to courses of action in foreign policy than nondemocracies” because the leaders of democratic states were more likely to pay a price at home if they reneged on the commitments they made. Fearon went so far as to suggest that the ability of governments to generate what he called “audience costs”—that is, to create situations in which they would pay a price with their domestic political constituency if they backed down in a crisis—played a “crucial” role in determining how international crises ran their course.²

That general line of argument had three major implications. The first, as Fearon put it, was that “democratic states should be less inclined to bluff or to try ‘limited probes’ in foreign policy—to make military threats and then back off if resistance is met.”³ The assumption here was that if a bluff was called and the government did not follow through on its threats, a substantial (and largely inescapable) price would have to be paid at home. Democratic states were thus less likely than their authoritarian rivals to make threats that might prove to be empty. Indeed, it was for this very reason that the threats they do make were thought to be especially credible. Kenneth Schultz then took the argument further in *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*. It was not just that a democratic government would pay a considerable price in domestic political terms if it were caught bluffing: in his view, such governments were structurally incapable of concealing their real intentions. “The government’s ability to conceal or misrepresent information,” he writes, “is highly constrained in democratic systems” because of the “transparency” of the policy process in such states.⁴ The democratic state, as he sees it, is not a “black box” but rather “a transparent or open box into which outside actors can look for clues about the government’s motivations and

¹ George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy: 1900-1950* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 66.

² James D. Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (September 1994): 577-79.

³ *Ibid.*, 578. See also James D. Fearon, “Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands Versus Sinking Costs,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 1 (February 1997): 68, 82.

⁴ Kenneth A. Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 6, 119. See also xiii, 7, 57, 239.

constraints”⁵ because “democratic institutions deprive the state of its ability to bluff effectively.” But a democratic state’s “diminished ability to engage in deception” is simply the price it pays for being better able to send credible signals: these two effects necessarily go hand in hand.⁶

The second implication is that democratic governments should understand that their ability to manage public opinion and control information so as to avoid the costs of bluffing is fairly limited. It might well be, as Schultz puts it, that democratic leaders “face short-term temptations to circumvent or suppress the constraints of democratic competition,” but “such efforts are unlikely to have the desired consequences.”⁷ He warns that “depriving the public and opposition parties of information or creating legal sanctions for dissent”⁸, might establish a precedent that could be used against the government party when it relinquishes power, and a rival state might interpret such repressive efforts as a sign of weakness. What this suggests is that democratic leaders should believe that their ability to manage public opinion is highly constrained.

The third implication is that if a democratic leader, despite all this, nonetheless makes a public threat but then fails to follow through on it, there ought to be major domestic political consequences for doing so. There is no way to ‘finesse’ the audience costs problem through clever tactics: the costs that are incurred in such a case are essentially inescapable. For if the problem could be finessed so that no costs were actually incurred, then there would be no way for the target government to distinguish a bluff from a genuine threat. If audience costs could be evaded, then even genuine threats would not be particularly credible: the whole mechanism outlined in the theory would simply not hold.

The goal of this paper is to gain insight into the general question of whether audience costs theory is valid by looking at a particular historical case: President Richard Nixon’s Vietnam policy, especially the decisions relating to America’s withdrawal from Vietnam in late 1972 and early 1973. Why this case? Throughout his first term in office, Nixon made a series of televised public statements that repeated over and over again the terms of an acceptable U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, the defining foreign policy issue of the time. These statements, visible to both his domestic and international audiences, functioned both as threats to North Vietnam and promises to the American public: the U.S. would not withdraw until South Vietnam’s freedom from Communist takeover was certain. But was that public policy in line with the real thinking of both Nixon and his main collaborator in this area, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger? Did Nixon and Kissinger believe, moreover, that they were locked into honoring these threats? Or did they feel that by

⁵ Ibid., 57.

⁶ Ibid., 240-43.

⁷ Ibid., 244.

⁸ Ibid.

resorting to a variety of tactics they could essentially finesse the accountability problem? Finally, when people began to sense that the actual policy Nixon pursued was not in line with what he had repeatedly promised about preserving South Vietnam's freedom, did he pay a large price in domestic political terms?

Rhetoric and Reality

It used to be taken for granted that the long American involvement in Vietnam was in large part to be understood in domestic political terms. As Kennan put the point in 1984: "Not only did no administration feel that it could afford to be seen as unwilling to make the effort to oppose a Communist takeover in Vietnam, but no administration, down to that of Mr. Nixon, having once engaged itself in such an effort and having been obliged to recognize that the effort was hopeless, dared to try to extract itself from the involvement at all, for fear of being pilloried by the silly charge that it had 'lost Vietnam'."⁹ Audience costs theory suggests that those successive governments were even more deeply locked into the policy by the public statements they had made. The implication is that the declaratory policy can be taken at face value: there could be no secret policy allowing for the collapse of South Vietnam to the Communists if public statements had committed the U.S. to the survival of a non-Communist regime there. In Nixon's case, the domestic political price he would have paid for backing down from those public statements would have been prohibitive—or at least that is what the theory would suggest.

Indeed, Nixon's public statements were unambiguous. He campaigned for the presidency in 1968 on a platform that promised as its "first priority foreign policy objective" an "honorable end to the war in Vietnam," a goal that he reiterated in eleven distinct televised addresses during his first term in office.¹⁰ But what did he mean by "honorable"? He declared repeatedly that the U.S. would not end its military campaign against North Vietnam until South Vietnam was safe from a takeover by the Communist forces that North Vietnam was supporting. A passage from a televised address to the American people he made in April 1970 was typical: "The enemy still demands that we unilaterally and unconditionally withdraw all American forces, that in the process we overthrow the elected Government of South Vietnam, and that the United States accept a political settlement that would have the practical consequence of the forcible imposition of a Communist

⁹ George Kennan, "Reflections on the Walgreen Lectures," in his *American Diplomacy*, 60th anniversary expanded edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 177.

¹⁰ Richard Nixon, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention" (August 8, 1968), The American Presidency Project at University of California, Santa Barbara, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25968>. For other statements along these lines, see *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1969* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1971): 907-908, 1025-26; 1970: 8-9, 373-74, 408-10, 825-27; 1971: 522-25; and 1972: 43, 104-05, 792. Also available through HeinOnline (www.heinonline.org). Henceforth cited in the form: PPP Nixon 1969: 907-908.

government upon the people of South Vietnam. That would mean humiliation and defeat for the United States. This we cannot and will not accept.”¹¹

Nixon’s position remained steadfast on this issue throughout his first term. In his speech accepting the Republican presidential nomination in August 1972, he continued to emphasize the need for “an honorable peace in Vietnam,” saying that he could accept no settlement that would impose a Communist takeover on South Vietnam any more than he could accept one that failed to return all American servicemen: “There are three things . . . that we have not and that we will not offer. We will never abandon our prisoners of war. Second, we will not join our enemies in imposing a Communist government on our allies—the 17 million people of South Vietnam. And we will never stain the honor of the United States of America.”¹²

The Paris Peace Agreement of January 1973, which, among other things, provided for America’s withdrawal from the war, allowed the North Vietnamese to keep troops in South Vietnam. Many people wondered, even at the time but especially subsequently, whether that meant the U.S. was resigning itself to an eventual Communist takeover of South Vietnam. If so, that would mean there was a big difference between Nixon’s declaratory policy on Vietnam and his actual policy. However, some leading scholars do not think U.S. policy at the time is to be interpreted in such terms. George Herring, the author of a standard history of America’s Vietnam policy, states flatly, for example, that Nixon “never abandoned his quest for ‘peace with honor.’”¹³ Larry Berman’s *No Peace, No Honor* also made the argument that Nixon never intended to allow South Vietnam to fall to the Communists. “Nixon’s plan,” Berman writes, was “to use the peace agreement as a pretext for continued American involvement in the war.”¹⁴ Communist violations would provide the basis for further military involvement: the B-52s could be used to “prop up” the government of South Vietnam, at least until Nixon left office. It was only the Watergate scandal and Nixon’s resignation in 1974 that “derailed the plan.”¹⁵

How does Berman go about supporting those claims? The bulk of the evidence comes from the records of what U.S. officials told the South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu and his representatives. The South Vietnamese were told repeatedly that if they signed the

¹¹ Richard Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Progress toward Peace in Vietnam,” (April 20, 1970), *PPP Nixon 1970*: 373-74.

¹² Richard Nixon, “Remarks on Accepting the Presidential Nomination of the Republican National Convention” (August 23, 1972), *PPP Nixon 1972*: 792.

¹³ George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 4th ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 313.

¹⁴ Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 228.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

agreement the Americans had worked out with the Hanoi regime, the U.S. would come to their aid with air power if the Communists ever tried to take over their country.¹⁶ But the evidence from such sources is inherently suspect. Nixon and Kissinger very much wanted the South Vietnamese government to sign the agreement; it would have been embarrassing for them if Thieu refused to sign and accused the United States of abandoning his country. Thieu thus had to be made, by a combination of carrots and sticks, to sign on to the settlement, and the most powerful incentive they offered was the U.S. promise to use air power against the North if the Communists attacked after the Americans withdrew. But Nixon and Kissinger were not being honest with Thieu, as Berman's own evidence suggests: Berman quotes one of Nixon's top assistants as saying that Nixon had made it clear that the central aim of this diplomacy was to "trick Thieu, if it looks like he's not going with us in regard to shooting his mouth off before the Inaugural."¹⁷

Beyond that, Berman does not present much evidence to show that Nixon was planning to use American air power to keep the Communists from taking over South Vietnam indefinitely. Perhaps his strongest piece of evidence is the record of a November 30, 1972 meeting Nixon held with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to brief them on the terms of the peace agreement then being negotiated.¹⁸ He instructed the military leaders to get ready to resume the bombing in the event that the agreement was violated, saying that such violations would provide the basis for a continuing American involvement in the war. As an internal document, this presumably carries more weight than the records of what the South Vietnamese were being promised, and the bulk of the evidence suggests that it is likely that Nixon intended to bomb the north if the Communists moved too quickly to take over the south.

However, the document does not show that Nixon was prepared to commit American power to the defense of South Vietnam on an indefinite basis—that is, it does not show that his goal was not simply to ensure that there would be a 'decent interval' between the American withdrawal and the likely collapse of South Vietnam, as many historians have suggested. Nixon certainly did not say at the November 30 meeting that achieving a 'decent interval' was his goal, but he could also scarcely have been expected to tell the military leaders directly that this was his policy even if it had been. It is evident from the notes of the meeting that Nixon was worried that military leaders might come out against the terms of the pending agreement, and he wanted to prevent them from doing so. Nixon noted in the meeting that General William Westmoreland, the former U.S. commander in Vietnam, felt that the U.S. should insist on a total withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces from the south, and Nixon made it clear that he did not want America's top military officers to take that kind of line. "It is important," he told the Chiefs, "that America's military express pride in the accomplishment of the proposed agreement. If all of the sacrifices are not to be in

¹⁶ Ibid., 153, 174-75, 187, 195-96, 198, 201-202, 217-18.

¹⁷ Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 227.

¹⁸ Ibid., 203-4.

vain, the military cannot criticize it.”¹⁹ With such concerns on his mind, it would be natural for Nixon not to want to give the JCS the impression that he was selling out South Vietnam. If he did not explicitly say that his hope was to secure a ‘decent interval,’ that in itself does not mean he was not thinking in those terms.

The issue thus boils down to the question of what we are to make of the ‘decent interval’ theory. If that theory were valid, it would mean that there was indeed a gap between Nixon’s actual and declared policy: all of his talk about ‘peace with honor’ and not abandoning South Vietnam to the Communists did not actually mean much in policy terms. It would imply that the government was not the prisoner of its own rhetoric—that the fear of incurring audience costs had not locked Nixon into a policy of making sure the Saigon regime did not fall.

Indeed, the evidence supporting the “decent interval” theory is quite impressive. Much of it was laid out in Jeffrey Kimball’s 2004 book *The Vietnam War Files*, and other scholars—Jussi Hanhimaki, Robert Dallek, Thomas Schwartz, and especially Ken Hughes—have presented additional material.²⁰ What these scholars have shown, first of all, is that beginning in 1971 Kissinger made it clear to both the Chinese and the Soviets that the United States was pursuing a ‘decent interval’ strategy. The Indochina section of Kissinger’s briefing book for his July 1971 trip to China included a passage outlining one of the points Kissinger was to make to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai: “On behalf of President Nixon I want to assure the prime minister solemnly that the United States is prepared to make a settlement that will truly leave the political evolution of South Vietnam to the Vietnamese alone . . . If the Vietnamese people themselves decide to change the present government, we shall accept it. But we will not make that decision for them.” In the margin of this section,

¹⁹ The document itself is in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Volume IX: 484-90. Given what we know from the tapes, it is clear that Nixon and Kissinger were deliberately misleading the JCS. It was only in March 1973 that one of the Chiefs, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, got wind of the fact that Kissinger was thinking in “‘decent interval’” terms. See Elmo Zumwalt, *On Watch: A Memoir* (New York: Quadrangle, 1976), 417-18. Note also Berman’s favorable reference (p. 133) to a comment made by the historian Mark Clodfelter about Nixon’s bombing efforts from April to October 1972. “Unlike Johnson,” Clodfelter wrote, “who used air power to help establish an independent, stable, non-communist South Vietnam, Nixon applied air power only to guarantee America’s continued withdrawal and to assure that the South did not face *imminent* collapse after the United States departure.” Emphasis added.

²⁰ Jeffrey Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); Jussi M. Hanhimaki, “Some More ‘Smoking Guns’? The Vietnam War and Kissinger’s Summitry with Moscow and Beijing, 1971-73,” *SHAFR Newsletter* (Dec. 2001); Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007); Thomas Schwartz, “‘Henry, . . . Winning an Election Is Terribly Important’: Partisan Politics in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 2 (April 2009); and Ken Hughes, “Fatal Politics: Nixon’s Political Timetable for Withdrawing from Vietnam,” *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 3 (June 2010). Key excerpts from nine documents relating to the “decent interval” question which originally appeared in *The Vietnam War Files* were published in the appendix to Kimball’s article “Decent Interval or Not? The Paris Agreement and the End of the Vietnam War,” *SHAFR Newsletter*, December 2003.

Kissinger wrote in by hand: “We want a decent interval. You have our assurance.”²¹ And Kissinger did, in the end, give the Chinese these assurances. “What we require,” Kissinger told Zhou on July 10, “is a transition period between the military withdrawal and the political evolution. Not so that we can re-enter, but so that we can let the people of Vietnam and other parts of Indochina determine their own fate . . . I have told the prime minister yesterday, and I am willing to repeat this, that if after complete American withdrawal, the Indochinese people change their governments, the U.S. will not interfere.”²²

Kimball, Dallek, and Hanhimaki quote similar comments from the records of Kissinger’s June 1972 visit to China. Here, Kissinger insisted that while an immediate relapse into violence would be viewed as unacceptable, a longer interval before the relapse would probably be tolerated: “Chou [Zhou] wanted to know what the United States would do if a civil war resumed after it withdrew its forces. Kissinger replied that if renewed fighting occurred at once, it would say, ‘This was just a trick to get us out and we cannot accept this.’ However, if there were a longer pause in the fighting, ‘it is much less likely that we would go back again, *much* less likely.’ Chou reminded him that he had said this in 1971. Kissinger did not dispute the point.”²³ The following day Kissinger told Zhou that “it should be self-evident that in the second term we would not be looking for excuses to re-enter Indochina. But still it is important that there is a *reasonable interval* between the agreement on the ceasefire, and a reasonable opportunity for political negotiation . . . the outcome of my logic is that *we are putting together a time interval between the military outcome and the political outcome.*”²⁴

The Soviets were given much the same message. Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev remarked at the Moscow summit in May 1972 that Kissinger had said during his secret visit to Moscow the previous month “that if there was a peaceful settlement in Vietnam [the Americans] would be agreeable to the Vietnamese doing whatever they want, having whatever they want after a period of time, say 18 months.”²⁵ As Kissinger told Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko at the May summit: “*All we ask is a degree of time so as to*

²¹ Excerpt from Kissinger’s briefing book for his July 1971 trip to China in Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, 187. Henceforth, documents reproduced in Kimball’s *Vietnam War Files* cited in the form: [Document name] in *VWF*, 194.

²² Kissinger-Zhou conversation, July 10, 1971 in *VWF*, 191.

²³ Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 405. Dallek’s emphasis.

²⁴ Hanhimaki, “Some More ‘Smoking Guns’?” Hanhimaki’s emphasis. See also Kissinger-Zhou conversations, July 9 and 10, 1971 in *VWF*, 188-93.

²⁵ Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 396.

leave Vietnam for Americans in a better perspective . . . We are prepared to leave so that a communist victory is not excluded, though not guaranteed."²⁶

The assurances that Kissinger gave those two powers (which they of course passed on to the North Vietnamese) were significant because they put America's credibility on the line. If subsequent American actions were not in line with those assurances, the U.S. government would pay a price in terms of how what its leaders said in private would be regarded by both the Soviets and the Chinese in the future. Indeed, Kissinger's assurances were credible precisely because those two governments understood that U.S. leaders could pursue a policy at odds with what they were saying in public—that is, that the audience costs they would incur by pursuing such a policy would not be prohibitive. This point, it is worth noting, stands audience costs theory on its head. But evidence of such assurances is far from the sole basis for the 'decent interval' theory. What was being said internally was also quite significant and indeed provides some of the strongest support for that interpretation.

Kimball has used the internal record to show that Nixon and Kissinger were privately thinking in 'decent interval' terms as early as the spring of 1971.²⁷ A memorandum he cites from Kissinger to Nixon, dated September 18, 1971, shows that U.S. leaders were still thinking in those terms later that year. Kissinger noted in that memo that he and the President had "recognized from the beginning" that the South Vietnamese might not be strong enough "to stand on their own within the time span that domestic opposition to American involvement would allow." Given that situation, it might be better to "end the war by an act of policy and leave the future of South Vietnam to the historical process." Such a settlement would enable America to withdraw and provide "a *healthy interval* for South Vietnam's fate to unfold."²⁸

The two most compelling pieces of evidence, however, come from the period in late 1972 when the agreement with North Vietnam was being negotiated. The first is from a tape of a conversation Nixon had with Kissinger on August 3, 1972. The President admitted that "South Vietnam probably can never even survive anyway" but wondered if America could "have a viable foreign policy if a year from now or two years from now North Vietnam gobbles up South Vietnam." Kissinger thought the answer was yes "if it looks as if it's the result of South Vietnamese incompetence." However, it would create a problem if "we now sell out" in a way that led to the fall of South Vietnam within three or four months. It was thus important to "find some formula that holds the thing together a year or two, after

²⁶ Hanhimaki, "Some More 'Smoking Guns'?" Hanhimaki's emphasis. See also Kissinger-Gromyko conversation, May 27, 1972 in *VWF*, 232-33.

²⁷ Nixon-Kissinger conversations, March 11, March 19, and June 23, 1971 in *VWF*, 144-50, 167-73 (esp. 145, 148, 168). See also Hughes, "Fatal Politics," 498-99.

²⁸ Memorandum, Kissinger to Nixon, September 18, 1971 in *VWF*, 197-98. Emphasis added.

which . . . Vietnam will be a backwater. If we settle it, say, this October, by January '74 no one will give a damn."²⁹

The second piece of evidence comes from the tape of a meeting Nixon and Kissinger had on October 6, 1972. As Hughes points out, this conversation came at a crucial moment: the deal being worked out with the North Vietnamese was on the verge of being finalized. However, its terms would probably lead to the eventual defeat of South Vietnam, and Nixon had at various times said both publicly and privately that he would not accept such a defeat. Kissinger, Hughes writes, needed to know "whether Nixon wanted him to make a 'decent interval' deal or not."³⁰

In that conversation, Kissinger compared the situation Nixon faced in Vietnam to that which former French President Charles de Gaulle had faced in Algeria: "As I look at it from a historical point of view, what did de Gaulle do in Algeria, who everyone thinks a great man? Basically, he made a settlement that turned the country over to his enemies . . . Why is he still considered a great man? Because he left on his own steam."³¹ Kissinger here emphasized the importance of Nixon seeming to have honored his threats to the North Vietnamese, even as he was negotiating an agreement that ran contrary to his declared policy of protecting South Vietnamese freedom. Nixon agreed with Kissinger, dismissing as "not really the important issues" the matters of South Vietnamese freedom and the return of the American prisoners of war. Instead, Nixon said, "the important issue is how the United States comes out . . . [and] that doesn't mean we have to succeed." As Hughes observes, "Nixon concluded that it was less important to succeed than to look successful."³² Nixon's primary concern is perhaps clearest in his outburst a few moments later: "How does the United States look in the way it handles this goddamn thing?"³³

Appearances were thus of critical importance, and in their private discussions Nixon and Kissinger took it for granted that the South Vietnamese would almost certainly eventually fall. "Before they [the South Vietnamese] collapse," Kissinger said, "they [the North Vietnamese] will offer us our prisoners for a withdrawal." Nixon's reply was unambiguous: "That's a deal we have to take, Henry." "That's right," Kissinger agreed, "but that will also

²⁹ Quoted in Schwartz, "Winning an Election," 173-74 and Hughes, "Fatal Politics," 500-501.

³⁰ Hughes, "Fatal Politics," 504.

³¹ Nixon-Kissinger conversation, October 6, 1972, Conversation 793-06, Presidential Recordings Program at the Miller Center [MC] of the University of Virginia, <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/presidentialrecordings/nixon/1972/10>. The relevant excerpt begins about 19 minutes, 15 seconds into the audio file. Henceforth, Miller Center conversations cited in the form: Nixon-Kissinger conversation, November 2, 1972, Conversation 034-542, MC.

³² Hughes, "Fatal Politics," 505.

³³ Nixon-Kissinger conversation, October 6, 1972, Conversation 793-06, MC. The relevant excerpt begins about 22 minutes, 20 seconds into the audio file. See also Hughes, "Fatal Politics," 506.

collapse the South Vietnamese—except we won't be so responsible for the whole settlement." Nixon was more than prepared to accept such an arrangement: "Well, if they're that collapsible, maybe they just have to be collapsed! That's another way to look at it. We've got to remember, we cannot—we cannot—keep this child sucking at the tit when the child is four years old. You know what I mean? There comes a time."³⁴

The sources are not absolutely unambiguous, but the case supporting the 'decent interval' theory is strong and quite compelling. Indeed, most of the historians who have studied this issue closely have concluded that the Nixon Administration, certainly from mid-1972, was in fact thinking in "decent interval" terms.³⁵ Even Kissinger himself, after decades of denial, has recently conceded—almost—that the Nixon Administration pursued a "decent interval" exit strategy.³⁶ It thus seems quite clear that U.S. leaders were able to pursue a policy that differed radically from the line they had for years taken in public. They were not dissuaded from doing so by the prospect of the audience costs they could incur when the discrepancy between the threatened policy and the policy actually pursued became clear.

Indeed, Nixon's willingness to deceive the American public for his own political benefit is particularly evident in a conversation which took place the evening after Kissinger made his famous announcement that "peace is at hand" in Vietnam. In that meeting, Kissinger asked Nixon if he got a good reaction to the announcement of the pending agreement while speaking to crowds in West Virginia and Kentucky in the course of last-minute campaigning efforts earlier that day. Nixon tells him that the response was so euphoric it nearly "took the roof off," and later offered a telling explanation: "Well, of course, the point is, they think you've got peace!" He can be heard laughing for a moment on the audio recording. "But that's all right. Let them think it!"³⁷

³⁴ Ibid. The relevant excerpt begins about 10 minutes into the audio file. See also Hughes, "Fatal Politics," 505.

³⁵ In addition to the works by Kimball, Hughes, Dallek, and Hanhimaki cited above, see also Edwin Moïse's contribution to the H-Diplo forum on the special issue of *Diplomatic History* on "The Politics of Troop Withdrawal" (the issue in which the Hughes article had appeared). The Moïse review appeared in H-Diplo on 14 June 2010 (<http://www.h-diplo.org/reviews/PDF/AR265c.pdf>). Note especially p. 3.

³⁶ Jeffrey P. Kimball, H-Diplo review of the Conference on "The American Experience in Southeast Asia, 1946-1975," H-Diplo Conference Reports and Reviews, 27 July 2011, <http://www.h-diplo.org/reports/PDF/AmericanExperience-SEAsia-Kimball.pdf>. As Kimball points out, although Kissinger at the conference "denied this was the case, he conceded several points: historical documentation confirms the administration made 'statements' about the decent interval; the Paris settlement 'was a precarious agreement'; the administration was 'willing to abide by the outcome of . . . [a post-settlement] political contest'; and 'we could not commit ourselves for all eternity to maintain a government against all conceivable contingencies.' He concluded by saying, 'so in that sense, the decent interval phrase has a meaning.'" A transcript and video of Kissinger's remarks can be found at <http://history.state.gov/conferences/2010-southeast-asia/videos-transcripts>.

³⁷ Nixon-Kissinger conversation, October 26, 1972, Conversation 032-063, MC. The relevant excerpts begin about 40 seconds and 2 minutes, 55 seconds into the audio file.

Managing the Problem

The basic theoretical argument that democracies enjoy a bargaining advantage in international disputes rests on the assumption that audience costs are automatically generated whenever leaders make public threats. The domestic costs of reneging on such threats are assumed to be inescapable: it is taken for granted that political leaders cannot avoid suffering these consequences by an appropriate choice of tactics. This is a crucial point, because if democratic leaders could finesse the audience-costs problem by manipulating public opinion, then their ability to bluff would be much greater, and the threats they made would not be especially credible—at least, they would be no more credible than those made by their authoritarian rivals.

The archival record reveals beyond reasonable doubt that Nixon and Kissinger thought they could pursue a policy—the ‘decent interval’ policy—that was at odds with the line the President had repeatedly taken in public. This is the central conclusion to be drawn from the evidence presented in the previous section. But why did they think they would be able to do this? Or, more to the point, why did they not feel that the audience costs that would be incurred for doing so would be prohibitive?

It was not that Nixon and Kissinger thought public opinion could be ignored with impunity: they knew full well how much it mattered. The archival record, however, shows that they thought they could limit the price they would have to pay by employing a particular set of tactics. In fact, the costs could be kept so low that they would have a relatively free hand to pursue the disengagement strategy they had come to view as essential by late 1972. Those tactics fall into four categories: deception; timing; framing; and shifting blame.

Deception. Implicit in the adoption of a decent interval exit strategy was a desire to intentionally deceive Nixon’s domestic audience. In other words, one of the goals of that strategy was to muddy the waters—to make it seem like America’s responsibility for what was likely to happen in South Vietnam was less direct than it really was.

The desire on the part of Nixon and Kissinger to conceal the shortcomings of the peace agreement they had negotiated with North Vietnam is perhaps most evident in their extensive efforts to silence Thieu. The breakthrough in the negotiations had come on October 8, 1972, when the North Vietnamese presented Kissinger with a draft agreement that contained an important compromise: they had dropped their demand that Thieu resign. North Vietnam remained intransigent, however, on one point that Thieu and his advisers believed would lead to South Vietnam’s eventual defeat. The South Vietnamese territories that had been taken by either the North Vietnamese army or the South Vietnamese Communists would remain in their possession at the time of the ceasefire.³⁸

Thieu felt betrayed by the terms of this draft agreement. He made this clear to Kissinger, who flew to discuss its terms with him on October 21: “Now that you recognize the

³⁸ Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, 249-50.

presence of North Vietnam here, the South Vietnamese people will assume that we have been sold out by the United States and that North Vietnam has won the war.”³⁹ On October 24, Thieu delivered a speech to the South Vietnamese people on both radio and television that warned that the terms of the pending settlement would lead eventually to the bloody defeat of South Vietnam. On the heels of this address, the North Vietnamese also made public the tentative terms of the agreement. On October 26, Kissinger held the peace conference in which he famously told the American public that “we believe that peace is at hand.”⁴⁰

Kissinger’s announcement was deceptive: it implied not only that the United States was ending its participation in the war, but also that peace was coming to South Vietnam as well. Of course, that scarcely corresponded to Kissinger’s own private assumption that South Vietnam would eventually fall after the United States withdrew. The announcement that peace was “at hand” also provided an illusion of triumph to the American public in the final weeks before the 1972 election. Nixon was pleased by the positive reception Kissinger’s announcement received in the American media, and Kissinger told him it had likely clinched the election. He told the President that one of Nixon’s political advisors had called him “and he thinks that we’ve wiped McGovern [the Democratic presidential candidate] out now.”⁴¹

Nixon and Kissinger sought to keep Thieu’s accusations of betrayal a secret from the American public even after the President’s landslide reelection on November 7. In the weeks that followed, the two men spoke increasingly contemptuously of their ally and repeatedly threatened that if he would not agree to support the agreement, they would make a bilateral deal with North Vietnam alone. On November 15, Kissinger told Nixon that “Goddamn Thieu is again going through his stalling act” in still refusing to support the pending agreement. “I think what we should do is get the best agreement we can next week. Then, if he doesn’t accept it, go bilaterally with Hanoi. It would be a terrible thing.”⁴² Three days later, Nixon related to White House Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman what his response had been to Kissinger’s news that Thieu was still balking: “I told Henry, ‘Well, just go right ahead to Paris.’ Get the very best deal he could, and then we’re just going to, in my

³⁹ Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 167.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 171-72.

⁴¹ Nixon-Kissinger conversation, October 26, 1972, Conversation 032-063, MC. The relevant excerpt is at the start of the audio file.

⁴² Nixon-Kissinger conversation, November 15, 1972, Tape 153-028, Nixontapes.org, edited by Luke Nichter [LN], <http://nixontapes.org/hak.html>. The relevant excerpt is at the start of the audio file. Henceforth, tapes from Luke Nichter’s collection cited in the form: Nixon-Kissinger conversation, December 13, 1972, Tape 028-987, LN.

opinion, then say to Thieu, ‘This is it. You don’t want to go? Fine. Then we’ll make our own deal, and you’ll have to paddle your own canoe’.”⁴³

Considering that Nixon’s public commitment to South Vietnam’s freedom was his main justification for the war’s continuation throughout his entire first term, it is striking that Nixon and Kissinger were willing to entertain making a bilateral agreement with North Vietnam if Thieu would not sign on. Far from feeling forced by his prior public threats to Hanoi to honor his commitment to South Vietnam—as audience costs theory might lead one to think—Nixon clearly believed that the best option was to exit the war via a political settlement that he knew would probably lead to the eventual fall of the Saigon regime.

However, Nixon also knew that a public break with Thieu had to be avoided if at all possible. Brokering an agreement that excluded the United States’ own ally would naturally suggest to both the American people and the international community that Nixon had reneged on his many public promises about South Vietnam’s freedom. This is evident in Nixon’s response to Kissinger’s remark on November 15 that a bilateral agreement with Hanoi alone would be “a terrible thing”: “Well, it would be a terrible shock, too! Let’s face it. We don’t want to do that. Because of the fact that, in effect, they’d say well, you could have done that all along.”⁴⁴

In the end, Nixon and Kissinger went to great lengths to avoid making a settlement that excluded Thieu, extending the talks with North Vietnam through early December as they tried to address the points that most bothered him. On December 17, the eve of the Linebacker II operation (better known as the “Christmas bombings” of North Vietnam), Kissinger told Nixon that “our strategy now has to be to turn on both of them,” meaning both North and South Vietnam. A letter would be sent to Thieu pressuring him to support an agreement in early January, after the bombings. Nixon agreed that coercive measures were needed now that his reassurances to Thieu had failed: “Fine, fine. I’ve tried the other [tactic, meaning reassurances], and now we’ll try this one. I don’t want him [Thieu] to take any heart from the fact that we’re hitting the North, that’s my point.”⁴⁵

Kimball presents several excerpts from this letter in *The Vietnam War Files*. The letter, which Kissinger evidently drafted but which was signed by Nixon and delivered in person to Thieu by Kissinger’s deputy, General Alexander Haig, contained both a carrot and a stick. On one hand, Nixon pointed out that the bombings “show what I am prepared to do in case of violation of the agreement.” On the other hand, Nixon warned Thieu of his “irrevocable

⁴³ Transcript of Nixon-Haldeman conversation, November 18, 1972, Conversation 33-98, LN. A PDF of the transcript is available at <http://nixon tapes.org/fifthchron.html>. The relevant excerpt is on page 9.

⁴⁴ Nixon-Kissinger conversation, November 15, 1972, Tape 153-028, LN. The relevant excerpt begins about two minutes into the audio file.

⁴⁵ Nixon-Kissinger conversation, December 17, 1972, Tape 034-114, LN. The relevant excerpt begins about 14 minutes into the audio file.

intention to proceed, preferably with your cooperation but, if necessary, alone” when negotiations resumed after the bombings.⁴⁶

When Thieu still had not agreed to the settlement as of January 20, 1973, Nixon and Kissinger developed a strategy to trick Thieu into signing the agreement. In a private conversation, Kissinger suggested to Nixon that they “give him [Thieu] an explanation why he has to answer tomorrow.” Nixon responded with a plan to dupe Thieu into signing by threatening him that all funding might be cut off to South Vietnam otherwise: “Why don’t you say this, that . . . I am convinced from having talked to Senator Goldwater and Senator Stennis, who are his major supporters in the Senate, that they will throw up their hands, that they will in effect inform me that the Congress will not go along on further aid [to South Vietnam] unless he goes along on Tuesday . . . You see, he doesn’t need to know whether we have [the meeting] or not. Is that going too far?” Nixon then allowed his genuine anger at Thieu to show: “In other words, I don’t know whether the threat goes too far or not, but I’d do any damn thing, that is, or to cut off his head if necessary.”⁴⁷

Thieu, convinced that he then had no choice, consented to initial the agreement, which saved Nixon and Kissinger the embarrassment of having Thieu charge Nixon with having betrayed the very ally that the war had supposedly been waged to protect. Instead, Nixon’s peace announcement presented the settlement as a true victory that achieved ‘peace with honor’ and had “the full support of President Thieu and the Government of the Republic of Vietnam.” Nixon went on to say, “Now that we have achieved an honorable agreement,” “let us be proud that America did not settle for a peace that would have betrayed our allies . . . or that would have ended the war for us but would have continued the war for the 50 million people of Indochina.”⁴⁸ Given that not only Thieu but also Nixon and Kissinger themselves privately believed that North Vietnam would eventually violate the agreement, and that South Vietnam in all probability could not survive without massive U.S. aid that Congress was unlikely to give, these comments were disingenuous at best and outright deceptive at worst. The agreement had anything but Thieu’s full support, and its terms secured only a finite time interval before the South Vietnamese people would again find themselves at war.

Timing. Nixon’s and Kissinger’s efforts to use deception to avoid potential audience costs went hand in hand with their use of a second tactic: controlling the timing of certain key events relative to one another. Of special interest are their efforts (a) to make sure that the peace agreement was signed at a time which would most benefit Nixon’s reelection chances, and (b) to guarantee that the collapse of South Vietnam, which was viewed as

⁴⁶ Letter, Nixon to Thieu, December 17, 1972 in *VWF*, 276-77.

⁴⁷ Nixon-Kissinger conversation, January 20, 1973, Conversation 036-021, MC. This audio file is found most easily at <http://millercenter.org/presidentialclassroom/exhibits/cut-off-his-thieus-head>, and the relevant excerpt begins approximately 4 minutes, 30 seconds into it.

⁴⁸ Richard Nixon, “Address to the Nation Announcing Conclusion of an Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam,” (January 23, 1973), *PPP* Nixon 1973: 18-20.

likely, would come well after American forces had withdrawn from that country. (The latter goal was of course implicit in the ‘decent interval’ strategy.)

When it became clear in early October 1972 that an agreement was on the horizon, but on terms that Thieu would likely see as a betrayal, Nixon began to push Kissinger to delay finalizing the settlement until after the presidential election on November 7 in an effort to avoid compromising what was expected to be a landslide reelection. On October 6, Kissinger told Nixon that “I actually think we can settle it . . . but I also think Thieu is right, that our terms will eventually destroy him . . . Given their weakness, their disunity, it will happen, and it will be the consequence.” But a few minutes later Nixon told him: “I don’t want it [the settlement] before the election . . . The more that we can stagger past the election, the better.” Kissinger’s instinct was that a successful withdrawal settlement would help clinch an election victory, but Nixon focused instead on the potential domestic costs of making a settlement that might be condemned as a betrayal by America’s ally. When Kissinger asked him, “You do not want it before the election?” Nixon told him, “I don’t want it before the election with a Thieu blow-up. If we do, it’s going to hurt us very badly.”⁴⁹

Kimball presents additional evidence showing that the Nixon Administration deliberately prolonged the withdrawal discussions with North Vietnam so that any potential ‘blow-ups’ with Thieu would not impact the election. In *The Vietnam War Files*, he reproduces a cable that Haig sent to Kissinger on October 22, 1972, as the talks with the North Vietnamese that had begun on October 8 concluded with the development of a draft agreement that satisfied both parties. The first words of Haig’s cable reveal that the administration had been expecting an agreement to come together soon and frankly referred to its policy of delaying the talks until the election was over: “We have long anticipated this outcome and anticipated before you left Washington that its likelihood was quite high. We had also concluded that in the event Thieu remained intransigent that the best interest of all would be served by using this intransigence to get a delay until after November 7.”⁵⁰

In accordance with the ‘decent interval’ strategy, Nixon and Kissinger also wanted to make sure that a certain period of time had elapsed—“a year or two years,” as Kissinger told Nixon on August 3, 1972—before South Vietnam eventually fell.⁵¹ If a ‘decent interval’ could be achieved, then Nixon and Kissinger believed they could escape the potential audience costs of being held responsible for renegeing on their public commitments and

⁴⁹ Nixon-Kissinger conversation, October 6, 1972, Conversation 793-06, MC. The relevant excerpts begin about 8 minutes and 11 minutes, 30 seconds into the audio file. It is worth noting that concerns about timing, and especially about the election, had long been a factor in the Nixon Administration’s calculations about Vietnam policy. See, for example, the evidence cited in Anthony Lewis, “Guilt for Vietnam”; Henry Kissinger, “Hanoi, Not Nixon, Set Pace of Vietnam Peace”; and Anthony Lewis, “The Lying Machine”; *The New York Times*, May 30, June 3, and June 6, 1994.

⁵⁰ Cable, Haig to Kissinger, October 22, 1972 in *VWF*, 255.

⁵¹ Hughes, “Fatal Politics,” 501.

abandoning South Vietnam to the Communists. Many of their actions were framed with this consideration in mind.

It seems, for example, that one of the chief motivations for the “Christmas bombings” of December 1972 was to help make sure that there would be a ‘decent interval’ by deterring the Communists from moving too quickly to take over the South.⁵² JCS Chairman Admiral Thomas Moorer told a Congressional Committee in January 1973 that he thought that North Vietnam’s “war-making potential, and particularly their ability to support the land battle in the South” had been “very heavily degraded.” “It would,” he believed, “take them over a year to restore all those yards to their capacity, capability, and flexibility that they had before.”⁵³ Nixon and Kissinger apparently hoped that “by hurting North Vietnam’s war-making ability in a relatively brief but massive campaign,” the bombing operation, as Kimball puts it, “would give Thieu a lease on life and assist in the creation of a decent interval.”⁵⁴ Berman quotes Kissinger saying two months later that America had to be prepared to renew the bombing in order to deter the North Vietnamese from launching an offensive “by the end of the year”—for if they attacked and succeeded, Kissinger wrote, then “the whole basis of the President’s policy” would be undermined.⁵⁵

Framing. To minimize the political price they might have to pay for agreeing to terms that they knew would probably doom the Saigon regime, Nixon and Kissinger knew it was important to do what they could to frame the Paris Peace Agreement as a victory. It was important, from Nixon’s point of view in particular, that the agreement not come across as a simple trade of a U.S. withdrawal for the release of American prisoners of war. If that was the way people understood it, he could be attacked by the Democrats for prolonging the war unnecessarily—for accepting the sort of agreement that he had been unwilling to accept two years earlier.⁵⁶ The record shows that the Nixon Administration gave

⁵² In addition to ensuring a decent interval by deterring the North Vietnamese from violating the agreement within the year, a second motivation of the Christmas bombings seems to have been to silence Nixon’s right-wing political opponents who objected to abandoning South Vietnam on terms that would likely lead to its defeat. The mere fact of the bombing—the fact, as Nixon put it in a telephone conversation with Kissinger on the eve of the Linebacker II operation, that the North Vietnamese were going to be given “a hell of a whack”—tended to neutralize the charge that the administration was simply abandoning South Vietnam to the Communists. This point is discussed further in the next section. See also: Transcript of Nixon-Kissinger phone conversation, December 17, 1972, 2nd part, Digital National Security Archive [DNSA] Kissinger Telephone Calls collection, item ka09162. The whole tape (Tape 034-114) is available on the Nixon Library website, and an audio clip containing this particular segment is available on the DNSA website (<http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>).

⁵³ “Bombings of North Vietnam,” *Hearings before Subcommittees of the Committee on Appropriations House of Representatives*, 93rd Congress, 1st session, January 9, 1973 in *VWF*, 280.

⁵⁴ Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, 275.

⁵⁵ Kissinger to Scowcroft, March 21, 1973, quoted in Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 255.

⁵⁶ Transcript of Nixon-Kissinger conversation, December 17, 1972, DNSA, item ka09161, p. 9.

considerable thought to how best to frame the settlement as a victory and was confident that the proper framing could go a long way toward avoiding the audience costs that might otherwise have been incurred.

This concern with framing is clear even from the public record. When it became evident to Nixon that he probably could not prevent North Vietnam from eventually taking over South Vietnam as he had both threatened and promised, he began publicly recasting what constituted a successful exit from Vietnam. In Nixon's televised speeches in early 1970, for instance, he vowed not to accept a settlement that would have the "practical consequence" of South Vietnam falling to the Communist uprising, but he had softened that line by mid-1972. On August 23, 1972, as he accepted the Republican presidential nomination, Nixon instead said merely that "we will not join our enemies in imposing a Communist government on our allies."⁵⁷ As Jane Holl observes in her dissertation on the role of domestic politics in the end of the Vietnam War, such shifts in rhetoric amounted to "a subtle retreat from the official position that the United States would be the guarantor of South Vietnam's sovereignty."⁵⁸ By late 1972, the American public was no longer used to hearing promises that South Vietnam's freedom would be preserved at all costs. Instead, the public had grown accustomed to hearing that a settlement that merely left Thieu in power for the time being would be considered successful. Nixon had effectively reframed as acceptable an outcome that was patently unacceptable by his own publicly stated standards of two years earlier.

In addition to such rhetorical shifts, Nixon and Kissinger carefully crafted their public statements to present the settlement as something that had been actively sought and freely chosen by the United States, rather than one whose terms Nixon had only agreed to because he knew he could achieve nothing better. Kissinger often emphasized the importance of such strategic framing efforts in his private conversations with the President; his October 6 comment to Nixon about the lessons of de Gaulle's exit from Algeria is a good case in point. Kissinger believed that if Nixon could also frame the U.S. withdrawal as something entered into of his own volition rather than as something forced on him by military stalemate, then history might judge him as favorably as it had judged de Gaulle.⁵⁹

A January 18, 1973 memorandum from Deputy Assistant to the President Dwight Chapin to Haldeman outlined an explicit plan about how to present the imminent peace settlement in public. One of the key tactics that Chapin repeatedly emphasized in the document is that of preempting negative publicity by framing the settlement positively as an act of Nixon's own

⁵⁷ Nixon, "Address" (April 20, 1970), *PPP Nixon 1970*: 373-74 and "Remarks" (August 23, 1972), *PPP Nixon 1972*: 792.

⁵⁸ Jane Ellen Kyrstyn Holl, "From the Streets of Washington to the Roofs of Saigon: Domestic Politics and the Termination of the Vietnam War" (doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, 1989), 289.

⁵⁹ Nixon-Kissinger conversation, October 6, 1972, Conversation 793-06, MC. The relevant excerpt (quoted in the previous section) begins about 19 minutes, 15 seconds into the audio file.

volition before others could frame it negatively as something that had been forced upon him. “Unless we plan to mark this moment down in history as ours,” Chapin wrote, “it will pass us by, or worse, be appropriated by others.” The document goes on to outline both short- and long-term “media-plans” that were “aimed at limiting the media’s own inclinations and initiatives.” The aim was to help shape “the reportorial and emotional context of the event.” The plans called for administration spokesmen to stress certain basic themes which echoed what the President had said in public: that Nixon had achieved “peace with honor”; that the “silent majority who stood with the president for an honorable peace” deserved credit for the settlement; that had the president’s opponents in Congress prevailed, one would be witnessing a “bloodbath”—the “false peace of an American surrender” and not the “honorable peace” Nixon had achieved.⁶⁰

Chapin understood that framing—he actually used that term—was of fundamental importance, and that the administration had to strike before its opponents did. The importance of framing the settlement the right way was explicitly recognized in the document: “Whether or not we succeed in the first few days of peace in framing such a context,” he wrote, “will largely determine the direction taken by what will suddenly become pressing domestic issues in the wake of peace—issues ranging from the ethics of dissent and amnesty, to nothing less than the future role and scope of American foreign policy in the world.”⁶¹ It is clear that Nixon, Kissinger, and their advisors believed that such framing efforts could help minimize any potential domestic audience costs that might be incurred.

Shifting Blame. To frame the agreement as a victory implied that the administration had to find a way to avoid audience costs if and when South Vietnam was defeated. A collapse—even one that took place after a decent interval—would inevitably raise the question of whether the agreement Nixon negotiated had been so flawed that in agreeing to it he had effectively walked away from his many public threats to North Vietnam during his first term. To avoid these potential costs, the Nixon Administration planned the use a fourth tactic: blaming others for South Vietnam’s eventual fall.

The central target of the Nixon Administration’s scapegoating was “the Left,” and particularly its representatives in Congress. As Kimball puts it, the administration wanted to make sure it could “saddle [Nixon’s] antiwar critics with responsibility for failure in Vietnam—if, in fact, Thieu’s government fell.”⁶² That argument was plausible, given that the Democrat-controlled 93rd Congress not only began its session on January 2, 1973 “with

⁶⁰ Memorandum, Chapin to Haldeman, January 18, 1973 in *VWF*, 288-90.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Jeffrey P. Kimball, “Out of the Primordial Cultural Ooze: Inventing Political and Policy Legacies about the U.S. Exit from Vietnam,” *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 3 (June 2010): 586.

several overwhelming caucus votes against continued funding for the war,”⁶³ as Holl notes in her dissertation, but also went on to pass the Case-Church Amendment in June 1973 prohibiting a resumption of military action in Vietnam without congressional approval and the War Powers Act in November 1973 limiting presidential power to commit the U.S. to war without congressional permission. Nixon and Kissinger knew that if Thieu’s government fell with Congress having refused to renew American military involvement in the war, then Congress could easily be blamed for the collapse that both men suspected was inevitable.

Nixon’s plan to blame the Left if South Vietnam collapsed had by no means been kept secret. Indeed, as Katz notes, as early as 1971 Nixon had “warned prominent Democrats that if anti-war legislation ‘tied his hands’ and let South Vietnam fall, ‘he would have no choice but to go directly to the people . . . taking on Congress and blaming them for this situation.’”⁶⁴ The Nixon Administration’s “media-plans” for shaping public perceptions of the Paris Peace Agreement in January 1973 also singled out Nixon’s “opponents in Congress” as targets for the media campaign, thus setting the stage for later accusations that it was the Left-controlled Congress—not themselves—who in the end had betrayed South Vietnam.⁶⁵

To a lesser extent, Nixon and Kissinger also considered two other candidates for public blame: the liberal media and the South Vietnamese themselves. The historian Robert McMahon shows that Nixon and Kissinger’s frustrations with the media’s influence on public opinion began as early as 1969. On September 10, Kissinger told Nixon that public support for his Vietnam strategy “might soon evaporate”: “‘Particularly significant,’ he [Kissinger] pointed out, ‘is the clear opposition of many ‘moderate’ leaders of opinion, particularly in the press and in the East (e.g. *Life Magazine*).’”⁶⁶ Nixon, writing to Haldeman on January 25, 1973, wanted the press specifically named alongside Congress as one of two major political forces who had worked against him: he “instructed Kissinger to emphasize in public statements ‘that our opponents in Congress and in the media wanted to end the war in Vietnam with dishonor and what amounted really to an abject surrender and defeat for the United States.’”⁶⁷

⁶³ Holl, “From the Streets,” 337.

⁶⁴ Andrew Z. Katz, “Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: The Nixon Administration and the Pursuit of Peace with Honor in Vietnam,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 506.

⁶⁵ Memorandum, Chapin to Haldeman, January 18, 1973 in *VWF*, 290.

⁶⁶ Robert J. McMahon, “The Politics, and Geopolitics, of American Troop Withdrawals from Vietnam, 1968-1972,” *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 3 (June 2010): 479.

⁶⁷ Chester Pach, “‘Our Worst Enemy Seems to Be the Press’: TV News, the Nixon Administration, and U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Vietnam, 1969-1973,” *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 3 (June 2010): 565.

Privately, Nixon and Kissinger also discussed the possibility of blaming South Vietnam itself for its eventual demise. As noted earlier, Nixon expressed to Kissinger on August 3, 1972 his suspicion that “South Vietnam probably can never even survive anyway” and asked Kissinger whether the U.S. could avoid humiliation if and when Saigon collapsed. Kissinger responded with a suggestion that—assuming the United States got the decent interval it had insisted on—the South Vietnamese themselves could be faulted. “If a year or two years from now,” he said, “North Vietnam gobbles up South Vietnam, we can have a viable foreign policy if it looks as if it’s the result of South Vietnamese incompetence.”⁶⁸ This sentiment is perhaps also implicit in Nixon’s comments quoted above about how if the South Vietnamese are “that collapsible, maybe they’ve got to be collapsed!” and about how “we [the United States] cannot—we cannot—keep this child sucking at the tit when the child is four years old.”⁶⁹

Congress, however, was the main target, and for many years was blamed for the collapse of the South Vietnamese regime in 1975. “We won the war in Vietnam,” for example, Nixon wrote in 1985, “but we lost the peace. All that we had achieved in twelve years of fighting was thrown away in a spasm of congressional irresponsibility.” Congress, in his view, had snatched “defeat from the jaws of victory.”⁷⁰ “Our defeat,” he wrote, “was so great a tragedy because after the peace agreement of January 1973 it was so easily avoidable . . . But Congress legislated an end to our involvement. It also legislated the defeat of our friends in the same stroke.”⁷¹ This, of course, was rather different from the line he had taken in private in 1972, when (as noted above) he had admitted to Kissinger that “South Vietnam probably can never even survive anyway.”

Using these four key tactics—deception, timing, framing, and shifting blame—the Nixon Administration attempted to minimize the potential political costs of the Paris Peace Agreement. They knew that they had negotiated a settlement that was not in line with the position Nixon had taken in public, but they believed that by using various tactics the audience-costs problem could be evaded. Of course, if a rational adversary knew, or even just suspected, that this was what U.S. leaders thought, then there would be no reason for it to take U.S. public statements all that seriously. If the audience-costs problem were manageable—or even if it were just believed to be manageable—public statements would not be costly signals, and the extent to which democratic leaders would enjoy a bargaining advantage by making them would be fairly limited.

A Price for Dishonesty?

⁶⁸ Hughes, “Fatal Politics,” 501.

⁶⁹ Nixon-Kissinger conversation, October 6, 1972, Conversation 793-06, MC. The relevant excerpt begins about 10 minutes into the audio file.

⁷⁰ Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 165.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 210.

Were the Nixon Administration's efforts to limit the political costs of the agreement even necessary? Robert Jervis made the point in a slightly different context that if Nixon and Kissinger had just been "honest with the American people, they might have been able to gain more domestic support, adopt a stronger policy, and minimize postwar recriminations. But their worst nature got the better of them."⁷² Is it possible that the tactics those two leaders used in late 1972 and early 1973 were not necessary—that they did not help Nixon and Kissinger achieve their ultimate goal of exiting the war with their public support intact? Perhaps the country was so fed up with the war that the administration would not have been punished politically for extricating the U.S. from the conflict, no matter how it did it. If that is true, then the potential audience costs for backing down from Nixon's threats might have been even more limited than he and Kissinger thought at the time.

What price then would have been paid if Kissinger and Nixon had been more open about what they were doing? Did people come to sense what their policy was, and in particular what the implications of the Paris Peace Agreement were? And, to the extent they did, was Nixon held accountable because his real policy was not in line with the many statements he had made about how only an 'honorable peace' guaranteeing South Vietnamese freedom was acceptable? Nixon and Kissinger clearly thought they would pay such a price, particularly from pro-Thieu American conservatives, if people came to understand what the real policy was; otherwise, they would not have adopted the tactics discussed in the previous section. But was that judgment in fact correct?

Some analysts—George Kennan, for example—seemed to think that Nixon's fears of a right-wing backlash were well founded.⁷³ But the historical record suggests that the tactics Nixon and Kissinger used to finesse the audience costs problem were largely unnecessary. Public opinion polls surrounding the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement suggest that the American public had few illusions as to the settlement's shortcomings, yet it supported the agreement anyway. The fact that Nixon's actual policy was not in line with his prior public statements did not seem to bother the American people—a surprising finding in the context of audience costs theory.

The key to understanding why Nixon was supported rather than punished for renegeing on his earlier promises about Vietnam lies in the political context in which the peace agreement was negotiated. Even conservatives were reluctant to criticize Nixon for what he had done. As Sandra Scanlon notes, the "growing unpopularity" of the war undermined the conservatives' commitment to the cause of military victory. Furthermore, Nixon's decision to go ahead with Operation Linebacker II in late December 1972, Scanlon writes, "did much to foster conservative support for the final outcome of Nixon's policies in

⁷² Robert Jervis, review of *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy*, by Jeffrey Kimball, *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 355.

⁷³ See Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 177.

Vietnam.” The bombing campaign allowed conservatives to overlook “the glaring weaknesses of the Accords” and allowed them “to declare publicly that North Vietnamese violations would be met with swift and forceful responses.”⁷⁴

Indeed, the reluctance of conservatives to criticize Nixon seems to have had deeper roots: taking a hard line on the issue was simply not profitable given the country’s strong desire to end the conflict. Even as early as 1969, when Kissinger asked his friend William F. Buckley, one of the most prominent conservatives in the United States at the time, “to help mobilize conservative opinion behind a firm policy,” Buckley refused to cooperate: “No,” he said, “that horse has fled the barn.”⁷⁵ Far from condemning Nixon for renegeing on his prior commitments, leading Republicans ultimately joined the President in claiming that the Paris Peace Agreement was a triumph for their cause. Scanlon quotes a particularly telling excerpt from a press release of January 24, 1973 by right-wing U.S. Senator Barry Goldwater in which he hails “the ceasefire and peace agreement in Vietnam” as “one of the most important victories that the United States has ever scored over Communist aggression.”⁷⁶

Prominent conservatives were thus willing to overlook the agreement’s shortcomings, and most liberals, who were primarily concerned with ending American involvement in the war quickly, were also not about to complain about the terms of the settlement. But what about the American people more generally? Most Americans, after all, had not wanted to see the United States exit the war by simply abandoning South Vietnam. A *Time Magazine* poll conducted in October 1972 found that 62% of respondents thought that, of the two 1972 presidential candidates, Nixon best represented their views on Vietnam, while only 38% favored McGovern.⁷⁷ This is telling given that McGovern’s stated Vietnam policy was to “immediately stop all bombing and acts of force,” “immediately terminate any shipments of military supplies that continue the war,” and “immediately begin the orderly withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam.”⁷⁸ The fact that McGovern was defeated the next month by a very large margin in his bid to succeed Nixon shows that despite their war-weariness, most Americans disliked the idea of simply abandoning Vietnam.

⁷⁴ Sandra Scanlon, “The Conservative Lobby and Nixon’s ‘Peace with Honor’ in Vietnam,” *Journal of American Studies* 43, no. 2 (Aug. 2009): 275.

⁷⁵ Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America’s Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 100. The same episode is discussed in: Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 96.

⁷⁶ Scanlon, “The Conservative Lobby,” 274.

⁷⁷ Survey by *Time*, conducted by Daniel Yankelovich, Inc., October 1972, accessed on RoperCenter.uconn.edu [RC]. Henceforth, items accessed at Roper Center cited in the form: Survey by *Time*, 16 January 1973, RC.

⁷⁸ “Transcript of Senator McGovern’s Speech Offering a Plan for Peace in Indochina,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 1972, p. 29, accessed on ProQuest.com.

Nixon knew, however, that this was no mandate to continue the war indefinitely. In a December 5, 1972 poll commissioned by the White House, only 30% of the respondents favored continuing the war until North Vietnam gave America and the South Vietnamese government “everything they want,” while 55% disapproved of that policy. This suggested that while most Americans might have preferred a negotiated settlement to an abrupt withdrawal, they also felt it was not essential that the settlement make good on all of Nixon’s many promises. Indeed, according to that same poll, more people were willing to accept a settlement that allowed North Vietnamese troops to “continue to occupy those areas of South Vietnam they now control” than opposed that provision. America’s willingness to accept that provision was for Thieu an outright betrayal; it certainly suggested that the United States was no longer prepared to insist on peace terms that would prevent the North from taking over the South. As Katz notes, “the proposal outlined in the poll query mirrored closely the terms of the Paris Accords signed eight weeks later, but by permitting NVA troops to remain in the South it did not bear much resemblance to conditions once considered necessary for South Vietnam’s survival.”⁷⁹ Yet a slight majority was willing to accept even a settlement of this sort.

That was true even though most people sensed what the consequences would be—namely, that such a settlement would lead to an eventual Communist takeover of South Vietnam. Gallup’s January 25, 1973 poll asked respondents: “Do you think the (Vietnam) peace agreement is likely to last, or not?” 41% said no, and only 35% said yes. The respondents were also asked: “After U.S. troops are withdrawn from Vietnam, do you think North Vietnam in the next few years is likely to take over South Vietnam again, or not?” A resounding 70% of the respondents said they believed that North Vietnam would violate the agreement in this manner; only 16% did not believe it. The same basic attitude was reflected in the respondents’ answers to yet another question in this poll: “When U.S. troops are withdrawn from Vietnam, do you think a strong enough government can be maintained in South Vietnam to withstand Communist political pressures, or not?” Only 27% thought this was possible, while 54% said no outright. Most Americans seemed to understand that the agreement did not follow through on Nixon’s threats to stay at war until South Vietnam’s freedom was secured.⁸⁰

It is no wonder, then, that most Americans did not believe Nixon when, after the Paris Accords were signed, he declared he had kept his promises and had achieved an ‘honorable’ peace. The polling data, in fact, suggest that the vast majority of Americans understood that Nixon was either lying or withholding information when he spoke publicly about the situation in Vietnam in late 1972 and early 1973. In the October 1972 *Time* survey noted earlier, 75% of the respondents said they “agreed completely” or “agreed partially” with the statement that “President Nixon has not told the American people the real truth about what’s happening in Vietnam.” A Gallup poll conducted from January 12-

⁷⁹ Katz, “Public Opinion and Foreign Policy,” 504.

⁸⁰ Poll by Gallup Organization, January 25, 1973, RC.

15, 1973 asked a similar question and got similar results. To the question, “Do you think the Nixon Administration is or is not telling the public all they should know about the Vietnam War?” 67% of the respondents said no, 9% gave no opinion, and only 24% said yes.⁸¹ While roughly a quarter of American adults believed that Nixon was being upfront with the public, almost three quarters felt (correctly) that Nixon’s rhetoric had to be taken with a grain of salt.

Yet despite the fact that most Americans did not trust what Nixon was saying and thought the Paris settlement would lead eventually to the fall of South Vietnam, the agreement was overwhelmingly supported by the American public—and the public fully supported Nixon’s handling of the issue. Thus, for example, a Gallup poll conducted on January 25, 1973 asked adults nationwide whether they were “satisfied or dissatisfied with the Vietnam peace agreement reached,” and the results were staggering: 80% were satisfied, 7% dissatisfied, and 13% gave no opinion. Another Gallup poll conducted over the next several days asked respondents whether they approved or disapproved of “the way President Nixon is handling the situation in Vietnam” and found a similar level of support for Nixon’s role in particular: 75% approved, 18% disapproved, and 6% offered no opinion.⁸²

Those high levels of public support for Nixon’s Vietnam policy continued well after the initial excitement about the agreement had subsided. Even in April 1973, when respondents in a Harris survey were asked how they would rate Nixon on bringing the “war in Vietnam to a close,” 64% responded with either “excellent” or “pretty good,” and only 34% said either “fair” or “poor.”⁸³ And in May 1975, right after the fall of Saigon, when respondents in a *Time* Magazine poll were asked how much they blamed the now-disgraced former President for recent events in Vietnam, 58% of the respondents said they blamed Nixon either “a little” or “not at all” for the collapse, while only 37% blamed him “a lot.” When asked the same question about Kissinger, still serving as Secretary of State, the respondents were even more supportive: only 11% blamed him “a lot,” while 33% blamed him “a little” and a striking 47% blamed him “not at all.”⁸⁴ Most people by that point did not want to blame anyone at all; indeed, they no longer wanted to think about the issue. As the journalist Fox Butterfield put it in a retrospective piece for *The New York Times Magazine* that ran after the tenth anniversary of the Paris Peace Agreement, “there were no postwar recriminations, no blame for who lost Vietnam. The shock had been so great that nobody wanted to know.”⁸⁵

⁸¹ Poll by Gallup Organization via the American Institute of Public Opinion (AIPO), January 12-15, 1973, RC.

⁸² Both polls conducted by Gallup Organization, January 25 and 26-29, 1973, respectively, RC.

⁸³ Survey conducted by Louis Harris & Associates, April 18-23, 1973, RC.

⁸⁴ Survey by *Time*, conducted by Yankelovich, Skelly & White, May 14-22, 1975, RC.

⁸⁵ Fox Butterfield, “The New Vietnam Scholarship,” *The New York Times Magazine*, February 13, 1983, p. 26.

Perhaps the most interesting point to emerge from a study of the polling data is that people did not want to hold Nixon responsible for the Paris settlement, even though they clearly sensed that it was at odds with the hard-line policy to which he had previously committed himself. In fact, it appears that most people would have disapproved if Nixon had tried to honor his earlier promises. The American public, as a whole, were prepared to allow events in Vietnam to run their course. In the January 25 Gallup poll, 71% of the respondents opposed bombing North Vietnam if it broke the agreement by invading the south, while only 17% supported that idea. 50% of the respondents opposed even sending war materials to South Vietnam's aid; only 38% approved.⁸⁶ The public thus approved of an agreement which they were not willing to enforce, and whose collapse they expected—that is, they approved of a policy that they believed would lead directly to the collapse of South Vietnam. Yet this was an electorate that had just voted overwhelmingly for Nixon, and had rejected McGovern in large part because the policy he had embraced would too directly and too obviously have that effect.

In effect, the majority of Americans seem to have actually supported the 'decent interval' exit strategy that Nixon and Kissinger worked so hard to conceal—and perhaps were willing to go a bit further. They preferred an agreement to an immediate withdrawal, but they also believed the agreement would fail—and in the event that it did they were prepared to let South Vietnam's fate play out without further American intervention, without even necessarily waiting for a so-called 'decent' interval to elapse. They were less concerned with saving face, or with America following through on its threats, than audience costs theory would suggest.

Of course, even if the American people did support it, that does not necessarily mean they would have been happy if Nixon and Kissinger had pursued their strategy openly. The problem, as Thomas Schelling once pointed out, was that "nobody could think of a graceful way of getting out."⁸⁷ A decision could not be reached in the way democracies are supposed to function, through honest and open debate. The Nixon Administration could scarcely proclaim openly that it was pursuing a decent interval exit strategy, so given its priorities—that is, given that it was unwilling to just 'cut and run'—it had little choice but to proceed the way it did. The dishonest way in which the Administration described what it was doing may have only provided a fig leaf, but that fig leaf played an essential role in the disengagement process—and this was true even if everyone knew it was just a fig leaf. In such circumstances, the fact that the real policy was not in line with the Nixon's prior public statements scarcely mattered. A degree of dishonesty was a vital lubricant in the policy process, and to the extent that people sensed this was the case, audience costs would not be incurred if Nixon pursued a decent interval strategy.

⁸⁶ Poll by Gallup Organization, January 25, 1973, RC.

⁸⁷ Thomas Schelling in Stanley Hoffman et al., "Vietnam Reappraised," *International Security* 6, no. 1 (Summer 1981), 17, 19.

Conclusion

The idea that democracies enjoy a bargaining advantage in international crises due to their superior ability to generate audience costs is taken very seriously in the international relations literature. That general theoretical argument implies: that democratic leaders find it hard to bluff; that democratic leaders cannot “finesse” the audience costs problem by an appropriate choice of tactics; and that when they do pursue a policy that is at odds with their public promises, they are bound to pay a price for that in domestic political terms. The goal of this paper was to see what light an examination of the American withdrawal from Vietnam during the Nixon period would shed on those claims.

It made sense to study this case because Nixon had laid out a very clear policy that put American credibility on the line. If the audience costs theory were correct, Nixon should have felt obliged to honor his commitments lest he pay a serious domestic political price for embarrassing the United States by failing to do so. He should have believed that any efforts to avoid paying this price while still renegeing on his promises would be largely futile. And if and when Nixon did accept a peace agreement that was not in line with his prior policy, he should have paid a major price for it.

Yet the actual story was very different. The theory suggests that democratic leaders tend to be locked into the policy outlined in their public statements: the audience costs that would be incurred if it became clear that their actual policy different would prevent a gap between real and declaratory policy from developing. But it seems quite clear that the Nixon Administration opted for a decent interval exit strategy as early as 1971, a policy that was certainly concealed from the public at the time.

The evidence also shows that Nixon and Kissinger thought they could manage the audience costs problem by adopting a certain set of tactics. These included concealing information from the public, timing key events in a way that would best serve their political interests, framing the agreement as a victory in spite of its flaws, and blaming others for South Vietnam’s eventual collapse.

Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, Nixon and Kissinger did not have to pay a major price when the public sensed that they had not brought the sort of peace the Administration’s public statements had called for: “peace with honor,” in the sense that they had used that phrase. Public opinion polls from the period immediately following the Paris Peace Agreement—and even following the later defeat of South Vietnam—suggest that the war-weariness of the American public meant that the agreement was acceptable, no matter what it seemed likely to lead to, and no matter what Nixon had earlier promised.

What, then, does this analysis tell us about audience costs theory? The main conclusion it suggests is that political context is far more important than the theory implies: how much of a price a leader pays for abandoning a commitment depends above all on how his or her constituency feels about that commitment. When a domestic audience believes that honoring a given commitment is no longer in the state’s best interests, a leader will not be faulted for abandoning that commitment.

It also suggests that the ability of political leaders to limit the price they pay at home for backing down from their threats might depend to a considerable extent—that is, to a greater extent than audience costs theory seems to allow for—on their tactical skills. It suggests that democratic leaders, in fact, have an arsenal of tactics at their disposal for minimizing the costs they might incur for pursuing a policy at variance with their public statements. Indeed, it is precisely because public opinion is so important in representative government that democratic political systems might very well *select for* leaders who are especially skilled or talented in this area.

The point can be put another way. According to audience costs theory and much of international relations scholarship, incentives to misrepresent play a fundamental role in international politics. But if that is true of the international arena, why should it not be true of the domestic arena as well? Shouldn't incentives to misrepresent play a central role in all political life—including the relationship between democratic leaders and their constituencies? If that is the case, we should not be surprised when we see democratic politicians attempting to mislead their own domestic audiences: they are simply responding to political incentives built directly into the democratic system. Their skill in doing so would in large measure account for their political success. Indeed, by the very logic of audience costs theory—which assumes that the power of public opinion in a given state will heavily influence government behavior—public statements made by democratic leaders should not be viewed as especially credible. In democracies, where the incentives to tell the public what it wants to hear are particularly strong, leaders' statements should in fact be especially suspect.

Marc Trachtenberg and Bronwyn Lewis both challenge audience costs theory effectively. They accomplish this in part by careful application of the historian's craft to previously secret evidence. That evidence, however, is not sufficient to do the job on its own. The more decisive doubt flows from the way the cases highlight an inherent limitation in the theory: its emphasis on incentives to honor past rhetorical commitments as opposed to incentives to give the public what it wants in the present. First I will examine the argument that Presidents John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon intended to betray their public commitment to pursuing victory in Vietnam. Then I will clarify the problem with the theory.

Reading the Evidence

The test of audience costs theory in these papers hinges on whether Kennedy and Nixon were ready to accept defeat in Vietnam despite their staunch public rhetoric to the contrary. Trachtenberg and Lewis both make a reasonable case that the answer is yes. I am half convinced. The evidence Trachtenberg marshals about Kennedy is impressive and does weaken the argument Leslie Gelb and I made thirty-five years ago.¹ The evidence presented by Lewis is convincing, on balance, that Nixon aimed at a "decent interval." Neither paper, however, gives as much consideration as I would to two points: the deep ambivalence in the thinking of presidents confronting intractable problems, and the difference between planning on U.S. withdrawal *without victory* and planning to accept *defeat*.

I have long believed that analyses of policymaking tend to underestimate the force of ambivalence at the highest level. Reconstructions of decisions illustrate conflict and disagreement *among* policymakers more often than *within* policymakers; while organizations and office holders maneuver and compete for leverage, and the process is often disjointed and murky, individuals are usually seen as having coherent positions. Politicians, however, have the psychological limitations of human beings. In difficult situations they resist facing painful tradeoffs, look for ways to have their cake and eat it too, hope for the best even if the odds are against it. Faced with problems that have no satisfactory solution, they lean one way when focusing on certain aspects of it and days later lean the other way when attention is drawn to different aspects. Which of the conflicting imperatives wins out is not a sure thing until decisions are final and implemented.

Although Trachtenberg and Lewis do not make as much of ambivalence as I would, the evidence they cite illustrates it.² In coming to judicious conclusions about how the balance

¹ Leslie H. Gelb with Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1979), 92-95 and *passim*.

² Trachtenberg (manuscript 35) does cite Frederik Logevall's emphasis on Kennedy's ambivalence.

tilts, they scrupulously cite private statements pointing in both directions, toward intent to withdraw without victory and toward persistence. Those who believe that Kennedy's directive to plan for complete withdrawal by 1965 was unconditional and irrevocable do not pay enough attention to his statement that Trachtenberg cites (manuscript 20): "if the job could not be finished by late 1965, 'we'll get a new date'."

Trachtenberg and Lewis do not question as much as I would whether intent to withdraw was identical to willingness to accept defeat. Yes, there were statements about withdrawal 'come what may' -- more of them, more unambiguous, in Nixon's case than Kennedy's -- but there were other indications that both presidents hoped that withdrawal could still be accomplished under conditions that allowed the non-communist South Vietnamese to hold on themselves. No one read all the rhetoric of staunch American commitment to mean that the United States would fight in Vietnam for 100 years. Nixon made the most of the term but "Vietnamization" was always the hope for eventual American disentanglement. Trachtenberg (manuscript 20) infers from the evidence that Kennedy's plan to withdraw by 1965 "was predicated on the assumption that the South Vietnamese army would eventually be able to essentially stand on its own."

It is not a pedantic nuance to emphasize the difference between non-victory and defeat. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Nixon all wanted desperately to get out of Vietnam. Except for Johnson between early 1965 and late 1968, they were all willing to pay a price to do so, to leave the war unresolved. The indications that Kennedy and Nixon seemed to decide at some points that they would pay the ultimate price of accepting outright Communist victory are balanced by indications that at other times they counted on an endgame short of that (and this was particularly true of most anti-war critics who often recommended the chimerical compromise of a coalition government). Neither Kennedy nor Nixon was committed to winning the war, but that did not mean they were willing to lose. As Trachtenberg quotes McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy believed "we mustn't be the ones who lost this war, someone else has to lose this war."³

Lewis's catalogue of statements by Nixon and Kissinger indicating commitment to the decent interval strategy are persuasive, but they do not show quite the decisive contradiction of public rhetoric that she suggests. Nixon never did make the concessions to North Vietnam that he said he would not accept in the public statements quoted by Lewis (manuscript, 3-4). Although Nixon and Kissinger secretly coerced South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu to accept adverse conditions in the 1973 peace accord, nothing shows that Nixon did not intend to continue to use U.S. military power -- airpower alone -- to support South Vietnam *in extremis*, as his other statements indicated he would, had Congress not forbidden it.

³ The importance to all presidents of not letting the war be lost on their watch is a principal argument in Daniel Ellsberg, "The Quagmire Myth and the Stalemate Machine," in Ellsberg's *Papers on the War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).

Kissinger's private statements about a decent interval during negotiations with the Chinese are the most damning contradictions of audience costs theory. Even these, however, are short of a *coup de grâce*. First, the statement to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai that the United States favored a settlement "that will truly leave the political evolution of South Vietnam to the Vietnamese alone" (Lewis manuscript, 5-6) is consistent with the hope that Vietnamization would leave the South Vietnamese able to hold on, while pandering to Chinese confidence in Communist victory. There is no reason to assume that Kissinger was being less dishonest with the Chinese than Nixon was with the American public.⁴

If ambivalence was as significant as I argue, private contradictions of public rhetoric do less damage to audience costs theory than otherwise, but some damage nonetheless occurs. This is clearest in regard to the Kennedy case. If Kennedy had stopped agonizing -- if he had definitely decided to bite the bullet and withdraw irrespective of defeat as a consequence -- he did not consider audience costs a sufficient deterrent. If he remained ambivalent, however, the decision to accept those costs was tentative.

The Problem in Applying the Theory

Which audience costs matter most? Political leaders must play to multiple constituencies and juggle contradictory goals. Assuming a single undifferentiated domestic audience as the constraint would be naïve. The threats leaders fear from their right or left flanks change over time as policies evolve (an important point in assessing the Nixon case in particular).

Audience costs as conceived in the theory -- the price for betraying commitments articulated to the public in the past -- are only a subset of domestic political costs. More salient to a politician are the costs to be paid for opposing what the public wants in the present. These can be quite different, especially when the frustrating results of long persistence sours the public on the policy promoted earlier. Voters will not punish a president for changing policy if they want the policy changed. The difference between costs for changing and costs for not changing shows why the audience costs problem was not a problem for Nixon; it cannot show that for Kennedy, not only because his potential betrayal of staunch rhetoric was never tested, but because public opinion had not evolved as far by 1965 as it had by 1975.

Whether Nixon did or did not care about betraying his public staunchness in support of Saigon, he was not courting domestic political losses for his two-faced policy. By the time his diplomacy was unfolding, he faced more potential losses from honoring his public commitments than from backing away from them. Domestic support for the war was

⁴ For example, Kissinger ridiculously encouraged the Chinese to believe that he and Nixon regretted the American role in rebuilding Japan's economy, considered Japan a militaristic threat, and looked forward to an American alliance with China against Japan! *Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976* documents cited in Stephen Sestanovich, *Maximalist: America in the World from Truman to Obama* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 178 and 361, n33.

steadily declining after 1968. Public opinion indulged Nixon's Vietnam policy (he buried George McGovern in the 1972 election) because he was steadily withdrawing U.S. troops and the U.S. bombing in late 1972 produced the peace agreement. The balance of public opinion by the end of Nixon's first term did not want to lose in Vietnam but neither did it want to keep paying a high price to win. Nixon had little to fear from McGovern on the left, but he had less to fear from John Ashbrook on the right.⁵ If Nixon had not resigned, he would have faced the same overwhelming opposition to renewing the war that Gerald Ford did in spring 1975. To believe that his previous staunch rhetoric would be a real impetus to continuing the war at that point would be nonsensical. How does audience costs theory handle this?

The Kennedy case is more intriguing. Trachtenberg does a careful job of weighing inconsistent indicators and establishing the plausibility of a withdrawal at the risk of defeat. Many in his generation and mine will take comfort in that judgment because we know what subsequently happened under Johnson, and perhaps because our admiration for Kennedy is left intact because he died before having to face the test that Johnson did. But this counterfactual guess requires believing that Kennedy would have been willing to answer for being the first president, in the cliché of the times, to lose a war. It means assuming that when faced by the choice that Johnson thought he faced in mid-1965 -- either escalating or allowing imminent Communist victory, after a long and costly American investment with thousands of American military advisors deeply involved and hundreds of casualties among them, a prospect more devastating than the Bay of Pigs -- Kennedy would have let the Communists take South Vietnam.⁶

Maybe. That, to say the very least, would have been a departure from the ambition and activism that otherwise characterized the New Frontier. As Stephen Sestanovich writes of Kennedy and his advisers: "They were committed both to boldness and to minimizing the risks of boldness. It is this combination that makes all conjecture about Kennedy's policies--that he would have become more aggressive, or that he would have become less--equally

⁵ Ashbrook won no more than 10 percent in any of the three Republican presidential primaries in which he ran against Nixon in 1972. Lewis (manuscript 11) reveals Nixon's decision that he did not want the peace agreement concluded before the 1972 election. This surprised Kissinger and would surprise most observers, and is the one major indication that he wanted to avoid provoking the pro-war constituency. Kissinger captured the domestic political dynamics of the period in these words: "Nixon as President was able to reconcile the Republican right to a withdrawal program and an inconclusive outcome for which the conservatives might well have assaulted a Democratic President. Thus there was no conservative counterweight to the increasingly strident protests. By tranquilizing the right, Nixon liberated the protest movement from its constraints; the center of gravity of American politics thus shifted decisively to the antiwar side even though the public had not changed its basic view." Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 298.

⁶ The fragments of Kennedy's ruminations about accepting defeat would be a stronger confirmation of intent if they were matched with evidence of reflections on the consequences of defeat, why they would not be dire, why and how he would get away with it domestically.

credible.”⁷ In contrast to the bare logic of audience costs theory, by the mid-1970s Nixon would have had to have paid domestic political costs if he had honored his hawkish rhetoric. In the mid-1960s Kennedy would have had to have paid audience costs if he had not. Trachtenberg convinces me that Kennedy *definitely thought* he might come to pay those costs, but not that the decision to do so was definite.

The Kennedy case puts a dent in audience costs theory in its own terms; the Nixon case shows how a simple version of the theory can be irrelevant. If the theory is taken to mean that presidents will care more about honoring prior public positions than about answering for results of current policies, it is not simple but simplistic, and Nixon discredits it. If the theory says, on the other hand, that leaders are constrained by political costs in general that may be suffered for the results of policy as it unfolds, it adds nothing to common sense. If the point of audience costs theory is to make the case for credible commitment by democratic governments it needs a complex conception of the dynamics of democratic politics over time. It also needs solid grounds for assuming that autocratic foreign leaders really understand the dynamics of democracy and the fact that American presidents are not as powerful and unconstrained as they are.

⁷ Sestanovich, *Maximalist*, 119.

Bad wars make challenging history, as is clear from the papers by Bronwyn Lewis and Marc Trachtenberg. Although their focus is on audience costs, both this question and the case of American decision-making in Vietnam raise and shed light on multiple theoretical questions. These two essays move us a significant step forward on several fronts.

Let me start with perhaps with the most general issue, one that follows from a question that Trachtenberg discusses at length. This is whether President John F. Kennedy would have pulled out of Vietnam if he had lived or instead would have followed a path similar to Lyndon Johnson's. Although Trachtenberg does not frame it in this way, I see this as linked to the famous typology of images or levels of analysis developed by Kenneth Waltz in *Man, the State, and War*.¹ Trachtenberg provides an excellent guide to the opinions and evidence that have been offered on this point, and I will later come back to some of the substantive arguments. But here I want to note that to claim that Kennedy's death made a big difference in U.S. policy is to argue that, in this case at least, the views of the person in charge matter a great deal. This denies that most of the causation is to be found at the level of the state and its domestic politics, as is argued by those who root the explanation in the imperatives of the capitalist economic or scholars who argue that any Democratic president would have had to fight in order to fend off Republican charges of being 'soft on Communism.' The claim that Kennedy mattered also denies third-image arguments for the severe external imperatives that, it can be argued, would have driven any president to fight in order to uphold the stability of the bipolar balance.²

A link between this question and audience costs is worth noting. To the extent that a leader's pledge binds him personally, then the change in leaders opens space for greater freedom of action. In other words, even if Kennedy had become trapped by his own pledges, Johnson would have not been punished by domestic audiences for behaving differently. On the other hand--and I think this was an important factor in Johnson's decisions--to a significant extent he felt that breaking with Kennedy's policies would be seen as a betrayal, although presumably these pressures eased after he won office in his own right.

For both Kennedy and Nixon (he too was not in office when the crucial decisions had to be made) we should separate what we think they would have done, what we think they think they would have done, and what public statements they made. It is the latter, of course, that are the focus of arguments about audience costs. But it is worth discussing the first two

¹ Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1959).

² As is indicated by the subtitle of Fredrik Logevall's *In Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), he believes that Johnson did have a real choice. I have discussed the general issue in "When Do Leaders Matter and How Would We Know?" *Security Studies*, vol 22, April-June 2013, 153-79.

questions as well because they are of great intrinsic interest. Trachtenberg thoroughly discusses the first question, and I would just add that Kennedy's statements (and I think Nixon's as well) can take us only so far in the counterfactual analysis of what he would have done if faced with the hard choice. As Trachtenberg shows for Kennedy and Lewis for Nixon, the private statements are not entirely consistent. In part, as they argue, this is because the president often wanted to please those he was talking to, and different audiences had different preferences. But I suspect part of the explanation is that the president himself was ambivalent. The questions were very hard, and we should not be surprised that he did not always give the same answer.

The arguments that Kennedy probably would have not intervened massively that I find most persuasive reason in a different way. Robert Dallek (cited by Trachtenberg on 18) and Fredrik Logevall (cited on 36) look at Kennedy's general view of international politics, his previous behavior, and his character, if you will.³ Kennedy's service in World War II and the experience of the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis had made him quite skeptical about military advice, something that was reinforced by what the military had been telling him about Vietnam. It is these broader and deeper factors that should influence our judgment more than the private statements, and they point away from full-scale intervention. I believe that the record is muddier in Nixon's case. On the one hand, he did seem dedicated to seeing that Communism did not take additional territory, and, unlike Kennedy, he was not sensitive to the domestic roots of the insurgency. On the other hand, while he often talked tough even--or especially--in private, he was restrained in his use of military force and was perfectly willing to sell out allies in the interest of his grand strategy, as he did with Taiwan.

The second question is what the president thought he would have done when faced with the difficult choice of massive escalation for Kennedy or resuming the war for Nixon. Trachtenberg and Lewis do excellent jobs of mining what both presidents said they would do. Even if the record were less ambiguous, I would argue that these statements were an imperfect guide. People simply do not know how they will react to very difficult situations. It could be that Kennedy thought he would refrain from escalating, but in the event would find that the situation looked different when it arrived and would do what Johnson did. Conversely, it is possible that he really had decided that he would fight if need be, but when faced with the choice would change his mind. It is not only hard for historians to judge what people would do in cases like these; it is hard for the person herself to know.⁴

The third questions is what the president said in public – i.e., how committed was he to a course of action. As Trachtenberg notes, most historians have provided an incomplete

³ Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy 1917-1963* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2003); Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁴ For a related argument, see Timothy Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002).

inventory, with those who believe that Kennedy would not have fought presenting one set of quotes and those who believe that he would have done as Johnson did citing another set. But, as far as I know, we still lack a complete inventory. This would not be dispositive, but certainly would be interesting. As it is, Trachtenberg and Lewis have compiled enough evidence to convince me that both presidents had left themselves a fair amount of wiggle room, to use a technical political science term. They did make committing statements, but qualified and contradicted them. It would be particularly interesting to contrast the record here with that of numerous presidents on Berlin – or at least West Berlin. My sense is that there was much less equivocation in this case. Kennedy and Nixon wanted to make their resolve clear, but on the other hand did not want to entirely lock themselves in. The obvious reason is that, contrary to audience cost theory and the broader theory of the use of commitment as a bargaining tactic that underlies it, presidents rarely have great faith that they can win a confrontation by staking their reputations on doing so. This is particularly true in a struggle like Vietnam in which even a successfully-projected image of resolve will not automatically lead to victory.

In this regard it is interesting that Nixon, who was deeply concerned with gaining bargaining advantage and had a keen eye for domestic politics, shunned the idea of using domestic audience costs to try to prevail in Vietnam. Instead, his original idea was linkage. He would tell the Soviets that the U.S. would not reach arms control agreements unless they put pressure on North Vietnam to end the war. He soon supplemented this with his “madman theory”--i.e., Schelling’s “rationality of irrationality” strategy of trying to convince the USSR and North Vietnam that if the war continued he might go crazy and use nuclear weapons.⁵ Far from involving the public, these maneuvers were carried out in secret. That they were ineffective (and I believe predictably so) is telling because it indicates that Nixon shunned the tactic of staking his domestic reputation on prevailing despite the lack of promising alternatives. As far as we can tell from the record, furthermore, his decision not to go public was based on his general penchant for secrecy and his knowledge that these policies were not likely to boost his popularity, not on the expectation that domestic opposition would be taken by adversaries as evidence that he was bluffing, as we might expect from Kenneth Schultz’s extension of the audience cost argument.⁶

Three related general points are important here. First, even if they read their Schelling (and Kennedy had read memos if not *Strategy of Conflict* and Kissinger was fully familiar with the work), as logically compelling as these arguments have been to many academics, they have much less appeal to decision-makers. My sense is that almost all of them want to keep as many options open as possible. Being committed, and getting trapped, is anathema to them. Of course this raises the central question I cannot answer of how much international behavior can be explained by the bargaining advantages that commitment is supposed to bring.

⁵ Thomas C. Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

⁶ Kenneth Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

This leads to the second point, which is a bit more psychological. Earlier I talked about what the presidents thought they would do if they faced difficult choices. My guess is that they really didn't know. Why should they spend precious intellectual and emotional resources on deciding ahead of time? After all, if their earlier policies worked, they would not be faced with the hardest decisions. Academics may think that people should and do think through the alternative courses of action well in advance, but my very strong sense – backed up by very little evidence – is that decision-makers are more sensible than that.

Third, I think Trachtenberg and Lewis are right that when faced with the difficult choice, neither Kennedy nor Nixon would have been oppressed by audience costs. Not only would they have been aware of their earlier statements that gave them running room, but, as Lewis brings out very well, they had multiple tools at their disposal to cover their tracks and reduce the price they would pay.

I think Kennedy, who was more self-conscious than many presidents, realized that he didn't know what he would do if he were faced by the choice of losing or escalating. For Nixon, the case was slightly different. The arguments about whether he and Kissinger thought they were settling for “a decent interval” misses the point because they did not know whether South Vietnam could survive or not. It was far from clear that the insurgency could be continued, that North Vietnam would use the units it had stationed in the South in order to gain more territory, or that it would invade, as it did in the spring of 1975. The strength and behavior of the South Vietnamese regime was also uncertain, and Nixon had tools he could deploy. While the war was deeply unpopular by 1973, Watergate had not yet weakened the presidency. The threat of bombing could well have kept the North Vietnamese in check, as they realized that it had defeated the Easter Offensive in 1972. (The success of airpower depended on the presence of American coordinators on the ground, however, and they were all withdrawn after the peace treaty.⁷) As Lewis and those she draws on make clear, the record is quite convincing that Nixon and Kissinger were willing to accept a decent interval if it came to that. But their statements to the Soviets, Chinese, and the North Vietnamese to this effect do not mean that they thought the cause was definitely lost. It is true that when Kissinger talked about the possible collapse of the South Vietnamese regime, Nixon replied, “well, if they're that collapsible, maybe they just have to be collapsed” (Lewis, 8), but Nixon did say “if.” Just as Kennedy did not have to decide whether he would escalate if that were the only alternative to losing, so Nixon did not have to decide whether he would bomb to try to enforce the peace agreement. Maybe it would not have to come to that. Perhaps South Vietnam would not be so collapsible and North Vietnam would be deterred. If worst came to worst, there would be a decent interval, and all Nixon had to decide was that such an outcome was acceptable if things came to that. But when he authorized the agreement he did not have to decide what he would actually do if South Vietnam were on the brink of defeat or collapse.

⁷ Stephen Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

This brings me to my final point. As Trachtenberg, Lewis, and others have noted, even if it is domestic rather than foreign audiences whose reactions most concern presidents, and they are likely to focus much more on the substance of what the president has done than on whether or not it is consistent with what he has said. So to argue against the centrality of audience costs in the technical sense of the president fearing that he will be punished for not living up to his pledges does not mean that the reaction of domestic opinion is unimportant. My guess is that Nixon felt that he could abandon South Vietnam if need be because domestic opinion had written off that country, or at least felt that the U.S. had more than lived up to its obligation to try to save it. To the extent that domestic opinion was important in Johnson's decision, I think it was not that he believed that people would compare his words to his deeds, but the fear that, irrespective of what he or Kennedy had said, he would be blamed for losing South Vietnam. What was salient in his mind was the price the Democrats had paid for 'losing China,' even though Truman had not pledged to save it. Similarly, to say that Nixon's policy was not shaped by the manipulation and fear of audience costs is not to claim that public opinion was unimportant. Far from it; after the failure of his original policy of prevailing in Vietnam by linkage and feigning madness, it was the unwillingness of the domestic public to continue the war that carried the day. Domestic opinion and domestic politics were primary; it was just that audience costs in the narrow sense were at most a small part of this.

“Audience Costs and the Vietnam War: A Commentary”

by Fredrik Logevall, Cornell University

Many historians will be familiar with the questions raised in these papers, and with the general interpretive scheme being examined. More than a few will have adopted the ‘audience costs’ framework in their own work, without necessarily knowing they’re doing so. It’s no disrespect to James Fearon to wager that relatively few foreign-relations historians are conversant with the argument he first laid out in his path-breaking article two decades ago,¹ or with the work on audience costs that has appeared since then. Why that should be so is an interesting question in itself. It is not that historians as a group are un-theoretical, even if some of them like to say they are. Theory, as John Lewis Gaddis has reminded us, is in the end generalization, and without generalization historians would have very little to say.² It is, rather, that the lifeblood of the historian is explanation, and we take evidence wherever we can get it in pursuit of that objective. The theory is there, but in a secondary or tertiary place. Or as Marc Trachtenberg puts it in his essay here, historians, to the extent they’re even aware of the theories political scientists debate among themselves, “have no dog in these fights”; they’re not interested in whether their own findings, their own interpretation, support this or that political science theory.

But a key tenet associated with audience-costs theory—that policymakers are to an important degree shackled by the public pronouncements they make, which has the effect of limiting their freedom of action, of tying their hands—is one that numerous historians (myself included) have explored with respect to particular episodes in the past. American policy in Vietnam provides a particularly interesting test case, because of the long and difficult and consequential U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia; because of the enormous amount of archival and other evidentiary material now available; and because of the view held in much (but by no means all) of the historiography that understanding American decisions on Vietnam requires understanding the domestic political context in which they were made.

Trachtenberg and Bronwyn Lewis give careful attention Vietnam policy under John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, respectively. They do so clearly and engagingly—not the least notable feature of these two papers is how immensely readable they are. Both show a nuanced grasp of the existing literature (though for my liking Trachtenberg exaggerates the influence of, and gives rather too much space to, Noam Chomsky’s caustic and tendentious *Rethinking Camelot*); both summarize the major interpretations emerging from that literature fairly and judiciously. Let me consider each in turn. Trachtenberg is correct to note that the old interpretation of Kennedy as a reflexive Cold Warrior no longer holds the

¹ James D. Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (September 1994), pp. 577-92

² John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 62.

sway it once did; the Kennedy who emerges out of the vast documentary record is a cautious, cool, flexible, and somewhat cynical politician and policymaker. He was never the hardline ideologue in international affairs that a few too-often-quoted lines from his inaugural address suggest he was. On Vietnam, Kennedy was from an early point skeptical about what Western military power could achieve against revolutionary nationalism in that part of the world—already in 1951, while on a visit to French Indochina with his brother Robert and his sister Patricia, he was deeply (and presciently) dubious that French arms would succeed in thwarting the Ho Chi Minh-led Viet Minh, even with large-scale American assistance.

The skepticism never really went away, even as the 1950s progressed and Kennedy moved closer to Cold War orthodoxy (part of his positioning, surely, for a run for the White House). As president, he resisted aides' calls in the fall of 1961 for committing U.S. ground forces to Vietnam. That year he also deflected his predecessor Dwight Eisenhower's urgings that he intervene militarily in Laos, where the anti-Communist position had eroded significantly over the previous two years and where the Hanoi-supported Pathet Lao now seemed on the verge of victory; instead, Kennedy opted for a political solution that he anticipated would fail over time but would at least remove Laos as a Cold War hotspot. Over time, Kennedy's misgivings about the prospects in Vietnam deepened, and in his final months he reportedly hinted to aides that he intended to withdraw from the war. As Trachtenberg is right to point out, the evidence for a gloomy Kennedy who planned to get out Vietnam come what may is more plentiful than is often acknowledged in the literature, especially if one considers that so many former officials spoke with one voice on the matter.

A few authors have gone further and asserted that Kennedy did more than talk about getting out; they say he actually initiated a full withdrawal in his final months. Trachtenberg engages this thesis at considerable length; like me he finds it unpersuasive, the evidence for it weak and contradictory. The way I interpret a series of important White House meetings on October 2 and 5, 1963, for example, is that Kennedy at that late hour was still unsure about which way to go in Vietnam, still postponing the really tough decisions for the future, and moreover that he had not given the proposal for a 1000-man withdrawal from South Vietnam very much thought. He says at one point: "My only reservation about this [1000-man withdrawal] is that it commits to a kind of a....if the war doesn't continue to go well, it'll look like we were overly optimistic, and I don't—I'm not sure we—I'd like to know what benefit we get out [of] at this time announcing a thousand."³ Could this be a ruse on the president's part, as proponents of this "incipient withdrawal" thesis (as I have called it elsewhere) claim? Conceivably, but these authors do

³ Recordings and transcripts of these October 1963 meetings can be found under "Transcript and Audio Highlight Clips" at www.whitehousetapes.org; last accessed on January 27, 2013.

not present persuasive evidence to that effect.⁴ A president determined to quit Vietnam regardless of the state of the war would have taken care in the summer and fall of 1963 to be more cryptic in his public pronouncements, and he would have been less dismissive of exploring a possible negotiated settlement to the conflict. Above all, he would have been more reticent about endorsing a showdown between South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem and dissident generals.

My own view, accurately summarized by Trachtenberg, is that Kennedy, as he boarded Air Force One for the last time that November, was in all likelihood leaving his Vietnam options open, playing a waiting game, temporizing. That's what successful politicians do with pesky policy problems, especially when a presidential election looms large on the horizon. To say this is not to deny the possibility that Kennedy had already determined that large-scale war involving regular U.S. ground troops would never occur while he was in charge. Nor is to deny that he might already have decided in his own mind that he would seek some kind of fig-leaf withdrawal from the conflict following the presidential election a year hence.

Ultimately, what needs to be explained is the paradox in John F. Kennedy's Vietnam policy. More than perhaps any other top U.S. official throughout the entire 30-year-long struggle for Vietnam (with the possible exception of Franklin Roosevelt at the very outset), Kennedy questioned the ability of the West to use military means to solve Asian problems that were at root political in nature. More than any of them, he grasped the power of nationalism, the power of "man's eternal desire to be free and independent" (as he put in a Senate speech on Algeria in 1957). And more than most, he appears to have doubted, especially as time went on, that vital American security interests were at stake in the struggle. Yet this same JFK deepened U.S. involvement in South Vietnam dramatically during his thousand days as president. In 1962, vast quantities of the best American weapons, aircraft, and armored personnel carriers arrived, along with thousands of additional military advisers. That year a full field command bearing the acronym MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) superseded MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) with a three-star general, Paul D. Harkins, in command. By the end of 1962, there were more than 11,000 American military advisers in Vietnam; by the time of Kennedy's assassination in late 1963, the figure came close to 16,000. A secret American war was by then under way. Ostensibly, Americans were serving purely as advisers and never engaging the insurgents except in self-defense; in actuality, their involvement extended further—on the ground as well as in the air. Can the audience-costs theory help resolve this paradox? Can it help explain the gap between what Kennedy said and did, between what he declared publicly and what he remarked in private, with the doors closed? Trachtenberg expresses skepticism about the applicability of the theory to Kennedy's Vietnam policy, and with good reason. Kennedy as president had considerable maneuverability on the war domestically, and he likely would have continued to do so had he returned from Dallas alive. His own experience showed

⁴ Fredrik Logevall, "Vietnam and the Question of What Might Have Been," in Mark J. White, ed., *Kennedy: The New Frontier Revisited* (London: Macmillan, 1998). For my review of one of the books putting forth this argument, Gareth Porter's *Perils of Dominance*, see *Passport*, 37:2, August 2006.

that absolute firmness was not always required in domestic terms when confronting Communist adversaries overseas—he did not suffer significant or lasting political damage at home from his decision to pursue a negotiated settlement in Laos in 1961, for example, or from his failure to take more forceful action against the Soviet military presence in Cuba in late 1962. “The president’s public statements,” Trachtenberg writes, “were by no means a straitjacket.” Indeed. But perhaps the straitjacket metaphor nonetheless misleads, creating a false choice between absolute freedom of action, on the one hand, and total restraint, on the other. It seems undeniable that Kennedy had audience costs very much in mind on Vietnam throughout his presidency, indeed from the time he began positioning himself for a run for the White House. If his public rhetoric as president—and that of his top advisors, including his brother Robert, the attorney general, who proclaimed on a visit to South Vietnam in early 1962 that the United States would stand by Diem’s government “until we win”—was not a straitjacket per se, surely it was confining, limiting his perceived maneuverability and pushing him to maintain the firm commitment to Saigon and hope for the best. As a Democrat, moreover, JFK felt the burden of contending with the ghosts of Joe McCarthy and the charge that the Democratic Party was ‘soft on Communism.’ Truman, too, had acted partly with this concern in mind, but the perceived power of this political imperative was even greater now, in the early 1960s, as Kennedy, feeling the vulnerability that all Democrats felt in the period, sought to avoid a replaying of the ‘Who lost China?’ debate, this time over Vietnam.

Lewis, in her examination of Nixon’s Vietnam decisions, likewise finds the audience-costs argument wanting. Like Trachtenberg she shows a keen interest in and thorough grasp of the key debates in the existing scholarly literature. I quibble with her claim that “it used to be taken for granted that the long American involvement in Vietnam was to be understood in large part in domestic political terms.” That view has certainly had its adherents over the years, but “taken for granted” is much too strong—if anything, I would say the historiography as a whole has underplayed too much the degree to which perceived domestic political imperatives drove the policymaking on Indochina, from the Truman era onward. To my mind she also mischaracterizes George Kennan’s concise and powerful articulation of this point from 1984, in which the veteran diplomat said: “Not only did no administration feel that it could afford to be seen as unwilling to make the effort to oppose a Communist takeover in Vietnam, but no administration, down to that of Mr. Nixon, having once engaged itself in such an effort and having been obliged to recognize that the effort was hopeless, dared to try to extract itself from the involvement at all, for fear of being pilloried by the silly charge that it had ‘lost Vietnam.’”⁵ According to Lewis, this quote shows that Kennan thought Nixon was justified in fearing a right-wing backlash should he fail to prevail in Vietnam; as I read it Kennan here does not speak to whether or not the worries were well-founded, only that they were felt.

Perhaps, too, Lewis’s otherwise nuanced discussion of the ‘Decent Interval’ decision misses the degree to which it was effectively forced on Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry

⁵ George Kennan, “Reflections on the Walgreen Lectures,” *American Diplomacy*, 60th anniversary expanded edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 177

Kissinger by the realities on the ground, and by the pressure applied by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, who, as a principal architect of Vietnamization, played a vital role in determining the pace and schedule of U.S. troop withdrawals from South Vietnam. The Decent Interval was intimately connected to this Vietnamization policy, and it's relevant to Lewis's broader analysis that Laird, a creature of Capitol Hill who maintained close ties with lawmakers during his tenure, viewed 'de-Americanization' as crucial to maintaining broad backing for the administration in Congress—a vital 'audience' in its own right, about which more below.

Lewis is particularly illuminating in her analysis of polling data from the period surrounding the Paris Peace Accords. She shows, notably, that the U.S. public "had few illusions as to the [Paris] settlement's shortcomings, yet it supported the agreement anyway. The fact that Nixon's actual policy was not in line with his prior public statements did not seem to bother the American people—a surprising finding in the context of audience-costs theory." Lewis packs a great deal of important information into this part of the paper, drawing on her own research and that of Sandra Scanlon; much of this data I had not seen before. It's hard to disagree with Lewis's broad two-part conclusion here: that most Americans appear to have supported the Decent Interval exit strategy, but that this does not necessarily mean Nixon and Kissinger were wrong to try to conceal what they were up to. "The dishonest way in which the administration described what it was doing may have only provided a fig leaf," she writes incisively, "but that fig leaf played an essential role in the disengagement process—and this was true even if everyone knew it was just a fig leaf. In such circumstances, the fact that the real policy was not in line with the Nixon's prior public statements scarcely mattered. A degree of dishonesty was a vital lubricant in the policy process, and to the extent that people sensed this was the case, audience costs would not be incurred if Nixon pursued a decent interval strategy."

Finally, in considering the audience-costs theory as it applies to Vietnam, and to the Nixon policy decisions in particular, a question lingers in the mind: Which audience? Lewis in her paper focuses narrowly on the audience cost of appearing to betray South Vietnam, but it bears stressing that candidate Nixon in 1968 also had to take account of another audience, one committed to 'peace now' and including within it a growing number of influential Americans—in Congress, in the media, and in the foreign policy establishment more broadly. The size and reach of this audience had grown by 1968 to the point that it narrowed the range of policy options open to Lyndon Johnson in his final year in office (and indeed helped drive him from the White House), and to his successor the year thereafter. Hence Nixon's perceived need to proclaim on the campaign trail in 1968 that he had a 'secret plan' to end the war. Hence his arguably treasonous effort that fall to sabotage the peace talks in Paris—he feared that these talks, if successful, would swing the election to Hubert Humphrey. And hence Kissinger's September 1969 warning to Nixon, quoted by Lewis, that popular backing for his Vietnam policy "might soon evaporate," on account of the "clear opposition of many 'moderate' leaders of opinion..." Lewis is not unaware of this other audience, but in my judgment she pays it insufficient heed. She is not wrong to say that Nixon and Kissinger pursued a Decent Interval strategy "that was at odds with the line the President had repeatedly taken in public"; it seems imperative to add, however, that they felt compelled to pursue this strategy—and Vietnamization before that—in good

measure because of other statements they and their associated had made in public, to the effect that they understood the need bring the war to an end (if always by 'honorable' means). By 1972, as Lewis's own analysis shows, the balance had shifted further; now the audience likely to be upset by a perceived abandonment of South Vietnam was far smaller and less able to extract costs than the audience that essentially just wanted the war to be done with.⁶

⁶ On this point I've benefited from conversation with Sean Fear, a Cornell Ph.D. student currently writing a dissertation examining how the war played out on the ground (politically and militarily) in South Vietnam in the period 1968-1973.

After the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union collapsed, scholars began arguing that democracies have important advantages over autocracies in the international arena. One of the main arguments that emerged in the mid-1990s was called audience costs theory.

The central claim in audience costs theory is simple and intuitively attractive. It goes like this: democratically-elected leaders, unlike their counterparts in autocratic states, have to pay careful attention to what they tell their publics, because if they make a promise and then renege on it, they may be punished in the next election. They will pay audience costs. This means that leaders in a democracy can make commitments in a crisis that they cannot back away from, because the political costs would be too great. In essence, they can make credible commitments.

Autocrats, on the other hand, have more flexibility, because they are ultimately not accountable to their publics. This asymmetry should give democracies a bargaining advantage in a crisis, because their leaders can make statements that lock them into a position from which they cannot budge without committing political suicide. Autocrats, in contrast, are freer to ignore their previous rhetoric and give ground in a crisis so as to avoid war. This argument implies that democracies are better suited to engage in coercive diplomacy, because of audience costs.

Some scholars take the argument about audience costs a step further and maintain that they underpin democratic peace theory. Democracies may have profound disputes between them, so the argument goes, but they ultimately do not go to war, mainly because they can credibly signal their preferences and commitments to each other. Thus, there is little room for miscalculation and good reason to strike a bargain that avoids war.

Audience costs theory was highly regarded for roughly the first fifteen years after James Fearon presented it in a 1994 article in the *American Political Science Review*.¹ Nevertheless, the supporting evidence was thin, and there were good reasons to question the theory's causal logic despite its *prima facie* plausibility. But few scholars challenged the case for audience costs before 2011, when a major article by Jack Snyder and Erica Borghard appeared in the *American Political Science Review*.² It not only took issue with the logic underpinning the theory, but challenged it on empirical grounds as well.

Subsequent critiques also challenged the theory's causal story and suggested that its main predictions did not fit the historical record. The most important pieces in this regard both

¹ James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (September 1994), pp. 577-92.

² Jack Snyder and Erica D. Borghard, "The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 105, No. 3 (August 2011), pp. 437-56.

appeared in 2012: an article by Alexander Downes and Todd Sechser in *International Organization* and another article by Marc Trachtenberg in *Security Studies*.³ Along with the original Snyder and Borghard critique, these studies suggest that the logic behind audience costs theory is flawed and there is little empirical evidence to support it. It is no exaggeration to say that these three pieces appear to be a devastating critique of the theory. Its proponents surely have a different view, although they have yet to respond to these negative assessments.

This is the context into which the papers under discussion by Bronwyn Lewis and Marc Trachtenberg fit. Each is a case study that deals with audience costs and the Vietnam War.

Trachtenberg focuses on President John F. Kennedy's public and private rhetoric about Vietnam. Kennedy repeatedly said that the United States was firmly committed to winning the war in Vietnam and would never cut and run. That claim notwithstanding, a good number of well-informed students of international politics believe Kennedy would not have sent American combat troops to Vietnam had he lived, and that indeed he was willing to countenance a decisive North Vietnamese victory. If true, this would be a strike against audience costs theory.

Others argue, however, that Kennedy would have had no choice but to commit large numbers of American troops to Vietnam in 1965, as President Lyndon Johnson did, because otherwise he would have paid substantial audience costs.

Trachtenberg, who is a brilliant historian with the instincts of a social scientist, looks carefully at the historical record to see whether audience costs mattered much to Kennedy when he thought about U.S. policy toward Vietnam. Of course, we can never know what Kennedy would have done in 1965, because he was tragically assassinated two years before the critical decisions were made on whether or not to Americanize the war.

What Trachtenberg discovers is that Kennedy talked in private about Vietnam as if audience costs hardly mattered to him. This is not to say he was committed to abandoning South Vietnam, because he was not. Nor was he committed to defending it no matter what. The president certainly preferred to see an independent South Vietnam survive, but he was clearly not so committed to that outcome that he would have sent major American combat units to defend that distant ally. Most importantly for the topic under discussion, there is little evidence that Kennedy thought his hands were tied because of possible audience costs.

Indeed, what is most striking about Trachtenberg's telling of the story is how little Kennedy seemed to care about what he had told the American public about Vietnam and also how flexible his thinking was about a complicated problem for which there was no obvious

³ Alexander B. Downes and Todd S. Sechser, "The Illusion of Democratic Credibility," *International Organization*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (July 2012), pp. 457-89; Marc Trachtenberg, "Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis," *Security Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (January 2012), pp. 3-42.

solution. Based on the available evidence there is little reason to think Kennedy would have felt bound by audience costs in 1965, had he not been assassinated two years earlier. In short, Trachtenberg's piece is another strike against audience costs.

The Lewis article focuses on how President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger dealt with potential audience costs between 1969 and 1973, when the Paris Peace Accords were signed and U.S. participation in the Vietnam War came to an end. During those years, Nixon and Kissinger frequently said in public that they were firmly committed to South Vietnam's survival and would never allow it to fall to the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). In fact, they sounded much like Kennedy in their public rhetoric about the American commitment to the Saigon government.

But when Lewis examined what Kissinger and Nixon were saying behind closed doors, it turned out to be completely different from what they were saying publicly. In private, they acknowledged that the situation on the ground in South Vietnam was hopeless and that it was just a matter of time before all U.S. ground forces were withdrawn from that country. What was important, they maintained, was to ensure that there was a 'decent interval' between the time American troops pulled out and the NVA conquered South Vietnam. Kissinger and Nixon, in other words, were well aware that they were abandoning the Nguyen Van Thieu government in Saigon when they negotiated the American withdrawal with Hanoi in 1972 and early 1973.

Kissinger and Nixon recognized that there might be audience costs to pay, given what they had previously said about Washington's ironclad commitment to the defense of South Vietnam. They were convinced, however, that they could spin the story of the final settlement in ways that took audience costs off the table. Lewis lays out the various tactics they employed toward that end, which included blaming the media, Congress, and the South Vietnamese themselves. Naturally, they also portrayed the Paris Peace Accords as a great victory for the United States, which they definitely were not.

Nevertheless, this campaign to bamboozle the public failed. Most Americans understood that their country was abandoning South Vietnam, which was unlikely to withstand an NVA assault without help from the U.S. military. But they did not care. They just wanted out of Vietnam once and for all. Actually, they were deeply gratified that Nixon and Kissinger had finally ended American participation in that disastrous conflict. In brief, there were no audience costs in this case, when there should have been according to the theory.

The Lewis piece is actually a more damning indictment of the audience costs argument than Trachtenberg's piece, simply because it is impossible to know for sure how audience costs would have affected Kennedy in 1965, when the situation in Vietnam had deteriorated to the point where a decision had to be made about introducing American combat troops. With Nixon and Kissinger, however, we have a full-blown test of the theory, as the critical decisions they made to end the war involved potential audience costs. After all, there was a significant mismatch between their rhetoric and their behavior. This is not to deny that there is much evidence in the Trachtenberg piece that challenges audience costs theory.

One might argue that the Lewis and Trachtenberg pieces represent just one perspective on the available evidence and that those facts could be employed differently to tell an equally plausible story that supports audience costs theory. There is no good reason, however, to think that is the case. Both scholars provide an abundance of evidence to support their claims. Moreover, they both examine the best possible counter-arguments that might be employed against their perspectives. They knock down those alternative arguments at virtually every turn. The result is two impressive pieces of scholarship that appear to be daggers in the heart of audience costs theory.

There is little doubt that the tide has turned against the early claims about the powerful influence of audience costs on democracies. What once looked like a promising perspective now appears to be badly damaged, to the point where it is now in danger of being removed from the inventory of serious international relations theories. It reminds me of what happened to dependency theory, which was treated respectfully by scholars of all persuasions in the early 1970s, but was paid hardly any attention a decade later. That theory was undermined for one simple reason: the evidence contradicted it in case after case.

Still, it is too soon to say that audience costs theory is destined to follow dependency theory into the graveyard of international relations theories. After all, its proponents have yet to respond to their critics and repair the case for audience costs. However, if that response never comes, or if a weak response is the best its advocates can muster, audience costs theory will be paid little attention in the future.

In sum, the proponents of audience costs will have to deal directly with both Lewis's and Trachtenberg's sophisticated studies, as each one challenges that theory in a serious way.

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