

Why Democracies Will Continue to Fight Small Wars Poorly: Evidence from United States Involvement in the Vietnam War¹

Jonathan D. Caverley
Northwestern University

Abstract

A capital- and firepower-intensive military doctrine is in general poorly suited for combating an insurgency. It is therefore puzzling that democracies, particularly the United States, remain so tenacious in pursuing such a suboptimal strategy over long periods of time and in successive conflicts. The paper explains this apparently non-strategic behavior by arguing that a capitalized military doctrine results in a condition of moral hazard by shifting the costs away from the average voter. The voter supports the use of a capital-intensive doctrine in conflicts where its effectiveness is low because the decreased likelihood of winning is outweighed by the lower costs of fighting. I test the theory's hypotheses against the dominant explanation of a myopic military by examining the development of counterinsurgency strategy in Vietnam during the Johnson Administration.

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Strong democracies have often met with frustration in fighting small wars, particularly against opponents employing unconventional strategies. The explanation for their limited success is well known; industrialized democracies tend to pursue capital- and firepower-intensive strategies stemming from the natural desire by wealthy democracies to send, in the words of Sam Colt, a bullet instead of a man. The real puzzle is the problem's venerability. Given the ample opportunities for learning, democracies should have adopted an effective means of counterinsurgency (COIN) but generally have not.

In almost every investigation of this puzzle, the Second Indochina War looms large as a pivotal case.² The American failure in Vietnam, according to these accounts, epitomizes the inability of democratic militaries in general and the U.S. military in particular to adopt an effective approach to overcoming an insurgency. The Vietnam War is especially significant for two generations of American military intellectuals who regard it as the paradigmatic case of organizational and cultural inertia within the military. Vietnam represents “the triumph of the institutional culture of an organization” resulting in the U.S military becoming “reliant on firepower and technological superiority” as a consequence of “its history of annihilating enemy forces.”³ Others use Vietnam to exemplify a more widespread apolitical and “machine-minded”

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

³ John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) p. 115. Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). Larry Cable, *Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Vietnam*, (New York: New York University Press, 1986). Historical accounts which blame military bureaucracy and culture for poor

culture pervading all of American society, while a less culturally oriented explanation identifies simple democratic cost aversion in Vietnam as the root cause of American failure to pursue COIN effectively.⁴

The current unconventional conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have spurred a renaissance of military-intellectual thought both on COIN and the myopia of the U.S. military that prevents its application. Works in academia, the military's professional journals, and the popular press employ the Vietnam War not simply for theory development, but as an analogy for these present-day conflicts.⁵

This approach provokes more questions than it answers. Why has the American experience in Vietnam, sufficiently searing to have a "syndrome" attributed to it, failed to inform the subsequent conduct of counterinsurgency? If the military is predisposed towards such a problematic approach, why do its civilian masters not step in or avoid such wars altogether? Why do voters fixate on the reduction of costs, while ignoring the reduced benefits that result from such a strategy? Why would democracies, supposedly the most prudent of regime types, choose these risky wars and fight them in such an unconstructive manner? This paper proposes

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

⁴ Colin S. Gray, *Irregular Enemies And The Essence Of Strategy: Can The American Way Of War Adapt?* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, March 2006), p. 37.

⁵ Ibid., p. 19. Douglas A. Ollivant, "The New U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual as Political Science and Political Praxis," *Perspectives of Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (June 2008), pp. 357-360. John A. Nagl, "A Better War in Iraq," *Armed Forces Journal*, (August 2006). Interestingly, one of the architects of American counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq wrote a dissertation on Vietnam's lessons, David H. Petraeus, "The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam: A Study of Military Influence and the Use of Force in the Post-Vietnam Era," (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1987). Tom Bowman, "'Clear And Hold' Showing Results 40 Years Later," Morning Edition, National Public Radio, October 13, 2008. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96350333>

and tests an alternative explanation for such apparently non-strategic behavior.

The paper argues that in order to reduce the costs of conflict for the relatively less wealthy voter, democratic leaders shift the burden of defense provision onto the rich by employing capital as a substitute for military labor. Because the costs of fighting an insurgency with firepower are relatively low for the median voter compared to a more effective but labor-intensive COIN approach, she will favor its use even in the face of lower benefits from due to diminished prospects of victory. This condition of moral hazard makes supporting a capital-intensive military doctrine *and* small wars of choice rational policies for the average voter.

While the theory sheds light on why a democracy would enter a small war with the intention of choosing a suboptimal strategy, about which current theory has little to say, the bulk of the paper challenges the explanations of military myopia and other approaches for flawed counterinsurgency in the Vietnam War. Employing a variety of primary and secondary sources it reveals the limitations of previous approaches and the particular need to nest military myopia within a theory of civilian leaders and the public that elects them. Led by the alternate theory, the paper marshals evidence that, contrary to much of the conflict's historiography, the Johnson Administration played a crucial role in rejecting a more labor-intensive COIN approach in favor of a capital-intensive strategy it understood to be less effective but reflective of the cost preferences of the average voter.

1 How to Lose a Small War

The venerable U.S. Marine Corps' *Small Wars Manual* usefully defines a small war as one “undertaken under executive authority, wherein military force is combined with diplomatic pressure in the internal or external affairs of another state whose government is unstable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory for the preservation of life and of such interests as are determined

by the foreign policy of our Nation.”⁶ As the phrase “under executive authority” implies, small wars will not require the mobilization of the country, although this does not obviate the need for public support. They are fought by a strong state against a weaker state or non-state actor (“weak actor” for simplicity). A small war is one of choice; it may be consistent with the strong state's grand strategy but on its own is not essential to it. The strong state's aims are limited or political, and success often requires the weak actor's compliance.

Because the strong state tends to enjoy overwhelming conventional superiority, a weak actor responding in kind will likely lose. Weak actors therefore will often resort to unconventional strategies such as insurgency or terrorism.⁷ Fighting an unconventional war is a daunting task even for powerful states. Such a conflict often demands tremendous investments in intelligence gathering and a deep understanding of a foreign culture. Success requires gaining the allegiance or at least acquiescence of local non-combatants by providing personal security and economic stability. Firepower, when not used with utmost discrimination, will likely have counterproductive effects. In general no substitute exists for boots on the ground. Indeed the ratio of personnel to population required for “nation-building” has stayed roughly stable at twenty per thousand since the end of World War II.⁸

These principles behind a successful counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign have remained largely consistent over at least the past half century.⁹ Indeed, there exists a remarkable amount

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

⁷ Arreguín-Toft, "How the Weak Win."

⁸ James T. Quinlivan, "Burden of Victory: The Painful Arithmetic of Stability Operations," *RAND Review*, Vol. 27, (Summer 2003), p. 28.

⁹ Classic works on COIN include David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006) and Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of*

of agreement on how states lose small wars. Ivan Arreguín-Toft demonstrates how a conventional offensive campaign against a guerilla warfare strategy will likely result in a win (or at least a “non-loss”) for the guerillas.¹⁰ Jason Lyall and Ike Wilson systematically tests and finds support for this conventional wisdom that mechanized militaries are less effective due to their attendant collateral damage, poor intelligence gathering ability and inability to secure the population.¹¹

2 Why Focus on Democracies?

Whereas the Correlates of War codes democracies as losing only three wars (conflicts with more than a thousand battle deaths) and winning nine since 1948, the lopsided ratio does not carry over into smaller conflicts.¹² The mosaic plots in Figures 1 and 2 use two data sets to compare democratic and non-democratic performance against insurgencies by incumbent regimes and third-party interveners, respectively. The first conclusion is obvious: counterinsurgency is hard and usually results in an insurgent win or a negotiated settlement. Figure 1 shows that democracies do not appear to perform any differently as an incumbent in an insurgency.¹³ If

Malaya and Vietnam (St. Petersburg, FL: Hailer Press, 1966). More recent versions with similar recommendations include David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Kalev I. Sepp, “Best Practices in Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review*, (May-June 2005), pp. 8-12. For the remainder of the paper, I will use “COIN” to denote this type of effective, labor-intensive form of stopping an insurgency; “counterinsurgency” refers to any strategy used against insurgents including the firepower-intensive American version in Vietnam.

¹⁰ Arreguín-Toft, "How the Weak Win."

¹¹ Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, "Rage against the Machines: Mechanization and the Determinants of Victory in Counterinsurgency Warfare," *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (January 2009), pp 67-106.

¹² J. David Singer, "Reconstructing the Correlates of War Dataset on Material Capabilities of States, 1816-1985," *International Interactions*, Vol. 14 (1987), pp. 115-132.

¹³ Lyall and Wilson, "Rage." The dataset collected by Lyall and Wilson is a large step forward in the study of small wars. Nonetheless, as with all such efforts, limitations exist. Lyall and Wilson defines

analysis is limited only to interventions by third party states against an insurgency (Figure 2), the democratic track record becomes even less impressive. Democracies are not only involved in a larger percentage of these conflicts, a multinomial logit analysis of regime type on war outcome shows that democracies are just as likely to fight an insurgency to a draw as a non-democracy and significantly more likely to lose (with a coefficient for democracy of 0.67 and a standard error of 0.37).

[FIGURE 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE]

While arguing that regime type does not affect overall performance against insurgencies, Lyall also rightly notes that democratic counterinsurgency efforts are more likely to be wars of choice abroad and tend to develop heavily capitalized militaries.¹⁴ Once these and other factors are controlled for, democracy has little independent effect on war outcome. But of course if democracies are more likely to “select” into challenging third part conflicts, and more likely to use a capital-intensive doctrine while doing so, then regime type may well play a role in poor counterinsurgency. Even if regime type makes little difference, this in itself is a puzzle given the large body of research claiming that democracies deliberately pick unfair fights and tend to win.

insurgencies as a violent, guerilla struggle by non-state actors against an existing political authority, “the incumbent.” Thus the unit of analysis is the insurgent-incumbent dyad, and thus does not reflect all the state-participants. Lyall correctly points out that most studies focus exclusively on democracies, and thus cannot make claims that democracies are more likely to lose against insurgencies than other regime types. See Jason M. Lyall, “Do Democracies Make Inferior Counterinsurgents? Reassessing Democracy’s Impact on War Outcomes and Duration.” *International Organization*, forthcoming. Data for third party interventions are compiled from Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict,” *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Summer 2008) pp. 7-44; and Nils Petter Gleditsch, Peter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margareta Sollenberg & Håvard Strand, “Armed Conflict 1946–2001: A New Dataset,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (2002), pp. 615–637. States with a Polity 2 score of 6 or higher were coded as a democracy. Ted Robert Gurr, Monty G. Marshall, and Keith Jagers, *Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2002* (2002).

¹⁴ Lyall, “Do Democracies Make Inferior Counterinsurgents?” p. 23.

2.1 The Puzzle for Democratic Exceptionalism

Democracies' poor track record in small wars starkly challenges the liberal consensus that democracies tend to pursue exceptionally moderate and successful foreign policies.¹⁵ Many of this research program's findings rest on the assumption that in democracies the costs of war are internalized; all costs and benefits of a decision are accounted for by the actor responsible for setting policy. Fred Chernoff describes the difference between democracies and other regimes, "citizens and subjects-rather than presidents and monarchs-fight in wars, die in wars, and pay taxes to finance wars. In most cases, it is not in the citizen's self-interest for the state to go to war."¹⁶ Conversely, shielding the decision-maker from costs can lead to aggressive behavior. The most comprehensive statement of this cost internalization mechanism suggests that democratic leaders respond to the voters' cost-benefit calculation by providing public goods,

¹⁵ Alexander B. Downes, "How Smart and Tough are Democracies? Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War," *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Spring 2009), pp. 9-51 lays out a general empirical critique of this program, including an examination of Vietnam as a deviant case.

¹⁶ Fred Chernoff, "The Study of Democratic Peace and Progress in International Relations," *International Studies Review* Vol. 6, No. 1 (2004), p. 54. See also Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 121 and Randolph M. Siverson, "Democracies and War Participation: In Defense of the Institutional Constraints Argument," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1995), p. 483. This mechanism is used to explain why democracies fight shorter wars Scott Bennett and Allan Stam, "The Declining Advantages of Democracy: A Combined Model of War Outcomes and Duration," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 42, No. 3 (1998) pp. 344-366, Branislav L. Slantchev, "How Initiators End Their Wars: The Duration of Warfare and the Terms of Peace," *American Journal of Political Science* Vol. 48, No. 4 (2004), pp. 813-829; prefer to negotiate Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), Darren Filson and Suzanne Werner, "Bargaining and Fighting: The Impact of Regime Type on War Onset, Duration, and Outcomes," *American Journal of Political Science* Vol. 48, No. 2 (2004), pp. 296-313 ; win the wars they do initiate Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), ch. 6; Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, Siverson, "Democracies and War Participation"; and spend less money on defense in peacetime but devote more to the effort in wartime, Benjamin O. Fordham and Thomas C. Walker, "Kantian Liberalism, Regime Type, and Military Resource Allocation: Do Democracies Spend Less?" *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 49, No. 1 (2005), pp. 141-157; Benjamin E. Goldsmith, "Defense Effort and Institutional Theories of Democratic Peace and Victory Why Try Harder?" *Security Studies* Vol. 16, No. 2 (2007), pp. 189-222.

including security and military victory, both efficiently and in abundance.¹⁷

2.2 Sources of Non-Strategic Behavior: Democratic Cost Aversion

While exceptionalism suggests that democracies pursue superior foreign policies, many studies focusing on small wars claim that democratic cost aversion leads to flawed warfighting.¹⁸

Stephen Rosen argues the Johnson Administration's futile signaling strategy was chosen to minimize losses. Gil Merom identifies a Catch 22: democracies build firepower-intensive, low-manpower militaries to reduce "the number and/or exposure to risks of soldiers," but consequently must rely on "higher and less discriminating levels of violence" leading to normative criticism from the "educated middle class." This cost aversion results in a "post-heroic warfare" employed by "Western democracies conducting non-existential wars in which their readiness to sacrifice is relatively low."¹⁹

These explanations clarify why a democracy may prefer a military doctrine poorly-suited for small warfighting, but cannot account for the insistence on fighting them anyway. Surely a pragmatic state would rather not fight a war at all than fight a war it is likely to lose. Patricia Sullivan identifies the problem, "extant theories cannot explain why militarily preponderant

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

¹⁸ Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose;" Zeev Maoz, "Power, Capabilities, and Paradoxical Conflict Outcomes," *World Politics* Vol. 41, No. 2 (1989), pp. 239-66; John E. Mueller, "The Search for the 'Breaking Point' in Vietnam," *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 24, No. 4 (1980), pp. 497-531; Patricia L. Sullivan, "War Aims and War Outcomes: Why Powerful States Lose Limited Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 51, No. 3 (2007), pp. 496-524.

¹⁹ Rosen, "American Theory." Merom, *How Democracies Lose*, pp. 21-22. Avi Kober, "The Israel Defense Forces in the Second Lebanon War: Why the Poor Performance?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 31, No. 1 (2008), pp. 3-40. Edward N. Luttwak, "A Post-Heroic Military Policy: The New Season of Bellicosity," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 75, No. 4 (1996).

states regularly make poor strategic choices,” but provides no answer.²⁰ Sullivan argues that the aims associated with small wars can lead to increased uncertainty over the likely costs, but a strategic actor should recognize this and adjust for the larger down-side risk before entering a conflict. Sullivan does not identify the source for this congenital risk acceptance.

2.3 Sources of Non-Strategic Behavior: Civil-Military Disconnects, Military Myopia and Strategic Culture

Organizational and cultural theories about the role of the military claim to fill this explanatory breach. These theories argue that without sufficient pressure from political leaders, elements of the national security structure, particularly the military, will pursue their own ends with little regard for grand strategy. Barry Posen and Jack Snyder focus on bureaucratic forces pushing militaries towards offensive doctrine, while Elizabeth Kier argues that military culture is of greater importance and not simply limited to a preference for the offense.²¹ Both approaches agree with one important Vietnam War policy-maker that allowing the military to “do its thing” during wartime is a mistake.²² Focusing on military culture is prominent in work specifically addressing U.S. conduct of small wars; Eliot Cohen states that, “The most substantial constraints on America's ability to conduct small wars result from the resistance of the American defense establishment to the very notion of engaging in such conflicts, and from the unsuitability of that

²⁰ Sullivan, "Aims and Outcomes," p. 497.

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

²² Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on US-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand, 1973).

establishment for fighting such wars.”²³

Whereas military myopia requires a civil-military disconnect (one of the hallmarks of a liberal democracy) an alternative suggests that the American military simply reflects the cultural preferences of the people it serves. Colin Gray describes American “public, strategic, and military culture” as “not friendly to the means and methods necessary for the waging of warfare against irregular enemies.”²⁴ Americans, so goes the claim, are profoundly apolitical when it comes to war.²⁵ A theory based on the premise that “America is what it is” is obviously not generalizable, and democratic difficulty in small wars is not isolated to the United States.²⁶

The next section offers a theory of how a rational actor, the average voter in a democracy, can pursue what appears to be a non-strategic policy. To do so I use the core logic of democratic exceptionalism, despite its claims that this sort of behavior should rarely happen in democracies.

3 A Theory of Redistribution and Military Doctrine

The theory shares two important assumptions with the cost internalization logic of democratic exceptionalism: the distribution of costs within the state affects its pursuit of security and a democratic government’s provision of security is a public good.²⁷ However, I relax the claim that costs are always internalized within democracies, arguing that the average voter’s share may

²³ Eliot A. Cohen, “Constraints on America’s Conduct of Small Wars,” *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Autumn, 1984), p. 165.

²⁴ Colin S. Gray, *Irregular Enemies*, p. vi.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7. Jeffrey Record, *Beating Goliath: Why Insurgencies Win* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2007).

²⁷ John Hudson and Philip Jones, “Public Goods’: An Exercise in Calibration,” *Public Choice* Vol. 124, No. 3-4 (2005), pp. 267-282. Ethan B. Kapstein, *The Political Economy of National Security: A Global Perspective* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), p. 5.

be much lower than the state's per capita costs.

Even in democracies, wealth is not distributed equally within any given state; the person with median income is less well off than someone possessing the mean. Political economists have argued that if the median voter can set a tax rate and spend the revenue on a service available to all citizens, she will take advantage of the potential for redistribution, a result known as the "Meltzer-Richard hypothesis."²⁸ Even with a flat tax on income, the wealthy will pay a larger portion of the costs for a public good enjoyed by all. For example in 2005 the fifth of the population with the highest incomes paid 69% of all U.S. federal tax revenue, the middle fifth on the other hand paid only 9% and the lowest quintile less than one.²⁹ Using similar logic, the median voter will prefer a heavier tax on capital, rather than labor, since labor income is distributed more equally than capital income.³⁰

Since every state has a skewed distribution of wealth, how taxes are spent plays a most important role. Military doctrine, the means by which military power is developed and exercised, can be stylized as a production function consisting of the two factors of capital (tanks, planes, ammunition, even training) and labor (soldiers, sailors, etc.) as well as the technology

²⁸ Allan H. Meltzer and Scott F. Richard, "A Rational Theory of the Size of Government," *Journal of Political Economy* Vol. 89, No. 5 (1981), pp. 914-927. Alberto F. Alesina and Dani Rodrik, "Distributive Politics and Economic-Growth," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 109, No. 2 (1994), pp. 465-490; Torsten Persson and Guido E. Tabellini, *Political Economics: Explaining Economic Policy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000). For a recent use of median voter theory and redistribution, see Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²⁹ Edward Harris, *Historical Effective Federal Tax Rates: 1979 to 2005*, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Budget Office, 2007). <http://www.cbo.gov/doc.cfm?index=8885>

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 117-122.

that allows one factor of production to serve as a substitute for the other.³¹ Capital and labor are imperfect replacements and show diminishing returns. Given a hundred tanks and ten soldiers, adding another tank will not produce as much capability as another soldier. The type of conflict affects substitutions as well; it is much harder to substitute capital for labor when fighting an unconventional opponent.

Tax revenue can pay for both the capital and labor inputs. Personnel can also be supplied through conscription, a tax on a citizen's labor rather income (the former more evenly distributed than the latter). Assuming the possibility of a draft, even if the odds of being conscripted are equally distributed, suggests that the median voter will demand that a larger amount of the military budget go towards the purchase of capital to reduce the risk of conscription. In cases where existing threats do not currently justify resorting to conscription, military capitalization will still to a large degree determine a draft's future likelihood. The median voter normally will be happy with an expensive, all-volunteer military; but once the level of threat creates a demand for labor that reaches into the middle class, the voter will support a conscripted military where draftees are protected by large amounts of capital.³²

Casualties are also a public bad; no one wants to see their fellow citizens to die. The less wealthy are more likely to be drafted and to join an all-volunteer force, may gain jobs from domestic weapons manufacturing, and often regard military service as a means of acquiring

³¹ This paper does not seek to distinguish between strategy, operations and tactics; substitution of capital for labor occurs at all levels. I have settled on the term "doctrine," defined by the U.S. Defense Department as "Fundamental principles by which the military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives," as the appropriate catch-all phrase. <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/d/01744.html>

³² Joseph P. Vasquez, III, "Shouldering the Soldiering: Democracy, Conscription, and Military Casualties," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 49, No. 6 (2005) pp. 849-873. If conscription falls more heavily on the less wealthy, then the favoring of capital should be even stronger.

human capital. Conscription is therefore an important, but not the only, reason why militaries with large amounts of labor can be a public bad. The median voter will accept a higher tax, what the British socialist Sidney Webb called “the conscription of riches,” to build highly capitalized militaries in both peace and in war, since such militaries redistribute money and skills through jobs and training as well as reduce the risk of conscription and casualties.

Before proceeding, it must be emphasized that I do not claim that the median voter theorem perfectly captures how policy is made in a democracy, or that one’s relative income determines one’s position on foreign policy. Rather, I use this simple theory to convey an equally simple insight: the use of capitalized doctrine instead of labor will reduce the costs of conflict for an important swath of voters, and politicians should respond accordingly. A capitalized military not only results in many of voters doing less of the fighting themselves, but also will allow someone else's resources to fund the costs of war. This distribution of costs allows us to understand how seemingly non-strategic behavior may well be in the interests of important rational actors within a democracy.

3.1 Substitutability through Doctrine leads to Moral Hazard

Because of its redistributive nature, a capitalized military doctrine can lead to moral hazard. Moral hazard arises when perverse incentives exist for actors to pursue riskier behavior. For example, drivers with auto theft coverage will more likely park on the street than pay for secure parking. Many domestic government programs merge the Meltzer-Richard effect with moral hazard. Deposit insurance uses backing by government funds to insure bank deposits up to a certain limit, a redistributive public good. Because the insurance applies regardless of the bank (subject to government regulations), an individual has little motivation to consider the bank's solvency. Indeed, she is likely to choose the higher interest provided by a bank making risky

investments.

In terms of defense provision, a lack of cost internalization creates an incentive for the median voter to support riskier behavior by its leaders, that is using a capital-intensive military in conflicts where substitutability is low because *the decreased likelihood of winning is outweighed by the lower costs of fighting in such a manner*. If the median voter's risky behavior is in effect being subsidized by the wealthy, democratic leaders sensitive to voter's costs will pursue strategies that make success less likely. I argue that this is precisely what happened in Vietnam.³³

4 Why did the United States Fight Poorly in Vietnam?

Like many preceding examinations of counterinsurgency, this paper focuses on the Johnson Administration, during which nearly all major escalation and warfighting decisions were made, briefly visiting the Nixon Administration to show the essential continuity of American military strategy in Vietnam. A general consensus exists on the how the choice of strategies contributed to failure: a flawed relative balance of effort between fighting the enemy's main and insurgent forces, and an unsound approach to combating the insurgency using the few resources that were assigned to this task.

COIN-oriented thinkers focus on pacification as the key means to any chance of success in Vietnam, but few writers describe the conflict in dichotomous terms (i.e. conventional versus unconventional). Throughout the period investigated in this article, a "main force" threat

³³ Many factors besides the redistributive preferences—labor productivity, wealth, population age, level of education, and geography—both influence military doctrine and correlate with democracy. The U.S. and its allies built high quality militaries to counteract the Soviet Union's quantitative advantage of the Soviet Union. By concentrating on warfighting across a long conflict, I essentially hold these other factors constant.

certainly existed—albeit one that was extremely hard to find, fix and destroy—and shielding the population from it had to be an intrinsic part of any strategy. Clearly the United States devoted relatively few resources to the counterinsurgency mission, arguably the more important one from 1966 onwards.

Critics also emphasize that *how* the United States pursued counterinsurgency played a central role in its failure. Rather than rooting out guerilla elements from populated areas, establishing secure spaces for South Vietnamese civilians, and engaging in civil development of these “pacified” areas, the United States instead sought to use firepower to interdict supplies for the insurgency, strategic bombings to make North Vietnam pay costs for its support, and “search and destroy” missions to kill enemy personnel at a rate exceeding the reinforcement rate. American forces were for the most part specifically excluded from pacification and population security, leaving them to a South Vietnamese military and government competence in these missions. This essay does not focus on the requirement of firepower and conventional forces to combat any main force threat. Rather, it focuses on why airpower, physical barriers, and a main force-focused attrition strategy were employed as tactics for counterinsurgency, as well as why it got less attention relative to the main force war.

4.1 What Constitutes Evidence?

This paper competitively tests cost distribution theory against its rivals in two ways. First, it presents evidence that cost distribution theory explains more aspects of the war than the others. This approach also helps illustrate its causal chain, inspiring confidence that the cost distribution mechanism is a necessary cause for poor strategy in an important case. Placed in this context many important events of the war—public opinion polling on strategies, the Stennis Hearings,

the McNamara Line, and the Marines' Combined Action Platoons (CAP)—take on new relevance. In addition, I claim to better explain aspects of the War that are covered by other theories.

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

Establishing this causal chain also allows the direct comparison of competing theoretical claims. Establishing that the Administration, important members of Congress, the military, and even the public shared a realistic assessment of the limited nature, stakes and prospects for success in Vietnam supports costs distribution theory over arguments of a broad American strategic culture. Showing that the Johnson Administration understood the superiority of a COIN approach and rejected it for domestic political grounds also undermines the strategic culture arguments. Military myopia claims that the U.S. military, particularly the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) commander William Westmoreland, displayed "an utter obliviousness to the political nature of the war" by rejecting an alternate COIN or pacification

strategy that was simultaneously more effective and less casualty-intensive.³⁴ Evidence that Westmoreland and other military experts recommended a more COIN-oriented strategy only to be rejected by civilians would undermine the military myopia case in favor of cost distribution. Finally, unlike its competitors, cost distribution theory suggests that the choice of a conventional approach to counterinsurgency should be consistent, even in the face of feedback that it is not working. Democratic exceptionalism, military myopia, and even strategic culture explanations suggest that a democracy eventually adjusts in the face of harsh wartime lessons. Cost distribution theory argues that, short of reducing the average voter's influence, a democracy may never "learn" effective COIN.³⁵

5 Public Opinion

Polling data shows a large portion of the public remained vaguely hawkish if poorly informed up through the Tet Offensive of 1968.³⁶ Even afterwards, while a five-to-three majority of the American public viewed the decision to go to war as a mistake, the same ratio wanted to win the

³⁴ Record, *Beating Goliath*, 121. Krepinevich, *Army and Vietnam* 21. Krepinevich challenges what many consider the Army's received wisdom embodied by Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2007). This article agrees with Summers that civilians set much of the ground strategy, but disagrees that these civilians pushed the Army towards COIN.

³⁵ Within space constraints, this article includes representative citations on war strategy and domestic politics from every major advisor to Lyndon Johnson from 1964 to 1968: the National Security Advisors, Secretaries of State and Defense, Chair of the Joint Chiefs, personal advisors such as Maxwell Taylor and Robert Komer, as well as the most pivotal deputies: William Bundy, John McNaughton and Nicholas Katzenbach. Vice President Hubert Humphrey wrote a prescient analysis of the insurgency and was subsequently marginalized by Johnson. William C. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, Vol. IV (New York: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 20. The Administration's sidelining of Edward Lansdale, one of the few government officials with expertise in counterinsurgency and Vietnam, also supports cost distribution theory. While McNamara dismissed Lansdale to Johnson in December 1965 as "a bunch of hot air," Westmoreland was somewhat more appreciative of Lansdale's expertise. James McAllister, "The Lost Revolution: Edward Lansdale and the American Defeat in Vietnam 1964-1968," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer 2003), p 14.

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

war by escalating.³⁷ Once this hawkish consensus began to break down in 1968, the role of income in public opinion on approval of the war grew significant, with poorer people being more hawkish.³⁸ A closer look at the polling data reveals a public relatively realistic about the prospects for limited success in Vietnam, and the means they were willing to employ in order to achieve it.

5.1 The Public Recognized and Supported Limited War

While critics describe American strategic culture as an “apolitical view of war, which encourages the pursuit of military victory for its own sake,” public opinion polling does not support this claim.³⁹ At the time of the 1965 escalation, 64% of Gallup poll respondents supported greater involvement, yet only 29% thought that a victory was likely. Another 30% predicted a stalemate.⁴⁰ Across several identical polls from January 1966 through the end of 1972, large majorities (ranging from 53-77%) agreed that the war in Vietnam was likely to end in a “compromise peace settlement.”⁴¹

In addition to a realistic assessment of the outcome, the largest group in most surveys supported actions advancing limited aims. A Harris Poll in December 1964 found 40% of the public approving of “continuing support for the anti-Communist government” and roughly equal

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

³⁸ Gartner and Segura, "Race, Opinion, and Casualties."

³⁹ Record, *Beating Goliath*, p. x.

⁴⁰ Gelb and Betts, *Irony*, pp. 129-130.

⁴¹ *Survey by Gallup Organization*, January 1-5, May 19-24, 1966; May 11-16, Nov. 16-21, 1967; Feb. 2-6, Mar. 2-7, 1968 (hereafter “Gallup”). Retrieved June 28, 2008 from the iPOLL Databank, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu.turing.library.northwestern.edu/ipoll.html>.

portions supporting withdrawal or “bombing North Vietnam.”⁴² In a November 1966 poll only 7% preferred to pull troops out, and another 5% supported a “neutralist South Vietnam.” 57% supported both sides withdrawing “under the United Nations,” and 31% advocated the pursuit of “total military victory.” In February 1967 the same question gained similarly meager levels of support for the dovish options (6% and 7% respectively) while 44% supported the UN option and a striking 43% supported total victory. The same question in May 1967 produced nearly identical results.⁴³

5.2 The Public Preferred Capital over Labor

While many respondents understandably were unsure about strategy and tactics, those expressing an opinion appeared realistic in assessing their efficacy. Public opinion was hawkish when it came to bombing, far less so for ground forces. In December 1965 a majority (52%) agreed that “we should go all out in bombing North Vietnam until the Communists are ready to negotiate,” while those favoring stopping the bombing only slightly outnumbered those supporting “continue as present.”⁴⁴ Compare this poll, which emphasized bombing, to the one portrayed in Figure 3, in which a plurality favored holding the line rather than “carry the ground war into North Vietnam,” and more respondents preferred negotiating over escalation.

[FIGURES 3 AND 4 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 3 depicts the results of two polls taken in June 1965 at the cusp of accelerated U.S.

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

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

⁴⁴ Gallup, Dec. 16, 1965.

involvement, giving a useful snapshot of the public's preferences regarding operations. Four out of five respondents were either unsure or skeptical that airpower alone could stop North Vietnamese infiltration (Figure 3b) but a large majority favored continued bombing of the North in retaliation regardless (Figure 3c). A slight plurality in Figure 3d supported the addition of more U.S. troops, but only for defending the South ("holding the line"). Scant support existed for carrying the ground war into North Vietnam (3a).⁴⁵

Six months later, Figure 4a shows a high percentage supported the decision to end the second bombing pause. While a smaller plurality supported ground action beyond "limiting U.S. ground action to a few strong coastal areas (enclaves)," a larger percentage was unsure compared to the support for bombing (4b). In terms of the effects of bombing, Figures 4c and 4d show that while slim majorities believed it hampered the North Vietnamese war effort, a stunning 86% (with very few "not sure" responses) believed that the bombing "backed up our troops in the field."⁴⁶

5.3 The Public was Shielded from the Costs It Cared About Most

Cost distribution theory suggests that one reason for public hawkishness in the face of limited success was the war's relatively low cost for the average voter. This phenomenon is clearly demonstrated by two sets of polls distinguishing between war costs that people cared about (manpower and casualties) and those that they experienced directly (inflation and taxes). If the government is responsive to voter preferences, responses to these two types of questions should

⁴⁵ *Survey by Louis Harris and Associates*, "Harris 1966 survey, nos. 1522 and 1531" (hereafter "Harris"), Retrieved March 20, 2009 from the Odum Institute; Louis Harris Data Center, University of North Carolina. <http://arc.irss.unc.edu/dvn/dv/odvn/faces/StudyListingPage.xhtml?mode=1&collectionId=4>.

⁴⁶ Harris, no. 1623, June 1966 and no. 1702, January 1967.

differ as leaders choose strategies that minimize the costs that disturb voters in favor of those that do not.

Questions in a 1967 poll distinguished between what “troubled” versus what “affected” respondents, showing that only 44% of respondents felt their personal lives had been “affected” by the war. Among those affected more respondents (32%) cited inflation than casualties (25%) as the source. However, responding to the question—“What two or three things about the war in Vietnam most trouble you personally?”—31% said the equivalent of casualties or killing, 12% said lack of progress, while only 7% said rising cost.⁴⁷ The same questions were asked in March of 1968, immediately after the high casualty rates of the Tet Offensive. Now over half the respondents thought the war had affected them personally, and half of these thought inflation and taxes to be the principal source. While only 9% knew any individual who had been killed in Vietnam, “concern” over the draft of a son or husband rose to 37%. In terms of “troubling aspects,” 44% were troubled by American casualties.⁴⁸ 7% were troubled by the draft and another 7% by financial costs.

[FIGURES 5 AND 6 ABOUT HERE]

While there is little difference among income groups regarding approval of strategy choices, some survey questions allow for testing the war effort’s distributive elements. Cost distribution theory suggests that lower income groups should be less sensitive to the costs of war when expressed in the form of higher taxes than in the form of higher labor costs (i.e. conscription). While few respondents to a 1967 poll supported any income tax increase,

⁴⁷ Mark A. Kelley and Charles J. Lorell, "Casualties, Public Opinion, and Presidential Policy During the Vietnam War," (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1985), pp. 23-28.

⁴⁸ 4% were concerned by South Vietnamese civilian casualties.

majorities among those initially opposed became more supportive if “convinced it would help pay for the war.” Moreover, one’s income appears to affect this support, as illustrated in Figure 5.⁴⁹ Wealthier respondents are more likely to remain opposed to raising taxes. The relationship to income changes in Figure 6 when respondents were asked if they favored shifting the selection of conscription to a lottery system without deferments. Opposition to a lottery grew with income, suggesting a belief by many that the deferment system favored the wealthy. This suggests that the conscription “tax” was perceived regressive, making capital that much more appealing to relatively poor voters.⁵⁰ Relative income appears to play a role in support for policy when costs are made explicit.

5.4 Government Responsiveness to the Public

Public opinion polls occasionally directly influenced the choice of strategies; National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, for example, cited one poll in Figure 3 in analyzing the differences between the U.S. and French experiences in Vietnam.⁵¹ But often these decisions were made in anticipation of public responses. Cost distribution theory does not require the public to express strong military doctrine preferences. Rather it suggest that the government assesses doctrine in

⁴⁹ A multinomial logistic regression of respondent’s income on support for the tax increase among those initially opposed shows that wealthier respondents are more likely to remain so (with a coefficient of 0.086 and standard error of 0.050, $p=0.086$). The wealthier are less likely to answer “not sure” as well (-0.229, standard error of 0.103). Wealthier respondents are less likely to change their initial opposition to the income tax (answering “more in favor” or “not sure”) with a coefficient of -0.107, standard error of 0.048. In the publicly available polling data sets, there are surprisingly few questions linking the war and raising taxes. Generally, polls that addressed income taxes also asked about a variety of alternate measures such price controls, which relatively less wealthy people tended to favor. See for example Gallup Oct. 21-26, 1966.

⁵⁰ A multinomial logistic regression of respondent’s income on support for the lottery gives a coefficient of -0.087 and standard error of .047. That is the wealthier appear less likely to support switching to a lottery system. The wealthy were much less likely to answer “Not Sure” as well (coefficient of -0.417, standard error of 0.069).

⁵¹ FRUS 3:33.

light of public preferences over outcomes (in the case of Vietnam a negotiated settlement without pulling out entirely) and the costs in blood and treasure.

Although this article focuses on the Administration's choice of how to fight the war, rather than the initiation of the war, it is important to underscore the pressures the Johnson Administration believed came from the public. Following Truman's "loss" of China, every administration understood Daniel Ellsberg's two rules for dealing with Indochina: "Do not lose the rest of Vietnam to communist control before the next election," and "Do not commit ground troops to a land war in Asia, either."⁵² Johnson bluntly told Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. "I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went." In a presidential memo Bundy argued, "The political damage to Truman and Acheson from the fall of China arose because most Americans came to believe that we could and should have done more than we did to prevent it. This is exactly what would happen now if we should seem to be the first to quit in Saigon."⁵³ Administration officials privately assessed the likelihood of a "win" to be quite low, yet felt they had little choice but to fight it.

Civilians from the outset reiterated the focus on enemy main force units and explicitly rejected the use of personnel (especially American forces) to pursue pacification. Recently sworn in and already preparing for the 1964 election, Johnson convened an ad hoc committee on the conflict chaired by William Sullivan, who had been told in advance that the policy would be a "slow, very slow, escalation" of bombing pressures against North Vietnam. Sullivan briefed

⁵² Daniel Ellsberg, *Papers on the War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 102.

⁵³ *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968* (FRUS) 1:8. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/johnsonlb/>. When a primary document is found in both the "Gravel edition" of the *Pentagon Papers* (PP) and FRUS, I cite the latter due to its availability online. FRUS citations refer to volume and document, rather than page numbers.

the Joint Chiefs that a military “presence” without “heavy forces” would maintain public support indefinitely.⁵⁴ One contemporary analysis based on anonymous interviews of State Department officials assessed that the President was “more inclined to listen” to advocates of “selective bombing of North Vietnamese targets and clandestine naval raids along the coast” because 1964 was an election year, and Johnson knew he had to “take some action soon to show that his administration was on top of the situation.”⁵⁵

The counterinsurgency approach that endured throughout the Johnson Administration can be captured in a single sentence from a January 1966 phone call between McNamara and Johnson. In it the Defense Secretary links bombing in the South as well as search and destroy operations to the interrogations of VC defectors that “indicate that the pressure that is being applied to them by air and by constant offensive probing by the [South Vietnam] government and U.S. forces is beginning to appear in morale.”⁵⁶ Again, this article does not claim that the military and the Administration failed to recognize the insurgent nature of the war in favor of focusing on main forces and strategic bombing. Rather firepower and attrition *was* the Administration’s counterinsurgency strategy.

In the following empirical sections I address why the government continued to pursue this strategy in the face of information that it was failing. First, I show the overarching philosophy of the war’s prosecution: the inefficient substitution of capital for labor. I then show how the administration chose airpower, barrier construction and a search-and-destroy/attrition strategy as their preferred means of fighting the insurgent component of the war. In each section I highlight

⁵⁴ McMaster, *Dereliction*, p. 68.

⁵⁵ Stempel, "Policy/Decision Making", p. 221.

⁵⁶ FRUS 4: 26.

evidence from internal deliberations and public statements that civilians made these decision with domestic politics in mind.

6 U.S. Strategy in Vietnam: “Expensive in Dollars, but Cheap in Life”

McNamara, famously obsessed with cost-benefit analysis, informed his subordinates in March 1965 “there is an unlimited appropriation available for the financing of aid to Vietnam.”⁵⁷ By the end of the 1966, McNamara told Westmoreland “he would approve whatever related requirements were developed to ensure that RVN [Republic of Vietnam, also referred in primary documents as GVN and SVN] manpower and U.S. money substitute for U.S. blood.”⁵⁸ In the face of an obviously failing strategy, the Pentagon Papers describes further attempts to de-emphasize labor, “certain ‘oblique alternatives,’ those which were not directly substitutable options” which were “designed to relieve pressure on U.S. resources, especially manpower.”⁵⁹

Of course the principal means of substituting capital for labor was the employment of air and artillery-delivered ordnance in the place of manpower, to a degree that counterinsurgency expert Robert Thompson observed, “All ground operations were designed to achieve a fix on an enemy unit so that every modern weapon could be brought to bear.”⁶⁰ Ordnance was expended

⁵⁷ PP 3:474. Congress was a willing accomplice. From the first Vietnam supplemental in 1965 though the end of 1972, 95% of members voted for appropriations bills on final passage. *U.S. Domestic Factors Influencing Vietnam War Policy Making*, Vol. IV (McLean, Virginia: The BDM Corporation, 1980). pp 5-20. Congress often tried to outdo the President, Army Chief of Staff General Johnson warned Westmoreland in an “eyes only” message that the Stennis subcommittee was “trying to prove that Mr. McNamara is starving the services in his budgets.” H. Johnson to Westmoreland, July 31, 1965, “Eyes Only Message File” [EOMF], Box 34, Papers of William C. Westmoreland, LBJ Library. President Johnson’s budget director Charles Schultze recalls that while normally “you can’t sell Congress on tax hikes,” the Treasury Secretary told Johnson “if you make it a war tax you’ll get it.” Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), p. 373.

⁵⁸ Gibbons, *U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, Vol. IV, pp. 106-107.

⁵⁹ PP 4:385.

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

routinely when it was likely to have only a marginal effect; seventy percent of artillery fire was employed in situations of light or inactive combat intensity.⁶¹ Upon hearing McNamara's "reluctant" endorsement of Westmoreland's initial request for ground forces, Johnson desperately sought alternatives, asking if "there's any way, Bob, that through your small planes or helicopters... you could spot these people and then radio back and let the planes come in and bomb the hell out of them?" and even suggested getting "every damn admiral that we've got that want some practice, and all these commanders on destroyers you've got all over the world out there where you could see them!"⁶²

The Administration and its uniformed subordinates highlighted this substitution for the public. Robert Komer, Johnson's principal counterinsurgency advisor, recalled the political exchange rate in 1982, "What it costs you in blood is much more politically visible than what it costs you in treasures."⁶³ Army general and JCS chairman Wheeler briefed a Rotary Club that, "The United States policy is to expend money and firepower, not manpower, in accomplishing the purpose of the nation."⁶⁴ Asked by a *New York Times* writer, "How large a commitment of men is the United States prepared to make at the end of 1965?" McNamara refused to answer, instead replying that "the thing we prize most deeply is not money but men. We have multiplied the capability of our men. It's expensive in dollars, but cheap in life."⁶⁵ Responding in a televised congressional hearing to a question on the economic costs of strategic bombing,

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

⁶² Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory*, pp. 194-195.

⁶³ Kelley and Lorell, "Casualties, Public Opinion, and Presidential Policy," p. 80.

⁶⁴ Krepinevich, *Army and Vietnam*, p. 198.

⁶⁵ Henry F. Graff, *The Tuesday Cabinet: Deliberation and Decision on Peace and War under Lyndon B. Johnson* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 81-82.

McNamara responded that financial comparisons do not “have great value in affecting the decisions as to whether to bomb or not bomb specific facilities.” Rather, “one of the standards I use in recommending targets for attack on the North” was comparing “the value of facilities destroyed in the North with the number of U.S. lives lost in the process of destroying them.”⁶⁶

6.1 Airpower as Counterinsurgency Strategy

Both elements of airpower used in the conflict, strategic bombing of North Vietnam and the more tactically oriented operations in the South, were designed with the insurgency in mind. A pivotal McGeorge Bundy memo on “sustained reprisal” argued that strategic bombing was a “new norm in counter-insurgency” because “to stop it [the bombing] the Communists would have to stop enough of their activity in the South to permit the probable success of a determined pacification effort.”⁶⁷ Later in 1965, Bundy noted the importance of population security and “the civil side of the war,” but then describes how it should be “fought in the shelter of sea and air power... the populated area is all accessible from the sea.”⁶⁸ Walt Rostow, Bundy’s successor as National Security Advisor in 1966, agreed, describing airpower as “the equivalent of guerilla warfare.”⁶⁹

Even if the expenditure of ordnance was unlikely to be effective, civilians pushed for its use, Westmoreland complained in an “eyes only” cable to Pacific Forces commander Admiral Ulysses Sharp, “Secretary McNamara manifested uncommon interest in our disclosure that small

⁶⁶ U. S. Congress, Senate, Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee of the Armed Services Committee, *Air War Against North Vietnam*, 90th Congress, 1st Session. (Washington D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1967) p. 283.

⁶⁷ FRUS 2:84.

⁶⁸ Graff, *Tuesday Cabinet*, p. 94.

⁶⁹ David Milne, “‘Our Equivalent of Guerilla Warfare’: Walt Rostow and the Bombing of North Vietnam, 1961-1968,” *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (January 2007), pp. 169-203.

percentage of daily requirements for tactical air strikes not always fulfilled” by available in-country resources. McNamara “voiced concern that ‘policy’ concerning use of in-country and carrier based air in support of operations in SVN not being adhered to,” stressing the “relative ease” of obtaining “additional carriers if needed.”⁷⁰

The Administration understood that bombing was unlikely to be effective even as it ordered them. Johnson was skeptical from the beginning. In a late-1964 memo to Maxwell Taylor, Ambassador to Vietnam as well as a key military advisor, Johnson claimed that regarding large-scale bombing, “I have never felt that this war will be won from the air,” making the point more colorfully in a March 1965 phone conversation with Senator Richard Russell, “Airplanes ain't worth a *damn* Dick!”⁷¹

[FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE]

Yet the U.S. embarked upon a massive air campaign and continued it long after sufficient evidence existed that it had little if any effect on the insurgency. The near one-to-one ratio of combat sorties in the theater to personnel in Vietnam allows for the dramatic comparison Figure 7. By 1966 the number of sorties overtook the number of personnel, rose more steeply to the peak deployment of 1968 and declined less sharply afterwards. Before the ratio increased by an order of magnitude in 1972, the largest sorties-to-personnel ratio occurred during 1969, when the U.S. military had supposedly shifted to a less firepower intensive pacification strategy.

6.1.1 Designed for Public Consumption

⁷⁰ Westmoreland to Sharp, July 17, 1965. EOMF, Box 30. McNamara was constantly pushing Wheeler and Westmoreland to improve the close air support provided to Army ground forces. Wheeler to Sharp December 22, 1965. EOMF, Box 30.

⁷¹ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, (New York: Modern Library, 2001), p. 511. Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory*, p. 212.

Johnson was much less worried about revealing the extent of the bombing campaign than the ground escalation.⁷² NSAM 328, authorizing expansion of the ground and air campaign, infamously noted the President's desire to “minimize any appearance of sudden changes in policy,” but this admonition applied specifically only to the additional personnel deployments and the “more active use” of Marines in Vietnam. Other actions, in particular “the present slowly ascending tempo of ROLLING THUNDER operations,” were not subject to this restriction.⁷³ When McNamara advised extending the May 1965 bombing pause by three days to “satisfy the *New York Times* editorial board,” Johnson responded, “If we hold off bombing any longer, people are going to say ‘What in the world is happening?’ My judgment is the public never wanted us to stop the bombing.”⁷⁴

Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs William Bundy linked strategic bombing, casualties and public opinion in a memo noting, “we are faced with the pressures from various quarters...to hit the North substantially harder. The degree to which this will rise during the next 3-6 months will depend heavily on actual casualty experience.” Bundy links support for increased bombing to the “Phase II” ground force deployment anticipated for 1966 in light of “US domestic reaction. There would be a lot of rumbling below decks and among the harder-action school of critics.” In this case, Bundy fretted, “pressures would be enormous thereafter [a bombing pause] to ‘really clobber’ the DRV.”⁷⁵ In the November 1967 debate over McNamara's proposal to stabilize the bombing of North Vietnam, Rostow observed that “Acknowledging my

⁷² Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 61.

⁷³ FRUS 2:242.

⁷⁴ McMaster, *Derelection*, pp. 284-285.

⁷⁵ FRUS 3:181 October 23, 1965. For similar sentiments from Rostow and McNamara, see FRUS 4:232, September 1966, which refers to November (i.e. the election).

limitations as a judge of domestic politics, I am extremely skeptical of any change in strategy that would take you away from your present middle position.” Rostow argued, “If we shift unilaterally to de-escalation, the Republicans will move in and crystallize a majority toward a stronger policy.”⁷⁶ Taylor attached a note concurring that curtailing bombing would mobilize “the large majority of our citizens who believe in the bombing but who thus far have been silent.”⁷⁷

The popularity of airpower, its linkage to troop levels and casualties in the minds of the public and policymakers, and the limits of military influence on the Administration are well illustrated by a rare instance of successful military subversion of Presidential policy. Given the opportunity in the summer of 1967 to testify publicly before John C. Stennis's hawkish Military Preparedness Subcommittee, the Chiefs pushed for an expansion of strategic bombing even as the Defense Secretary, convinced by then of bombing's futility, challenged its effectiveness. McNamara gave a masterful brief on bombing's limitations, but was contradicted by both the generals and senators suggesting that “we probably would have suffered fewer casualties in the south if the air campaign against the north had not been burdened with restrictions and prohibited targets.”⁷⁸

Questioning Admiral Sharp, Senator Stuart Symington highlighted the substitution logic, “if instead of diminishing the bombing effort you increased it, you could do as good a job or a

⁷⁶ FRUS 5:381.

⁷⁷ Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam* (New York: Norton, 1989), pp. 104-107.

⁷⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Air War*, p. 208.

better job, with less troops in South Vietnam could you not?”⁷⁹ The Senator’s comments reveal an awareness of the bombing’s ineffectiveness, “Why is it that we are putting out this gigantic effort, but getting so little, so terribly little results? It is what everybody wants to talk about when I go back to Missouri.” Rather than considering another strategy however, Symington observed that, “The people are now beginning to realize that we have shackled our seapower and shackled our airpower.”⁸⁰ Despite his dismay over JCS maneuvering, the President began to abandon his civilian advisors’ recommendations in favor of the military’s more politically palatable ones.⁸¹

The testimony the generals did not give is equally suggestive. While the Committee’s portfolio included oversight of all elements of the war effort, almost all discussion focused on airpower rather than personnel. Despite their deep-seated belief in the need for more soldiers, when questioned on the subject, the generals’ near-unanimous reply was that higher troop levels were not as important as increased bombing.⁸²

6.2 Installing a Barrier as Counterinsurgency Strategy

Even when the air war’s shortcomings became clear, the administration chose neither to increase ground forces nor reconsider involvement in Vietnam, but instead attempted to build an anti-infiltration barrier, one of the Pentagon Papers’ “oblique strategies.” Various named “Practice Nine,” “Muscle Shoals” and “Igloo White,” its colloquial name became the “McNamara Line” due to his enthusiastic support. Designed partly to head off an Army request for four more

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 34. Sharp, while a strong advocate of increased strategic bombing, refused to agree with Symington’s claim that bombing reduced troop requirements.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 420.

⁸¹ Schandler, *Unmaking*, 61.

⁸² Marine Corps Commandant Wallace Greene being a vocal exception.

divisions to block incursions, its development was championed by McNamara and other politically-oriented officials in the face of objections from military experts. William Sullivan, then Ambassador to Laos, recalled that “Neither Taylor nor I thought very much of it.” All of the Joint Chiefs (with the notable exception of Wheeler) agreed with Sharp’s assessment, “an inefficient use of resources with small likelihood of achieving U.S. objectives in Vietnam.”⁸³

Despite these objections, McNamara approved the plan in September of 1966, including it in a Presidential memo the next month as one of the five principal means of reversing the war's course. In early 1967, NSAM 358 classified the program with the “highest national priority category.”⁸⁴ The building of the system itself cost a striking \$2 billion (about \$13 billion in current dollars).⁸⁵ Faced with JCS foot-dragging McNamara shouted, “Get on with it for God's sakes, it's only money!”⁸⁶

Not only was the barrier given near-limitless resources, its development was designed with public consumption in mind. In a May 19 memo on finding a way to reduce bombing in a manner “acceptable to our own people,” Rostow mooted “Surfacing the concept of the barrier may be critical to that turnaround [in public opinion].”⁸⁷ Polls backed up Rostow; when asked to evaluate ways “to step up our military effort in Vietnam,” the most popular option (60% approval versus 18% opposed) was “building a military barrier across all entrance routes into

⁸³ Robert D. Rego, "Anti-Infiltration Barrier Technology and the Battle for Southeast Asia (1966-1972)" (Air Command and Staff College, Air University, 2000), pp.1-2.

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

⁸⁵ Rego, "Anti-Infiltration Barrier," p. x.

⁸⁶ Halberstam, *Best and Brightest*, p. 630.

⁸⁷ FRUS 5:162, see also PP 4:385.

South Vietnam.”⁸⁸ A *Washington Post* column with the sadly ironic title “The Vietnam Wall,” trumpeted the (leaked) project as “a revolutionary new approach” that could “conceivably transform the Vietnamese war.”⁸⁹ Originally proposed by the Pentagon's JASON advisory group as a substitute for the ineffective air campaign, the barrier simply supplemented it.⁹⁰

6.3 Main Force Focus as Counterinsurgency Strategy

One of the war's most puzzling aspects is the leeway apparently given to the military in determining the ground strategy.⁹¹ Given civilian micromanagement elsewhere, Occam's razor suggests a superior explanation: the commander in the field was doing precisely what the president wanted him to do.⁹² Johnson well understood what type of war would be fought and he and his advisors reiterated this strategy throughout the war.

Both civilians and the military regarded the setting of ceilings on troop numbers as sufficient means of precluding a COIN approach.⁹³ In some respects it dictated a firepower intensive effort, a senior deputy's eyes-only message to Westmoreland observed that it seems, “the smaller the number of maneuver battalions the more B-52's we need.”⁹⁴ Inconsistent with military myopia theory, in 1965 the Army deployed dismounted infantry units rather than

⁸⁸ Harris 1967 “Vietnam survey, no. 1735.”

⁸⁹ Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Inside Report...The Vietnam Wall," *The Washington Post*, August 1, 1966.

⁹⁰ PP 4:115-123.

⁹¹ Krepinevich, *Army and Vietnam*, p. 165.

⁹² I am grateful to John Nagl for making this point, which appears obvious to me only in hindsight.

⁹³ McMaster, “Human Element.”

⁹⁴ Depuy to Westmoreland, January 31, 1966, EOMF, Box 31. The JCS, apparently in response to the President's desire to “kill more Viet Cong,” concluded in their planning of April 1965 that given the limits to deployed forces, a massive application of airpower in the South was the only option. McMaster, *Dereliction*, p. 272

armored brigades and divisions in order to get as many soldiers as possible into the field given personnel caps.⁹⁵ Moreover, the generals understood that heavy forces were inappropriate for the terrain and the type of war being fought, Westmoreland insisted to his Washington colleagues that “Vietnam is no place for either tank or mechanized infantry units,” and Army Chief of Staff Harold Johnson agreed, “the presence of tank formations tends to create a psychological atmosphere of conventional combat.”⁹⁶ The Army’s shift to armor occurred gradually over 1966 only as the need to substitute for labor became more apparent.⁹⁷

This section moves beyond the role that limits on personnel strength played in the ground campaign to show that the civilians understood COIN’s potential effectiveness but rejected the strategy. More importantly for theory testing, civilians frequently overruled recommendations of Westmoreland and others to more aggressively focus on pacification.

6.3.1 Civilians Understood and Rejected COIN

Those looking for a description of effective COIN strategy cannot improve on McNamara's memo to Johnson in March 1964, which expresses “the basic theory now fully accepted both on the Vietnamese and U.S. sides...concentrating on the more secure areas and working out from these through military operations to provide security, followed by necessary civil and economic actions to make the presence of the government felt and to provide economic improvements.”

The Administration understood the limitations of fighting an insurgency conventionally;

McNamara briefed the President in July 1965, “success against the larger, more conventional,

⁹⁵ Westmoreland to H. Johnson, July 5, 1965 and July 7, 1965. Westmoreland to Waters August 11, 1965. EOMF, Box 30.

⁹⁶ H. Johnson to Westmoreland, July 3, 1965. EOMF, Box 30.

⁹⁷ Donn A. Starry, *Armored Combat in Vietnam* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), p. 56.

VC/PAVN forces could merely drive the VC back into the trees and back to their 1960-64 pattern—a pattern against which U.S. troops and aircraft would be of limited value.”⁹⁸ “The large-unit operations war,” McNamara briefed Johnson in 1966, “is largely irrelevant to pacification as long as we do not lose it.” Yet the President summarily rejected the COIN option on multiple occasions. The ground campaign was confined to ordnance for main force attrition; the President constantly exhorted his chiefs to “kill more VC.”⁹⁹ In the face of feedback that the program was not working well, Johnson stuck with it anyway. More accurately, the administration's pacification strategy *was* the main force war.

During a July 21, 1965 briefing on ground force employment, Johnson expressed concern that it “looks dangerous to put U.S. forces in those red areas.” McNamara replied, “You're right. We're placing our people with their backs to the sea—for protection. Our mission would be to seek out the VC in large scale units.”¹⁰⁰ In a September 1965 memo to Johnson, McGeorge Bundy summed up the decision faced by the President, “In the light of our military build-up we felt that the VC may be avoiding major unit actions and reverting to a strategy of small-scale actions over a prolonged period. The problem arises as to how we use our substantial ground and air strength effectively against small-scale harassment-type action, whether we should engage in pacification as opposed to patrolling actively, and whether, indeed, we should taper off our ground force build-up.” Bundy reported that “We asked Lodge to develop a specific plan for

⁹⁸ FRUS 3:67

⁹⁹ McMaster, *Dereliction*, p. 248. Jack Valenti (one of Johnson's most loyal aides) observed in an “eyes only” memo to the President that “you are rightly judging the trends of the war from...numbers of VC killed” and that “the kill rate is vital to you judging the amount of punishment being meted to the enemy.” Valenti then suggested some “cloak-and-daggerish” means of collecting this data independently of the Defense Department. Valenti to Johnson, March 24, 1966, Box 9, White House Central Files, Confidential File, LBJ Library.

¹⁰⁰ FRUS 3:71.

our joint consideration which would involve the concentration of GVN forces on pacification and the reliance on U.S. forces to handle large-scale VC actions.”¹⁰¹

In November deliberations over how best to pursue pacification, Ambassador to Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge forcefully argued that the “crux of the problem” in the U.S. pacification effort, “is security. To meet this need we must make more U.S. troops available to help out in pacification operations as we move to concentrate ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] effort in this work.”¹⁰² The reaction could not have been stronger or clearer: a joint telegram from Rusk, McNamara and Komer stated that beyond Westmoreland’s planned “use of limited number U.S. forces in buddy system principle to guide and motivate ARVN... there should be no thought of U.S. taking on substantial share of pacification.” Rusk later emphasized to Lodge that the strategy was discussed “at highest levels [i.e. the President], who wished to emphasize that this represents final and considered decision.”¹⁰³ At this time McNamara not only recommended troop increase without revising the ground strategy, “The principal task of U.S. military forces in SVN must be to eliminate the offensive capability of the regular units, ”but gives the President a choice between *two versions* of search and destroy. The first would be “to increase friendly forces as rapidly as possible, and without limit, and employ them primarily in large-scale ‘seek out and destroy’ operations to destroy the main force VC/NVA units,” while the second was “a similarly aggressive strategy of ‘seek out and destroy’ but to build friendly forces

¹⁰¹ FRUS 3:151. Taylor, writing to the President at the end of 1965, not only recommended that “the role of our U.S. ground forces in this campaign for increased population security should be primarily the destruction of mainline Viet Cong/North Vietnamese units,” but criticized the “inclination to turn over all or most of the heavy fighting to U.S. forces and allow the bulk of the Vietnamese forces to retire behind a screen of U.S. provided protection to perform clearing jobs and local defense....At least half of the South Vietnamese regular units should be used in mobile combat roles.” FRUS 3:250.

¹⁰² The telegram is found in PP 2:602-605, and footnoted in FRUS 4:290.

¹⁰³ FRUS 4:304

only to that level required to neutralize the large enemy units.” McNamara advocated a shift to the second version in part because “an endless escalation of U.S. deployments is not likely to be acceptable in the U.S.”¹⁰⁴

When Westmoreland requested additional personnel in April 1967, Komer noted that the enemy main force strength had leveled off and half of the U.S. maneuver battalions were already supporting pacification “by dealing with the middle war, the VC main force provincial battalions.” Johnson’s pacification expert warned that, “A major U.S. force commitment to pacification also basically challenges the nature of our presence in Vietnam and might force U.S. to stay indefinitely in strength.” Observing the political reality that “another major U.S. force increase raises so many other issues,” Komer recommended more Vietnamese involvement coupled with “a minor force increase... accelerated emphasis on a barrier, and some increased bombing.”¹⁰⁵ Even those favoring escalation evinced modest expectations for the reinforcements’ effectiveness, concern for the domestic implications, and no change in strategy. In a memo explicitly addressing public responses to escalation strategies, Rostow establishes the goal of freeing up “additional allied forces to permit Westy to get on with our limited but real role in pacification, notably with the defense of I Corps in the North and the hounding of provincial main force units.”¹⁰⁶ Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach believed the time had come to “change” the war strategy and “use the great bulk of U.S. forces for search and destroy.” A “small number” of troops could be used for pacification but “targeted primarily on

¹⁰⁴ FRUS 4:312.

¹⁰⁵ FRUS 5:147.

¹⁰⁶ FRUS 5:162.

enemy provincial main force units.”¹⁰⁷ During a July meeting Johnson agreed with McNamara’s recommendation that “U.S. units will continue to destroy the enemy’s main force units,” while ordering his subordinates to “shave [any additional troops requests] the best we can.”¹⁰⁸

The civilians clearly based their rejection of COIN on an anticipation of massive troop requirements and casualties. Responding to junior Army officers recommending increased attention to pacification, General Johnson (a pacification proponent) replied that “we are not going to be able to respond to the public outcry in the United States about [the] casualties that might result.”¹⁰⁹ In a July 1965 memo McNamara noted to Johnson the differences in manpower requirements between main force and counterinsurgency operations, “The number of U.S. troops is too small to make a significant difference in the traditional 10-to-1 government-guerrilla formula.”¹¹⁰ According to Katzenbach, “pacification is not the ultimate answer—we have neither the time nor the manpower.”¹¹¹

6.3.2 Civilians Overrode Military Recommendations

The military myopia case is based on the armed forces pushing a flawed strategy up the chain of command or at least of an environment of neglect allowing the military to pursue its problematic aims. The record does not support this interpretation.

¹⁰⁷ PP 4:508.

¹⁰⁸ “Notes from Meeting of the President with Secretary McNamara to review the Secretary’s Findings during Vietnam Trip.” July 12, 1967. Box 1, Tom Johnson papers, LBJ Library.

¹⁰⁹ Krepinevich, *Army and Vietnam*, p. 172

¹¹⁰ FRUS, 3:67. In 1965, intelligence estimated that there were 226,000 “communist forces” in South Vietnam versus 571,000 members of the South Vietnamese armed forces. In 1968 the numbers were 290-340,000 and 819,000 respectively. See Thayer, *War without Fronts*, pp. 32-35. Thus 1.7 million American and Free World Forces would have been needed to fill the gap in 1965, and 2.1-2.6 million in 1968.

¹¹¹ PP 4:508.

Not only did military leaders generally cave in to Johnson's demands, they also carefully calibrated their recommendations to make them as politically palatable as possible.¹¹² Asked if domestic opposition was a factor in JCS decisions, General Wheeler replied, "Not directly...[but] the Chiefs are well aware of the problems engendered for the Presidents by the minority dissent to his course of action," citing the need not to "put a club in the hands of dissenters."¹¹³ When the JCS were unlikely to support the President's strategy, they were excluded from deliberations. Many of the most important military policies—the escalation decisions of June and July 1965, establishing the principal war aim of "killing more VC," the emphasis on B-52 bombing of Viet Cong sanctuaries—were made with very little strategic input from the JCS, to the point of lying to Wheeler about the purposes of meetings to which he was not invited.¹¹⁴ Only when McNamara and other civilians turned against the prevailing (and popular) airpower strategy did the Chiefs find a more receptive presidential audience.

Indeed, Westmoreland was one of the few policymakers in 1964 to recommend "Option A" (status quo advisory effort) in the famous three-option framework that led to the ROLLING THUNDER bombings.¹¹⁵ In a January 6, 1965 cable to Johnson via Maxwell Taylor (then Ambassador to Vietnam), Westmoreland asserted that "if [the U.S. advisory] effort has not succeeded there is less reason to think that U.S. combat forces would have the desired effect...intervention with ground combat forces would at best buy time and would lead to ever

¹¹² McMaster, *Dereliction*, throughout, but especially Chapter 15.

¹¹³ Graff, *Tuesday Cabinet*, pp.125-126.

¹¹⁴ McMaster, *Dereliction*, p. 301.

¹¹⁵ For a description of this strategy's development see PP 3:205-51. On Westmoreland's understanding of the importance and proper conduct of pacification, see Andrew J. Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 72, No. 4, (October 2008), pp. 1213-1247.

increasing commitments.” Westmoreland argued that instances from 1963-1964 where U.S. ground forces would have been helpful were “few and far between.... In balance, they do not seem to justify the presence of U.S. units.”¹¹⁶ In an “eyes only” message to Wheeler, Westmoreland was even more emphatic, recommending the “present policy” until “some positive momentum in pacification” was made. “Expanded and concerted U.S. attacks on DRV” were inadvisable until justified by “a firmer RVN base and prospects for victory.” He continued that South Vietnam’s government “may become unhealthily preoccupied with external operations to the detriment of pacification.”¹¹⁷

In a cable to Wheeler in August of 1965, Westmoreland anticipated a fraught relationship between pacification and the American public and pleads for “continued efforts to explain [to the U.S. public] the nature of the war in Vietnam and the fact that the real battle is for control of the people and the hamlets in which they live.”¹¹⁸ In September, Bundy reported to Johnson that “Lodge and Westmoreland feel VC ‘lie-low’ tactics will become increasingly a police-social action problem” and summarized Westmoreland’s concept of operations, “Destroy VC units where they can be found and pacify selected high priority areas, restore progressively the entire country to GVN control, support “rural reconstruction” with comprehensive attention to the pacification process.” As mentioned earlier, Bundy advised Lodge to develop a strategy where U.S. forces continue to focus on main forces rather than pacification.¹¹⁹ Admiral Sharp, in an “eyes only” message to Wheeler, complained that the Department of State “is somehow hopeful

¹¹⁶ Gibbons, *U.S. Government and Vietnam*, p. 26.

¹¹⁷ Westmoreland to Wheeler, “Future U.S. Actions in RVN” Nov 26, 1964. EOMF, Box 30.

¹¹⁸ Westmoreland to Wheeler, August 28, 1965, EOMF, Box 34.

¹¹⁹ FRUS 3:151.

pacification may be achieved by the Vietnamese themselves while being aided by little if any U.S. participation.” Sharp continues, “we will do far better in pacification if we too press forward setting the example in performance and results...The GVN cannot do the pacification alone, this would prolong the struggle beyond foreseeable limits. If the Viet Cong go underground and revert to small-scale actions, we should employ U.S. forces in coordination with the ARVN and proceed with securing and pacifying areas as fast as we can.”¹²⁰

Contradicting both McNamara’s recommendations and military myopia’s interpretation, in August 1966 Westmoreland proposed a new “Concept of Operations” that devoted, “a significant number of the US/Free World Maneuver Battalions” to pacification missions which “encompass base security and at the same time support revolutionary development by spreading security radially from the bases to protect more of the population. Saturation patrolling, civic action, and close association with ARVN, regional and popular forces to bolster their combat effectiveness are among the tasks of the ground force elements.”¹²¹ In an accompanying memo to the President, endorsed by Rostow, Maxwell Taylor acknowledged that Westmoreland’s strategy could result in “speeding up the termination of hostilities in South Viet-Nam,” but cautioned “there will be a cost to pay for this progress in a rise in the U.S. casualty rate and in the ratio of U.S. casualties to those of the GVN.” After noting the likely negative reaction domestically, he concludes that if pacification becomes the strategy “General Westmoreland will be justified in asking for almost any figure in terms of future reinforcements.” A handwritten note on a follow-up memo cites the President’s instructions, “Let’s get something to Westy so that he will not assume that we have approved.”

¹²⁰ Sharp to Wheeler, September 22, 1965, EOMF, Box 34.

¹²¹ FRUS 4:220-223.

Civilian objections to military recommendations continued into the next year. In a May memo arguing that “the ‘philosophy’ of the war should be fought out now,” John McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs and important advisor on strategy in Vietnam, advised the rejection of Westmoreland's March 1967 request for 200,000 more soldiers because Westmoreland intended to use the reinforcements “to relieve the Marines to work with ARVN on pacification” and for similar missions in the Mekong Delta and Quang Ngai province. Referring to pacification as a “less essential mission,” McNaughton suggested avoiding escalation by “making more efficient use of presently approved U.S. manpower (e.g., by removing them from the Delta, by stopping their being used for pacification work in I Corps, by transferring some combat and logistics jobs to Vietnamese or additional third-country personnel).”¹²² McNamara agreed with this assessment in a memo to the President, which reveals the sensitivity to troop deployment and a continued main force focus, “We have already passed the “cross-over point,” where the enemy's losses exceed his additions; we will soon have in Vietnam 200,000 more U.S. troops than there are in enemy main force units. We should therefore, without added deployments, be able to maintain the military initiative, especially if U.S. troops in less-essential missions (such as in the Delta and in pacification duty) are considered strategic reserves.” In objecting to the escalation, McNamara points that Westmoreland intended the bulk of the first 100,000 troops for pacification in the Delta region.¹²³ Westmoreland complained to Wheeler and Sharp in August 1967 that “Secretary Rusk is thinking in terms of the more conventional type warfare where our forces could launch such an all-out offensive from a reasonably secure area of departure, leaving behind a pacified

¹²² FRUS 5:161.

¹²³ FRUS 5:177.

rear area, and against identified enemy formations disposed along a recognizable front. Such is not the case in SVN.”¹²⁴

6.3.3 Civilians Rejected the Best Example of COIN: The Marines’ Combined Action Program.

Military myopia’s claims rest on the counterfactual that an extension of the Marines’ innovative Combined Action Program (CAP), the conflict’s best example of American COIN, could have employed the same number of soldiers stationed in Vietnam while minimizing casualties and enhancing population security.¹²⁵ Obviously, this argument cannot be tested, but it is also irrelevant if civilians, as well as the military, did not hold this position at the time.¹²⁶

Krepinevich's claim that 167,000 American soldiers was sufficient to blanket South Vietnam with CAP teams is based on the reports of the Pentagon's Systems Analysis Office (the “SEA Reports”).¹²⁷ These reports deployed blistering empirical criticisms of the prevailing attrition strategy, and acknowledged the CAP program’s excellence, but were skeptical of CAP’s wider viability.

Broadening CAP required 279,000 Popular Forces (PF) militia members, and consequently “the reluctance of the [South Vietnam government] to assign PF personnel to CAPS is a serious problem in considering any expansion.” Between July 1967 and November 1968, the PF to

¹²⁴ Westmoreland to Wheeler and Sharp, August 26, 1967 EOMF, Box 36.

¹²⁵ Krepinevich, *Army and Vietnam* p. 176. Nagl, *Soup with a Knife*, Thompson, *No Exit*. p. 198. A CAP team consisted of a 13-man Marine rifle squad assigned to a local 35-man Vietnamese militia platoon living among the people to provide both security and civil assistance.

¹²⁶ As I emphasize throughout this essay, determining the circumstances under which a solid COIN approach results in fewer casualties remains an open and important policy question.

¹²⁷ A more modest estimate in early 1969 suggested that given the number of troops deployed, the CAP concept could be extended to 2,500 (of 12,000) hamlets. Hugh Hanning, *Lessons from the Vietnam War* (London: Royal United Service Institution, 1969), p. 18.

Marine ratio had declined from 1.7 to 1.4.¹²⁸ As of mid-1967, SEA assessed that a CAP Marine had a 75 to 80 percent chance of being wounded and a 16 to 18 percent chance of being killed.¹²⁹ Finally, the SEA report observed in November 1968 that “in over three years of operations no evidence exists that U.S. Marines have been able to withdraw from a CAP solely because their Vietnamese counterparts were able to take over.”

While Krepinevich dismisses Westmoreland's objection to CAP—“I simply had not enough numbers to put a squad of Americans in every village and hamlet”—as “lip service,” this assessment was shared by an administration determined to hold down deployments and casualties. Indeed Maxwell Taylor found Westmoreland *too* receptive to CAP. In his memo to Johnson cautioning against Westmoreland’s proposed 1966 strategy, Taylor observed that Westmoreland “endorses the expansion by U.S./Free World forces of control over terrain and population around base areas in application of the “oil spot” concept as the Marines have been doing in the I Corps area (and other U.S. forces elsewhere to a lesser degree). Additionally, “Westy also contemplates mixed pacification operations in which U.S. forces would act in close cooperation with Vietnamese military and paramilitary forces in order to bolster their effectiveness in protecting pacification activities.”¹³⁰ Taylor’s disapproval is documented above. Seeking ways to trim personnel in 1967 McNaughton specifically noted, “other ground-force requirements could be eliminated if the U.S. Marines ceased grass-roots pacification

¹²⁸ Thomas C Thayer, ed., *Pacification and Civil Affairs*, vol. 10, *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War: 1965-1972* (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Defense (Systems Analysis), 1975), 26-27. Jack Schulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: 1968, the Defining Year* (History and Museums Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 1997), p. 628.

¹²⁹ Michael E Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1989), p. 87-88.

¹³⁰ FRUS 4:221.

activities.”¹³¹ Interviewed in 1976, Komer assessed that CAP demanded “an enormous requirement for American infantry which we did not have.”¹³² Written in the mid- to late-1968, the “Pentagon Papers” acknowledges CAP's unquestioned success relative to any other approach but warns that the Marine strategy “requires vast numbers of troops,” and should only be “undertaken with full awareness by the highest levels of the [US government] of its potential costs in manpower and time.”¹³³ It is unrealistic to think that the administration would have supported such a program given political limitations on personnel and casualties and the easy availability of materiel.

A competent COIN strategy on the lines of CAP might quite possibly have been more effective and reduced casualties, but clearly civilians were unwilling to take that chance. Ambassador Lodge made the case in a cable to Rusk at the end of 1965, “If we define “satisfactory outcome” as “hold the delta and the coastal plain, the provincial capitals and the roads, push out durably, even though slowly, within South Viet-Nam through the kind of pacification-countryside...perhaps we could hold on for a long time without `major bloodshed`. I realize that even this may cause bloodshed too.”¹³⁴ Lodge would more forcefully come out against “search and destroy” in March 1968 (following the Tet offensive), but even then the President responded skeptically for domestic political reasons.¹³⁵

¹³¹ FRUS 5:161. William Bundy wrote to Katzenbach that pacification of the Delta region should be avoided, as “Apart from the military merits, any force increase that reaches the ‘Plimsoll Line’--calling up the Reserves--involves a truly major debate in Congress...and might also lead to pressures to go beyond what is wise in the North, specifically mining Haiphong.” FRUS 5:154.

¹³² Schulimson et al., *Marines in Vietnam*, p. 620.

¹³³ PP 2:535.

¹³⁴ FRUS 3:264.

¹³⁵ For the Lodge memo to the President see FRUS 6:106. In a subsequent meeting the President

6.4 Did Nixon and Abrams Fight a Better War?

Some accounts claim that once Creighton Abrams replaced Westmoreland in mid-1968, the war was fought successfully.¹³⁶ However, any changes in tactics on the ground, such as Vietnamization, were driven by the decisions of Johnson and Nixon to freeze and then lower the level of troop deployments. This section briefly reviews this period of the war to emphasize the consistency of American military doctrine and the continued firm control of the military by civilians.

While responsibility for fighting had to be shifted to the Vietnamese due to American personnel reductions, the U.S. contribution to counterinsurgency retained its firepower-intensive emphasis. After the U.S. “shifted” to a pacification strategy, consumption of artillery rounds remained constant from June 1967 to June 1970, even as 200,000 troops were drawn down.¹³⁷ Abrams kept his air cavalry units in theater until 1972 to provide “a maximum of firepower and mobility with a minimum of U.S. troops.” By the end of 1971 armored units represented over half of the U.S. maneuver battalions still in Vietnam.¹³⁸ Removing infantry first lowered casualty rates but at the cost of diminished COIN effectiveness.¹³⁹

Komer (who admittedly had a poor relationship with Abrams) did not believe that the new commander altered the strategy upon relieving Westmoreland, “There was no change in strategy

responds to Rusk’s noting that “Lodge thinks we should do less search and destroy and build up the South Vietnam forces” with, “There are two or three dangers in this: 1) We comply with the Senator Kennedy demand. 2) We create doubt about the fact we are doubtful. 3) We were charged with handpicking. 4) It might harden public position against us.” FRUS 6:142.

¹³⁶ Sorley, *Better War*. Also Nagl, *Soup with a Knife*, pp. 168-174 and Gray, *Irregular Enemies*, pp. 17-18.

¹³⁷ Thayer, *War without Fronts*, p. 57.

¹³⁸ Starry, *Armored Combat*, pp. 164-165.

¹³⁹ Thayer, *War without Fronts*, p. 122.

whatsoever. In fact [Abrams] said he didn't intend to make any changes unless he saw that some were necessary.“ Instead, the strategy “didn't really change until we began withdrawing.”¹⁴⁰

This is not to blame Abrams; he had little control over numbers set by the President and Congress, whose priorities are clear from budget and deployment figures. Figure 7 shows that the gap between sorties and personnel hit its maximum in the first two years of Abrams's command. Of the \$21.5 billion dollars spent in fiscal year 1969, only five percent went towards pacification and civil operations. The total amount of money spent for 1971 was lower, but the ratio no different. Thomas Thayer, in charge of the SEA reports for this time period, specifically describes the American war effort of 1969-1971 as, “first and foremost an air war although Vietnam was billed as a land war in Asia, and second, a ground attrition campaign against communist regular units. Pacification was a very poor third.”¹⁴¹

7 Democracies Will Fight More Small Wars... Poorly

This paper seeks to accomplish two tasks. The first is to establish that civilian officials (and ultimately the public) played an essential role in the selection of a capital-intensive strategy to fight insurgents in Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson was convinced that the U.S public would punish any Administration that “lost” South Vietnam to communism, but was equally certain that public preferences constrained the number of people to be deployed and lives to be lost far more than the amount of money to be spent and ordnance to be consumed. In response he and his subordinates actively instructed the military to fight what they themselves acknowledged to be

¹⁴⁰ W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1977), pp. 79-93. In this conference report, several veteran Vietnam counterinsurgents (including Komer, Robert Thompson, and Francis “Bing” West) criticized the strategy of attrition, but only one identified significant differences between the Westmoreland and Abrams approaches.

¹⁴¹ Thayer, *War without Fronts*, pp. 23-26.

an ineffective, capital- and firepower-intensive strategy. The second task is to explain this seemingly non-strategic behavior using a theory, generalizable beyond this specific case, of the distribution of the costs of war within the electorate.

Israel's experience in its 2006 war against Hezbollah suggests that this phenomenon is not limited to the Vietnam War or to American strategic culture.¹⁴² Israel expended 170,000 artillery shells, twice the number fired in the conventional 1973 War, in a month.¹⁴³ The Israeli Defense Force's (IDF) initial campaign plan—a rapid air and small unit ground assault that relied on firepower to control territory—was specifically designed to minimize ground force size and casualties. The Israeli Cabinet rejected it; the Transportation Minister objected to “exposing 40,000 troops to the Lebanese reality.”¹⁴⁴ Four days into the conflict, the IDF Deputy Chief of Staff recommended stopping, “We have exhausted the [aerial] effort; we have reached the peak; from now on we can only descend.”¹⁴⁵ Nonetheless, despite its intention avoid a ground war, the Israeli government announced ambitious goals far beyond the release of hostages and deterring further rocket attacks.¹⁴⁶ A subsequent government commission describing the strategic conundrum evokes the constraints faced by Johnson in Vietnam: “declared goals were too ambitious, and it was publicly stated that fighting will continue till they are achieved. But the authorized military operations did not enable their achievement.” The report acknowledges the

¹⁴² This paper focuses on democracies, but non-democracies may also be subject to these pressure. According to the theory, a state in which the very wealthy controlled policy would result in labor-intensive doctrine. Of course, no pure democracy or plutarchy exists in the world; the more the government must take the average citizen's preferences into account, the more it will conform to the theory's predictions.

¹⁴³ Kober, "Second Lebanon War," p. 24.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 10-11.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁴⁶ Ehud Olmert, "Israel Will Not Be Held Hostage - Olmert's Address to the Knesset," *Jerusalem Post*, July 18, 2006.

government's bind: no “other effective military response to such missile attacks than an extensive and prolonged ground operation” existed, but this “would have a high ‘cost’ and did not enjoy broad support.”¹⁴⁷

I explain such behavior with a theory of cost distribution that starts with four major assumptions: security is a public good; voters weigh security benefits against taxes, conscription and casualties; median wealth is less than mean wealth in every state; and that this median voter gets her way in a democracy. From these assumptions I derive a voter preference for a capitalized military. When the ability to substitutability personnel for materiel is low, as it is against unconventional opponents, a high degree of capitalization can result in the prosecution of wars using ill-suited doctrine because the costs remain modest for this pivotal voter. Like the democratic exceptionalist research program, this paper finds evidence that the American public weighs the benefits of limited war against the costs. However, exceptionalism's cost internalization mechanism provides an overly optimistic assessment of democracies' discretion in fighting and perhaps even choosing war. Neither an apolitical public, nor a dysfunctional military culture, nor a military doctrine divorced from grand strategy causes flawed warfighting strategy. Rather, it results from the average voter in a democracy getting what she wanted. While claiming that democracies substitute capital for labor to reduce the costs of war for voters is not news, tying the pursuit of such a strategy to a rational voter has two novel and important implications.

If, as many argue, most wars of the twenty-first century will be hybrid conflicts involving unconventional opponents, finding the root cause of poor counterinsurgency is an essential task.

¹⁴⁷ ”The main findings of the Winograd partial report on the Second Lebanon War,” *Haaretz*, January 5, 2007. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/854051.html>

This paper argues that focusing on reforming the armed services (or even the civilian tools of foreign policy) in the effort to improve democratic performance in small wars is its own form of myopia. My theory gives reason to be skeptical of how much the U.S. military will be allowed to shift by its civilian masters and the public to which they are held accountable.¹⁴⁸

Dysfunctional organizations can eventually learn and adapt. The public's foolish preconceptions may be dissuaded through public education and the marketplace of ideas. Even positing a powerful strategic culture underpinning U.S. doctrine suggests "it is at least possible that by deconstructing the standard American 'way'...some pathways to improved performance may be identified."¹⁴⁹ But if a rational, fully informed electorate views such a military doctrine as its best option, the prospects for change are less clear.

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

¹⁴⁸ Not to mention the large numbers of civilian casualties that generally result from using firepower against an insurgency.

¹⁴⁹ Gray, *Irregular Enemies*, p. 30.

Figure 1 Comparing Incumbents' Outcome against Insurgencies by Regime (1950-2007)

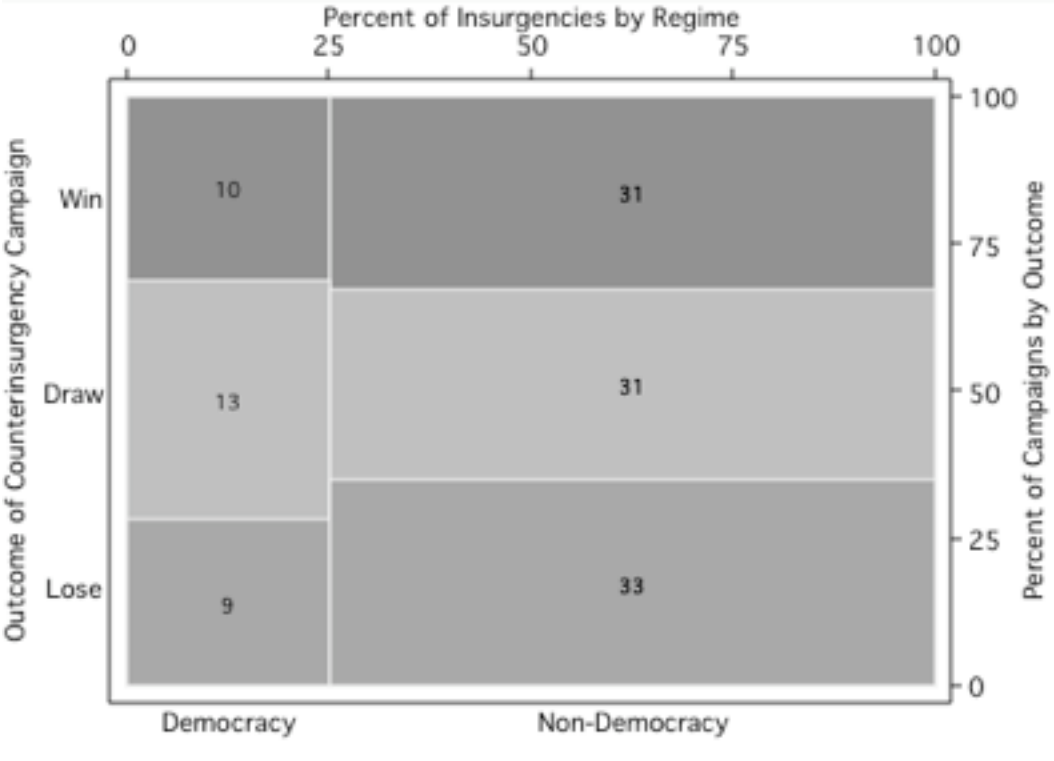
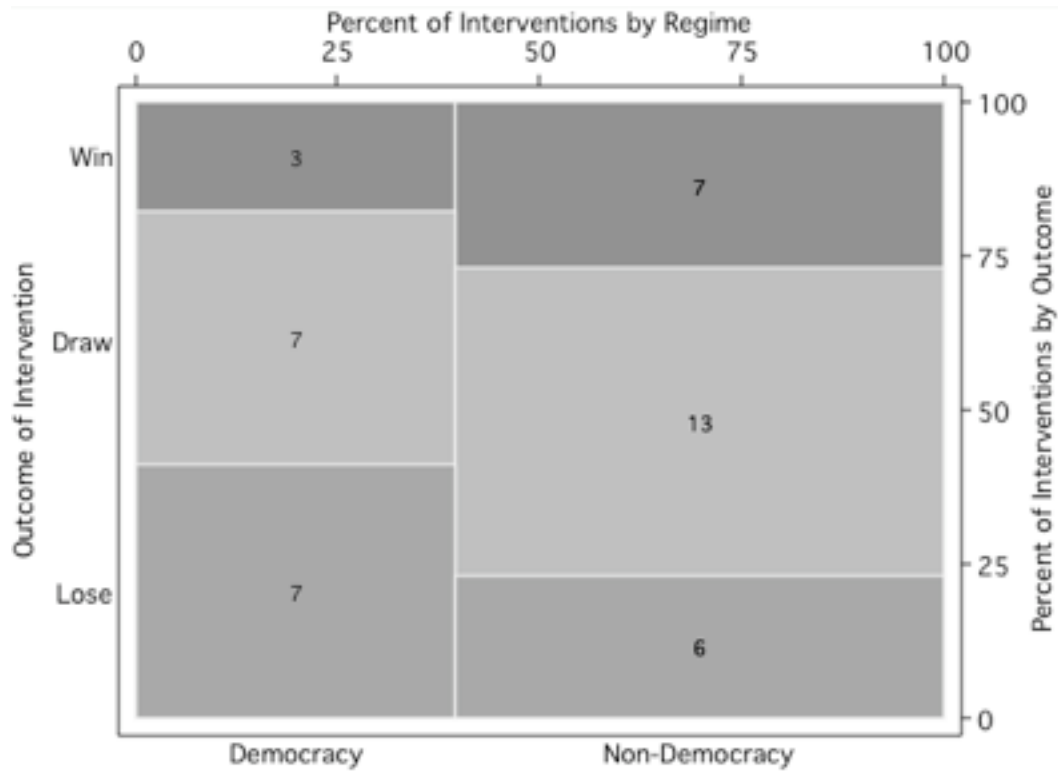
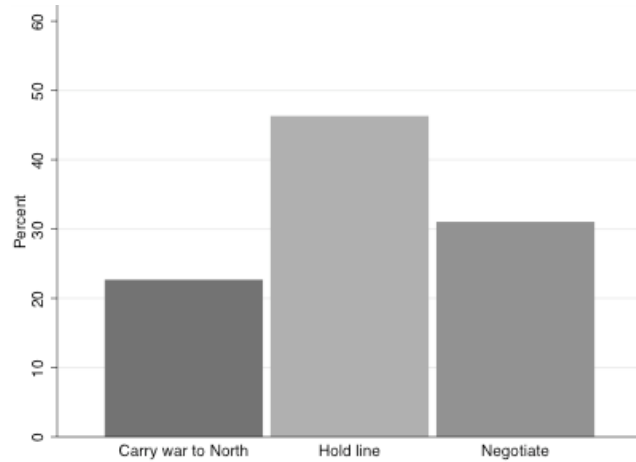


Figure 2 Comparing Outcomes of Third Party Interventions against Insurgencies by Regime (1950-2007)

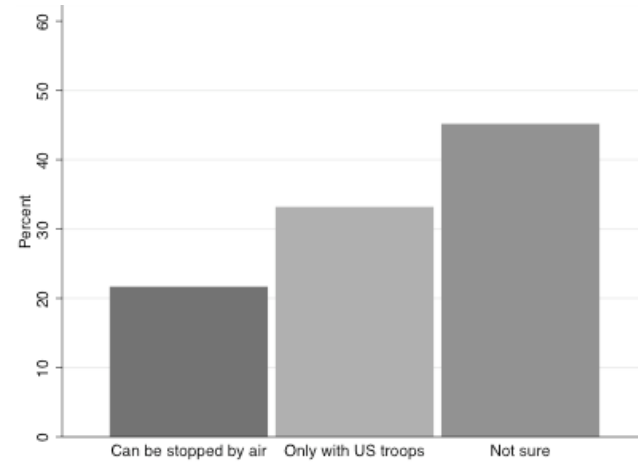


SOURCE: Lyall and Wilson, Chenoweth and Stephens, States coded as democracies when Polity IV score is six or greater. Ted Robert Gurr, Monty G. Marshall, and Keith Jagers, *Polity IV*

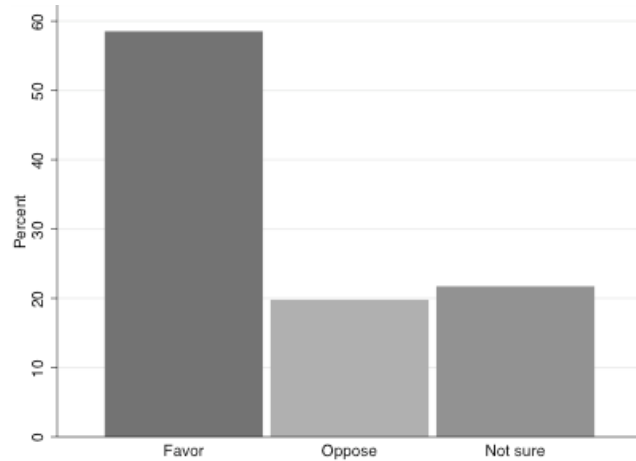
Figure 3 Public Opinion on Bombing and Ground Forces, June 1966



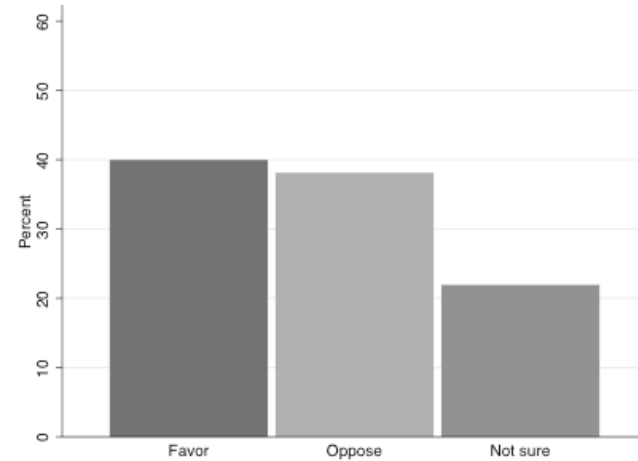
(a) Carry ground war into North, negotiate, or hold the line to prevent Communists taking over South Vietnam?



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



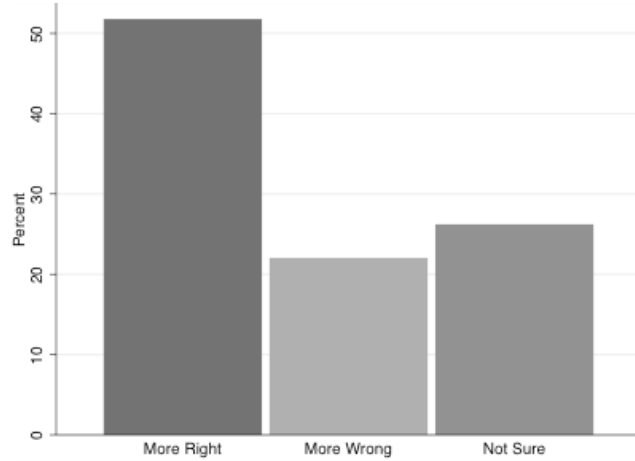
(c) Favor continued bombings in North in retaliation for Communist raids in South?



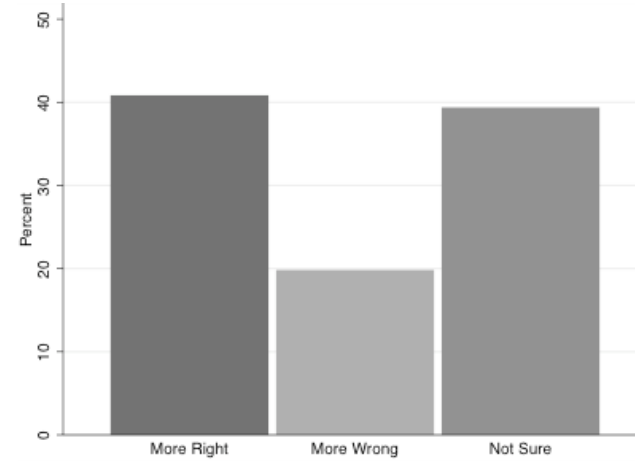
(d) Favor or oppose sending in more U.S. troops to South Vietnam today?

SOURCE: Harris Polls 1522 and 1531, June 1965

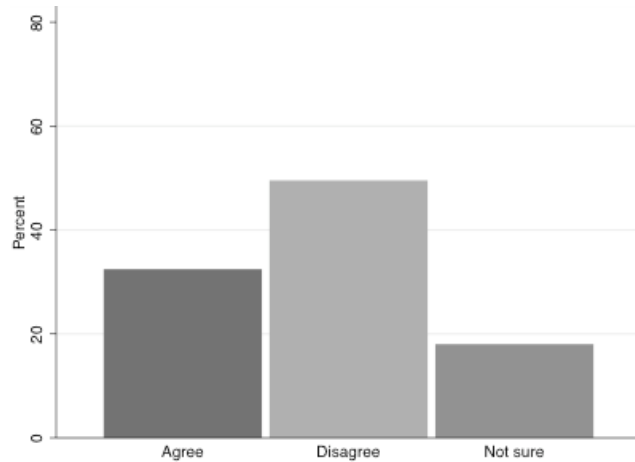
Figure 4 Public Opinion on Bombing Pause and Enclave Strategies, 1966 and 1967



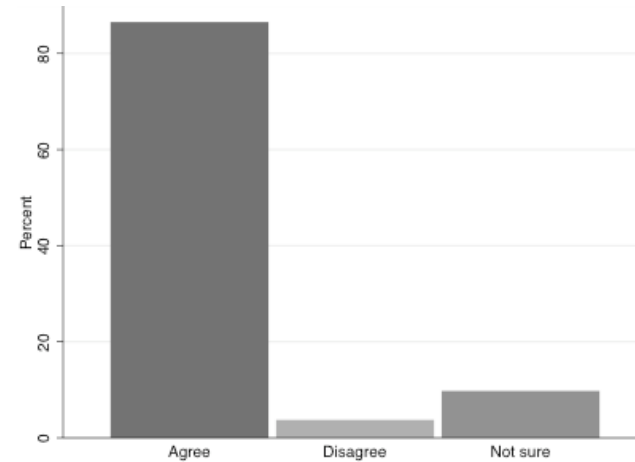
(a) Administration more right or wrong? Not continuing bombing pause.



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



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



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

SOURCE: Harris Polls 1623, June 1966 and 1702, January 1967

Figure 5 Support for Income Tax Increase "if you were convinced it would help pay for the war in Vietnam," by Total Family Income for 1966

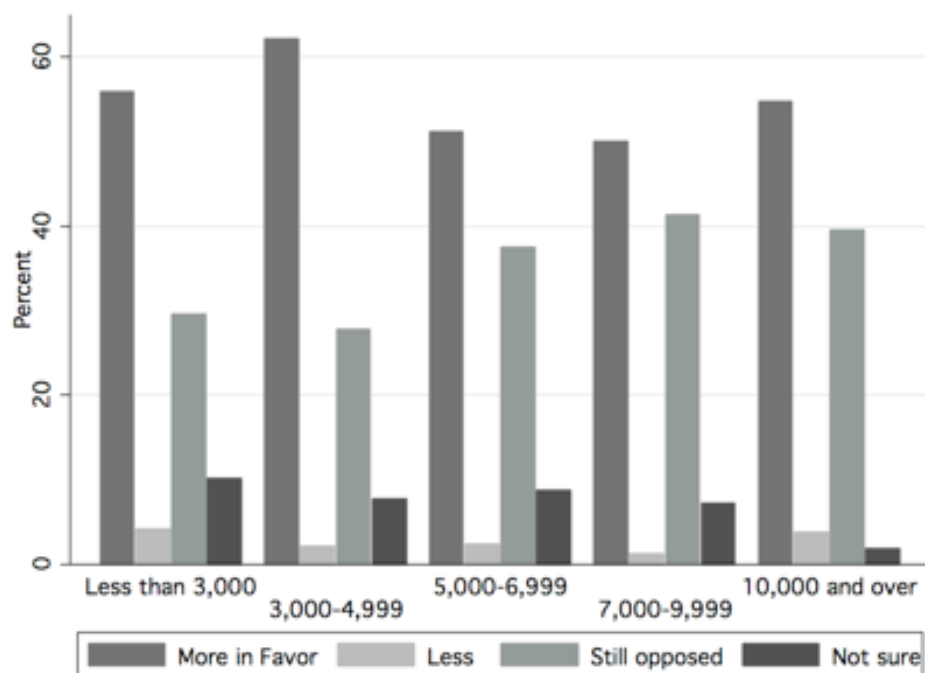
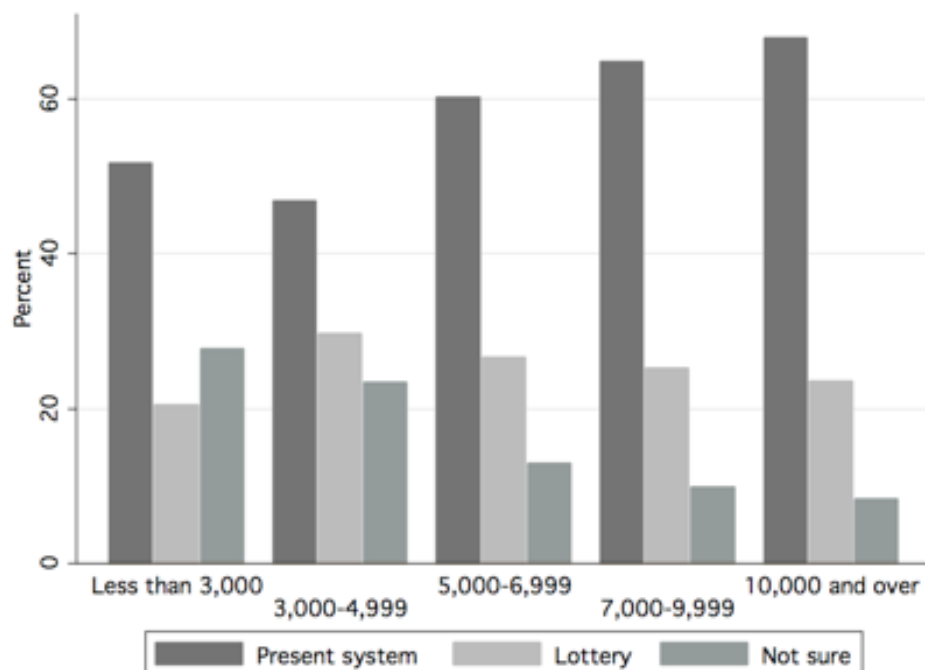
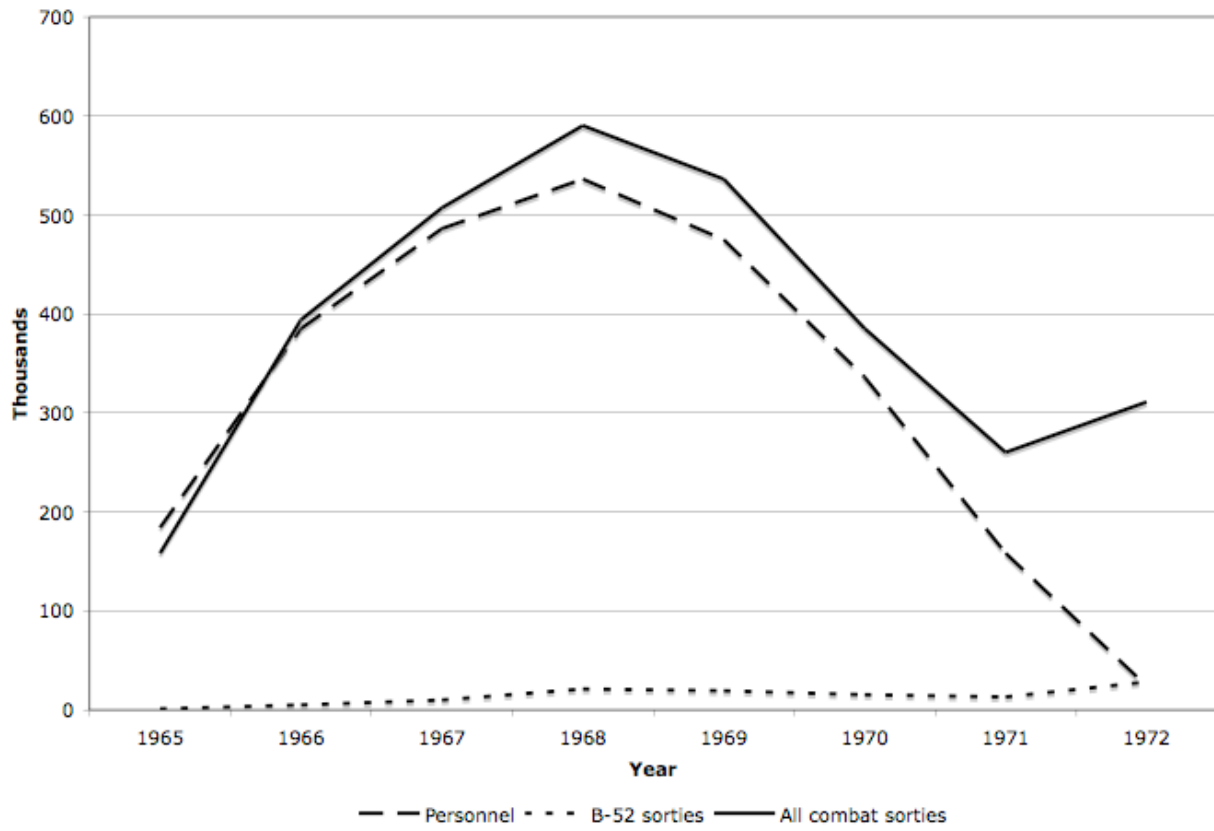


Figure 6 Responses to "Would you have the present draft system or a lottery system for the draft?" by Total Family Income for 1966



SOURCE: Harris Poll 1702, January 1967

Figure 7 Numbers of Personnel/Aircraft Sorties in Vietnam/Southeast Asia, 1965-1972



SOURCE: Thayer, *War without Fronts*, p. 32.