Why Democracies Will Fight More Small Wars. . . Poorly*

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Abstract

Industrialized democracies tend to pursue a capital- and firepower-intensive military doctrine ill-suited for combating an insurgency. It is therefore puzzling that democracies, particularly the United States, remain so stubborn in initiating these conflicts and so tenacious in pursuing a suboptimal strategy over long periods of time and with mounting costs. The paper addresses this puzzle by arguing that a capitalized military doctrine results in a condition of moral hazard for the average voter, shifting the costs away from the median voter and leading a democratic state to pursue attempts at military coercion whose expected value in increased security is outweighed by the likely total costs for the state. Furthermore, the voter will support using a capital-intensive military in conflicts where its effectiveness is low because the decreased likelihood of winning is outweighed by the lower costs of fighting. The result is the continued application of an inefficient military doctrine in pursuit of modest war aims, a low likelihood of victory or a combination of the two. I test the theory's hypotheses using process tracing of the Johnson Administration's counterinsurgency strategy during the Vietnam War.

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> *When one considers the vast resources committed to carrying out our Vietnam policy, the effective power generated therefrom seems to have been relatively small.*
> General Maxwell Taylor (1972, 402)

Strong democracies in general, and the United States in particular, often have 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 a capital- and firepower-intensive strategy ill-suited for combating an insurgency. This in turn is a function of 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 have not. Alternatively if democracies are simply incapable of fighting another way, they should not fight these wars of choice at all, but still do. Are the political aims of the United States and other democracies divorced from their preferred military means?

This paper argues they are not. Pursuing a capital-intensive military doctrine *and* an aggressive grand strategy that risks small wars of choice are both rational choices for the average voter. By empowering the relatively poor median voter, democracies develop militaries that 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 low expected values. This condition of moral hazard, when the costs of a belligerence are shifted to the wealthy, allows the voter to act aggressively in ways not necessarily in the state's interest.

1 Why Do Strong Democracies Continue to Lose Small Wars?

The United States Marine Corps' famous *Small Wars Manual* (1940) defines such an operation 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." This definition, while vague, provides some important insights into these conflicts' characteristics. First they are non-existential wars. 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 support from the public. Small wars are fought by a strong state against a weaker state or non-state actor ("weak state" for simplicity). While these wars may be consistent with the strong state's grand strategy they are not essential to it; small wars are generally wars of choice. The strong state's aims are limited or political, and success often requires the weak actor's compliance. Small wars are likely to involve intervention in another state's domestic affairs, and the target state may be quite unstable.

Because the strong state tends to enjoy overwhelming conventional superiority, a weak state responding in kind is likely to lose. Weak states therefore will often resort, at least in part, to unconventional warfare such as insurgency or terrorism (Arreguín-Toft 2001). Fighting an unconventional war is a daunting task, even for powerful states. Such a conflict often demands tremendous investments in intelligence gathering, often calling for 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. Years are often needed for the strong state to accomplish its aims. Firepower, when not used with utmost discrimination, will likely have counterproductive effects. In general no substitute exists for boots on the ground.

Table 1: Third Party Intervention in Insurgencies

Democracies			Nondemocracies		
Win (3)	Lose (7)	Draw (7)	Win (7)	Lose (6)	Draw (13)
Greece, 1944-49					Yemen A.R., 1962-69
Malaya, 1948-57			Laos, 1963-73		
	Morocco, 1957		S. Vietnam, 1965-74		
	Laos, 1963-73		Cambodia, 1970-78		
	S. Vietnam, 1965-74		Lebanon, 1970-90		
	Chad, 1969-79				Oman, 1972-75[a]
	Cambodia, 1970-74				Oman, 1972-75
	Lebanon, 1970-88				Angola, 1975-88
		Oman, 1972-75		Ethiopia, 1975-83	
		Palestine, 1973-*			Morocco, 1975-79
		Kashmir, 1988-*			Angola, 1976-87
		Azerbaijan, 1992-2005		Uganda, 1978-79	
	Somalia, 1992-1994		Uganda, 1978-79[b]		
Kosovo, 1999				Afghanistan, 1979-88	
		Sierra Leone, 2000	Cambodia, 1979-89		
		Afghanistan, 2003-*	Mozambique, 1985-90		
		Iraq, 2004-*			Kashmir, 1988-*
					Angola, 1989-92
					Rwanda, 1990
					Tajikistan, 1992-97
					Zaire, 1996-2001
				Zaire, 1996-200[c]	
				Congo, 1998-2002	
					Algeria, 2003-*
					Sudan, 2003
				Uganda, 2005	

* signifies ongoing conflicts. SOURCES: Chenoweth & Stephan (Forthcoming) and Gleditsch, Wallensteen, Sollenberg, & Strand (2002).

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[a] P.R. Yemen fought on side of PFLOAG rebels

[b] Tanzania fought on behalf of National Resistance Army rebels.

[c] Rwanda and Uganda supported Kabila's rebellion.

These aspects of small wars are well-known and the principles behind a successful counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign have remained largely consistent over at least the past half century (Gray 2006, Thompson 1966).[1] Indeed, there exists a remarkable amount of agreement on *how* states lose small wars. Lyall & Wilson (2007) systematically tests and finds support for this conventional wisdom that the mechanized militaries built by industrialized states are less effective due to their attendant collateral damage and poor intelligence gathering ability.[2] Ivan Arreguín-Toft (2001) shows how asymmetric interactions between weak and strong state strategy can make war costly; the pursuit of a conventional offensive campaign against a guerilla warfare strategy will likely result in a win (or at least a “non-loss”) for the guerillas.

The difference between democracies’ performance in conventional and irregular wars is striking. Whereas the Correlates of War shows democracies losing only three wars and winning nine since 1948, Table 1 shows that democracies to be twice as likely to lose than win when intervening against an insurgency in another state, the paradigmatic small war.[3] 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). While some authors who study counterinsurgency observe that the strong state’s regime type makes little difference in the outcome of such conflicts, but this in itself is a puzzle given the large body of research claiming that democracies deliberately pick unfair fights and tend to win (Reiter & Stam 2002).[4]

States pursuing limited aims can accept only limited costs (Mack 1975, Mueller 1980, Maoz 1989, Sullivan 2007), and several studies claim that democracies tend to be averse to costs, resulting in flawed warfighting. Stephen Peter Rosen (1982) argues that in its desire to limit losses, the Johnson Administration pursued a futile strategy of signaling to North Vietnam. Gil Merom (2003, 21-22) observes a democratic Catch 22 inherent in small wars: by building a firepower-intensive, low-manpower military "democracies can limit the size and nature of the fighting force and/or reduce the risks soldiers face in combat," but "in order to remain effective in spite of the reduction of the number and/or exposure to risks of soldiers, they must rely on higher and less discriminating levels of violence" leaving the state vulnerable to normative criticism from a vocal minority (the "educated middle class"). The result is a "post-heroic warfare" (Luttwak 1996) employed by "Western democracies conducting non-existential wars in which their readiness to sacrifice is relatively low" (Kober 2008). This tendency to substitute capital for labor is particularly pronounced in the United States. Jeffrey Record (2005, 25) describes the American way of small war as "60 years of preoccupation with high-technology conventional warfare against other states and accelerated substitution of machines for combat manpower, most notably aerial standoff precision firepower for large ground forces."

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[1] This is not to say that all small wars, or even all insurgencies, are exactly alike. Nonetheless, there is sufficient consistency to allow for some generalizable theory. It is hard to dispute that a firepower-intensive strategy using few people is singularly inappropriate in almost all cases.

[2] Lyall & Wilson find little evidence that democracy plays any role, at least in the twentieth century.

[3] Data from Chenoweth & Stephan (Forthcoming) and Gleditsch et al. (2002).

[4] See Desch (2002) for an empirical critique of the democratic victory hypotheses, but also see the responses (Lake 2003, Reiter & Stam 2003).

1.1 Explaining Persistence

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. Merom argues that a democratic "state" must build a firepower-intensive military to safeguard its foreign policy autonomy, because it must sometimes initiate potentially unpopular wars for reasons of *realpolitik*. But it is unclear: a) why the state's assessment of threats and grand strategy should differ so thoroughly from its citizens' and even given "a," b) why a strategic actor does not factor this in when choosing conflicts. Surely a realist state would rather not fight a war at all than fight a war it is likely to lose. Similarly, Patricia Sullivan (2007, 497) identifies the problem, "extant theories cannot explain why militarily preponderant states regularly make poor strategic choices," but does not supply a satisfactory answer.

Sullivan claims that the war aims frequently 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.

1.2 Military Myopia

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. While Posen and Jack Snyder (1984) claim that bureaucratic forces push militaries towards offensive doctrine, Elizabeth Kier (1997) claims that the culture of a state's military is of greater importance, and is not simply limited to a preference for the offense. Both approaches agree with one important Vietnam War policymaker that allowing the military to "do its thing" during wartime is a mistake (Komer 1973).

This explanation is also prominent in work specifically addressing U.S. conduct of small wars, much of it written by uniformed intellectuals, generally locates blame within its military culture (Krepinevich 1986, Nagl 2005, McMaster 2008). Cohen (1984, 165) argues 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 establishment for fighting such wars."

Andrew Krepinevich (1986) labels this culture ingrained in the United States military particularly the Army, as the "Army Concept." The Concept emphasizes a firepower-intensive strategy of attrition that is "nothing more than the natural outgrowth of its organizational recipe for success—playing to America's strong suits, material abundance and technological superiority, and the nation's profound abhorrence of US casualties" (196). Krepinevich (1986, 5-6) recognizes that much of this stems from "the substitution of material costs at every available opportunity to avoid payment in blood," and notes that this effect is likely to be more pronounced during limited wars, when the United States has more discretion over the employment of its resources. Krepinevich and others have traditionally viewed the American conduct of the Vietnam War as the classic manifestation of this pathology.

This culture's existence, however, does not answer the paper's central question: why does culture not adapt in response to repeated failure, or why do civilian planners not adapt to the stubborn culture? I make this argument using the core assumption of a large research program, what I call democratic exceptionalism that *claims that sort of behavior should rarely happen in democracies.*

2 A Theory of Redistribution and Military Doctrine

The distribution of the costs of arming and war within the state is my theory's independent variable. When all of a state's costs and benefits of a foreign policy decision are accounted for by the actor responsible for selecting the policy, costs are internalized. A departure from this state due to the shielding of the decision-maker from some costs results can lead to moral hazard, as epitomized by Kant's famous description of the differences between despotic and republican approaches to war, "For the head of state is not a fellow citizen, but the owner of the state, and a war will not force him to make the slightest sacrifice so far as his banquets, hunts, pleasure palaces and court festivals are concerned. He can thus decide on war, without any significant reasons, as a kind of amusement" (Kant 1795[1991]).

Kant's suggestion that a despot can choose war trivial reasons anticipates contemporary democratic exceptionalism. Many of this program's findings rest on this Kantian assumption, recently restated by Fred Chernoff (2004, 54), "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."[5] This mechanism is used to explain why democracies fight shorter wars (Bennett & Stam 1998, Slantchev 2004), prefer to negotiate (Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, & Morrow 2003, Filson & Werner 2004), win the wars they do initiate (Siverson 1995, Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, & Smith 1999, Reiter & Stam 2002), and spend less money on defense in peacetime but devote more to the effort in wartime (Fordham & Walker 2005, Goldsmith 2003, Goldsmith 2007).

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[5] See also Reiter & Stam (2002, 121) and Randolph Siverson (1995, 483).

I relax this axiomatic (if often tacit) claim that costs are always internalized within democracies, arguing that the costs for the median voter may be much lower than the per capita cost for the state. Thus the same potential incentives for aggression that Kant associates with despotism exist in democracies. When the average voter has no skin in the game, a condition of moral hazard exists.

As mentioned earlier, even in democracies, wealth is not distributed equally within any given state. It is skewed right; the person with median income is less well off than one with the mean. Using this model, political economists have argued that if the median voter can set a tax rate and spend the government revenue on a service available to all citizens, she will take advantage of the potential for redistribution (Meltzer & Richard 1981, Persson & Tabellini 2000, Alesina & Rodrik 1994). Even with a flat tax on income, the wealthy will pay a larger portion of the costs for a public good enjoyed by all. This lowering of the median voter's costs relative to the benefits of a public good, leads to an increased demand for these benefits (Persson & Tabellini 2000, 49).[6] Using similar logic, economists have made the case that in a closed economy with an uneven distribution of wealth the median voter will prefer a heavier tax on capital, rather than labor, resulting in redistribution (Persson & Tabellini 2000, 117-122). *The more military coercion becomes an exercise in fiscal rather than social mobilization, the more prone a democracy will be towards a "conscription of riches" to fund an increasingly belligerent foreign policy.*

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[6] For example, according to the Congressional Budget Office, in the United States, not known for its progressive tax code, the fifth of the population with the highest incomes were responsible for 69% of all federal tax revenue, and the top 1% paid 28%. The middle fifth on the other hand, paid only 9% and the lowest quintile paid less than one percent (Harris 2007).

2.1 The Importance of Military Doctrine

While inequality is an essential prerequisite for security to contain a redistributive element, it is not necessarily the portion of the theory with the most explanatory power. Since every state has a skewed distribution of wealth, much of the "work" in explaining variation is done by the former.

2.1.1 Capitalization

Military power can be stylized as the output from a production function consisting of the two factors of capital (tanks, planes, ammunition, even training) and labor (soldiers, sailors, etc.) as well as technology. One factor of production can serve as a substitute for the other. However, 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 military power as another soldier.[7] Until it is possible to build a military made entirely of robots, defense requires some of both factors.[8]

Tax revenue can pay for both the capital and labor inputs. Personnel can also be supplied from an alternate type of tax: conscription. The logic of Persson & Tabellini (2000) should apply since a draft is a tax on labor rather than capital. Assuming the possibility of a draft, even if the odds of being called up are equally distributed among all citizens, 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 the level of threat does 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 demand a military staffed through a fair draft whose conscripts are protected by large amounts of capital (Vasquez 2005).

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[7] In economic terms these factors exhibit a declining marginal rate of technical substitution.

[8] Even then this is likely to be prohibitively expensive and may very well result in a war between humans and machines programmed to enslave us all, a public bad.

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, are more likely to join an all-volunteer force, may gain jobs from domestic weapons manufacturing, and often regard military service as a means of acquiring human capital. Democracies are likely therefore 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 for combatants. 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.[9] In short a capitalized military not only results in the median voter doing less of the fighting herself, but also will generally allow someone else's resources to fund the costs of war.

2.1.2 Substitutability through Doctrine

The ability to replace military labor with capital is constrained by substitutability, which is determined partially by the available technology. The right tools can increase the output of military power with the same amount of inputs, or increase the effectiveness of one's favored factor of production. Both are important. A bulldozer makes one person much more effective at moving earth, but for the purposes of archaeology it is a disastrous substitute for several individuals wielding small chisels and brushes. Different industries use labor-augenting technology to varying degrees of advantage. For example, it takes fewer units of labor to assemble a car today than a century ago, but the amount of labor required to play a Beethoven string quartet has not budged in two hundred years.[10]

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[9] Buying military capital apparently creates more jobs than hiring more soldiers. A thirty-year-old study claims that one billion dollars in US government spending would create 98,000 public service jobs, 53,000 civilian production jobs, or 45,800 military jobs (Nincic & Cusack 1979). Given the US pursuit of the "Revolution in Military Affairs," the disparity is likely to be much larger now. Thus military capital is also a superior form of pork barrel spending compared to increasing the number of soldiers.

Irregular and regular warfare can be considered two different "industries." For COIN, better tools are of minimal value in making a capitalized military more effective and technique, while crucial, only goes so far when faced with labor constraints. Indeed the ratio of personnel per population in order to conduct "nation-building" has stayed roughly stable at twenty per thousand since the end of World War II (Quinlan 2003). Little can be accomplished without boots on the ground. A capitalized military will be much more effective against a conventional opponent than an unconventional one. Such a fighting force dispatched the Iraqi conventional forces with ruthless efficiency in both 1991 and 2003, but is poorly suited for conducting counterinsurgency. War type, the interaction of the weak state's strategy and the strong state's military doctrine (Arreguín-Toft 2005), is of equal if not greater influence on substitutability as technology. The paper seeks to demonstrate how a strong (democratic) power would pursue a conventional, capital-intensive military strategy against an unconventional opponent.

2.2 Moral Hazard

Because of the redistributive nature of a capitalized military, such a military doctrine can lead to moral hazard, a perverse incentive for risky behavior. Moral hazard is an important component in the study of insurance in which the insured has an incentive "to change their behavior in a way that increases claims against the insurance company" (Rauchhaus 2006). For example, drivers insured against auto theft will more likely park on the street than pay for secure parking compared to the uninsured. Many domestic government programs merge the Meltzer-Richard effect with moral hazard. Federal deposit insurance ensures that every individual's bank deposits are safe up to a certain limit (a redistributive policy). Because the insurance applies regardless of the bank, 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. I simply extend these concepts to building a military and its employment as a tool for coercion.

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[10] Because the improved labor productivity in one industry raises the wages for the entire economy, industries where the labor share remains constant (such as many portions of the public sector) are likely to exhibit soaring costs, a phenomenon known as "Baumol's cost disease" (Baumol & Bowen 1966, Baumol 1993). This is one reason counterinsugency is likely to be fiscally draining in the long run.

No matter how redistributive the military, voters will not support conflicts with a vanishing chance of victory. No public good can be gained from such military interventions and conflict remains costly for the median voter who still pays some taxes and may be conscripted (a deductible of sorts). Rather, moral hazard increases the likelihood of entering conflicts whose expected value in increased security is outweighed by the likely total costs for the state, which are borne inordinately by the wealthy. The median voter's risky behavior is in effect being subsidized. The lack of cost internalization creates an incentive to use the 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.*

The result is the continued application of an inefficient military doctrine in pursuit of modest war aims, a low likelihood of victory or a combination of the two. Indeed, the median voter will continue to build the "wrong" type of capitalized military in anticipation of fighting small wars compared to a counterfactual cost internalized actor. Redistribution-induced moral hazard explains what other rational choice approaches to small wars have not, the initiation and continuation of small wars when the costs of fighting do not appear worthwhile for the state.

Figure 1 illustrates the different choices made by both a counterfactuall cost internalized actor and the median voter given an exogenously set capital-intensive military. When the security gains are high (a vital national interest is at stake), both actors will pursue a war, regardless of the weak actor's strategy. However, when the potential gains are modest the unitary actor will enter a war only against a conventional opponent where a capital-intensive military is likely to be highly effective. The cost internalized actor will avoid using a highly capitalized military against an unconventional opponent even for moderate security benefits. Low benefits do not justify choosing war, regardless of how effective the strong state's military

Unitary Actor Sets Foreign Policy

		Weak Conventional Opponent	Weak Unconventional Opponent
Security Gain	High	War	War
	Moderate	War	No War
	Low	No War	No War

Median Voter Sets Foreign Policy

		Weak Conventional Opponent	Weak Unconventional Opponent
Security Gain	High	War	War
	Moderate	War	**War**
	Low	**War**	No War

Figure 1: Effect of A Heavily Capitalized Military on War Selection

doctrine might be.

The two highlighted boxes in the median voter's decision matrix show the conditions of moral hazard. The median voter in Figure 1 will choose wars using an efficient strategy against a conventional foe for low gains that a cost internalized actor would eschew. The strong state's success may be assured, but the stakes are trivial. More importantly she will use an inefficient strategy against an unconventional opponent in pursuit of moderate aims because the reduction in costs outweighs the sacrifice in expected value. My theory predicts that under the "right" circumstances, democracies will take steps that will make success less likely even in relatively important conflicts. I claim that this is precisely why the United States fought a losing strategy for so long in Vietnam.

3 Why did the United States Fight Poorly... or at All in Vietnam?

I use process tracing of the development of American counterinsurgency strategy before and during the Vietnam War to competitively test my theory of moral hazard against other explanations for aggression from International Relations, historical and policy-oriented research. I choose Vietnam for my case study for a variety of reasons. Vietnam represents a glaring anomaly, a "deviant case," for democratic exceptionalism (Downes 2008). It is also the essential case for much of the work on military myopia. Finally it is an important case for understanding the history of United States foreign policy, and its ramifications are still being felt in the current debates over strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan. In doing so, I explore whether my theory fits the evidence better than the competing explanations (George & Bennett 2005).

Finally, the theory enhances our understanding of an important historical case by linking earlier findings of Vietnam War historiography in a novel and consistent way. Most members of the administration were at least skeptical of the domino theory and realized that prospects for success were low. The principals understood that they were adapting "ends to fit preferred means" (Gaddis 1982, 253) in the conduct of the war. Prior work has faulted the firepower and airpower intensive nature of American warfighting, the lack of a systematic COIN doctrine, the avoidance of casualties, and even the deliberate substitution of capital for labor (Mueller 1980, 505). The war was relatively popular with the public through the Tet Offensive of 1968. The administration's refusal to mobilize society is well known, as is Johnson's concern for his Great Society domestic legislation. To the military's dismay, civilian leadership played an intimate role in nearly all elements of the war's conduct (McMaster 1997).

This paper's theory tie these findings into a coherent and parsimonious theory as well as to draw in additional elements. I therefore incorporate primary source materials to find supporting evidence that has hitherto been unremarked or overlooked. If my theory can "predict" and explain new findings in such a scrupulously studied case. Placed in the context of the theory several important events of the Vietnam War—public attitudes towards strategies, the Stennis Hearings, the McNamara Line, and the Combined Action Platoons—all take on new relevance.

The most important piece of evidence underpinning military myopia's claims regarding the Vietnam War is that the person most epitomizing the "Army Concept"—Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) commander, General William Westmoreland—chose a foolish ground strategy. Westmoreland, according to his critics "displayed an utter obliviousness to the political nature of the war" (Record 2007, 121), resolutely rejected an alternate strategy that was simultaneously more effective and less casualty-intensive, one exemplified by the Marine Corps' "Combined Action Platoons" (CAP), and instead grew dangerously obsessed with a Korea-type threat of incursion or even invasion from North Vietnam (Krepinevich 1986, 21).[11]

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[11] Krepinevich is a revision of Summers (2007), which had been the popular explanation for the loss in Vietnam among American military circles since its original publication in 1981 (Nagl 2005). This paper incorporates elements from both of these important works. Like Summers, I agree that civilians set most of the ground strategy in an effort to control the costs of war, but disagree that these civilians pushed the

The major contribution of Lyndon Johnson was his acquiescence in how the ground war was conducted. The American people played a similarly passive, if enabling, role; flawed American grand strategy and military doctrine stems from the people's inability to understand the political nature of limited war. Like military myopia, this approach often rests on a cultural argument, one afflicting the nation, not just the military. Gaddis (1982, 242) cites the "strange dread of American irrationality" as a motivation for the Johnson Administration's conduct of the Vietnam War. Jeffrey Record (2007, 20) agrees that in Vietnam, the US "grasped neither the essentially political nature of the conflict nor the limits of its own conventional military power in the Indochinese political and operational setting." Like Johnson, the voters were guilty of a sin of omission, the military of commission.

After laying out hypotheses, the paper first conveys the public opinion environment regarding the costs and benefits of Vietnam in which the Johnson Administration found itself. The bulk of the paper's empirical work focuses on how the war was fought in the air and on the ground ground war, and whether its conduct better fits the predictions of military myopia to cost distribution. I then briefly examine the Kennedy and Nixon Administrations to show the continuity of American strategy as well as to refute competing explanations.

3.1 Hypotheses

This paper challenges this thesis and the evidence supporting it without rejecting it entirely. The military did play an independent role resulting in certain counterproductive actions in the Vietnam War. It seems clear that the Army-Marine rivalry contributed to the rejection of the CAP and its superior approach towards COIN, and my theory does little to explain the insistence by American advisors on training the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) as a conventional force.[12] At best, however, military myopia is an intervening (or confounding) variable. Even things that may seem internal at first, such as the counterproductive

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Army to devote too many resources towards COIN.

[12] But then again, the ARVNs conspicuous inability to resist the onslaught of Viet Cong regulars in 1965 led to the large-scale introduction of ground troops.

policy of individual (rather than unit) rotations were designed for civilian and ultimately public approval. If Army leadership was slavishly devoted to firepower, it was because their civilian masters had ensured that such men were promoted. Thus even if the military was indeed myopic, the distortion of their collective lens is ultimately traced back to the civilian leadership and the voters that elected them.The relationship between military myopia and poor small warfighting is spurious, because both outcomes result from the preferences of the average voter.

H$_1$ *The public is more likely to support arming, war, and escalation if they are capital-intensive.*

H$_2$ *The public, and therefore the government, prefers an increase in an ineffective capital-intensive effort over a more effective labor-intensive one.*

These preferences should be quite stable over time. Democratic exceptionalism, balance of power and even military myopia explanations would suggest that eventually an organization, particularly a democracy, will adjust in the face of harsh wartime lessons. I argue that, short of reducing the influence of the average voter, a democracy may never "learn."

3.2 What Constitutes Evidence?

I focus on the Johnson Administration since during this period that almost all of the major escalation and warfighting decisions were made. To support my causal story I must establish three propositions. First the public must support a capital-intensive approach to limited war as well as an aggressive employment of such a doctrine. Second, government officials must act upon these views, preferably in ways they would not have pursued otherwise. Finally, I must establish, contra the predictions of military myopia, that these officials directed the military to fight accordingly, again preferably in ways the generals would not have pursued otherwise.

The key causal mechanism for my theory—strategy set by officials responding to the perception of the public's desire for an aggression—is challenging to pin down empirically. The historiography of the war is both extensive and controversial, containing a wealth of primary and secondary sources. However the availability of public and private records of the positions and ideas of nearly every important government decisionmaker means that evidence can be found that individuals regularly contradicted each other and even themselves.

This empirical predicament is mitigated by the theory's focus on democracy and voter pressure. For all his complexities and inconsistencies, Johnson (and his aides) was a near constant assessor of and triangulator towards the country's (or at least the Congress's) median voter. Although he of course tried to shape that opinion, he understood the limits of his ability to do so. He was constantly aware of the pressures of both hawks and doves, and equally suspicious of both. The Administration publicized actions likely to meet with voter approval; public statements by Johnson and his subordinates emphasizing capitalized warfare over labor-intensive COIN are therefore good sources of support for the theory. Trumpeting the air war and counterinsurgency through firepower to the public by civilians cannot be explained by military myopia.

Given the taboo against incorporating domestic political concerns into foreign policy decisionmaking, the fact that the Presidents closest national security advisors spoke and wrote frequently about it is excellent evidence and should be scrutinized. I also look for deliberations in which important actors including the president acknowledged their actions to be suboptimal, but ordered them anyway. These actions should persist over time despite continued feedback that the strategy was not working.

An important component of military myopia theory is the claim that General Westmoreland chose a foolish ground strategy with minimal civilian interference. I therefore examine discussions and decisions among civilians regarding military strategy in the absence of the uniformed leadership, as well as the orders given to them. Showing that civilians overruled military pacification plans due to labor constraints contradicts the military myopia thesis while supporting mine. Finally, the military myopia explanation requires a counterfactual alternative strategy that was simultaneously less labor-intensive and more effective. I therefore examine civilian assessments of the War's most successful COIN program, the Marines' "Combined Action Platoons" (CAP).

4 Public Opinion

Polling data shows a public that was vaguely hawkish if poorly informed up through the Tet Offensive of 1968 (Mueller 1987). 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 war by escalating (Gelb & Betts 1979, 172). More importantly for the purposes of this theory, as the war consensus broke down in this time period, the role of income in public opinion (with poorer people being more hawkish) became significant (Gartner & Segura 2000).

A closer look at the polling data reveals a public relatively realistic about the prospects of limited success in Vietnam, and the means they were willing to employ in order to achieve it. Three points emerge. First, rather than the commonly held image of the public as having an unsophisticated, win-or-loss view of the war, the polls reveal a more nuanced attitude. The public did not want to escalate, but consistently preferred increased involvement to a communist South Vietnam. The public was largely aware and willing to accept that the conflict was likely to end in stalemate and discriminated between "negotiated" (acceptable) and "neutralist" (unacceptable) settlements. Second, the public placed limits on means, consistently preferring bombing over ground operations. The perceived costs were relatively mild for the average voter, and a disconnect existed between the public's concerns (casualties and the draft) and actual experience of war costs (taxes and inflation).

4.1 The Public Recognized and Supported Limited War

Critics commonly describe American strategic culture as an "apolitical view of war, which encourages the pursuit of military victory for its own sake" (Record 2007). The public opinion polling does not support this claim. 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 (Gelb & Betts 1979, 129-130). 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." Even following the Tet Offensive of 1968 the poll responses shifted from 20 to 10% predicting "all-out victory," "compromise" rose from 61 to 77%, while the percentage predicting defeat *declined* slightly.[13]

In addition to a realistic assessment of the outcome, the largest group among those surveyed supported actions maintaining such a limited aim, rather than "going all out" or "pulling out." A Harris Poll in December 1964 found 40% of the public approving of "continuing support for the anti-Communist government" and roughly equal portions supporting withdrawal or "bombing North Vietnam" (Stempel 1966, 249-25). 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: 6%, 8%, 41% and 44% respectively (Mueller 1987, 87).

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[13] *The Gallup Poll* (N.d.) Jan. 1-5, May 19-24, 1966; May 11-16, Nov. 16-21, 1967; Feb. 2-6, Mar. 2-7, 1968.

4.2 The Public Preferred Bombing

Public opinion was hawkish when it came to bombing, far less so for ground forces. John Mueller (1987, 70) uses the surge in popularity following the 1966 bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong as an example of "rally-to-the-flag" behavior, but support for precisely these actions had been steadily rising from September 1965 though May 1966, when the escalation was announced. Before Johnson expanded the target set to include them, large majorities favored bombing oil storage, industrial plants and factories, but drew the line at bombing big cities (Gallup Feb. 10-15, Jun. 8-13, 1966). Asked in December 1965 whether "we should go all out in bombing North Vietnam until the Communists are ready to negotiate," a majority (52%) favored "going all out," while those favoring stopping the bombing only slightly outnumbered those supporting "continue as present" (Gallup Dec. 16, 1965).[14] These sentiments remained consistent throughout the war. 58% versus 21% thought that bombing the North would help, rather than hurt, "chances for a settlement of the Vietnam war" (Gallup Feb. 16-21, 1967) and a year later a vast majority (69%) favored continuing bombing (Gallup Feb. 2-6, 1968).

Few polls explicitly compared a bombing-intensive strategy to a ground war, but some evidence supports my theory. A December 1964 study from the University of Michigan showed that 37% of the respondents strongly opposed withdrawing right away (versus 18% in favor of withdrawal). When questioned if the US should commit ground forces however, 32% opposed and 24% approved (Logevall 1999, 282). In February 1965, 67% approved of broader air strikes and in May 59% thought the bombing should be expanded. But only a minority favored the use of ground troops in both cases (Gelb & Betts 1979, 218). Over a series of polls through November 1967 a majority approved "increasing the strength of attacks against North Vietnam," which consisted only of air strikes, versus withdrawing troops or carrying on the present level of fighting (Gallup Aug. 18-23, 1966; Aug. 24-29, Oct. 6-11, 1967). In late 1967, while ROLLING THUNDER continued to receive majority support at the time, 43% opposed “extending the ground war into North Vietnam,” although 38% favored it (Gallup Oct. 26-31, Nov. 16-21, 1967).

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[14] A huge majority generally rejected going "all-out" if atom bombs were mentioned.

Two contemporaneous polls from August 1967 allow for some comparison of the public’s military doctrine preferences. When asked if we should “end the war,” “fight to negotiated peace” or “fight on to a total military victory,” 51% favored the negotiated peace versus 21% for victory and 24% for getting out. However when given the choice between “carry on its [the US military’s] present level of fighting” or “increase the strength of its attacks on North Vietnam” (an entirely air campaign), the more hawkish option received 50% support versus 10% (Mueller 1987, 88).

4.3 The Public was Shielded from Costs

One reason for the generally hawkish nature of the polls despite limited success was the relative costlessness for the average voter. This phenomenon is clearly demonstrated by two sets of polls showing the distinction between the war costs that people cared about (manpower and casualties), and those that they experienced directly (inflation and taxes). A Harris poll in the summer of 1967 showed that a slight majority of Americans felt their personal lives had been “unaffected” by the war. Of the 44% claiming to be “affected,” a quarter said it was due to casualties while 32% said inflation. However, in response 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 or mishandling of funds (Lorell 1985, 25).

The same questions were asked in March of 1968, immediately after the high casualty rates of the Tet offensive (500 killed per month versus 200 preceding the previous poll). 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.[15] 7% were troubled by the draft and another 7% by financial costs.[16]

5 Government Responsiveness to the Public

Since Truman's "losing China," every administration well 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" (Ellsberg 1972, 102). Johnson retrospectively justified his actions, "A divisive debate over 'who lost Vietnam' would be in my judgment, even more destructive to our national life than the argument over China had been" (Johnson 1971). Johnson bluntly told Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. that "I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went." Responding to a pessimistic memo from Senator Michael Mansfield, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy countered, "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" (FRUS 1:8, January 9, 1964).[17] Johnson's frequent lament regarding Mansfield's dovishness reveals his assessment of the political terrain, "Why do I have to have a saint for Majority Leader? Why can't I have a politician?"(Beschloss 2001, 373).[18]

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[15] 4% were concerned by South Vietnamese civilian casualties.

[16] Opinions on taxes were more confused, but when forced to choose between guns and butter, butter lost out. When asked in January 1966 "do you think the Government should continue to pay for these programs [list of domestic spending programs] here at home, or do you feel they should be cut back to help finance the war in Vietnam? 48% favored continued spending rather than cutting back (Gallup, Jan. 21-26,1966). But in the same month, when forced to choose between increased taxes and cutting back domestic programs, almost half the respondents favored cutting back, versus 29% raising taxes (Gallup, Jan. 1-5,1966). Huge majorities rejected the notion of raising the income tax however (Gallup Oct. 21-26,1966; Jul. 13-18, 1967).

[17] When the document is found in both the "Gravel edition" of the *Pentagon Papers* (PP) and *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968* (FRUS), I cite the FRUS due to its availability online at http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/johnsonlb/. The number for FRUS citations refers to the volume and document, rather than page.

[18] Despite the war's unpopularity, Nixon anticipating his 1972 reelection campaign, wrote in in his diary that "Both Haldeman [Nixon's chief of staff] and Henry [Kissinger] seem to have an idea—which I think is mistaken—that even if we fail in Vietnam we can still survive politically. I have no illusions whatever on

Sworn in as President in November 1963, Johnson began to develop a Vietnam policy even as he prepared for the 1964 election. The new President, on the advice of McGeorge Bundy, established an ad hoc committee on Vietnam chaired by a diplomat named William Sullivan. Soon afterwards in a committee meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) the question of how long the American people would support the current policy came up. Sullivan suggested that support would be indefinite as long as the military "presence" in Vietnam did not include heavy forces. Forrestal would later recall that Sullivan had been told in advance that the policy to be pursued was going to be solely a "slow, very slow, escalation" of bombing pressures against North Vietnam (McMaster 1997, 68).

One contemporary analysis based on anonymous interviews of State Department officials assessed:

> Johnson was more inclined to listen to military strategists who opposed American involvement on the ground. Instead, they advocated other measures to end the guerilla threat–selective bombing of North Vietnamese targets and clandestine naval raids along the coast. . . 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. (Stempel 1966, 221)

Following the Tonkin Gulf retaliations, Louis Harris (1973, 57), the famous pollster, noted that "Johnson was winning the Vietnam issue both ways: He won over the militant pro-intervention people with his firm military response while, at the same time, people were still worried that Goldwater, his opponent, if elected, would plunge the country into nuclear war." Johnson held out the prospects of a ground war against the Chinese as the result of Goldwater recklessness, "Losing 190 lives in the period that we have been out there is bad, but it is not like the 190,000 that we might lose the first month if we escalated that war." Johnson's selling point: "I haven't chosen to enlarge the war. Nor have I chosen to retreat and turn it over to the Communists." (VanDeMark 1991, 18). In general Johnson emphasized the avoidance of casualties while leaving the door open for an air campaign. His referring to the need to negotiate was constant, the possibility of (modest) escalation was

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that score, however. " (quoted in Clodfelter 2006, 147).

acknowledged, but the option of neutralization was always rejected (Logevall 1999, 253). The constraints of the election were in the minds of Johnson's foreign policy advisors; McGeorge Bundy noted that the "Goldwater crowd" was "more numerous, more powerful and more dangerous than the fleabite professors" (Herring 1986, 140).[19]

Historian William Logevall (1999, 288) argues that, "In terms of his domestic flank, Johnson had considerable freedom of action on Vietnam after the election." But to say that the electoral and political pressures on LBJ had diminished misjudges the type of politician he was and the agenda he proposed. By 1965 if not before, he was focused already on the 1966 election, knowing that his ambitious domestic reforms rested on successfully weathering the mid-term losses that traditionally come from the President's party. McGeorge Bundy's notes on the President's remarks during a national security strategy make this clear:

> It's a new ball game. 1966 election. (FRUS 3, 223 December 7, 1965)

In July 1966 Arthur Schlesinger, an early dove, wrote despairingly in his journal that "playing the war to the hilt has recommended itself to him [Johnson] as the best way of reversing the polls and bringing about Democratic gains in November" (Schlesinger 2007, 247-248). The remainder of this paper will show that the president felt public pressure regarding how to fight as much as whether to fight.

6 Johnson's Pessimistic Escalation

Johnson famously referred to Vietnam as a "little fourth-rate country," and the private consensus of the Administration regarding Vietnam was pessimistic. Administration officials assessed the likelihood of a "win" to be quite low. Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton told McNamara in 1966 the probability of "success" was .2, rising to a mere .5 in 1968 (PP 3:484). Bundy famously estimated the chances of "changing the course in

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[19] The North Vietnamese understood the direction of public pressure, the NVN foreign minister (Pham Van Dong) told an unofficial Canadian intermediary that "Johnson worries also of course about the coming electoral battle in which it is necessary to outbid the Republican candidate" (Logevall 1999, 209).

Vietnam" at "between 25% and 75%," telling Johnson that even if unsuccessful, "At a minimum it will damp down the charge that we did not do all that we could have done, and this charge will be important in many countries, *including our own*" (FRUS, 2:84; emphasis added). In addition to knowing that the odds were grim and the international stakes modest, administration members were also painfully aware that the military was not suitable for the job, and the strategy they pursued far from ideal. Even optimistic advisors understood this. Robert Komer, Johnson's principle advisor on pacification, observed that "Few of our programs—civil or military—are very efficient, but we are grinding the enemy down by sheer weight and mass" (PP 2:575). McNamara's gloomy October 1966 memo to the President assessed the likelihood that current military doctrine would succeed, "The large-unit operations war, which we know best how to fight and where we have had our successes, is largely irrelevant to pacification as long as we do not lose it." While McNamara recommends pursuing large-unit operations in tandem with negotiations, "we should recognize that success from them is a mere possibility, not a probability" (FRUS 4:268). McNamara then notes the administration's need to "give clear evidence that the continuing costs and risks to the American people are acceptably limited."

Yet despite the pessimism, from a very early point in the Johnson Administration the strategy was set and did not vary much over the war's course. Where the public supported aggressiveness, in the relatively cost-free air campaign, the principal limitation on the Administration were concerns over Soviet and Chinese retaliation. On the other hand, the deployment of American ground forces was limited for almost entirely domestic political reasons, particularly avoiding the "Plimsoll line" of mobilizing the Reserves. The use of security forces (especially American forces) to pursue the COIN-oriented strategy of pacification was explicitly rejected. Instead, a series of second-best choices, "improvisations that defied military logic" (Herring 1986, 180), were instituted.

6.1 Civilians Dominated the Military

For the military myopia theory to be true, evidence must exist of the armed forces pushing a flawed strategy up the chain of command. At the very least an environment of malign neglect allowing the military to pursue its problematic aims must exist. The record does not support this interpretation. Indeed, given the institutional power of the military, its success at checking the policies of Eisenhower and Truman, and the ready availability of platforms provided by hawkish congressional committees, it is shocking that the uniformed leadership was not more vocal in criticizing of a strategy they disagreed with strongly (McMaster 1997). This is in no small part due to the fact that the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations ensured that their principle military advisors were handpicked "new men," unlikely to turn into a MacArthur or LeMay.

H.R. McMaster (1997) shows that not only did military leaders generally cave in to the demands of President Johnson, but also carefully calibrated their recommendations to make them as politically palatable as possible. When Earle "Bus" Wheeler, Army general and Chairman of the JCS, was asked by the historian Henry Graff (1970, 125-126) if the "problem of opposition to the war... became a factor in making decisions?" the general 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."

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 the Chairman about the purposes of meetings (McMaster 1997, 301). Only upon McNamara and other civilians turning against the prevailing (and popular) strategy, did the Chiefs find a more receptive audience in their President.

6.2 “Expensive in Dollars, but Cheap in Life”

Throughout the war, the administration and its uniformed subordinates understood the need to substitute treasure for soldiers (and casualties), making sure the public knew this. Komer recalled the political exchange rate in a 1982 interview that, “What it costs you in blood is much more politically visible than what it costs you in treasures” (Lorell 1985, 80). Bus Wheeler also made this case publicly, telling a Rotary Club that, “The United States policy is to expend money and firepower, not manpower, in accomplishing the purpose of the nation. The fire power support being given to our fighting men in Vietnam, three times the rate expended in Korea, exceeds the amount of support available to any force in history” (Krepinevich 1986, 198). At the war’s beginning McNamara was asked for a *New York Times* profile, “How large a commitment of men is the United States prepared to make at the end of 1965?” The Secretary refused to answer, replying instead, “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” (Graff 1970, 81-82). McNamara, famously obsessed with cost-benefit analysis during peacetime, informed his subordinates in March of 1965 that “there is an unlimited appropriation available for the financing of aid to Vietnam. Under no circumstances is a lack of money to stand in the way of aid to that nation” (PP 3:474).

While the administration generally sought to conceal or downplay any war costs, when push came to shove the President asked for money, not people. Johnson publicly announced to Congress that “the world’s most affluent society can surely afford to spend whatever must be spent for its freedom and security.” At no time did the President allow a vote on troop use, mobilization of the reserves or a second bill akin to the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. The few times Johnson risked putting any aspect of the war up for a Congressional vote were appropriations bills such as the modest $700 million supplemental of 1965 and the $12.7 billion supplemental in January 1966. 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 (*Congressional Quarterly Weekly* 1973).[20]

That Johnson dissembled about the financial cost of war is undeniable (Halberstam 2001, 604). However, the charge that he refused to raise taxes is also plainly false. He proposed increasing excise taxes in January 1966, dropped it when the economy slowed, then renewed the request at a larger rate in August (BDM Corporation 1980). Johnson's hesitation to be more aggressive was not due to his reluctance to ask the people for war funding but rather fear for his domestic programs' survival in the face of the escalation pressures that may be unleashed. The President was quite certain that the people (or at least important members of Congress) would prefer guns over butter. LBJ's budget director Charles Schultze explains the impossibility of gaining "a tax increase on economic grounds alone; you can't sell Congress on tax hikes," he recalled "[Treasury Secretary] Joe Fowler telling him, Mr. President, if you make it a war tax you'll get it. But—people forget this—Johnson at the time was a dove. He knew that to get a tax hike he'd have to call it a war..." (Shapley 1993, 373). Any tax bill had to get past powerful legislators, such as House Ways and Means Committee Chair Wilbur Mills, with little love for the Great Society (or civil rights). The Arkansas representative fought the surcharge as a means of resisting Johnson's domestic program rather than the war. Once the bulk of Great Society legislature had been passed, Johnson renewed his push for a tax increase, making a direct appeal to the war effort. In his 1967 State of the Union address, the President requested a six percent surcharge "for so long as the unusual expenditures associated with our efforts in Vietnam continue." The tax increase finally became law June 28, 1968, following Johnson's promise to Mills to reduce *domestic* expenditure by $6 billion.

6.3 Civilians Pursued Substitution at the Expense of Effectiveness

The ground campaign's focus on firepower was so intense that the counterinsurgency expert Robert Thompson (1969) observed that "All ground operations were designed to achieve a fix on an enemy unit so that every modern weapon could be brought to bear." Ordnance was expended 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 (Thayer 1985, 57). When confronted with failure, the Administration constantly sought out ways to *increase* the firepower-to-personnel ratio, even at the cost of effectiveness. Upon hearing McNamara's "reluctant" endorsement of Westmoreland's initial request for ground forces, Johnson desperately sought alternatives, "I don't think that 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?" Bizarrely , the President even moots using the Navy, "Shouldn't we have 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?" (Beschloss 2001, 194-195). This quest for imperfect substitutes continued throughout the war; in the *Pentagon Papers'* analysis of the "Program 4" escalations of late 1966, frustrated policymakers continued to explore imperfect substitutes, "certain 'oblique alternatives,' *those which were not directly substitutable options* appeared during this time—all of them designed to relieve pressure on US resources, especially manpower" (PP 4:385; emphasis added). One of the most important alternatives analyzed but the *Papers* was a massive effort to build an anti-infiltration barrier.

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[20] Indeed, Congress would often go above and beyond, voting unanimously in 1965 to double the pay raise for the armed forces proposed by Johnson (*The Economist*, 697 Aug. 21, 1965)

6.3.1 The McNamara Line

Even when the air war's shortcomings became clear, the administration chose neither to increase ground forces nor reconsider its involvement, but instead attempted to build an anti-infiltration barrier stretching across the 17th parallel from the Tonkin Gulf into Laos. Variously named "Practice Nine," "Muscle Shoals" and "Igloo White," its colloquial name became the "McNamara Line" due to his enthusiasm. Designed partly in response to the Army request for four more divisions (40-60,000 soldiers) to block incursions, the McNamara Line attempted to accomplish the mission with one quarter the manpower.

Proposed by the Pentagon's JASON advisory group as a substitute for the ineffective air campaign (PP 4:115-123), expectations for its effectiveness were minimal. William Sullivan, Ambassador to Laos and an important player in the counterinsurgency effort, recalled that "Neither [Maxwell] Taylor nor I thought very much of it" (Rego 2000, 1). Pacific Forces commander Ulysses Sharp assessed it as "an inefficient use of resources with small likelihood of achieving US objectives in Vietnam." 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." The building of the system itself cost a striking $2 billion, with operational costs described by one analysis as "astronomical" (Rego 2000). Faced with JCS foot-dragging McNamara shouted, "Get on with it for God's sakes, it's only money!" (Halberstam 2001, 630).

In a May 19 memo suggesting ways to shore up domestic support, Rostow explicitly described the McNamara Line as a publicly acceptable substitute for bombing, noting the need to justify "our total policy in Vietnam in a manner which is consistent with diminished attacks in the Hanoi-Haiphong area" in a way "acceptable to our own people. Surfacing the concept of the barrier may be critical to that turnaround" (FRUS 5:162, see also PP 4:385). Despite its highly classified nature, the plans were quickly leaked. In a *Washington Post* column with the sadly ironic title "The Vietnam Wall," Rowland Evans and Robert Novak trumpeted the project as "a revolutionary new approach" that could "conceivably transform the Vietnamese war" (Evans & Novak 1966). McNamara held a triumphant news conference to advertise the barrier's success on September 7, 1967.

7 The Ineffective Air War

A pivotal McGeorge Bundy memo on "sustained reprisal," shows that ROLLING THUNDER *was* the United States counterinsurgency strategy. Bundy argued that strategic bombing was a a "new norm in counter-insurgency" due to "The great merit of this proposed scheme is that 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" (FRUS 2:84). Later in 1965, Bundy again notes the importance of "the civil side of the war," then describes how it should be conducted: "It is less than a full-scale war and more than a guerilla war. It is being fought in the shelter of sea and air power. . . the populated area is all accessible from the sea" (Graff 1970, 94). The substitution of firepower for counterinsurgency was widely publicized; speaking to a Virginia business council, General Wheeler reported that, "These two air weapons—helicopters and fighter bombers—provide to South Vietnam and to US forces an advantage in mobility and firepower—the fundamentals of combat—greatly exceeding that available to counterinsurgency forces in any other guerrilla war" (Krepinevich 1986, 170).

Yet the Administration knew bombing was unlikely to be effective. Johnson was skeptical of bombing's effectiveness from the beginning. In a late-1964 memo to Maxwell Taylor, Ambassador to Vietnam as well as a key military advisor, Johnson claimed that "In regard to recommendations for large-scale bombing: I have never felt that this war will be won from the air" (Halberstam 2001, 511). The President made the same point more colorfully in a March 6, 1965 phone conversation with Senator Richard Russell, "Airplanes ain't worth a *damn* Dick!" (Beschloss 2001).

Nonetheless despite this skepticism, the US embarked upon a massive air campaign and continued it long after any usefulness was over. The ratio of tactical sorties to deployed military personnel rose gradually but steadily from 1965 to 1968, dipping slightly during the "pacification" phase of the war (1969-1970). However the overall sortie-to-soldier ratio rose steadily due to the steady increase in B-52 missions, the ability of which to drop ordnance dwarfs that of the typical fighter-bomber mission. The near one-to-one ratio of combat sorties in the theater to personnel in Vietnam allows for the dramatic comparison in Figure 7. By 1966 the number of sorties overtakes the number of personnel and rises more steeply to the peak deployment of 1968 and declining less sharply afterwards, with the ratio increasing by an order of magnitude in 1972.

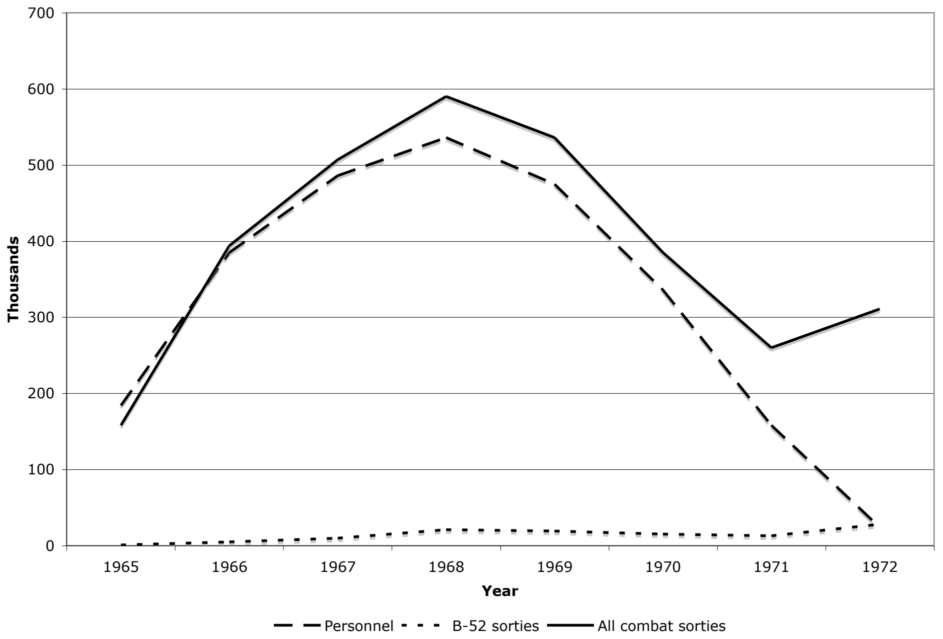

Figure 2: Numbers of Personnel/Aircraft Sorties in Vietnam/Southeast Asia SOURCE: Thayer (1985)

7.1 Designed for Public Consumption

Johnson was much less worried about revealing the extent of the bombing campaign than ground escalation (Schandler 1977, 18). NSAM 328, authorizing escalation on the ground and air campaign, infamously concludes with the President's desire to "minimize any appearance of sudden changes in policy," but this admonishment applied specifically only to the additional personnel deployments and and the "more active use" of Marines in Vietnam. Other actions, in particular "the present slowly ascending tempo of ROLLING THUNDER operations," were not nearly as sensitive (FRUS 2:242 Apr 6, 1965).

When McNamara advised extending the May 1965 bombing pause by an additional three days to "satisfy the *New York Times* editorial board," Johnson responded that "If we hold off bombing any longer, people are going to say 'What in the world is happening?' " The President continued, "My judgment is the public never wanted us to stop the bombing. We have stopped in deference to Mansfield and Fulbright, but we don't want to do it too long else we lose our base of support" (McMaster 1997, 284-285).[21]

Policymakers' continued to assess the public to be hawkish on bombing through much of the war. Walter Rostow (Bundy's successor as National Security Advisor in 1966) concludes a September 1966 bombing analysis for the President with remarkable candor, "I add an amateur political judgment: a 'pause' during the [1966 US mid-term election] campaign, without solid evidence that a move towards peace will promptly follow, could be quite dangerous," to which McNamara handwrote a note agreeing, "I am inclined to agree that a 'pause' prior to November would be unwise" (FRUS 4:232).

In the November 1967 debate over McNamara's proposal to stabilize the bombing of North Vietnam, Rostow again advised the President that doing so would push the president off his "middle ground at home," and cited a Gallup poll showing 67% approval for continued bombing. "Acknowledging my limitations as a judge of domestic politics, I am extremely skeptical of any change in strategy that would take you away from your present middle position." Rostow argued, "If we shift unilaterally to de-escalation, the Republicans will move in and crystallize a majority toward a stronger policy." Taylor agreed that curtailing bombing would mobilize "the large majority of our citizens who believe in the bombing but who thus far have been silent" (Berman 1989, 104-107).

7.2 The Stennis Hearings

The popularity of airpower 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 bombing even as the Defense Secretary challenged its effectiveness. Johnson did not even wait for the hearings to being to increase the number of ROLLING THUNDER targets.[22] McNamara was subsequently fired (Schandler 1977, 61). Despite his dismay over JCS treachery, the hearings helped convince the President to abandon his civilian advisors' recommendations of restraint in favor of the more politically palatable ones of the military .

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[21] Many Republicans clearly viewed more airpower as the politically advantageous alternative to sending troops (Beschloss 2001, 361-363). In June 1965 Gerald Ford, supported by Richard Nixon, declared that "in this crisis, some Republican leaders believe American air and sea power must be used more effectively in North Vietnam against significant military targets…We question the logic of committing US ground forces on a large scale to fight a war in Southeast Asia" (Gibbons 1995, 305).

McNamara gave a masterful brief on the air campaign's limitations, but was dismissed by both the generals and the senators through rhetorical questions such as, "Would not the converse be true in 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?" Generals appearing before the committee were treated to leading questions along the lines of, "It is important for us to continue this bombing. otherwise, we will lose thousands more American men. That is correct, is it not?" Stuart Symington's comments reveal an awareness of the bombing's ineffectiveness, as well as the desire to plow on, "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. The people are now beginning to realize that we have shackled our seapower and shackled our airpower."

The testimony the generals did *not* give is equally important evidence. The Committee's portfolio included oversight of all elements of the military effort in Vietnam, but almost all discussion centered around airpower. There is scant mention of the need for more soldiers, although this was a belief even more deeply shared by the military, for the simple reason that it was not politically tractable.[23] While several senators asked about the need for more soldiers, the generals' near-unanimous reply was that higher troop levels were not as important as increased bombing.

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[22] A fact smugly noted by the Committee Report (3), "it was with gratification that the subcommittee learned that on August 8, 1967, one day before the hearing commenced, additional important targets were approved, many for the first time."

[23] Not coincidentally, Stennis was viewed by the Administration as one of the principal roadblocks to a reserve call-up (PP 4:299).

8 The Ineffective Ground War

According to military myopia explanations, this gave Westmoreland space to pursue slavishly the "Army concept" in ways counterproductive to the war (Krepinevich 1986, 165). Civilian acquiescence is explained by claims that the Administration was either hoodwinked by the military or had used up its political capital by micromanaging the air war (Gallucci 1975, 129-130). Given civilian micromanagement of every other aspect of the war, Occam's razor suggest a superior explanation: the commander in the field was doing precisely what the president wanted him to do.[24] Johnson well understood what type of war would be fought and he and his advisors reiterated this strategy throughout the war. The evidence of a hands-off approach towards ground operations by Johnson is considerably overstated; Westmoreland needed presidential authorization to use anti-personnel artillery rounds during the 1968 siege of Khe Sanh (Rosen 1982, 96).

Most importantly, Westmoreland and others believed that troop limitations sharply constrained the campaign to a war of attrition (and then eventually Vietnamization). The development of armor doctrine over the course of the war shows that the civilian determination to minimize the number of deployed personnel helped shift the Army towards capital-intensiveness. Working under the civilian induced personnel caps in 1965, the Army deployed dismounted infantry units rather than armored brigades and divisions in order to get as many soldiers as possible into the field, a fact not explained by military myopica (Starry 1980, 56). The shift to armor only occurred gradually over 1966 as the need to substitute for labor became more apparent.

8.1 Civilians Understood COIN

Those looking for a description of effective COIN strategy cannot improve on McNamara's memo to Johnson on March 16, 1964. It shows that the administration not only understood pacification's importance but also the best way to conduct it. " the basic theory now fully accepted both on the Vietnamese and US sides—of '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' " (FRUS 1:84).[25]

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[24] I am grateful to John Nagl for making this crucial point that only now in hindsight seems obvious to me.

Administration officials, including the President, understood that much of the US military, particularly the Army, was ill-suited for such a mission. Notes on a 1964 White House meeting report Bundy commenting that "the basic problem was that the military thought of the war in Vietnam too much in terms of regular conventional warfare with an identifiable enemy and specific military objectives…" At the same meeting Michael Forrestal, a senior NSC aide, observed "that the operations the military consider important, such as the search and clear, are not the type of actions that will be most effective in achieving US objectives" (FRUS 1:99). Unhappy with the air campaign, Johnson was willing initially to use only specific types of ground forces, "Rangers and Special Forces and Marines," to be "directed at the guerillas and aimed to stiffen the aggressiveness of Vietnamese military units" (FRUS 1:477).

Contrary to military myopia's prediction, even *Westmoreland* advised the president not to initiate ground operations. The MACV commander was one of the few policymakers in 1964 to recommend Option A (status quo advisory effort) in the famous three-option memo that led to the ROLLING THUNDER bombings. In a January 6, 1965 cable to Johnson, Westmoreland asserted that "any value [of US ground forces] would be more than offset by their political liability [in Vietnam]." Describing the Vietnamese shortcomings, he suggests that "If that [US advisory] effort has not succeeded there is less reason to think that US combat forces would have the desired effect… Thus intervention with ground combat forces would at best buy time and would lead to ever increasing commitments." Westmoreland argued that instances from 1963-1964 where US ground forces would have been helpful were "few and far between…In balance, they do not seem to justify the presence of US units, even disregarding the political problems involved." (Gibbons 1995, 26).

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[25] McNamara continues, "A Civil Administrative Corps is urgently required to work in the provincial capitals, the district towns, the villages, and the hamlets...The paramilitary forces are now understrength and lacking in effectiveness. They must be improved and reorganized… The National Police require special consideration… offensive Guerrilla force should be created to operate along the border and in areas where VC control is dominant. Such a force could be organized around present Ranger Companies and ARVN Special Forces and provided with special training and advice by US Special Forces."

McNamara reminded the President of the limitations of American ground forces in July of 1965, "success against the larger, more conventional, VC/PAVN forces could merely drive the VC back into the trees and back to their 1960-64 pattern—a pattern against which US troops and aircraft would be of limited value" (FRUS, 3:67). A year later McNamara wrote that "the threat of a Communist large-unit military victory has been eliminated," yet the "principal task of US military forces in SVN must be to eliminate the offensive capability of the regular units in order to allow the GVN to counter the guerilla force." McNamara recommended that only half of the ARVN, and "a portion of the US forces," should be shifted (PP 4:368-376). Clearly the administration had determined that if pacification was not going to be done by the Vietnamese, it was not going to be done at all.

8.2 Civilians Rejected COIN

The COIN option was summarily rejected by the President on multiple occasions (Buzzanco 1996). One outspoken advocate, Marine General Victor Krulak, successfully arranged a meeting with Johnson to discuss this strategy in mid-1966. By his own testimony, the general never finished making his case; midway through Krulak's description of intensified pacification using US forces combined with attacking Haiphong, Johnson "propelled me firmly toward the door"(Krulak 1999). The ground campaign would be confined to using ordnance for main force attrition. In the face of feedback that the program was not working well, Johnson stuck with it anyway.

Johnson clearly accepted the attrition strategy with its focus on body counts and on the main force conflict, i.e. "search and destroy." The President was constantly exhorting his chiefs to "kill more VC." The administration very deliberately focused on the main force war rather than pacification. More accurately, the administration's pacification strategy *was* the main force war. The decision is explicitly linked to casualty reduction in a July 21, 1965 briefing on the employment of ground forces. In response to the President's observation, "Looks dangerous to put US 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*" (FRUS 3:71; emphasis added).

In his final Draft Presidential Memorandum (DPM) in November 1966 recommending a new end-strength of 470,000, McNamara shows no sign of changing the ground strategy, "The principal task of US military forces in SVN must be to eliminate the offensive capability of the regular units." Indeed, McNamara 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 only to that level required to neutralize the large enemy units and prevent them from interfering with the pacification program" (FRUS 4:312). McNamara advocates a shift to the second version in part because "an endless escalation of US deployments is not likely to be acceptable in the US."

Komer, the administration's pacification expert, questioned Westmoreland's 1967 troop request by noting that the enemy main force strength had leveled off and half of the US maneuver battalions were already supporting pacification "by dealing with the middle war, the VC main force provincial battalions." Komer warns that "A major US force commitment to pacification also basically challenges the nature of our presence in Vietnam and might force us to stay indefinitely in strength." Komer observed the political reality that "Whether or not the added US forces would become heavily involved in pacification, however, another major US force increase raises so many other issues" (FRUS 5:147). Instead Komer recommends more Vietnamese involvement coupled with "a minor force increase. . . accelerated emphasis on a barrier, and some increased bombing."

Even those favoring escalation evinced modest expectations for the reinforcements' effectiveness, concern for the domestic implications, and no change in strategy. A Rostow memo explicitly noted the need to present any escalation in a manner "acceptable to our own people." The goal would be to free 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" (FRUS 5:162). Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach, reflecting what the *Pentagon Papers* describe as a growing consensus, believed the time had come to "change" the war strategy and "use the great bulk of US forces for search and destroy." A "small number" of troops could be used for pacification but "targeted primarily on enemy provincial main force units." According to Katzenbach, "pacification is not the ultimate answer—we have neither the time nor the manpower" (PP 4:508).

At the time, it was almost universally assumed that a "normal" counterinsurgency strategy would require a 10:1 ratio of pro-government forces to guerillas, acknowledged in a July 1965 McNamara memo to Johnson: "The number of US troops is too small to make a significant difference in the traditional 10-to-1 government-guerrilla formula, but it is not too small to make a significant difference in the kind of war which seems to be evolving in Vietnam–a "Third Stage" or conventional war" (FRUS, 3:67). In 1965, intelligence estimated that there were 226,000 "communist forces" in South Vietnam versus 571,000 members of the RVNAF (Thayer 1985, 32-35). Thus 1.7 million American and Free World Forces would have been needed to fill the gap in 1965.[26] McNamara acknowledged the ratio in a memo, even while calling the guerilla warfare portion of the operation "manageable." In Wheeler's business council speech extolling the virtues of firepower he assured his audience that the required ratio "is not eight or ten-to-one. . . we can achieve the preponderance of force required with less" (Krepinevich 1986, 170).

Civilian rejection of pacification persisted over time and in the face of military recommendations. Contrary to military myopia's predictions, Westmoreland advanced a new "Concept of Operations" in August 1966 (FRUS 4:220) where he recommended splitting American forces between offensive operations and "revolutionary development" (pacification). The roles of the pacification were textbook COIN.[27] Maxwell Taylor acknowledged to Johnson that the 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 US casualty rate and in the ratio of US 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" (FRUS 4:221). Taylor's brief made an impression; Johnson appended a handwritten note to a followup memo, "Let's get something to Westy so that he will not assume that we have approved" (FRUS 4:223).

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[26] And 2.1-2.6 million in 1968.

Objections to COIN continued into the next year. In a May memo arguing that "the 'philosophy' of the war should be fought out now," John McNaughton advised the rejection of Westmoreland's March 1967 request for 200,000 more soldiers. Westmoreland intended—contrary to the military myopia argument—to use the reinforcements "to relieve the Marines to work with ARVN on pacification" and for other pacification missions in the Delta and Quang Ngai.[28] Referring to pacification as a "less essential mission," McNaughton suggests avoiding escalation by "making more efficient use of presently approved US 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)" (FRUS 5:161).

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[27] "I visualize that a significant number of the US/Free World Maneuver Battalions will be committed to Tactical Areas of Responsibility (TAOR) missions. These missions 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."

[28] McNaughton could not have been more specific in his rejection of COIN, arguing that Americans have no business in the Delta because "(1) The Delta is a fairly active VC area, in which a moderately high level of Stage II guerrilla warfare tactics are pursued; and (2) the VC effort is primarily indigenous (that is, the North Vietnamese Main Force units play almost no role)."

Military myopia rests on the counterfactual that a better strategy existed in the form of the Marine Corps' innovative Combined Action Program (CAP), the best example of American-initated COIN during the conflict (Thompson 1969, Nagl 2005). Invoking CAP success, Krepinevich (1986, 176) argues that a 550,000 troop ceiling would provide enough soldiers for hamlet-level security and civil action, with several infantry divisions left to counter large-scale incursions.[29] Obviously, this claim cannot be tested. However, even if Krepinevich is correct in CAP's effectiveness, this is irrelevant if the civilians, as well as the military, did not hold this position at the time.

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").[30] These reports deployed blistering empirical criticisms of the prevailing attrition strategy, but even while acknowledging the excellence of the CAP program, they were skeptical of its wider viability. 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. While one CAP supporter makes the case that "although casualties are high, they are only 50 per cent of the casualties of the normal infantry of marine battalions being flown around by helicopter on large scale operations" (Hanning 1969, 18), at the time in Vietnam, only 80,000 of the deployed American soldiers were involved in active combat.[31] Thus a larger absolute number of personnel in the theater would have been put in harm's way by shifting to large-scale COIN.

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 (Thayer 1975, 26-27) and November 1968 (Schulimson, Blasiol, Smith, & Dawson 1997, 628), the PF to Marine ratio had declined from 1.7 to 1.4. 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 (Peterson 1989, 87-88). Finally, the SEA report observed in November 1968 that "in over three years of operations no evidence exists that US Marines have been able to withdraw from a CAP solely because their Vietnamese counterparts were able to take over."[32]

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[29] A CAP team consisted of a 13-man Marine rifle squad assigned to a local 35-man Vietnamese militia platoon. The Marines would live among the people providing both security and civil assistance such as medical treatment.

[30] 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 (Hanning 1969, 18).

[31] This, as Krepinevich points out, is due to the very high "tooth-to-tail ratio" of the American military, a product of capital intensive military doctrine.

Krepinevich and other critics dismiss 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," but this assessment was shared by an administration determined to hold down deployments and casualties. William Bundy, in a February 1965 memo entitled "Where Are We Heading?" underscored the need for "intensified pacification within South Viet-Nam," but then went on to caution that "to meet the security problem, this might include a significant increase in present US force strength" (PP 3:691). In his 1967 search to trim personnel numbers McNaughton specifically noted that "other ground-force requirements could be eliminated if the US Marines ceased grass-roots pacification activities" (FRUS 5:161). Interviewed in 1976, Komer, reflecting decision-makers' conventional wisdom, assessed that CAP demanded "an enormous requirement for American infantry which we did not have" (Schulimson et al. 1997, 620). Probably writing in mid- to late-1968, the *Pentagon Papers'* editor acknowledges CAP's unquestioned success relative to any other approach but warns that the Marine strategy "requires vast numbers of troops," which should only be "undertaken with full awareness by the highest levels of the [US government] of its potential costs in manpower and time" (PP 2:535).

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[32] In fairness, many Marines disagreed (Schulimson et al. 1997, 629). Francis "Bing" West argues that CAP would have worked if it was implemented more systematically (West 2003). This may be true, but the decision-makers did not believe it.

8.3 Did Nixon and Abrams fight a Better War?

Some revisionist accounts claim that once Westmoreland was replaced by Creighton Abrams in mid-1968, the war was fought much more successfully, but American political will had been too damaged by previous incompetence for the public to recognize this (Sorley 1999). 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 troops 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 it is certainly true that the drawdown forced the US to rely on the South Vietnamese, the remaining American force did not deviate much from the American way of small war at this time.

While responsibility for fighting had to be shifted to the Vietnamese due to American personnel drawdowns, the US contribution to counterinsurgency retained its firepower-intensive emphasis. Once Nixon no longer felt constrained by fears of Soviet or Chinese counter-escalation he initiated the LINEBACKER air campaigns and mined Haiphong harbor. B-52 bombers sorties in the South actually *increased*. An analyst of the use of armor in Vietnam noted that "almost every air cavalry unit remained in Vietnam until early 1972. These armored units provided a maximum of firepower and mobility with a minimum of US troops." By the end of 1971 armored units represented over half of the US maneuver battalions still in Vietnam (Starry 1980, 164-165). Removing infantry first lowered casualty rates at the cost of diminished COIN effectiveness (Thayer 1985, 122). After the US "shifted" to a pacification strategy, consumption of artillery rounds remained constant from June 1967 to Jun 1970, even as 200,000 troops were drawn down. (Thayer 1985, 57).

Robert Komer (who admittedly had a poor relationship with Abrams) did not believe that the new MACV commander initated a new strategy upon his relief of Westmoreland (Hunt 1995, 212), "There was no change in strategy whatsoever. In fact [Abrams] said he didn't intend to make any changes unless he saw that some were necessary. The myth of a change in strategy is a figment of media imagination; it didn't really change until we began withdrawing." (Thompson & Frizzell 1977, 79). In 1974 conference of veteran Vietnam counterinsurgents (including Komer, Robert Thompson, and Francis "Bing" West), several criticized the strategy of attrition, but only one claimed that there was much difference in the approaches of Westmoreland and Abrams (Thompson & Frizzell 1977, 79-93).

Budget and deployment figures give a sense of Nixon's priorities. Of the $21.5 billion dollars spent in fiscal year 1969, only five percent went towards pacification and civil operations. The amount of money spent for 1971 was lower, but the ratio was no different (Thayer 1985, 23). Figure 7 shows that the gap between sorties and personnel hit its maximum in the first two years of Abrams's command. This is not to blame Abrams for the strategy; he had little control over these numbers which were ultimately set by the President and Congress. Thomas Thayer (1985, 26), in charge of the SEA reports for this time period, specifically describes the American war effort of 1969-1971as, "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."

9 Democracies Will Fight More Small Wars. . . Poorly

Lyndon Johnson was convinced that the U.S public would punish an Administration that "lost" South Vietnam to communism, but was equally certain that the number of people to be deployed and lives to be lost were constrained. In response he and his subordinates actively instructed the U.S. military to fight what was widely acknowledged at the time to be an ineffective, capital- and firepower-intensive strategy to maintain the status quo. Ultimately this was neither a failure due to an apolitical public, a dysfunctional military culture nor a military doctrine divorced from grand strategy. Rather, it resulted from the average voter in a democracy getting what she wanted.

I explain this behavior with a theory starting with four major assumptions: security is a public good, voters weigh security benefits against their personal costs in taxes, conscription and casualties, the median voter gets her way in a democracy, and the existence of economic inequality. From these assumptions I derive a voter preference for a capitalized military doctrine limited by substitutability due to war type and technology. When substitutability is low, as it is against unconventional opponents, a high degree of capitalization can result in non-strategic behavior at the state level, the prosecution of wars using ill-suited doctrine because the costs remain low for this pivotal voter.

Vietnam is not an outlier; the war between Israel and Hizballah beginning on July 12, 2006 is an instructive example. 170,000 artillery shells, twice the number of the large-scale, conventional 1973 War, were fired by Israel (Kober 2008, 24). The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) initially proposed a rapid air and ground assault twenty-five miles north to the Litani River, controlling territory with firepower and small units while hunting for Katyusha launchers. Although specifically designed to minimize ground force size and casualties, the Israeli Cabinet rejected it. The Minister of Transportation objected to "exposing 40,000 troops to the Lebanese reality," a prevalent sentiment among the civilians (Kober 2008, 10-11). By July 16 the IDF Deputy Chief of Staff recommended stopping the operation: "We have exhausted the [aerial] effort; we have reached the peak; from now on we can only descend" (quoted in Kober 2008, 4). Nonetheless, having already decided to avoid a ground war, the Israeli government announced ambitious goals far beyond the release of hostages and deterring further rocket attacks (Olmert 2006, Kober 2008). A subsequent government commission describes the strategic conundrum: "declared goals were too ambitious, and it was publicly stated that fighting will continue till they are achieved. But the authorized military operations did not enable their achievement." The report acknowledges the government's bind, no "other effective military response to such missile attacks than an extensive and prolonged ground operation" existed, but this "would have a high 'cost' and did not enjoy broad support" (*Winograd interim report* 2007).[33]

Focusing on military culture as an explanation for poor democratic performance in small wars is its own form of myopia. A remarkable amount of soul-searching is currently underway in the US military intellectual world. One junior officer has attacked the hidebound nature of senior uniformed leadership. Another advocates establishing an Army Advisory Corps. Several general officers have argued for a wholesale change of Army culture. My theory gives reason to be skeptical of how much the US military will be allowed to shift by its civilian masters and the public to which they are held accountable.[34]

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[33] In the first nine months of 2007, while American personnel in Iraq surged by about twenty percent, Coalition forces launched 1,140 airstrikes, approximately four times the number for all of 2006. In Afghanistan such sorties rose from 1,770 to 2,764 (Michaels 2007).

These lessons are unlikely to be learned because the average voter tends to support an aggressive grand strategy vis-á-vis small wars and a military doctrine that fights them ineffectively. Like the democratic exceptionalist research program, this paper finds evidence that the American public weighs the political benefits of limited war against the costs of gaining them. However, exceptionalism's cost internalization mechanism makes overly optimistic predictions regarding democracies' discretion in choosing war. Cost-benefit calculations are likely to be distorted given the type of military preferred by voters. Because of the heavily capitalized nature of its armed forces, the United States is likely to fight small wars badly, but will continue to fight them all the same. For a democracies' average voter, building a military to fight these wars of choice inefficiently but often is not a bug; it is a feature.

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[34] Norms of civil-military relations may also circumscribe the critical inquiry of uniformed scholars.

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