

How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?

Alexander B. Downes

Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War

The argument that democracies are more likely than nondemocracies to win the wars they fight—particularly the wars they start—has risen to the status of near-conventional wisdom in the last decade. First articulated by David Lake in his 1992 article “Powerful Pacifists,” this thesis has become firmly associated with the work of Dan Reiter and Allan Stam. In their seminal 2002 book, *Democracies at War*, which builds on several previously published articles, Reiter and Stam found that democracies win nearly all of the wars they start, and about two-thirds of the wars in which they are targeted by other states, leading to an overall success rate of 76 percent. This record of democratic success is significantly better than the performance of dictatorships and mixed regimes.¹

Reiter and Stam offer two explanations for their findings. First, they argue that democracies win most of the wars they initiate because these states are systematically better at choosing wars they can win. Accountability to voters gives democratic leaders powerful incentives not to lose wars because defeat is likely to be punished by removal from office. The robust marketplace of ideas in democracies also gives decisionmakers access to high-quality information regarding their adversaries, thus allowing leaders to make better decisions for war or peace. Second, Reiter and Stam argue that democracies are superior war fighters, not because democracies outproduce their foes or overwhelm them with powerful coalitions, but because democratic culture produces soldiers who are more skilled and dedicated than soldiers from non-

Alexander B. Downes is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Duke University.

For constructive feedback on previous versions of this article, the author would like to thank Jonathan Caverley, Kathryn McNabb Cochran, Michael Desch, Matthew Fuhrmann, Christopher Gelpi, Sarah Kreps, Matthew Kroenig, Jason Lyall, Sebastian Rosato, Joshua Rovner, Elizabeth Saunders, John Schuessler, Todd Sechser, Jessica Weeks, seminar participants at Harvard University’s John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Security Studies Program, as well as the anonymous reviewers.

1. David A. Lake, “Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (March 1992), pp. 24–37; and Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 28–33. See also Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Randolph M. Siverson, “War and the Survival of Political Leaders: A Comparative Study of Regime Types and Political Accountability,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (December 1995), p. 852; and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), chap. 6.

International Security, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Spring 2009), pp. 9–51

© 2009 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

democratic societies.² Because democratic culture emphasizes individualism, and because democratic citizens are fighting for a popular government, soldiers from democracies are more likely to take the initiative, exhibit better leadership, and fight with higher morale on the battlefield than soldiers from repressive societies.

Reiter and Stam test these selection effects and war-fighting arguments using quantitative methods. In an analysis of interstate war outcomes from 1816 to 1990, for example, they find that war initiators and targets are significantly more likely to prevail as they become more democratic. Using a data set of battles in wars from 1800 to 1982, Reiter and Stam also find that soldiers from democracies exhibit greater initiative and leadership in battle, but not necessarily higher morale.

Although many scholars have criticized Reiter and Stam's arguments and findings,³ few have challenged the data analysis of interstate war outcomes that constitutes the chief piece of evidence for their argument that democracies win wars more frequently than autocracies.⁴ In this article, I reexamine the quantitative evidence on war outcomes that Reiter and Stam offer in support of their arguments. I begin by laying out in greater detail the selection effects and war-fighting theories of democratic effectiveness, and briefly summarize some of the main criticisms that have been leveled against these arguments.

In the next section, I reanalyze Reiter and Stam's data on war outcomes and show that their statistical results are not robust. I suggest two alterations to the analysis. First, Reiter and Stam code all states that do not initiate wars as targets even when these states joined the war later on the initiator's side. In actu-

2. For the democratic power argument, see Lake, "Powerful Pacifists"; and Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*, pp. 232–236, 257–258. Bueno de Mesquita and colleagues also argue that democracies start wars only if they are "near certain of victory" (p. 240).

3. Michael C. Desch, "Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters," *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Fall 2002), pp. 5–47; Michael C. Desch, "Democracy and Victory: Fair Fights or Food Fights?" *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003), pp. 180–194; Michael C. Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness: The Fallacy of Democratic Triumphalism* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Ajin Choi, "The Power of Democratic Cooperation," *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003), pp. 142–153; Ajin Choi, "Democratic Synergy and Victory in War, 1816–1992," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (September 2004), pp. 663–682; Risa A. Brooks, "Making Military Might: Why Do States Fail and Succeed? A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Fall 2003), pp. 149–191; Stephen Biddle and Stephen Long, "Democracy and Military Effectiveness: A Deeper Look," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (August 2004), pp. 525–546; and Jasen J. Castillo, "The Will to Fight: National Cohesion and Military Staying Power," unpublished manuscript, Texas A & M University, July 2008.

4. The exceptions are Desch, "Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters"; Desch, "Democracy and Victory: Fair Fights or Food Fights?"; and Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness*. I discuss Desch's critique further below.

ality there are three categories of states: initiators, targets, and joiners. I code a variable for war joiners and add it to the analysis. Second, Reiter and Stam exclude draws from their analysis of war initiation and victory with little justification given that costly stalemates can threaten the tenure of democratic leaders. I therefore add wars that ended in draws to the data set. I use ordered probit and multinomial logit models on a dependent variable consisting of wins, draws, and losses to show that democracies of all types—initiators, targets, and joiners—are not significantly more likely to win wars.

I then analyze the relationship between democracy and victory from another angle to provide a more complete understanding of how democratic politics might affect decisions to go to war in ways less positive than those outlined in the selection effects argument. I do so through an in-depth case study of the Johnson administration's decision to begin bombing North Vietnam in 1965 and then to send large numbers of U.S. ground troops into action in South Vietnam later that year. Vietnam is an anomaly for the selection effects argument in two ways. First, the United States initiated the interstate phase of the war, but at best emerged from Vietnam in 1973 with a costly draw; others code the war as a loss for the United States.⁵ Second, President Lyndon Johnson and his key subordinates chose to fight in Vietnam even though they understood that the prospects for a quick and decisive victory were slim. The selection effects argument, however, implies that because democratic leaders are cautious in selecting only those wars they are highly likely to win, democratic elites who choose to initiate or enter wars should be confident of victory.

The case study investigates this anomalous case for selection effects and the puzzle of U.S. escalation to develop new theories of how democracy affects leaders' choices to go to war.⁶ First, I briefly make the case for coding the United States as either the initiator or a joiner of the Vietnam War. Although Reiter and Stam code the Vietnam War as being initiated by North Vietnam, in fact the United States was the first state to use interstate force when it began the bombing of North Vietnam in February 1965.⁷ More important, Vietnam was a war of choice for the United States, meaning that the war did "not result

5. Reiter and Stam code the war as a draw; the Correlates of War data set codes it as a defeat for the United States. See Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 56; and Correlates of War Interstate War Data, ver. 3.0, <http://www.correlatesofwar.org>.

6. On the use of case studies for this purpose, see Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 20–21, 111–115.

7. See, for example, the Correlates of War (COW) data set.

from an overt, imminent, or existential threat to a state's survival."⁸ The choice to intervene in Vietnam, in other words, was the same type of decision as the choice to initiate war, and thus should be governed by the same factors highlighted in the selection effects argument.

Second, I document the prevailing pessimism about the likelihood of victory in Vietnam among the key decisionmakers in Johnson's administration in 1964 and 1965. These men, including the president himself, were deeply pessimistic about the military and political situation in South Vietnam. Moreover, they were not optimistic that bombing the North or introducing U.S. ground troops in the South would coerce Hanoi to stop supporting its Vietcong allies or allow U.S. and South Vietnamese forces to defeat the insurgency. Civilian and military officials alike warned that the war would require several years and hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops with no guarantee of victory. Despite this widespread pessimism in Washington, the president chose to take the United States into Vietnam.

Third, I argue that democratic politics was an important factor in explaining why Johnson decided to fight in Vietnam even though victory appeared unlikely. The case suggests that under certain circumstances democratic processes can compel leaders to embark on wars even when the prospects of winning are uncertain. In Vietnam, for example, President Johnson appeared to believe that he had more to lose from not fighting than from entering a costly and protracted war in Southeast Asia. Johnson judged that his treasured domestic reform agenda, the Great Society, would be killed if he did not stand firm and prevent the "loss" of South Vietnam. Leaders of democracies may thus face pressure to fight abroad to protect their legislative agendas or programs at home. The recent case of Iraq suggests a second mechanism whereby democracy can lead to risky war choices: it may prompt leaders to downplay or minimize the potential costs of conflict to obtain public consent for wars they want to fight for other reasons. Leaders of democracies have incentives not to plan for the postwar era if the costs of regime change, occupation, and nation building are potentially high because divulging those costs to the people beforehand might dampen public ardor for war. Failing to plan for the day after the initial victory, however, increases the likelihood that things will go wrong later and that democracies will blunder into costly quagmires.

8. Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Wars of Choice: Leadership, Threat Perception, and Military Intervention," unpublished manuscript, George Washington University, October 2008, p. 1 n. 1.

The article concludes that more research is necessary not only to parse the varied effects of democracy on military effectiveness, but also to investigate alternative factors that may provide superior explanations for military outcomes.

Selection Effects, War Fighting, and Democratic Victory

This section sketches the selection effects and war-fighting arguments that together make up the theory of democratic victory in war.

SELECTION EFFECTS

The selection effects argument posits that democracies are better than nondemocracies at selecting winnable wars. Two facets of democratic institutions provide the reason: electoral accountability and the marketplace of ideas. The first mechanism, electoral accountability, focuses on the political consequences of policy failure. In democracies, it is easier to remove leaders than in nondemocracies: people simply have to go to the polls and cast their votes for a competing candidate in sufficient numbers, and the incumbent is forced out of office. In autocracies, by contrast, it typically takes a violent coup, revolt, or rebellion to oust unpopular leaders because elections are either rigged or nonexistent.

Moreover, the argument maintains that losing a war is a major policy disappointment that is likely to turn the public against the leader responsible. Defeat is costly not only in money expended but also in human terms, namely the nation's sons and daughters whose lives are lost in a failed cause. National pride may also suffer depending on the depth of the humiliation caused by the adversary. Public anger is likely to be more intense if the leader who lost the war is also the one who started it.

This combination of ease of removal in democracies and the likelihood that policy failure—in the form of losing the war—will turn the public against the leader and increase the likelihood that he or she will suffer defeat in the next election induces a healthy dose of caution in democratic elites. As Reiter and Stam put it, "Because democratic executives know they risk ouster if they lead their state to defeat, they will be especially unwilling to launch risky military ventures. In contrast, autocratic leaders know that defeat in war is unlikely to threaten their hold on power. As a result, they will be more willing to initiate risky wars that democracies avoid. . . . Simply put, compared to other kinds of states, democracies require a higher confidence of victory before they are will-

ing to launch a war. . . . The prediction that follows is that democracies are especially likely to win wars that they initiate.”⁹

The second causal mechanism in the selection effects argument posits that democratic leaders are able to make better decisions because they have access to high-quality information. Democratic policymakers’ “estimates of the probability of winning,” in other words, “are more accurate representations of their actual probabilities of victory.”¹⁰ The main reason for this information advantage is the freewheeling, competitive marketplace of ideas in democracies. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press, for example, permit the expression of a multiplicity of voices and viewpoints on foreign policy, which in turn leads to better policymaking. “The proposition that the vigorous discussion of alternatives and open dissemination of information in democratic systems produce better decisions,” write Reiter and Stam, “is an idea at the core of political liberalism.” An energetic press also limits the ability of the government to misrepresent the facts or purvey “unfounded, mendacious, or self-serving foreign policy arguments,” as does the presence of opposition parties hoping to displace the current regime and gain power for themselves.¹¹ The virtues of this public discussion are augmented by the unvarnished and outstanding military advice that policymakers receive from a professional and meritocratic officer corps.¹² The marketplace of ideas thus improves the overall quality of information available, encourages healthy debate among a variety of alternatives, and places limits on political actors’ ability to mislead the public.

WAR FIGHTING

The second part of Reiter and Stam’s theory contends that democracies are superior war fighters once engaged in conflict. Some scholars argue that democracies prevail because they are wealthier than autocracies and mobilize a greater share of that wealth in wartime.¹³ Others maintain that democracies are more likely to come to each other’s defense—thereby forming overwhelm-

9. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 20.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24. Militaries in authoritarian states, by contrast, sometimes represent the greatest threat to the survival of the regime and are thus kept weak and staffed by incompetent (but loyal) officers. This practice undermines both the quality of military advice and the army’s ability to fight. See, for example, Stephen Biddle and Robert Zirkle, “Technology, Civil-Military Relations, and Warfare in the Developing World,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (June 1996), pp. 174, 179–180.

13. Lake, “Powerful Pacifists”; and Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*.

ing countercoalitions—and are also better able to cooperate in prosecuting the war.¹⁴ Reiter and Stam reject these claims and advance an alternative explanation for democratic battlefield success. They put forward three related propositions regarding the influence of democracy on tactical military effectiveness. First, the popular nature of democratic governments engenders trust, loyalty, and consent among soldiers, which translates into an army that fights with higher morale than an autocratic army. Second, the emphasis on individual rights and freedoms in liberal democracies produces soldiers willing to take the initiative in battle. Third, amicable civil-military relations in democracies mean that the cream rises to the top in democratic militaries rather than incompetent regime loyalists as in many autocracies. Because of this meritocratic system, soldiers from democracies display better leadership skills in battle.¹⁵

EVIDENCE

Reiter and Stam test their arguments using quantitative methods. Examining a data set of interstate wars between 1816 and 1990, they find that democracies won 93 percent of the wars they started, compared with 60 percent for dictatorships and 58 percent for mixed regimes. Democratic targets also won a majority of their wars (63 percent), although at a lower rate than democratic initiators, but still higher than other regime types (34 percent for dictatorships and 40 percent for oligarchies). In a multivariate probit model controlling for traditional variables such as relative material capabilities, material contributions from allies, terrain, and choice of military strategy, both democratic initiators and democratic targets correlate positively and significantly with victory. Reiter and Stam also perform a separate analysis on a sample of battles taken from the Historical Evaluation and Research Organization (HERO) data set. They find that although democracy is not associated with higher morale, democratic armies did display greater levels of initiative and leadership in battle.¹⁶

Reevaluating the Statistical Evidence for Democracy and Victory

A measure of how tremendously influential Reiter and Stam's work has been in the field is the substantial amount of criticism it has elicited. Several critics

14. Lake, "Powerful Pacifists"; and Choi, "Democratic Synergy and Victory in War."

15. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, pp. 60–71. Reiter and Stam also argue that because democracies do not abuse enemy prisoners of war, enemy soldiers are more willing to surrender to democratic armies rather than fight to the death. They do not test this argument, however.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 45, 78–81.

of the selection effects argument, for example, cite evidence from the George W. Bush administration's decision to attack Iraq in 2003 to argue that the democratic marketplace of ideas does not operate as theorized and is incapable of providing much of a constraint on powerful executives.¹⁷ Others target the electoral accountability mechanism, arguing that authoritarian leaders may actually be more cautious about going to war than democrats because autocrats who lose wars are sometimes exiled or killed, whereas democrats may be removed from office but are rarely punished.¹⁸ Indeed, one statistical study finds no evidence that defeat in crisis or war raises democratic leaders' risk of losing office, or that prevailing in such conflicts lowers the risk of removal.¹⁹ Case studies have also turned up tepid support for electoral accountability, finding instead that democratic leaders often keep their own counsel and initiate wars that lack broad public support.²⁰

Scholars have also questioned the arguments and evidence for the war-fighting explanation of democratic victory. Some contend that alternative explanations—such as gross imbalances of power or alliances with nondemocratic states in which the autocracy made up the bulk of the alliance's military power—account for many democratic victories. Once these “unfair fights” are removed, democracies perform only slightly above average.²¹ Others point out that the HERO data set used by Reiter and Stam in their analysis of battlefield

17. Chaim Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War,” *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Summer 2004), pp. 5–48; Jon Western, “The War over Iraq: Selling War to the American Public,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (January 2005), pp. 106–139; and Jane Kellest Cramer, “Militarized Patriotism: Why the U.S. Marketplace of Ideas Failed before the Iraq War,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (July 2007), pp. 489–524.

18. Desch, “Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters,” pp. 9–16. See also H.E. Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000). For an argument that leaders in certain types of autocracies are just as accountable domestically as leaders in democracies, see Jessica L. Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve,” *International Organization*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (Winter 2008), pp. 35–64.

19. Giacomo Chiozza and H.E. Goemans, “International Conflict and the Tenure of Leaders: Is War Still *Ex Post* Inefficient?” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (July 2004), p. 613.

20. Desch, “Democracy and Victory: Fair Fights or Food Fights?” pp. 189–192; and Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness*, pp. 50–51, 72–76, 97–104.

21. Desch, “Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters,” pp. 9–16. Desch deemed 54 of the 75 wars in Reiter and Stam's data set to be unfair fights. Of the 21 remaining conflicts, he credited the more democratic side with 12 wins and 9 losses for a winning record of 57 percent. This move sparked a serious methodological dispute regarding the legitimacy of dropping cases versus using control variables. See David A. Lake, “Fair Fights? Evaluating Theories of Democracy and Victory”; Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, “Understanding Victory: Why Political Institutions Matter”; and Desch, “Democracy and Victory: Fair Fights or Food Fights?” all in *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003), pp. 154–167, 168–179, and 180–194, respectively.

effectiveness is plagued by measurement error and dubious intercoder reliability, and that the data set's leadership, initiative, and morale variables rely on subjective, unverifiable judgments rather than hard data.²² A third critique suggests that the relationship between democracy and victory is spurious: wealthy countries are more likely to become democratic, and wealth also explains war outcomes.²³

Although many of these critiques raise valid issues and warrant further research, few of them directly confront Reiter and Stam's large-*n* evidence that democratic war initiators and targets are significantly more likely to prevail. In this section, therefore, I revisit Reiter and Stam's core statistical analysis. Although others have criticized their coding of particular war initiators or outcomes and questioned their approach of using regression analysis with control variables—and I share some of these concerns—coding issues are not the main basis of my critique. Nor do I reject Reiter and Stam's multivariate regression approach. Rather, I argue that the statistical significance of their results is critically affected by two debatable decisions: the choice to code all noninitiators of wars as targets, and the decision to omit wars that ended in draws. I reanalyze their data after dividing states into initiators, targets, and joiners, and adding draws to the data set.²⁴ After making these changes, I find that democratic initiators, targets, and joiners are not significantly more likely to win wars. The fragility of the statistical evidence to reasonable alternative coding and modeling choices raises doubts about the robustness of the finding that democracies are better at choosing and fighting wars.

22. Desch, "Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters," pp. 39–40. Brooks also notes that the initiative variable in HERO—which Reiter and Stam use as an indicator of individual battlefield initiative—actually codes which side attacked first. Brooks, "Making Military Might," pp. 181–182.

23. Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness*, pp. 171–173. Similarly, Biddle and Long find that after controlling for factors such as amicable civil-military relations and human capital, democracy actually reduces battlefield effectiveness. Biddle and Long, "Democracy and Military Effectiveness." Several recent studies also find that democracy makes no difference or actually reduces the likelihood of victory in counterinsurgency wars. See Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, "Rage against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars," *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (January 2009), pp. 67–106; Jason Lyall, "Do Democracies Make Inferior Counterinsurgents? Reassessing Democracy's Impact on War Outcomes and Duration," *International Organization* (forthcoming); and Jonathan D. Caverley, "Democracies Will Continue to Fight Small Wars . . . Poorly," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, New York, February 2009, p. 31.

24. Reiter and Stam report that adding draws did not much change the results. They also recoded as initiators states that joined wars later, reporting that this weakened the results. They do not appear to have tested these two changes simultaneously, however. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 213 n. 62, and p. 40.

REITER AND STAM'S APPROACH

Reiter and Stam gathered data on war outcomes for interstate wars occurring between 1816 and 1990. Arguing that their hypotheses “relate only to the likelihood of victory,” Reiter and Stam dropped all conflicts that ended in draws, leaving 197 cases in the data set.²⁵ The authors then coded each belligerent’s level of democracy as adjudicated by the widely used Polity index, a 21-point scale normalized around zero (ranging from –10 to +10), and whether that belligerent initiated the war or was a target. The coding of initiation relies primarily on the Correlates of War (COW) project, which defines a war initiator as the first state to use force in an interstate dispute that resulted in at least 1,000 battle deaths.²⁶ Reiter and Stam note two instances in which they changed COW’s initiation coding: the Crimean War (1853–56, initiator changed from Turkey to Russia) and the First Balkan War (1912–13, changed to include as initiators all three members of the Balkan League, which declared war simultaneously).²⁷ All states that are not coded as war initiators are coded as targets. This includes states that were actually attacked by the initiator, as well as states that joined the war later on either side, including as allies of the initiator. Britain and France, for example, are coded as targets in the Crimean War even though they joined the conflict a year after it started. Turkey is also coded as a target in the eastern theater of World War I despite having joined the side of the states Reiter and Stam coded as the war’s initiators, Germany and Austria. Reiter and Stam also coded several other variables that should affect the likelihood of victory, including states’ relative power and the power of their allies, the quality of their troops, the two sides’ military strategies, and the roughness of the terrain over which the war was fought.

A pair of interaction terms—between states’ Polity scores and war initiation, on the one hand, and Polity score and war target, on the other—tests Reiter and Stam’s selection effects and war-fighting arguments. Each of these terms is

25. *Ibid.*, p. 39. Reiter and Stam “coded war outcomes . . . based on whether a state achieved its immediate military aims.” By contrast, wars that “end in what is essentially the prewar status quo” are considered draws. Reiter and Stam, “Understanding Victory,” p. 173; and Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 211 n. 41.

26. This is a rather narrow conception of war initiation, and it is unclear if it always captures the logic of the selection effects argument, which is about how wisely states choose war as a policy option. Using force first in a dispute is not always a good indicator of whether a government chose to go to war, or had war thrust upon it by the choice of another state.

27. Reiter and Stam also changed COW’s coding of the initiator of the Russo-Polish War (1919–20), Changkufeng (1938), and Vietnam (1965–73); did not code an initiator in the Vietnamese-Cambodian War (1975–79); and divided the Yom Kippur War (1973) into two parts, crediting Israel with two victories. Reiter and Stam changed a few war outcome codings as well, but because restoring them to their original values does not affect the results, I defer discussion of these cases to an online appendix, <http://www.duke.edu/~downes>.

positive and significant in a probit regression controlling for other determinants of victory, signifying that both initiators and targets become more likely to win as they become increasingly democratic. I was able to replicate Reiter and Stam's main model from *Democracies at War*; the results appear in model 1 of table 1.²⁸ The coefficients and standard errors for all variables are nearly identical to those reported in the book.²⁹

Previous appraisals of Reiter and Stam's work have criticized some of their codings of war initiation and outcomes. Michael Desch, for example, contends that Reiter and Stam misidentify the initiator in three wars—the Boxer Rebellion (1900), the Hungarian War (1919), and World War II in Europe (1940–45), initiated by autocracies rather than democracies—and mistakenly code the outcome in another two—Israeli draws rather than victories in the War of Attrition (1969–70) and the First Lebanon War (1982).³⁰ Making these suggested coding changes and rerunning the analysis renders the Polity \times target interaction statistically insignificant, as shown in model 2, but does not alter Reiter and Stam's finding that war initiators are more likely to win as they become more democratic. The utility of this critique is limited, however, because it does not address the more fundamental issues in Reiter and Stam's analysis, that is, their amalgamation of war joiners and war targets and their decision to exclude an entire class of war outcomes. I take up these issues below.³¹

28. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 45, table 2.2, model 4. Replication data are available at <http://dvn.iq.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/stam>.

29. The significance levels, however, differ slightly. The p -value for democratic targets, for example, is only 0.02, not <0.01 as stated in the text. Similarly, the p -value for war initiator is 0.008, rather than <0.001 .

30. Desch, "Democracy and Victory: Fair Fights or Food Fights?" p. 187; and Desch, "Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters," p. 14. Desch also credits Israel with only one victory in the Yom Kippur War. Desch, "Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters," p. 16. Because Reiter and Stam exclude draws, Desch's three suggested outcome changes leave 192 cases in the analysis.

31. That said, I find some of Reiter and Stam's changes to the COW initiation and war outcome codings to be unconvincing. Clearly Britain and the United States did not initiate World War II in Europe in 1940, for example. I code Germany and Italy as initiators. Even if the two democracies had started the war, this would not support the selection effects argument because they could not have been optimistic in 1940 about the war's eventual outcome. Other changes made by Reiter and Stam that I return to their original values include the United States as the initiator of the Vietnam War; Vietnam as the initiator of the war with Cambodia in 1975; a single war between Israel and the Arab states in 1973; and a draw (rather than an Israeli win) in the War of Attrition. That said, I leave Reiter and Stam's coding of the Vietnam War as a draw unchanged. Coding the war as a loss for the United States and South Vietnam (as the COW data set does) further weakens the result reported below for democratic initiators.

Table 1. Probit and Ordered Probit Models of War Outcomes

	Model 1 Reiter and Stam Replication (probit, dependent variable is win/lose) †	Model 2 Reiter and Stam's Model with Desch's Suggested Changes (probit, dependent variable is win/lose) ‡	Model 3 Tripartite Coding of Belligerents, Tripartite Coding of War Outcomes (ordered probit, dependent variable is win/ draw/lose)
Polity (−10 to +10) × Initiation	0.068** (0.030)	0.082*** (0.031)	—
Polity (−10 to +10) × Target	0.064** (0.028)	0.042 (0.030)	—
Polity (1 to 21)	—	—	0.030 (0.045)
Initiation	0.91*** (0.34)	1.00** (0.49)	0.37 (0.56)
Target	—	—	−0.16 (0.60)
Polity (1 to 21) × Initiation	—	—	−0.009 (0.047)
Polity (1 to 21) × Target	—	—	−0.008 (0.048)
Relative capabilities	3.73*** (0.52)	3.99*** (0.79)	2.35*** (0.49)
Alliance contribution	4.72*** (0.68)	4.99*** (1.09)	3.00*** (0.74)
Quality ratio	0.05 (0.03)	0.06 (0.04)	0.04* (0.02)
Terrain	−10.93*** (2.94)	−13.11*** (3.92)	−1.89* (1.13)
Strategy × Terrain	3.56*** (0.97)	4.17*** (1.30)	0.50 (0.36)
Strategy 1	7.24** (2.89)	8.80** (3.73)	−0.47 (1.30)
Strategy 2	3.48* (1.99)	3.81 (2.70)	−2.55*** (0.88)
Strategy 3	3.36** (1.43)	4.06** (1.83)	−0.21 (0.65)
Strategy 4	3.07** (1.25)	3.43** (1.46)	1.11 (0.73)
Constant	−5.52*** (1.70)	−6.20*** (2.18)	—

Table 1. (continued)

<i>N</i>	197	192	233
Log Pseudo-LL	-64.89	-62.78	-168.46
Wald Chi ²	96.62***	76.26***	95.89***

Robust standard errors in parentheses (model 1; clustered on each war, models 2–3).

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

† Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), table 2.2, model 4.

‡ Initiator changed to China in the Boxer Rebellion, Hungary in the Hungarian War, and Germany and Italy in World War II in Europe; outcome of the War of Attrition and First Lebanon War changed from Israeli victories to draws (and thus dropped from the analysis, which includes only wins and losses); and Israel credited with only one win in the Yom Kippur War. Michael C. Desch, "Democracy and Victory: Fair Fights or Food Fights?" *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003), p. 187; and Michael C. Desch, "Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters," *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Fall 2002), p. 14.

THE MISSING WAR JOINERS

As described above, Reiter and Stam use two interaction terms to test their democracy arguments: the first multiplies states' Polity scores by war initiator, and the second does the same for Polity and war target. Puzzlingly, Reiter and Stam equate "targets" with "noninitiators" even when a state later joined a war on the initiator's side. The way they code the variable conflates actual targets with states that join wars after they have started.

To take into account this third category, I created a variable called "war joiners" coded 1 if a state entered a war after it began and did not have an alliance or defense pact with the side it joined.³² Twenty-five states fall into this category. "War initiators," by contrast, are coded as those states that either attacked first or had a preexisting alliance with the attacker and entered the war within one week.³³ Many states, for example, such as Austria in the Second Schleswig-Holstein War (1864), are listed in the COW data set as entering a war on the same date as the "initiator" (in this case, Prussia) but are not coded

32. An alternative way to code joiners would be to define them as states that enter a war after a certain amount of time has passed. I employ a purely temporal definition of belligerency status as a robustness check below.

33. In practice, states tend to enter wars within a few days or wait at least several months, meaning that the one-week cutoff is not sensitive to minor changes. I chose one week because states that wait longer than a few days to enter a conflict cannot reasonably be described as initiators or targets.

as initiators by COW or Reiter and Stam. Austria and Prussia, however, concluded an alliance on January 16, 1864, to enforce the Treaty of London, which granted Schleswig and Holstein autonomy within Denmark, and went to war together two weeks later.³⁴ This is also the case for many states that enter wars within a few days of the conflict's onset. Italy in the Austro-Prussian War (1866) and Britain and France in the Sinai/Suez War (1956), for instance, concluded prewar alliances with the technical initiators of these conflicts (Prussia and Israel, respectively). In the Suez case, the short delay in the Anglo-French attack was actually part of the agreed plan.³⁵ In all cases, therefore, formal allies of the state that attacked first which entered the war within seven days are coded as initiators.³⁶ "War targets," finally, consist of states that are the object of an attack by the war initiator(s) at the outset of the conflict or countries that have an alliance with the victim state and join the war within a week. A choice to attack a state that is part of an alliance ultimately accepts the risk that the allies will fight on behalf of their partner, and thus such allies should also be considered targets.

To clarify these categories, consider World War I in the western theater. Germany (allied with Austria) attacked France to initiate the conflict. Germany and Austria are coded as initiators and France as a target. Several other states, though, including Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, and the United States were not allied with either the initiators or the targets when the war started, and did not join the war for several months or years. I code these states as joiners. Italy and Romania are also coded as joiners: although members of the Triple Alliance, these states did not go to war in 1914, instead choosing to join the Entente in 1915 and 1916, respectively. The trickiest case is Britain, which—although it was a member of the Triple Entente and entered the war within a few days—never clearly committed to fight on France's behalf in case of a German attack. I nevertheless code Britain as a target by virtue of its alliance membership.³⁷

34. A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 142–145. Taylor's account also indicates that the two powers attacked at the same time: "The two Great Powers then declared that they would act alone; on 1 February their forces crossed the frontier into Sleswick" (p. 146).

35. Jack S. Levy and Joseph R. Gochal, "Democracy and Preventive War: Israel and the 1956 Sinai Campaign," *Security Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Winter 2001/02), p. 38.

36. The COW initiator variable, which Reiter and Stam follow, is supposedly coded as the first state(s) to use force. Several cases in the COW data set and in *Democracies at War*, however, appear to be coded on the basis of joint declarations of war rather than first uses of force, including the allies in the Boxer Rebellion, the First Balkan War, the eastern and western theaters of World War I, the Hungarian War, and the Palestine War. My coding thus simply applies this rule consistently rather than haphazardly.

37. The details of the case largely support coding Britain as a joiner rather than as a target. Britain's Triple Entente membership did not include a commitment to go to war if France (or Russia)

THE MISSING DRAWS

A second debatable choice in Reiter and Stam's analysis concerns their treatment of draws. In their investigation of democracy, war initiation, and victory, Reiter and Stam contend that their hypotheses bear only on the likelihood of winning, and thus they omit draws. Later in their book, they perform a separate analysis that includes draws where they find that democracies settle for stalemates more quickly than autocracies in wartime.³⁸

The omission of draws from the analysis of war initiation and victory, however, is questionable. The selection effects argument stipulates that democratic leaders, fearing possible removal from office for initiating costly or losing wars, choose to start only those wars they think they can win. Given this logic, the justification for excluding draws is tenuous because all outcomes that are not victories are potentially damaging to the incumbent's chances of retaining office. Excluding draws would perhaps be warranted if democratic leaders were never punished for settling for these outcomes, but history demonstrates otherwise. Harry Truman, for example, was politically crippled by the stalemate in Korea and gave up on seeking another term as president because he had little chance of winning re-election. Fifteen years later Lyndon Johnson—faced with plummeting support for the war in Vietnam following the Tet Offensive—similarly ended his bid for another term in office. In between these two U.S. cases, British Prime Minister Anthony Eden resigned shortly after Soviet and American pressure forced him to cut short his joint attack with France and Israel on Egypt after Gamal Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. Finally, although George W. Bush narrowly managed to defeat a strong challenge from Senator John Kerry in 2004, the president's sky-high approval ratings following the September 11 terrorist attacks plunged when the easy ouster of Saddam Hussein in 2003 gave way to a protracted Sunni insurgency in Iraq. In short, democratic leaders are frequently punished for draws in the same way they are punished for losses. According to the selection effects logic, therefore, democracies should avoid wars they foresee may become protracted stalemates, just as they should shun wars they fear they may lose.³⁹

was attacked by Germany. The British Cabinet had rejected a more formal alliance in June 1914, similarly rejected a commitment to defend France in July, and engaged in a fierce debate over whether to enter the war when it broke out. Changing the coding of Britain to a joiner does not substantially change any of the results shown below.

38. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, pp. 164–192. This analysis, it should be noted, includes many of the same variables that Reiter and Stam earlier argued applied only to the likelihood of victory, such as regime type, war initiation, strategy, terrain, and the balance of material capabilities.

39. For a similar approach to dealing with draws, see Jessica L. Weeks, "Leaders, Accountability, and Foreign Policy in Non-Democracies," Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 2008, pp. 17–26;

CHANGES TO THE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Introducing a third category of belligerency and war outcomes complicates the statistical analysis, necessitating several changes to Reiter and Stam's model. First, additional variables and interaction terms must be added to the equation. Because all states for Reiter and Stam were either initiators or targets, they were able to omit the Polity term from their regressions (including it results in multicollinearity). To capture the effects of change in democracy on likelihood of victory for initiators and targets, they simply included (in addition to a dummy variable for war initiator) two interaction terms: Polity \times initiator and Polity \times target. With three categories of states, however, five terms are needed to capture all the relevant effects: β_1 Polity, β_2 initiator, β_3 target, β_4 Polity \times initiator, and β_5 Polity \times target.⁴⁰ β_1 represents the effect of a one-unit increase in Polity score when the state is not an initiator or a target (i.e., it is a joiner). The other terms in the equation have no substantive meaning in isolation, but must be interpreted together. β_1 , β_2 , and β_4 in combination determine the effect of a one-unit increase in Polity for war initiators; β_1 , β_3 , and β_5 do the same for war targets.

Because the effects and significance of interaction terms are not immediately obvious from examining coefficients, the substantive impact of these variables must be examined over the range of values they may plausibly take.⁴¹ In this case, given that states that score at both extremes of the Polity index (full autocracies and full democracies) are present in the data set, it is necessary to examine the effect of level of democracy and type of belligerent, as the former varies from its lowest to highest value. To be able to interpret the interaction terms, however, the Polity scores need to be rescaled so that they are not symmetrical around zero. In this case, I have added 11 to each state's Polity score, such that the variable now ranges between 1 and 21.⁴²

and Lyall and Wilson, "Rage against the Machines." One might argue that leaders in these cases simply got it wrong: information available to them *ex ante* pointed toward an easy victory, but unforeseeable events that occurred later resulted in a reversal of fortune. This is not true, however, for Korea and Vietnam. Indeed, even Reiter and Stam conclude with regard to Vietnam that "the outlook for the conflict was not promising" in the early stages and that "the American leadership did not in 1965 foresee an imminent victory." See Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, pp. 173, 174.

40. Methodologists have shown that it is imperative to include all constituent variables when using interaction terms. Thomas Brambor, William Roberts Clark, and Matt Golder, "Understanding Interaction Models: Improving Empirical Analyses," *Political Analysis*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Winter 2006), pp. 66–69; and Bear F. Braumoeller, "Hypothesis Testing and Multiplicative Interaction Terms," *International Organization*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (Fall 2004), p. 809.

41. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, pp. 52–57.

42. Many of the variables used in Reiter and Stam's analysis were originally coded for this earlier book. Allan C. Stam III, *Win, Lose, or Draw: Domestic Politics and the Crucible of War* (Ann Arbor:

Second, to test whether the omission of draws has any influence on Reiter and Stam's finding that democracies are more likely to win in war, I added to the data set those wars that Reiter and Stam coded as ending in draws. There were sixteen draws involving thirty-seven states.⁴³ Owing to a missing Polity score for India in the First Kashmir War (1947–48), these additions result in a total of 233 cases in the new data set. I then obtained data for the relevant independent variables for these cases from Stam's *Win, Lose, or Draw* data set.⁴⁴

Third, because the dependent variable is now trichotomous, I use an ordered probit model to estimate the effects of the independent variables on war outcomes (win = 2, draw = 1, loss = 0). This model is specifically designed for dependent variables where outcomes are clearly ordered and ranked (e.g., disagree, agree, strongly agree), but the distances between the categories are unclear.⁴⁵ An ordered model is justified in this case because the underlying variable—military effectiveness—is continuous, and these three outcomes—win, draw, or lose—represent ranked and ordered levels of military proficiency.

STATISTICAL RESULTS

Model 3 in table 1 shows the results of an ordered probit regression of war outcomes. Included are the five variables needed to test the joint effects of democracy and war initiator/target/joiner, as well as the same slate of control variables used by Reiter and Stam in *Democracies at War*: relative power, allies' contribution, troop quality, difficulty of terrain, four combinations of attacker/defender military strategy, and an interaction between strategy and terrain.⁴⁶ The coefficients for the key variables are quite different from Reiter and Stam's results in model 1, but this is not very informative given the presence of multiple interaction terms in the model. The real difference in the results becomes apparent only when the substantive effects for regime type on different war outcomes are shown graphically. Figures 1, 2, and 3 plot the marginal effects of

University of Michigan Press, 1996). The data are available at <http://dvn.iq.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/stam>.

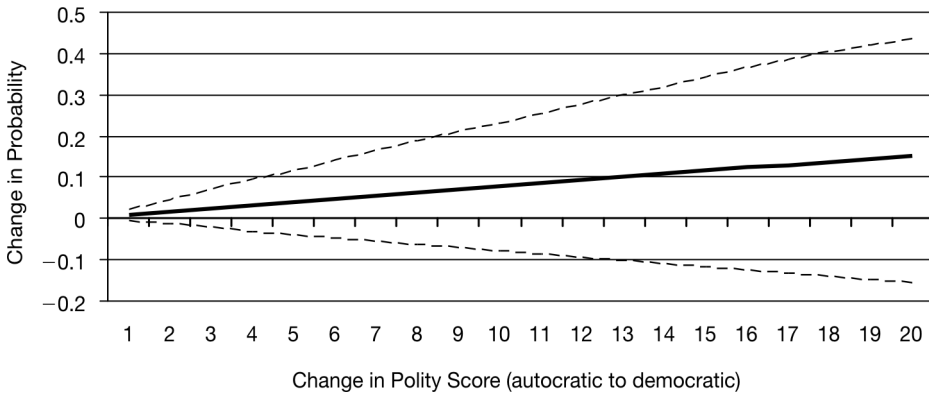
43. J. Scott Long, *Regression Models for Categorical and Limited Dependent Variables* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1997), p. 114.

44. Interaction terms cannot be interpreted as marginal effects. Brambor, Clark, and Golder, "Understanding Interaction Models," pp. 71–73.

45. I calculate robust standard errors clustered on each war on the presumption that observations within a war are correlated with each other, but observations across different wars are not. Reiter and Stam also used robust standard errors but do not seem to have clustered them on each war.

46. For detailed descriptions of these variables, see Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, pp. 41–44.

Figure 1. Marginal Effect of Change in Democracy on Probability of Victory for War Initiators (ordered probit, with 95 percent confidence interval; dependent variable = win/draw/lose)



changes in democracy on the likelihood of victory for war initiators, targets, and joiners.⁴⁷ Figure 1, for example, shows that moving from the most autocratic to the most democratic regime type increases the likelihood of an initiator winning by about 15 percent. The problem is that the 95 percent confidence interval for this effect includes zero across its entire range, indicating that it is not statistically significant. Figures 2 and 3 similarly demonstrate that as war targets and joiners become increasingly democratic, they become more likely to win (16 and 22 percent, respectively), but the wide confidence intervals show that these estimates are also statistically insignificant. Table 2 summarizes the marginal effects of changing Polity from least to most democratic on the likelihood of victory, draws, and defeat for war initiators, targets, and joiners, with the accompanying 95 and 90 percent confidence intervals. Although in each case the effect is in the expected direction—increasing democracy makes victory more likely and lowers the probability of defeat (the effect on draws is negative but minimal)—in no instance is it statistically significant. In other words, in statistical terms the substantive effects of democracy are indistinguishable from zero, meaning one cannot reject the null hypothesis that de-

47. Marginal effects were calculated using CLARIFY with continuous variables set to their means and binary variables set to their modes. Michael Tomz, Jason Wittenberg, and Gary King, *CLARIFY: Software for Interpreting and Presenting Statistical Results*, ver. 2.1, <http://gking.harvard.edu/stats.shtml>.

Figure 2. Marginal Effect of Change in Democracy on Probability of Victory for War Targets (ordered probit, with 95 percent confidence interval; dependent variable = win/draw/lose)

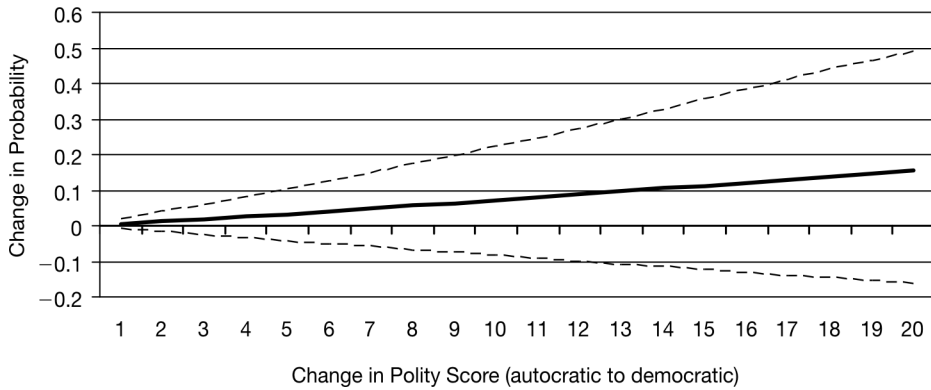


Figure 3. Marginal Effect of Change in Democracy on Probability of Victory for War Joiners (ordered probit, with 95 percent confidence interval; dependent variable = win/draw/lose)

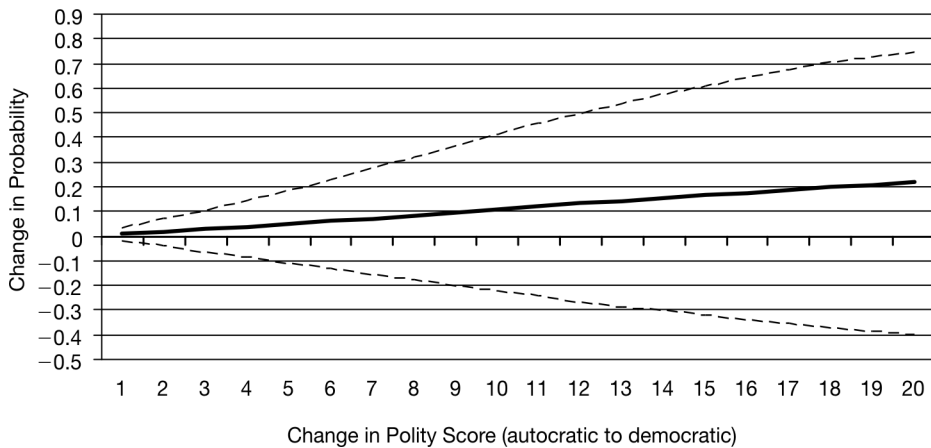


Table 2. Summary of Marginal Effects of Changing Democracy from Minimum to Maximum on All War Outcomes for War Initiators, Targets, and Joiners (from table 1, model 3)

Type of Belligerent	War Outcome	Change in Probability	Standard Error	95 Percent Confidence Interval	90 Percent Confidence Interval
Initiator	Win	0.151	0.154	-0.157, 0.436	-0.112, 0.394
Initiator	Draw	-0.036	0.041	-0.125, 0.035	-0.113, 0.024
Initiator	Lose	-0.114	0.120	-0.346, 0.119	-0.314, 0.085
Target	Win	0.156	0.170	-0.163, 0.487	-0.125, 0.437
Target	Draw	0.003	0.028	-0.056, 0.064	-0.041, 0.051
Target	Lose	-0.159	0.173	-0.490, 0.179	-0.436, 0.136
Joiner	Win	0.218	0.309	-0.401, 0.703	-0.289, 0.695
Joiner	Draw	-0.032	0.054	-0.164, 0.055	-0.135, 0.041
Joiner	Lose	-0.185	0.284	-0.688, 0.397	-0.622, 0.300

mocracy has no effect on the likelihood of victory and defeat for any type of belligerent.⁴⁸

One objection to these results is that I have defined joiners too broadly.⁴⁹ In particular, one could argue that belligerent status should be defined solely on the basis of when states enter wars rather than on the basis of prewar alliances. Only states that enter a war well after it has started—more than one week, for example—constitute joiners, whereas those that quickly enter on the attacker's or victim's side should be considered initiators or targets, respectively. To check for the possibility that this different conception of war joining affects the results, I recoded initiators, targets, and joiners along the lines just suggested and reanalyzed the model.⁵⁰ The results for initiators become somewhat stronger: shifting from lowest to highest levels of democracy increases the probability of victory 22 percent. This increase, however, still remains insignificant at the most generous level of confidence (90 percent confidence interval = -0.062, 0.478). Results for targets and joiners are weaker than with the previous definition of belligerency.⁵¹ Thus, I conclude that a purely temporal definition of war joiners does not affect the results.

48. It is worth noting that the marginal effects shown in figures 1–3 and table 2 represent the maximum possible effects that democracy can exert on war outcomes. More realistic changes in regime type—such as from an autocracy to a mixed regime, or a mixed regime to a democracy—result in smaller changes in the likelihood of victory and defeat.

49. Details on all robustness and specification checks, as well as the data used in the analysis, may be found on the author's website, <http://www.duke.edu/~downes>.

50. There are now 18 joiners instead of 25.

51. The increase in the probability of victory that results from moving from least to most democratic is 9 percent for targets and 17 percent for joiners. Neither is significant.

Table 3. Marginal Effects of Changing Democracy from Minimum to Maximum on Probability of Victory for War Initiators, Targets, and Joiners (from model 3 reestimated with multinomial logit)

Type of Belligerent	Change in Probability of Victory	Standard Error	95 Percent Confidence Interval	90 Percent Confidence Interval
Initiator	0.037	0.230	-0.415, 0.467	-0.343, 0.400
Target	0.122	0.211	-0.291, 0.519	-0.232, 0.467
Joiner	0.258	0.265	-0.243, 0.736	-0.173, 0.689

A second possible objection to this analysis is that ordered probit is the wrong statistical model to analyze war outcomes. Ordered logit/probit assumes that each independent variable exerts an effect of the same magnitude and in the same direction on each category of the dependent variable. If a variable increases the likelihood of a draw relative to a loss, in other words, it also increases the probability of a win relative to a draw by a similar amount. These assumptions may be incorrect, however. Multinomial logit allows the effects of the independent variables to differ for each category of the dependent variable. Coefficients are calculated for two war outcomes compared with a third that is omitted (losses and draws compared to wins, for example). To see if the type of statistical estimator influences the results, I reran the analysis using multinomial logit and calculated marginal effects as discussed above. Table 3 shows that the results are consistent with those produced by ordered probit: democratic initiators, targets, and joiners are not statistically more likely to prevail in war.

I performed two other robustness checks. First, if democracies are cleverer about choosing which wars to enter, the selection effect should apply to war joiners as well as initiators. To test this argument, I created a variable coded 1 if a state was either an initiator or a joiner. I interacted this variable with the Polity score and reanalyzed model 3.⁵² The results represent only a slight improvement on those for initiators alone: moving from least to most democratic improves the likelihood of victory 19 percent for states that started or joined ongoing wars, but the effect is insignificant (90 percent confidence level = -0.063, 0.426).

Second, given my argument above that draws have been politically damaging to democratic leaders—and hence that draws might be the “functional

52. In this case only three variables are needed to estimate the joint effect of democracy and belligerent status: Polity score, initiator/joiner, and Polity \times initiator/joiner. The Polity score term picks up the effect of democratic targets.

equivalent" of losses—one could simply recode draws as losses (technically "not wins") and retain a dichotomous dependent variable rather than switch to a tripartite coding of war outcomes. Reestimating the model using probit after making this adjustment confirms the earlier results: democratic initiators, targets, and joiners are not significantly more likely to prevail in war.⁵³

In summary, the statistical significance of Reiter and Stam's core results depends on two debatable choices: first the decision to amalgamate war targets and joiners, and second the decision to exclude draws. When targets and joiners are disaggregated, and draws are included in the analysis, no type of belligerent—initiators, targets, or joiners—is significantly more likely to win (or less likely to lose) as it becomes more democratic. This finding is robust to a variety of specification checks.

One might concede that my reanalysis shows that Reiter and Stam's findings do not hold for the time period they analyzed but point out that the last war in their original data set—the Second Sino-Vietnamese War (1985)—began more than twenty years ago. By my count, nine interstate wars (possibly ten, depending on how one counts the Russo-Georgian conflict of 2008) have been fought since that time—Chad-Libya (1987), Iraq-Kuwait (1990), Persian Gulf (1991), Armenia-Azerbaijan (1992–94), Ethiopia-Eritrea (1998–2000), India-Pakistan (1999), the Kosovo War between NATO and Yugoslavia (1999), United States-Afghanistan (2001), and United States-Iraq (2003)—several of them with positive outcomes for democratic belligerents.⁵⁴ It is possible that the addition of these post-Cold War contests may improve the statistical significance of the relationship between democracy and victory.⁵⁵ What is unclear is whether such a finding would really bolster confidence in democratic military effectiveness. The process by which the United States went to war with Iraq, for example, was deeply flawed, and this defective process contributed to the insurgency that has plagued the country ever since.⁵⁶ Similarly, few predicted that the Taliban would be defeated so quickly, and the political

53. Changes in probability of victory that result from shifting from least to most democratic (with 90 percent confidence intervals) are as follows: initiators, 0.008 (–0.327, 0.344); targets, 0.124 (–0.209, 0.461); joiners 0.247 (–0.244, 0.703).

54. Each of these wars—with the possible exceptions of Iraq's conquest of Kuwait and the Kosovo War—exceeded the 1,000 battle-death threshold.

55. I cannot test this conjecture because I do not have data for all of Reiter and Stam's variables for recent wars.

56. See, for example, Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation and the Marketplace of Ideas"; James Fallows, "Blind into Baghdad," *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 293, No. 1 (January/February 2004), pp. 52–74; and Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

goals of the war—the destruction of al-Qaida and stable democracy for Afghanistan—have not been realized, as the writ of Hamid Karzai’s government remains limited to Kabul, and al-Qaida (and the Taliban) has acquired a new sanctuary in the mountainous tribal areas of Pakistan. President Bill Clinton began a war with Yugoslavia essentially without a strategy, believing that a few days of bombing would cause Slobodan Milošević to give up, and President George H.W. Bush decided to confront Iraq in 1991 when many believed doing so would be a costly bloodbath.⁵⁷ Democratic India repelled Pakistan’s cross-border intrusion into Kashmir in 1999, but Pakistan—which initiated the war—at that time was also a democracy. Given the shaky statistical foundation of the democracy and victory findings, process tracing of the decisions to start wars and the sources of victory in wars becomes all the more important for testing theories. Others have begun this task,⁵⁸ and I provide my own contribution with the U.S. decision to fight in Vietnam below.

Choosing Stalemate in Vietnam

The previous section showed that the apparent statistical correlation between democracy and victory for both war initiators and targets is tenuous, and may well be illusory. This section turns to the causal logic of the theory, specifically of the selection effects argument. Reiter and Stam posit that electoral accountability and the marketplace of ideas cause leaders of democracies to choose only winnable wars. In Vietnam, however, we observe a democratic leader entering a war even though he knew the odds of victory were slight. Although there are several plausible explanations for this, one of the most prominent is that the need to protect his domestic legislative agenda caused Lyndon Johnson to perceive the costs of fighting a losing war in Vietnam as lower than the costs of staying out. In other words, in certain circumstances democracy may propel leaders to engage in wars with a low probability of success, thus causing democracies to suffer the occasional draw or loss. I do not claim that these circumstances are common; in the conclusion I suggest some potential cases for further research. My claim is merely that domestic politics played an important role in at least one important case—Vietnam—and that this

57. Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O’Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO’s War to Save Kosovo* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), pp. 91–96; and Jacob Weisberg, “Gulfballs: How the Experts Blew It, Big-Time,” *New Republic*, March 25, 1991, p. 19.

58. See, for example, Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness*.

represents an alternative mechanism through which democracy can lead to war.

Some readers might object that a single case study cannot provide definitive evidence against a probabilistic theory such as Reiter and Stam's. But it is not my purpose to "falsify" their argument. Rather, I endeavor to make two points. First, I show that democracies sometimes go to war when they are unsure of the prospects of victory, and that this can help explain cases of democratic stalemate and defeat. Second, I propose an alternative mechanism inherent in democratic politics that can cause democracies to choose war under less-than-ideal circumstances.

Below, I first show that Vietnam was a war of choice for the United States. A strong argument exists on technical grounds to code the United States as the initiator of the war, but the more important point is that the Johnson administration had a choice about whether to enter or escalate the conflict and selected itself into the war. I then demonstrate that at both critical decision points—to bomb North Vietnam in February 1965 and to send U.S. combat troops in June—key policymakers advocated war despite being deeply pessimistic about the prospects for victory, understanding that the United States faced a long and costly war of attrition. This contradicts the expectation from the selection effects argument that leaders of democracies choose war only when they have high confidence in victory.⁵⁹ Lastly, I argue that democratic politics actually pushed Johnson to fight even in the face of long odds.

THE VIETNAM WAR: A WAR OF CHOICE FOR THE UNITED STATES

The question of who started the interstate phase of the Vietnam War is difficult to answer. A civil war began in 1960 in South Vietnam between the government, supported by the United States, and the National Liberation Front, better known as the Vietcong (VC), supported by North Vietnam. In 1965 a separate interstate conflict broke out pitting North Vietnam against the United States and South Vietnam. According to the COW definition of war initiator as

59. Reiter and Stam, for example, cite the case of French leaders in 1911 declining to go to war against Germany when the general staff rated their chances of victory at less than 70 percent. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 13. Of course, this "70 percent rule" is undermined by both its reputed source—Napoleon Bonaparte, hardly a democrat—and Reiter and Stam's reference in the same paragraph to the belief of some U.S. government officials that U.S. chances of victory in Vietnam rose only to 70 percent by 1968 with the commitment of several hundred thousand troops. One would think that a 70 percent chance of winning would be the bare minimum for a leader to risk his political life; more likely he would require an 80 or a 90 percent likelihood of victory.

the first state actor to use force against another state, the United States should be coded as the initiator of the conflict. The reason is that the United States was the first state to use interstate force when President Johnson ordered Flaming Dart I, a set of air raids on army barracks in southern North Vietnam, on February 7, 1965. Four days later, Johnson ordered another air strike (Flaming Dart II). Soon thereafter, the president formally approved Rolling Thunder, an ongoing bombing campaign described by National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy as “a program of sustained reprisal against the North.”⁶⁰

Skeptics of this coding would point out that both Flaming Dart raids were launched in response to VC attacks that killed U.S. servicemen, first at Pleiku and then at Qui Nhon.⁶¹ Because the VC was a nonstate actor, however, to code these strikes as the war’s beginning presumes that the VC was fully controlled by—or doing the bidding of—Hanoi. Subsequent research has shown that the attack on Pleiku was in fact not ordered by the North.⁶² Nor does the presence of North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam before 1965 necessarily point to the North as the initiator. Although Hanoi began to send individual soldiers south in late 1963 or early 1964, and the 325th Division of the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) left for South Vietnam in mid-November 1964, PAVN regiments did not openly enter the fray until the communist spring offensive began in May 1965.⁶³ Until then Hanoi’s troops fought as part of VC units.

Further evidence indicates that on December 1, 1964, Johnson had in principle already approved a policy of bombing North Vietnam, desiring only increased political stability in Saigon (and a suitable provocation) before implementing it.⁶⁴ Phase I of the plan began with bombings of infiltration routes in Laos (Operation Barrel Roll) on December 14. The VC strike on Pleiku was used as a pretext to put into effect a policy that had already been decided upon. As Bundy remarked to a reporter, “‘Pleikus are streetcars’—meaning

60. Bundy to Johnson, “The Situation in Vietnam,” Memorandum, February 7, 1965, in *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), 1964–1968, Vol. 2, doc. 84. All *FRUS* documents cited in this article are available online at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus>.

61. Eight Americans died in the attack on Pleiku; twenty-three were killed at Qui Nhon.

62. According to historian Mark Moyar, Vietnamese sources indicate that the “attack had been conceived and ordered by the local commander of the Viet Cong forces in Pleiku province, who . . . was simply trying to hurt his adversaries.” Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 486 n. 14.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 372. South Vietnamese and U.S. forces also began covert and naval incursions into the North under the aegis of OPLAN-34A at about the same time that Hanoi covertly began sending troops south.

64. Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 270.

that the United States had been waiting for such an incident and planned to make use of it." "Pleiku," remarks historian Brian VanDeMark, "seemed a propitious moment to begin the bombing of North Vietnam which Bundy and others had already embraced as a remedy to South Vietnam's political failure." As David Kaiser puts it, "Having lost the war in the South Vietnamese countryside, they [Johnson and his advisers] had chosen to begin a new war against the government, the society, and the regular army of North Vietnam." William Gibbons concurs: "Thus, on February 8, 1965 the decision was made by the President to begin waging war on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam."⁶⁵

Although the weight of the evidence probably favors labeling the United States as the initiator of the war in the technical sense, the more important point is that President Johnson and his team of advisers chose to fight a war against North Vietnam that was not forced upon them.⁶⁶ It was not as if PAVN armored divisions were pouring across the Rio Grande from Mexico; there was no attack on the U.S. homeland and no existential threat to the survival of the United States. Even those who argued that U.S. entry into the war was necessary to prevent Asian dominoes from falling understood that withdrawing from Vietnam would have had only a marginal impact on U.S. security in the short term. The president may have paid a political price for pulling up stakes, but that is not the same as saying the United States had no choice but to fight. If not the initiator of the war, then, the United States chose to join an ongoing war that had only a peripheral impact on its security. The selection effects argument should therefore apply to the U.S. decision to fight in Vietnam.

THE VIETNAM WORKING GROUP AND THE DECISION TO BOMB

The selection effects hypothesis implies that because democratic leaders start only those wars they think they can win, they should be confident about their military prospects when deciding to go to war.⁶⁷ As the evidence below dem-

65. Bundy, quoted in Robert L. Gallucci, *Neither Peace nor Honor: The Politics of American Military Policy in Viet-Nam* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 46; Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 63; David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2000), p. 411; and William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships*, Pt. 3: *January–July 1965* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 68.

66. This is a central theme of Logevall, *Choosing War*.

67. One might expect leaders to cite a favorable military balance, superior military technology or strategy, or the outstanding fighting qualities of their troops. Interestingly, Reiter and Stam do not identify a particular factor that leaders examine when deciding whether a war is winnable. For ex-

onstrates, this was emphatically not the case: U.S. policymakers understood just how dire the political and military situation was in South Vietnam, and they knew that using force against North Vietnam would probably not improve matters on the ground. I focus on the two key decisions for escalation: the decision to bomb North Vietnam, and the choice to send a large number of U.S. ground troops to South Vietnam.⁶⁸

By the time the Johnson administration began seriously debating escalation in Vietnam in November 1964, its most prominent members agreed that the situation there was ominous. Since the overthrow of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem a year earlier, much of the news out of Saigon had been grim.⁶⁹ Summing up the thoughts of many, the deputy U.S. ambassador in Saigon, David Nes, wrote in February 1964, "I do not see in the present military regime or any conceivable successor much hope in providing the real political and social leadership or the just and effective country-wide administration so essential to the success of our counter-insurgency program."⁷⁰ The president shared his subordinates' pessimism, telling Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in late April, "We're not getting it done. . . . We're losing."⁷¹ In September a draft paper by Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs John McNaughton argued that pacification in the South could not succeed without a strong central government. Unfortunately, he continued, "It has become apparent that there is no likelihood that a government

ample, they find no evidence that democracies won "because they were bigger or had more allies, better troops, or better strategy choices." Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 37.

68. I do not address the role of the marketplace of ideas in the Vietnam decisions, except to note that Johnson adopted a "policy of minimum candor" in his dealings with the public, the media, and congressional leaders. He refused to announce major decisions publicly, concealed the level of escalation, and endeavored to squelch congressional debate on the wisdom of fighting in Vietnam. The case is thus not supportive of marketplace of ideas arguments. See Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983), p. 430; George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1986), p. 133; and John Schuessler, "Doing Good by Stealth? Democracy, Deception, and the Use of Force," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2007, chap. 3.

69. For selected examples of this reporting, see Robert McNamara, "Vietnam Situation," Memorandum for the President, December 21, 1963, in Senator Mike Gravel, ed., *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, Vol. 3 (Boston: Beacon, 1971), p. 494; Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE), No. 50-64, "Short-Term Prospects in Southeast Asia," summarized in Carroll to McNamara, Memorandum, February 12, 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Vol. 1, doc. 42; McNamara to Johnson, "South Vietnam," Memorandum, March 16, 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Vol. 1, doc. 84; and William Bundy, "Next Courses of Action in Southeast Asia," Memorandum, August 13, 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Vol. 1, doc. 313.

70. Memo to Ambassador Lodge, February 17, 1964, quoted in Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 113.

71. Quoted in Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 145.

sufficiently strong to administer a successful pacification program will develop. It follows that our current U.S. policy, which is based on such a program, will not succeed."⁷² These gloomy appraisals of the political situation in South Vietnam were reinforced by negative reports on military conditions, as well as pessimism regarding the utility of using force against North Vietnam to improve the situation in South Vietnam.⁷³

Despite these downbeat assessments, by September 1964 the president and his advisers generally agreed that a greatly expanded U.S. presence would be required if South Vietnam was to be saved.⁷⁴ Two factors, however, led Johnson to hold off on escalation. First, he was worried that the rickety government in South Vietnam remained too fragile to withstand a major escalation in the war. As he put it in a White House meeting in early September, "With a weak and wobbly situation it would be unwise to attack until we could stabilize our base."⁷⁵ Second, the president, having established his hawkish credentials in August by launching retaliatory air strikes and obtaining the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, tacked back toward the doves to present himself as the candidate of peace in the upcoming presidential election. Johnson wished to avoid any major escalation in Vietnam before November, having previously rebuffed a recommendation in March by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to attack the North by telling them "he did not want to start a war before November."⁷⁶ At the same time, Johnson did not want to be tagged as the man who lost Vietnam; he preferred to avoid a major decision either way until after he was safely reelected.

72. John McNaughton, "Plan of Action for South Vietnam," 2d draft, September 3, 1964, in Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 3, p. 556. McNaughton reiterated this judgment two months later: "Progress inside SVN is important, but it is unlikely despite our best ideas and efforts." John McNaughton, "Action for South Vietnam," 3d draft, November 7, 1964, in Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 3, p. 602.

73. See, for example, the memos by George Ball and William Bundy (October 5 and 19, respectively), discussed in Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, pp. 349–353. Two Pentagon war games on Vietnam conducted in April and September (Sigma I and II) suggested that bombing North Vietnam would do nothing to staunch the insurgency in the South and might actually increase the North's will to resist. "Sigma I-64: Final Report," D-6, and "Sigma II-64: Final Report," D-2, D-7, D-14, both in *Declassified Document Reference Service*.

74. Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 235.

75. Memorandum of a Meeting, White House, September 9, 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 1, doc. 343.

76. Quoted in Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 304. The chiefs' proposal may be found in Joint Chiefs of Staff to McNamara, "Vietnam," Memorandum, March 2, 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 1, doc. 66. In fact, during the presidential campaign against Republic Senator Barry Goldwater, an advocate of escalation in Vietnam, President Johnson repeatedly told voters that he would not "send American boys 9 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves." Quoted in VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, p. 19.

According to McGeorge Bundy, 1964 was the “year off. It was so under Johnson, and it would have been under [a surviving Kennedy] as well. Neither man wanted to go to the election as the one who either made war or lost Vietnam. If you could put it off you did.” There was little doubt, however, which way Johnson was leaning.⁷⁷

Shortly before Election Day, when his victory appeared assured, Johnson tasked a National Security Council working group to explore the options available to the United States in Vietnam. The group, chaired by Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy, quickly coalesced on three alternatives: Option A, which would continue the status quo; Option B, a “systematic program of military pressures against the north,” escalating at a “fairly rapid pace”; and Option C, which supplemented current policies with a strategy of graduated military pressure against the North.⁷⁸ The group would eventually settle on Option C, but not because its members believed it stood a good chance of succeeding.⁷⁹ This attitude is evident in McNaughton’s November 19 draft “Courses of Action in Southeast Asia.” McNaughton argued, for example, that “the United States could not be certain of securing its maximum objectives in South Vietnam even if it undertook all-out war with North Vietnam or China.”⁸⁰ What is more, even the best-case outcome of pursuing Option C did not promise much of an accomplishment. A redraft of this paper by William Bundy classified possible outcomes as follows: “At best: To avoid heavy risk and punishment, the DRV [North Vietnam] might feign compliance and settle for an opportunity to subvert the South another day. That is, a respite might be gained. At worst: South Vietnam might come apart while we were pursuing the course of action. In between: We might be faced with no improvement in the internal South Vietnam situation and with the difficult decision whether to

77. Quoted in Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 108. Johnson’s desire to delay a decision until after the 1964 election might be construed as support for Kurt Taylor Gaubatz’s argument that democratic executives are more likely to initiate wars early in their terms of office when the political risk is low rather than later on. This only applies, however, if the leader believes the war will be short, and thus he or she can reap the political benefits of victory come re-election time. As Gaubatz notes, his argument “would not explain behavior if a conflict was expected to be long and drawn out.” This is exactly what Johnson believed about Vietnam. See Gaubatz, *Elections and War: The Electoral Incentive in the Democratic Politics of War and Peace* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 54.

78. “Courses of Action in Southeast Asia,” November 21, 1964, in Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 3, pp. 656–666.

79. Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 259. See also National Security Council Working Group on Vietnam, “Intelligence Assessment: The Situation in Vietnam,” November 24, 1964, in Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 3, pp. 651–652.

80. Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 363.

escalate on up to major conflict with China.”⁸¹ The best-case scenario, in other words, was a return to the status quo in which the VC insurgency continued with reduced support from the North but Hanoi simply waited for another opportunity to subvert the South.

In late November, the U.S. ambassador to Saigon, Maxwell Taylor, arrived in Washington to participate in meetings where the working group’s conclusions would be debated with the president in attendance. Taylor came armed with a dismal report on the situation in South Vietnam. The report concluded, for example, that “the counterinsurgency program country-wide is bogged down and will require heroic treatment to assure survival,” and “it is impossible to foresee a stable and effective government under any name in anything like the near future.”⁸² Yet rather than call for a reappraisal of the U.S. commitment to the South, Taylor was adamant that the United States should take strong action (in the form of bombing) against Hanoi. Johnson and his wise men agreed: escalation “should be undertaken regardless of the political picture in Saigon, either to reward the GVN [Government of Vietnam] or to keep it from disintegrating.”⁸³

Although now committed to bombing in principle, Johnson remained reluctant to move forward without greater stability in Saigon, but the continuing turmoil there made it increasingly clear that no matter how long he waited, the political situation in South Vietnam was unlikely to stabilize.⁸⁴ As chaos mounted and morale plummeted in the South, U.S. policymakers came to argue that bombing was needed to stabilize the situation and instill confidence in South Vietnam, rather than stability being a pretext for bombing. As George Herring has put it, “By the end of January 1965 . . . the major argument against escalation had become the most compelling argument for it.”⁸⁵ With prompting from McNamara and McGeorge Bundy, Johnson decided it was time to act: “Stable government or no stable government . . . we’ll do what we have to do. I’m prepared to do that. *We will move strongly.* [Gen. Nguyen] Khanh is our boy.”⁸⁶ Contrary to the selection effects argument, in other words, “no one

81. “Courses of Action in Southeast Asia,” p. 665.

82. Taylor, “The Current Situation in South Viet-Nam—November 1964,” in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 1, doc. 426.

83. Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 269.

84. On January 27, 1965, South Vietnamese strongman Gen. Nguyen Khanh launched a bloodless coup that ousted the civilian premier, Tran Van Huong.

85. Herring, *America’s Longest War*, p. 127.

86. Quoted in Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 318 (emphasis in original). For Bundy and McNamara’s prompting, see the famous “fork in the road” memo, January 27, 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 2, doc. 42.

among them [top U.S. officials] viewed the disintegration in South Vietnam as a reason to de-escalate, to find some means to withdraw from the war."⁸⁷ Instead they argued that force should be initiated against Hanoi despite the precarious political and military situation in South Vietnam, the low likelihood that attacking North Vietnam would reverse those conditions, and the risk that Hanoi and its Chinese ally might invade the South, leading to a nontrivial chance that the United States would have to resort to nuclear weapons. As Fredrik Logevall has written, "The most striking thing about the Johnson administration's decision to move to an escalated war was not that it contained contradictions . . . but that it came despite deep pessimism among many senior officials that the new measures would succeed in turning the war around."⁸⁸

Indeed, many Johnson administration officials subscribed to the "good doctor" theory originally articulated by McNaughton, which argued that fighting and losing in Vietnam was better than withdrawing without a fight. According to the theory, to establish the credibility of U.S. commitments, "We must have kept promises, been tough, taken risks, gotten bloodied, and hurt the enemy very badly," even while losing, to be seen as a good doctor whose patient (South Vietnam) died despite the doctor's best efforts.⁸⁹ Top U.S. policymakers, in other words, were willing to start a war and lose to bolster U.S. credibility.

Even as Rolling Thunder got under way in early March 1965, and U.S. Marines came ashore at Da Nang, Johnson's closest advisers were not optimistic regarding the ability of the bombing to turn the tide. Arguing in February for the commencement of bombing, McGeorge Bundy warned, "At its very best the struggle in Vietnam will be long," and estimated that his suggested policy of sustained reprisals against North Vietnam had between a 25 and 75 percent chance of success.⁹⁰ Bundy, McNamara, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk met on the evening of March 5 to discuss Vietnam, and Bundy conveyed the thrust of their discussion in a memo to the president the next day: "Two of the three of us think that the chances of a turn-around in South Vietnam remain less than even; the brutal fact is that we have been losing ground at an increasing rate in the countryside in January and February. . . . And there is no

87. Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 271.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 271.

89. John McNaughton, "Aims and Options in Southeast Asia," 1st draft, in Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 3, p. 582.

90. Bundy to Johnson, "The Situation in Vietnam," February 7, 1965. Nor were the service chiefs confident that Operation Rolling Thunder would produce results. See Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 3, p. 320.

evidence yet that the new government has the necessary will, skill and human resources which a turn-around will require."⁹¹ McNaughton, who had recently returned from South Vietnam, confirmed these fears in mid-March, noting that the "thing is much worse" than anyone in Washington thought.⁹²

In short, the United States chose to initiate the bombing of North Vietnam even though most top U.S. officials believed that bombing was unlikely to break Hanoi's will to support the insurgency, significantly degrade the Vietcong's ability to fight and reverse the military situation in South Vietnam, or produce a stable, popular government in Saigon.

THE TURN TO GROUND TROOPS

As Johnson administration officials feared, Rolling Thunder did not improve the political or military situation in South Vietnam. Yet another coup by a group of officers, led by Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky and Gen. Nguyen van Thieu, removed Premier Khanh from the scene for good in late February, but this was not necessarily a turn for the better. As William Bundy would later put it, the Ky-Thieu combination "seemed to all of us the bottom of the barrel, absolutely the bottom of the barrel."⁹³ A variety of U.S. government studies found that Hanoi remained convinced it was winning and that the bombing had done little to curtail infiltration, weaken North Vietnam's military capabilities, or diminish Hanoi's will to continue the struggle.⁹⁴ As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Earle Wheeler summed it up on April 1, 1965, "We are losing the war out there."⁹⁵

As it became clear that Rolling Thunder was failing to achieve its objectives, the pressure to send U.S. ground troops to save the situation grew increasingly intense. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Harold Johnson returned from Vietnam in mid-March recommending the insertion of an army division in the central highlands plus a four-division blocking force to cut infiltration routes. In late March, the head of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), Gen. William Westmoreland, recommended an increase of 33,000 troops, including

91. Bundy to Johnson, Memorandum, March 6, 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 2, doc. 183.

92. Quoted in VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, p. 96.

93. Quoted in Herring, *America's Longest War*, p. 137. Desertion from South Vietnam's army grew to 11,000 per month, and morale failed to improve in the South. See Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 367.

94. VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, p. 105; Wheeler to McNamara, Memorandum, April 6, 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 2, doc. 241, quoted in Karnow, *Vietnam*, p. 430; and State Department, Division of Intelligence and Research, "The Effects of the Bombings of North Vietnam," June 29, 1965, quoted in George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1987), p. 337. Bombing also cemented closer ties between Hanoi and its more powerful communist allies.

95. Quoted in VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, p. 109.

an army division and an airborne brigade. In mid-April, the Joint Chiefs called for an increase of three divisions; participants in the Honolulu conference on April 20 agreed to raise U.S. troop levels to 82,000. In June, Westmoreland again requested more troops—a lot more: an increase to 175,000 (44 battalions) by the end of 1965, with an additional 95,000 to come in 1966. After a series of meetings in mid-July, Johnson eventually agreed to the 175,000 figure, although he preferred to announce only a 50,000-man increase to 125,000 in public on July 28.

Was the decision to Americanize the ground war in South Vietnam driven by optimism that U.S. troops could defeat the Vietcong and PAVN units in a quick and decisive fashion? Hardly. Pessimism was widespread among the key decisionmakers in Washington and Saigon. When General Johnson returned from South Vietnam in mid-March, for example, he observed that the “much-weakened South Vietnamese armed forces . . . were incapable of handling the Viet Cong, and the United States therefore needed to introduce its own troops into the war.” As discouraging as this message was, worse was yet to come: the general warned that “victory could require five years and 500,000 U.S. troops, well beyond what the President and the rest of the civilians had expected.”⁹⁶ McNamara’s recommendation of 82,000 troops after the Honolulu conference in April “was not presented to the president as a prescription for winning the war, but, rather, simply for denying victory to the Viet Cong,” which he thought would take “more than six months, perhaps a year or two.”⁹⁷

By June the situation in South Vietnam was so bad that U.S. military and political officials agreed that the war, as General Westmoreland reported to the Joint Chiefs early in the month, was on the verge of being lost. Two weeks later, Westmoreland definitively stated that the United States faced a protracted war of attrition: “By way of introduction, the premise behind whatever further actions we may undertake, either in SVN [South Vietnam], or DRV, must be that we are in for the long pull. The struggle has become a war of attrition. Short of [a] decision to introduce nuclear weapons against sources and channels of enemy power, I see no likelihood of achieving a quick, favorable end to the war.”⁹⁸ Ambassador Taylor in Saigon concurred, commenting that

96. Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 368.

97. Kahin, *Intervention*, p. 319.

98. Westmoreland to JCS, telegram, June 7, 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 2, doc. 337; and Westmoreland to Wheeler, telegram, June 24, 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 3, doc. 17. As Wheeler would later recall, “In the summer of 1965, it became amply clear that it wasn’t a matter of whether the North Vietnamese were going to win the war; it was a question of when they were go-

restraining Hanoi required turning the tide on the ground in the South, which “may take a long time and we should not expect quick results. . . . There is no strategy that can bring about a quick solution.”⁹⁹ The civilians in Washington were equally downcast. As McNamara confided to the British foreign secretary, “None of us at the centre of things [in U.S. policymaking] talk about winning a victory.”¹⁰⁰ Similarly, William Bundy lamented that none of the options on the table—including the deployment of 300,000 U.S. troops—“seems likely to raise the chances of real success from perhaps (by hypothesis) 15 percent without such actions to 25–30 percent with them.”¹⁰¹ George Ball questioned whether victory could be had with 500,000 troops.¹⁰² Even the president admitted privately and publicly in June that the communists were winning the war.¹⁰³

The crucial debates on ground troops took place on July 21–22, 1965.¹⁰⁴ In preparation, McNaughton wrote a paper for McNamara in which he strikingly argued that the probability of success if the United States sought to win with 200,000 to 400,000 or more combat troops rose only to 50 percent by 1968.¹⁰⁵ McNamara’s July 20 paper, which formed the basis of discussion in the meetings that followed, painted a similarly grim picture, assessing that “the situation in South Vietnam is worse than a year ago (when it was worse than a year before that).” McNamara noted that communist forces were “hurting ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] forces badly” and might soon conquer the central highlands; the Ky government probably would not last until the end of the year; pacification efforts were losing ground; interdiction had failed; and the communists “seem to believe that South Vietnam is on the run and near collapse.” McNamara recommended increasing the U.S. troop commitment by

ing to win it.” Quoted in Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), pp. 69–70.

99. Saigon Embassy to State, telegram, June 3, 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 2, doc. 328.

100. Quoted in Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 368. In an oral history ten years later, McNamara said he thought that the United States was “on a certain course of defeat,” and moreover that “it wasn’t clear to me that we could avoid defeat by any action in our power.” Quoted in Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 222.

101. Quoted in Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, p. 334.

102. Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 448.

103. McGeorge Bundy, “Personal Notes of a Meeting with President Johnson,” June 10, 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 2, doc. 343; and VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, pp. 160, 162.

104. Johnson had in fact already decided to approve Westmoreland’s request before these discussions took place, but the July 21–22 deliberations are still highly revealing of various officials’ estimates of victory. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, pp. 380–382.

105. John McNaughton, “Analysis and Options for South Vietnam,” July 13, 1965, cited in Kahin, *Intervention*, p. 357.

thirty-four battalions to a total of 175,000 men by the end of 1965, with another 100,000 in early 1966 and further deployments possible after that depending on the circumstances. McNamara conceded, however, that “success” might merely mean a return to the VC guerrilla campaign of 1960–64, and warned that there was no obvious way to get U.S. troops out of South Vietnam.¹⁰⁶

The ensuing discussions revealed that McNamara’s evaluation of the consequences of Americanizing the war was far too optimistic. McNamara, for example, acknowledged that pacification would take a minimum of two years and would likely require another 100,000 U.S. troops. Indeed, Westmoreland had informed McNamara that even if MACV’s troop request was met in full, “No reasonable assurances can be given that we can prove to the Viet Cong that they cannot win and force them to settle on our terms.”¹⁰⁷ McGeorge Bundy supported McNamara’s recommendation, yet warned, “There are no early victories in store, although casualties are likely to be heavy.” Ball also argued strongly against ground troops, contending that “this war will be long and protracted. The most we can hope for is a messy conclusion.” General Wheeler thought there was no chance of winning in a year regardless of the number of troops sent: “We might start to reverse the unfavorable trend in a year and make definite progress in three years,” he said. Similarly, in the meeting on July 22, Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Wallace Greene told the president that 500,000 troops would be needed, and the war would last five years.¹⁰⁸

In short, the United States chose to enter the ground war in South Vietnam despite the widely shared view among the president and his advisers that such a conflict would be a protracted war of attrition, lasting three to five years and requiring perhaps half a million U.S. troops in which victory was far from assured.

EXPLAINING THE DECISION FOR WAR

Many factors undoubtedly contributed to Johnson’s decision to fight in Indochina; untangling this knot is impossible here.¹⁰⁹ Two factors are par-

106. Incongruously, though, McNamara concluded that his recommended course of action stood “a good chance of achieving an acceptable outcome within a reasonable time in Vietnam.” McNamara to Johnson, Memorandum, July 20, 1965, in *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. 3, doc. 67.

107. Quoted in Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, p. 373.

108. The notes of these meetings are reprinted in Kahin, *Intervention*, pp. 368–386. Quotes are from pp. 376, 374, 377; Greene’s estimate is on p. 384.

109. Some argue, for example, that fear of the domino effect in Asia prompted Johnson to hold the line in Vietnam. Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken*, pp. 290, 375–376. Closely related is the view that Johnson fought in Vietnam to deter China. Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 362. Others minimize the impor-

ticularly relevant to the analysis in this article, however, and thus deserve emphasis. First, as noted above, many of the top civilian policymakers in the administration believed that losing in Vietnam was preferable to pulling out without a fight because going down fighting would bolster U.S. credibility. According to this view, “The United States should strive to project the image of a patient (South Vietnam) who died despite the heroic efforts of the good doctor (the United States).” As McNaughton wrote, even if intervention failed, “it would, by demonstrating U.S. willingness to go to the mat, tend to bolster allied confidence in the U.S. as an ally.”¹¹⁰ Put bluntly, many of those charged with making the decision to go to war and planning military operations believed “it was not necessary to win in Vietnam.”¹¹¹ Stalemate (and a willingness to take casualties) was sufficient to communicate U.S. credibility. In short, beliefs about how to convey resolve, then current among civilian policymakers, made defeat an acceptable outcome.

Second, many historians have argued—and many of Johnson’s statements confirm—that domestic politics affected the decision for war, and that Johnson feared political punishment if he withdrew from Vietnam more than if he engaged in war. Historians largely agree, for example, that protecting the Great Society was the crucial factor that explains why Johnson escalated the war the way he did: slowly, incrementally, and most of all, secretly. According to George Kahin, “The slow pace at which Johnson escalated . . . must in considerable part have reflected his mounting concern that a sharp, clear-cut escalatory move in Vietnam might so rock the boat as to threaten passage of many as-yet-unrealized pieces of Great Society legislation.” Similarly, Logevall maintains that Johnson’s concerns regarding the Great Society “directly influenced the *way* in which he expanded the war—in particular, they dictated that the escalation be as quiet as possible so as to avoid the need for choosing between the war and the programs, between guns and butter.” Participants in the key debates over escalation, such as McGeorge Bundy and members of the

tance of credibility concerns and domino beliefs, arguing instead that the United States intervened because of its preponderance of power over the communist bloc. Porter, *Perils of Dominance*. A third view emphasizes the causal power of analogies in explaining the decision for war, and a fourth stresses Johnson’s fear of humiliation and loss of personal credibility. See, respectively, Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992); and Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 389–393.

110. Quoted in Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 272. See also H.R. McMaster, *Derelection of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1997), pp. 184–185.

111. McMaster, *Derelection of Duty*, p. 332.

Joint Chiefs, sensed Johnson's desire to protect his domestic legislation lurking in the background. Bundy recalled after one meeting that "his [Johnson's] unspoken object was to protect his legislative program." Johnson himself later explained the need to keep his "foreign policy in the wings" by arguing that "the day it [Congress] exploded into a major debate on the war, that day would be the beginning of the end of the Great Society."¹¹²

Beyond influencing how Johnson escalated the war, however, some argue that his fears over the fate of the Great Society contributed to his decision to go to war in the first place. It was not that the public or Congress was clamoring for war; polls showed that the public was split on the question of escalation, and many of the most powerful senators from the president's own party were skeptical of escalation. Rather, Johnson worried that if he pulled U.S. forces out of Vietnam, Republicans and conservative Democrats would join forces to block the Great Society. This thesis has been restated recently by Francis Bator, who served as deputy national security adviser in the Johnson administration. According to Bator, "The war deprived the Great Society reforms of some executive energy and money. *But Johnson believed—and he knew how to count votes—that had he backed away from Vietnam in 1965, there would have been no Great Society to deprive. It would have been stillborn in Congress.*" Bator argues that Johnson "knew that an honest discussion of the Westmoreland [forty-four battalion] plan would provoke a coalition of budget balancers and small-government Republicans, who balked at the high cost of guns and butter, and Deep South senators, who were determined to block civil rights legislation. They would need only 34 votes out of 100 to block cloture—20 Deep South senators plus 14 conservative Republicans."¹¹³ Only a minority of senators was required to obstruct Johnson's domestic reforms, and Johnson believed that this blocking coalition would be triggered by any attempt to quit Vietnam.

At first glance, this thesis appears implausible given Johnson's landslide victory just a few months earlier and the solid Democratic majorities that resulted in both houses of Congress. As Johnson's new vice president, Hubert

112. Kahin, *Intervention*, p. 320; Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 391 (emphasis in original); Bundy, quoted in Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, p. 426; and Johnson, quoted in Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), pp. 281–282. See also VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, pp. 54, 71, 109–110, 131, 162, 213, 217; and McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, pp. 194, 263, 308–309, 326. McMaster goes so far as to argue that Johnson's oft-expressed fear of Chinese or Soviet intervention was a ploy to protect his domestic political agenda (pp. 314, 317).

113. Francis M. Bator, "No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (June 2008), pp. 309, 321–322 (emphasis in original).

Humphrey, wrote to him the month after the inauguration, "1965 is the year of minimum political risk for the Johnson Administration."¹¹⁴ McGeorge Bundy later contended that the president could have used his considerable powers of persuasion to make the case for withdrawal without suffering significant domestic political consequences: "I think if [Johnson] had decided that the right thing to do was to cut our losses, he was quite sufficiently inventive to do that in a way that would not have destroyed the Great Society."¹¹⁵ Yet there is substantial evidence that Johnson "believed that losing Vietnam in the summer of 1965 would have wrecked his plans for a Great Society" by triggering a destructive debate similar to the one over "who lost China?" that devastated Truman's presidency.¹¹⁶ Johnson perceived this Vietnam dilemma soon after he inherited the presidency, telling his Senate mentor Richard Russell in May 1964, "Well, they'd impeach a president that would run out, wouldn't they?" Johnson later repeated this view during the height of the debate over ground troops in July 1965: "When I land troops they call me an interventionist . . . and if I do nothing I'll be impeached."¹¹⁷ As Johnson later told his biographer, Doris Kearns,

I knew from the start . . . that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved—the Great Society—in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. All my programs. All my hopes to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. All my dreams to provide education and medical care to the browns and the blacks and the lame and the poor. But if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam . . . there would follow in this country an endless national debate—a mean and destructive debate—that would shatter my Presidency, kill my administration, and damage our democracy.¹¹⁸

Although the evidence is far from conclusive and the debate is still ongoing, there is plausible evidence that the democratic process in this case gave the president incentives to undertake, rather than avoid, a risky war with uncertain prospects for success.

114. Quoted in Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, pp. 94–95. Humphrey argued that Johnson should exploit his unique position to cut his losses and extricate himself from Vietnam.

115. Quoted in Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 391. See also Fredrik Logevall, "Comment on Francis M. Bator's 'No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection,'" *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (June 2008), p. 357.

116. Larry Berman, "Comment on Francis M. Bator's 'No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection,'" *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (June 2008), p. 362. This is also Berman's conclusion in *Planning a Tragedy*, p. 146.

117. Quoted in VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, p. 162.

118. Quoted in Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, pp. 251–252.

Conclusion

This article sought to reevaluate the argument that democracies are more likely to win wars. The most comprehensive study on this subject to date, Dan Reiter and Allan Stam's *Democracies at War*, offers two explanations for democratic victory. According to the selection effects theory, democratic war initiators are better at choosing winnable wars because leaders fear the electoral costs of failure and benefit from a vigorous marketplace of ideas that weeds out bad ideas and provides leaders with high-quality information to inform policy decisions. The war-fighting theory, by contrast, maintains that democratic culture and the popular nature of democratic regimes produces superior soldiers who are better leaders and fight with greater initiative than soldiers from nondemocratic societies. I reanalyzed the quantitative data offered in support of these two arguments and found that the results were not robust. For example, rather than code all nonwar initiators as targets, it is more accurate to code only states that were attacked as targets and the remainder as joiners. Moreover, given that democratic leaders sometimes suffer politically for wars that end in draws, it seems reasonable to include draws in the analysis. When these two changes are made, democratic war initiators, targets, and joiners are no longer statistically more likely to prevail. These findings raise doubts regarding the quantitative basis for the view that democracies are more likely to win wars.

I also bring qualitative evidence to bear specifically on selection effects. An examination of the Johnson administration's decision to fight in Vietnam revealed that, contrary to the selection effects argument, Lyndon Johnson and his principal foreign policy advisers did not go to war in Vietnam confident of victory. In fact, from late 1963 onward the news out of South Vietnam was largely negative, and U.S. policymakers knew that bombing the North or introducing U.S. ground troops would not in all likelihood reverse the downward trends in the South. George Ball articulated the selection effects mechanism in a June 1965 memo to President Johnson. After detailing the dismal conditions in South Vietnam and the absence of any assurance that Americanizing the war could change things, Ball wrote, "'Good statesmanship' . . . required cutting 'losses when the pursuit of particular courses of action threaten . . . to lead to a costly and indeterminant result.'"¹¹⁹ Yet Johnson forged ahead into a war his military advisers warned would take at least five years and half a million men.

119. Quoted in VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, p. 166.

Moreover, my analysis reveals that domestic political considerations if anything provided an added impetus to credibility and domino theory arguments for going to war. Johnson believed he would face a backlash if he withdrew from Vietnam that would imperil his Great Society programs and ruin his presidency. He worked assiduously to avoid a fractious debate between guns and butter by escalating the United States' military role in Vietnam quietly and gradually. Johnson also apparently believed that any attempt to renege on the U.S. commitment to an independent, noncommunist South Vietnam would have triggered a blocking coalition in the Senate capable of killing his legislative program. In short, democratic politics, rather than helping Johnson choose a short, victorious war, may instead have pushed him to fight a war he knew to be unwinnable because he believed that the domestic consequences of not fighting were worse.

The recent Iraq case suggests a second way that domestic politics in democracies can lead to costly quagmires: leaders may seek to conceal the potential costs of wars of choice from the public in order to build support for going to war in the first place. In 2003 no one doubted that the U.S. military would quickly defeat the Iraqi Army. The major question was what would happen after the Baathist regime was toppled. The potential costs and difficulties of occupying and administering Iraq were well known from the 1991 Gulf War when they deterred the George H.W. Bush administration from overthrowing Saddam Hussein. Many of the same men who argued against going to Baghdad in 1991, including Dick Cheney and Colin Powell, held even more powerful positions in 2003. Yet the George W. Bush administration denied that there would even be an occupation of Iraq, arguing that Americans would be welcomed as liberators who would quickly turn over power to Iraqi exiles such as Ahmed Chalabi. The Bush administration made many other specious arguments for attacking Iraq, but soft-pedaling the costs and avoiding the hard questions about how to govern and rebuild an Iraq riven by ethnoreligious tensions and crippled by thirty years of Saddam Hussein's police state surely helped the administration obtain the war it wanted but also the quagmire that followed.

Additional research is needed to explore the extent to which these two mechanisms undermine the likelihood of democratic victory.¹²⁰ It will be im-

120. For another argument about how domestic politics can lead to democratic defeat in war, with an application to Vietnam, see Caverley, "Democracies Will Continue to Fight Small Wars . . . Poorly."

portant to consider, for example, how much Johnson's decision to fight in Vietnam to protect the Great Society at home stemmed from idiosyncratic factors, such as his personality, his set of political beliefs, or the dynamics of U.S. politics in the 1960s. A brief perusal of historical cases, however, suggests that Vietnam is not the only instance of a democracy initiating war under adverse circumstances. When democratic Poland attacked the newborn Soviet Union after World War I, for example, Polish leader Joseph Piłsudski was reportedly not confident he would prevail. The British minister to Warsaw reported at the time of Poland's offensive that "there is no doubt that he [Piłsudski] went into the Ukraine with his eyes open, for he had told me some time ago that every army which had entered the Ukraine had had reason to repent having done so."¹²¹ Similarly, Israeli officials were far from unanimous about the likelihood of victory before the Six-Day War in 1967. During a cabinet meeting at the beginning of the crisis, for example, Prime Minister Levi Eshkol asked Yitzhak Rabin, the chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF): "What's to stop the Egyptians from taking the south? The Syrians from attacking our settlements?"¹²² Former Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion vehemently opposed the war because he did not believe Israel could win. Even Moshe Dayan thought the situation was "graver than in 1956, and far more so than in 1948." Finally, Rabin suffered a breakdown during the crisis and warned that Israeli forces might suffer tens of thousands of dead.¹²³

Two recent conflicts—the 1999 Kargil War and the 2008 Russo-Georgian War—were also initiated by democracies despite high risks and low likelihoods of success.¹²⁴ Pakistan, for example, initiated the first war between two nuclear-armed states when it attacked India, seemingly contradicting the high degree of caution that infuses democratic decisionmaking.¹²⁵ Similarly,

121. Quoted in Zygmunt J. Gąsiorowski, "Joseph Piłsudski in the Light of British Reports," *Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 50, No. 121 (October 1972), p. 559. See also Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness*, p. 73.

122. Quoted in Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Presidio, 2002), p. 89.

123. Tom Segev, *1967: Israel, the War, and the Year That Transformed the Middle East*, trans. Jessica Cohen (New York: Metropolitan, 2007), pp. 248, 243, 286.

124. At the time of the Kargil incursion, Pakistan scored +7 on the Polity index, and Georgia scored +6 in 2008 (down slightly from +7 the previous year). The Polity Project considers states that score +6 or higher to be democracies. See *Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800–2007*, <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>. Although technically not an interstate war, the Israeli war against Hezbollah in the summer of 2006 is another recent example of a dubious democratic war choice.

125. Evidence also indicates that Pakistan breached the Line of Control in Kashmir because it was growing ever more pessimistic about the prospects for prying the Muslim-majority province away

Georgia launched a major assault on the breakaway enclave of South Ossetia in August 2008 despite the presence of Russian “peacekeeping” forces in the province, several of whom were killed in the initial attack. The Russian Army struck back, drove the Georgians out, and went on to occupy not only South Ossetia but (temporarily) large chunks of Georgia proper. Finally, democratic states that join ongoing wars can also provide evidence regarding selection effects. It is not clear, for example, that the United States selected easy, winnable wars when it joined the two world wars and the Korean War.

Regarding the second mechanism, in which democratic leaders conceal the long-term costs of war to gain consent for fighting now, the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon is a possible case. Although Israel achieved its short-term objective of eliminating the Palestine Liberation Organization from Lebanon, the invasion spawned a new terrorist organization, Hezbollah, dedicated to violently resisting Israel’s presence in the country. The IDF occupied southern Lebanon for eighteen years but was ultimately unable to neutralize this resistance and withdrew in 2000. Michael Desch has already shown how a small faction of the Israeli leadership was able to take the nation to war against the will of the cabinet and the public.¹²⁶ They may have also downplayed the potential long-term costs of war to maintain short-term consent.

This article has argued that the relationship between democracy and military outcomes is more complicated than previously thought. Democratic processes can drive national leaders to start or enter wars they are not confident of winning, or get caught in quagmires by failing to confront the possible long-term consequences of a short-term victory. Just as further research is needed to parse out the countervailing effects of democracy, additional work is also needed on other determinants of military effectiveness. Desch, for instance, has restated the case for material power in accounting for war outcomes. Stephen Biddle has challenged the role of material factors, arguing instead that skilled force employment does a better job of explaining victory and defeat.¹²⁷ Why some states are better at force employment than

from India. Sumit Ganguly and Devin T. Hagerty, *Fearful Symmetry: India-Pakistan Crises in the Shadow of Nuclear Weapons* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), p. 158. For more on Kargil, see S. Paul Kapur, *Dangerous Deterrent: Nuclear Weapons Proliferation and Conflict in South Asia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 117–131.

126. Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness*, pp. 100–101.

127. *Ibid.*; and Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

others, however, is left out of Biddle's framework. One promising explanation is civil-military relations, but others have argued that conceptions of collective identity may hold the key.¹²⁸ This debate is ongoing, and more work needs to be done to resolve it, but this article suggests that democracy is not the simple answer it has been portrayed to be.

128. On civil-military relations, see Risa A. Brooks, *Shaping Strategy: The Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008); Weeks, "Leaders, Accountability, and Foreign Policy in Non-Democracies"; Biddle and Long, "Democracy and Military Effectiveness"; and Biddle and Zirkle, "Technology, Civil-Military Relations, and Warfare in the Developing World." On identity, see Castillo, "The Will to Fight"; and Jason M. Lyall, "Paths of Ruin: Why Revisionist States Arise and Die in World Politics," unpublished manuscript, Princeton University, 2006.