

War and the Inner Circle: Democratic Elites and the Politics of Using Force

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Much of the literature on domestic politics and war assumes that open political debate, and especially the role of public opinion, is a key distinguishing feature of democracies in the international arena. Yet scholarship on political behavior demonstrates that the public is uninformed about foreign policy and tends to take cues from elites. This paper argues that the importance of elite cues gives democratic elites a crucial and often-overlooked role in democratic foreign policymaking. Four features of an elite audience—different preferences, concentrated power, informational advantages, and small coalition size—mean that the political logic of facing an elite audience is distinct from the public-driven logic of traditional models. These features give democratic leaders strategic incentives to bargain with, accommodate, or co-opt key elites, and to manage information flow among elites themselves. These elite political dynamics yield different insights than a voter-driven model and have significant implications for theories of democracies and war. This paper explores these dynamics in the Vietnam War, arguing that Lyndon Johnson's main domestic political task was to manage elites as he pursued escalation.

Foreign policymaking in democracies contains a paradox. On the one hand, democratic leaders are subject to the political constraints imposed by regular elections. On the other hand, scholars of American political behavior have long emphasized that the public does not know much about foreign policy and often take cues from elites. In particular, the presence of elite consensus is an important determinant of public support for government policy, even

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in wartime.¹ Although much work on regime type in the last few decades has focused on how accountability to the public helps make democracies distinctive in the international arena, recent research has highlighted the role of elites. In democracies, for example, elite cues can trigger public opinion in ways that can either engage or mitigate public accountability mechanisms.² While many scholars acknowledge that elites are crucial cue givers, however, in both the IR literature and the literature on political behavior more generally, few studies investigate how the configuration of elite cues emerges. The origins of elite cues—and the elite consensus or division that results—have potentially crucial implications for understanding the role of domestic politics in democratic foreign policy. Are democratic elites a conduit for mass politics, or can they play an independent role in democratic foreign policy-making that offers an alternative pathway to understand how democracies make decisions about the use of force?

This paper contends that elite political dynamics are a crucial and overlooked political force in democracies, and that these dynamics are essential for understanding the nature of democracies in the international arena. I argue that the importance of elite cues yields strategic incentives for leaders to bargain with and accommodate key elites, who can impose costs on leaders that may influence how democracies use force in ways unanticipated by voter-driven accounts. The configuration of elite cues—especially, the presence of an elite consensus on the use of force—does not arise randomly or from a process of unfettered political debate. Rather, I posit that leaders play an “elite coalition game” at a level between their international interactions with other states and their direct contact with the domestic public. If leaders are able to earn and retain the support of other key elites, or at least prevent significant elite criticism, then they can effectively manage public opinion. But this process may require leaders to pay significant political costs or make policy concessions to elites, in ways that may alter or undermine the policy itself and that differ from the outcomes of more direct voter accommodation mechanisms. While this article does not directly test the relative importance of elite versus mass audiences, it suggests that elite audiences present democratic leaders with a distinct political logic that

¹ John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Adam J. Berinsky, *In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

² For examples in the context of crisis bargaining and domestic political audience costs, see Branislav L. Slantchev, “Politicians, the Media, and Domestic Audience Costs,” *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (June 2006): 445–47; Robert F. Trager and Lynn Vavreck, “The Political Costs of Crisis Bargaining: Presidential Rhetoric and the Role of Party,” *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 3 (July 2011): 526–45; Matthew S. Levendusky and Michael C. Horowitz, “When Backing Down Is the Right Decision: Partisanship, New Information, and Audience Costs,” *Journal of Politics* 74, no. 2 (April 2012): 323–38; Philip B. K. Potter and Matthew A. Baum, “Looking for Audience Costs in All the Wrong Places: Electoral Institutions, Media Access, and Democratic Constraint,” *Journal of Politics* 76, no. 1 (January 2014): 167–81.

may keep the public in the background and, at times, short-circuit the more direct role of public opinion. By “elites,” I mean those with at least some access to the state’s decision-making apparatus and information sources and who are seen as authoritative in their domains.³ For use of force decisions, legislators, high-level bureaucrats, and military leaders are the most likely elites to matter systematically.

Four features of an elite audience distinguish it from a mass public audience. First, elites have a different distribution of preferences than voters. Second, elites have concentrated power that can magnify the political influence of certain viewpoints relative to their representation among the electorate. Third, elites with different levels of information, power, and access also serve as information and signaling sources for other elites who may themselves lack knowledge or seek political or bureaucratic cover. Fourth, elite audiences are smaller and thus more targetable through side-payments or accommodations.

These features of an elite audience give the democratic leader strategic incentives to manage a coalition of elites. Elites have leverage over leaders through two mechanisms. The first, and the main focus of this paper, is elites’ ability to impose direct costs on the leader, for instance by withholding or blocking something the leader wants. This mechanism gives leaders incentives to accommodate elites who are pivotal to achieving key policy aims; to co-opt opponents; and to manage information flow even among elites, for example by accommodating elites who provide information or political cover to others, or ensuring that information that might undermine policy does not reach those who could impose political costs. In the context of US foreign policy, an important manifestation of this mechanism is that elites’ ability to stymie a president’s legislative agenda or other policy aims can alter how the leader evaluates the political costs of fighting or staying out of a conflict. Although this mechanism has been recognized, particularly in the context of the Vietnam War and Lyndon Johnson’s concern with the Great Society, the intra-elite informational and bargaining dynamics remain to be explored.⁴ The second mechanism is that elite dissent can serve as a “fire alarm” to alert rationally ignorant voters to problems with the leader’s policies. Although this paper concentrates on the potential direct costs elites can impose, I discuss the possibility that elite debate or discontent will spill into public discourse because it is an important indirect cost stemming from

³ For a discussion, see Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, D. Alex Hughes, and David G. Victor, “The Cognitive Revolution and the Political Psychology of Elite Decision Making,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 2 (June 2013): 368–86.

⁴ Although the Great Society-Vietnam connection has been discussed and debated extensively in the historical literature (as discussed below), it is rarely explored in theoretical terms in international relations scholarship. One exception is Alexander B. Downes, “How Smart and Tough Are Democracies? Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War,” *International Security* 33, no. 4 (Spring 2009): 9–51.

elites and the two mechanisms cannot be fully separated.⁵ Leaders thus also have an incentive to accommodate those who could be particularly credible cue givers to the public. These mechanisms go beyond arguments that elites simply manipulate or deceive the public.⁶

The argument suggests that while the public still plays a role, in at least some cases, elites are on the front lines of domestic political accountability in democracies. Such an argument, in turn, has potentially important implications for understanding how democracies behave in the international arena. First, focusing on an elite audience may yield different theoretical and empirical insights than a voter-driven model. Second, an elite-centered pathway for democratic foreign policymaking may help put in context recent (though still-debated) findings that democracies and autocracies are similar in several aspects of their conflict behavior.⁷ After two decades of scholarship focusing on the potential advantages that democracies enjoy in foreign affairs—including making threats and fighting wars—recent research has suggested that some authoritarian regimes may behave similarly to democracies in the international arena.⁸ Much of this work has emphasized political accountability in some authoritarian regimes. But an alternative pathway for elite influence in democracies suggests that democracies may have lower levels of public contestation than idealized views of public opinion suggest, possibly weakening some of the proposed mechanisms that make democracies distinctive. Third, and relatedly, although this paper does not examine audience costs directly, an elite-centered argument may have implications for democratic credibility. Although these implications remain to be fully explored, one possibility is that if leaders can limit accountability to a small number of elites, then elite political dynamics may weaken potential credibility-enhancing features of democracies (such as free flow of information or the inability to target coalition members with private goods).

⁵ I provide a more complete discussion of the public “fire alarm” mechanism elsewhere. See Elizabeth N. Saunders, “The Political Origins of Elite Support for War: How Democratic Leaders Manage Public Opinion” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, February 2015).

⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth About Lying in International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); John M. Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics, and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

⁷ For example, in the context of audience costs, see Jessica L. Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve,” *International Organization* 62, no. 1 (January 2008): 35–64; Alexander B. Downes and Todd S. Sechser, “The Illusion of Democratic Credibility,” *International Organization* 66, no. 3 (July 2012): 457–89.

⁸ Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs”; Jessica Chen Weiss, “Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences and Nationalist Protest in China,” *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (January 2013): 1–35; Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015). Previous, seminal work in the “democratic advantage” school includes James D. Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (September 1994): 577–92; Kenneth A. Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), chap. 6.

This paper uses the Vietnam War to explore the dynamics of an elite audience. Examining a major war is a difficult case for an elite-driven explanation, since we might expect public opinion to be engaged on this of all foreign policy issues. Since the war escalated most significantly under Lyndon Johnson, his decisions are the main focus. There is a wide, though not universal, consensus that domestic political considerations played at least some role in the decision to escalate US involvement in Vietnam, as well as the military strategy.⁹ Yet the nature of Johnson's domestic political problem is somewhat puzzling, given that the public did not know much about Vietnam and that Johnson won the 1964 election in a landslide. I argue that while Johnson was motivated by electoral considerations, he was aware that his main domestic political task was to manage elites as he pursued escalation. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of an elite democratic audience for understanding crisis behavior, democratic credibility, and escalation.

PUBLIC OPINION, ELITES, AND DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Traditional models of crisis bargaining and war that introduce domestic politics typically rely on an electoral mechanism that allows voters to hold leaders accountable for enacting, or failing to enact, policies that accord with voter preferences. Scholarship in this vein has examined how public political contestation—which features voters prominently—points toward democratic advantages in crisis bargaining and warfighting. For example, Dan Reiter and Allan Stam argue that democracies tend to win the wars they fight as “a direct result of the constraining power of political consent granted to the leaders and the people’s ability to withdraw it.”¹⁰ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and colleagues’ selectorate model also argues that democracies are more selective and fight harder in the wars they choose to fight, in part because in democracies the “winning coalition” that keeps a leader in power is a simple majority of the selectorate, which consists of all citizens who can vote. The need to generate public goods to satisfy this larger audience (for example,

⁹ See, for example, Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982); Leslie Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1979); Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). More recently, see Francis M. Bator, “No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection,” *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 3 (June 2008): 309–40 (as well as the responses to Bator cited below).

¹⁰ Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, 9.

by putting more effort into winning wars) distinguishes democracies from autocracies with a smaller selectorate.¹¹

In terms of the role of public opinion in escalating crises or wars, the literature on audience costs has emphasized how public scrutiny can help democracies make more credible threats because the public disapproves of and will ultimately punish leaders who threaten to fight or escalate but then back down. For example, James Fearon's original formulation of audience cost theory—in which leaders pay costs for backing down from threats in crises—posited the “plausible working hypothesis” that democratic leaders could more easily generate credibility-enhancing audience costs (although as Branislav Slantchev notes, the original theory did not contain a mechanism linking regime type to audience costs).¹² Somewhat lost in the debate has been the definition of the domestic audience itself, not only in audience cost theory, but in terms of the audience for foreign policy decisions more generally.¹³ Fearon noted that “relevant domestic audiences have included kings, rival ministers, opposition politicians, Senate committees, politburos, and, since the mid-nineteenth century, mass publics informed by mass media in many cases.”¹⁴ Much subsequent work assumes that the public is the main domestic audience in democracies.¹⁵ Even a prominent critique of audience cost theory points instead to the role of hawkish publics who may want their leaders to fight.¹⁶

A recent wave of research has highlighted problems with what we might term the “democratic advantage” school. One strand has taken a more nuanced view of authoritarian regimes, arguing that domestic political accountability is possible in some autocracies through elite or even mass political mechanisms, potentially allowing these regimes to make credible threats or initiate wars at similar rates to democracies.¹⁷ On the democratic side, a significant problem with focusing on the public is that the public is

¹¹ Bueno de Mesquita et al., *Logic of Political Survival*, 69–70; chap. 9. See also David A. Lake, “Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War,” *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 1 (March 1992): 24–37.

¹² Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences,” 582; Branislav L. Slantchev, “Audience Cost Theory and Its Audiences,” *Security Studies* 21, no. 3 (August 2012): 376–82.

¹³ For a recent exception that nonetheless still focuses on public opinion, see Joshua D. Kertzer and Ryan Brutger, “Decomposing Audience Costs: Bringing the Audience Back into Audience Cost Theory,” *American Journal of Political Science* (forthcoming).

¹⁴ Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences,” 581.

¹⁵ See, for example, Alastair Smith, “International Crises and Domestic Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 3 (September 1998): 623–38. The experimental work on audience costs also reflects this assumption. See Michael Tomz, “Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach,” *International Organization* 61, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 821–40.

¹⁶ Jack Snyder and Erica D. Borghard, “The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound,” *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 3 (August 2011): 437–56.

¹⁷ Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs”; Weiss, “Authoritarian Signaling.”

rarely informed enough to hold leaders accountable.¹⁸ Indeed, scholars of American political behavior have shown that even in wartime, elite cues mediate judgments about a leader's decisions.¹⁹ The configuration of elite cues helps shape the public's response. In the work of John Zaller and extensions in the study of war by Adam Berinsky, there are two contrasting configurations: when elites are united, the attentive public will generally support government policy; when elites disagree, the public will follow the views of the elites they support on partisan grounds.²⁰ This strategy is rational for busy voters who want to economize on the costs of information gathering.

Some scholars have highlighted the importance of elite cues in democratic settings. For example, in the context of audience costs, Matthew Levendusky and Michael Horowitz find that elites can provide cues that can mitigate audience costs, such as information that backing down was the right decision or that there is bipartisan support in Congress for the president's policy.²¹ Philip Potter and Matthew Baum argue that leaders have an incentive to hide foreign policy blunders and that the public relies on elites with independent access to information (usually, opposition parties) to inform them of significant problems. They show that variation in the number of political parties and in access to free media affects the ability of democracies to generate audience costs, which do not arise "mechanistically or universally."²²

While these arguments have pushed the debate forward, IR theory has still not fully taken on board the implications of elite leadership and rational voter ignorance. Furthermore, existing elite approaches have yet to explore a key dimension of democratic competition: strategic behavior by democratic leaders. Leaders are not passive actors and have incentives to try to keep

¹⁸ See, for example, Slantchev, "Politicians, the Media, and Domestic Audience Costs"; Erik Gartzke and Yonatan Lupu, "Still Looking for Audience Costs," *Security Studies* 21, no. 3 (August 2012): 391–97; Potter and Baum, "Looking for Audience Costs in All the Wrong Places."

¹⁹ Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, 102–106, chap. 9; Berinsky, *In Time of War*. For an overview of political communication's implications for foreign policy, see Matthew A. Baum and Philip B.K. Potter, "The Relationships between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 39–65.

²⁰ Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, chap. 6; Berinsky, *In Time of War*, 66–71.

²¹ Levendusky and Horowitz, "When Backing Down Is the Right Decision." Additionally, Schultz gives a prominent role to opposition elites, although voters play an important sanctioning role. See Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*. Other scholarship that highlights elites in democratic contexts (but that does not focus on the strategic dimensions of elite interaction) includes John M. Owen, "How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace," *International Security* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 87–125; Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Jon W. Western, *Selling Intervention and War: The Presidency, the Media, and the American Public* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). Jack Snyder highlights elite coalition politics in the case of the American Cold War consensus and the Vietnam War, but argues that the effects of elite politics in democracies are relatively minor and that the Cold War effects were temporary. See Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 257.

²² Potter and Baum, "Looking for Audience Costs in All the Wrong Places," 169.

elites on board to prevent dissent from cuing the public in the first place. Additionally, leaders have other priorities, perhaps international or domestic, that might be affected by their crisis behavior. Key elites may have preferences and leverage that allow them to impose direct costs on the leader, suggesting that the leader may have incentives to accommodate them even if voters are not paying attention.²³ Finally, many of the democratic advantage arguments (both older and newer) focus on opposition parties as the key actors. But other elite actors within a democracy may be important information sources not only for the public but also for other elites, which in turn gives leaders incentives to take steps to keep that information hidden. The domestic political costs that affect decisions about war and peace may vary even within a single democracy or a single set of democratic institutions, raising further theoretical questions as well as concerns about the substance of policy in a crucial democratic power like the United States.²⁴

ELITE AUDIENCES AND DOMESTIC POLITICAL COSTS

I argue that rather than the mass public, the main audience for foreign policy choices is often a relatively small number of elites. There are two principal ways that elites can supplant voters as the proximate audience for a leader's decisions. First, elites can impose direct costs on a leader in ways that may only partially represent or, in some cases, directly contradict, the latent or expressed preferences of voters. Second, elites can provide cues to the public. Both of these mechanisms yield strategic incentives for the chief executive, who can use the tools of his office to avoid the costs elites can impose directly or through their effect on the public.

In more formal terms, the traditional crisis bargaining and escalation framework conceives of a two-level game, with the top level depicted as a crisis bargaining game between two states, and a second level played between a leader and a domestic audience, often assumed to be the mass public in a democracy.²⁵ I posit that there is an intermediate game between

²³ See Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?"

²⁴ Of course, there could be interesting variation across different types of democratic regimes in terms of the mechanisms I identify in this paper, as Potter and Baum suggest. See Potter and Baum, "Looking for Audience Costs in All the Wrong Places." Given this paper's goal of establishing the elite audience in democracies and the mechanisms through which it can impose costs on democratic leaders, I restrict my focus to a single democracy—the United States—where we might expect public opinion to play an especially significant role and whose foreign policy is of crucial importance to the international system. Future research might explore how the mechanisms I identify vary across democratic regimes.

²⁵ For an example that assumes the public is the domestic audience, see Smith, "International Crises and Domestic Politics." On two-level games, see Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 427–60. It is notable that Putnam's argument did not assume that the domestic level consisted of the voting public and instead focused on elites and interest groups. As mentioned, some models, such as Schultz's, give an intermediate role to elites. See Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*.

the crisis bargaining and public game: an elite coalition or “insiders” game. Leaders can attempt to keep the voters in the background and minimize electoral consequences by playing this intermediate game; alternatively, a leader could choose to engage the public (for example, in order to activate the traditional notion of public audience costs), but this process is not frictionless and will also involve managing elites. Even if the public remains disengaged, however, the leader must still confront domestic politics within the elite coalition game because some elites may have the ability to impose direct costs. The elite coalition game is thus a crucial step that can give certain elites leverage over policy and can short-circuit the logic of voter accountability.

In this paper, I concentrate on the first mechanism—the direct costs that elites can impose on leaders and the consequences for democratic warfighting when leaders attempt to avoid these costs. Both mechanisms may operate, however, and they are also not completely independent. Intra-elite conflict may spill over into the public domain, triggering a public “fire alarm” that wakes the rationally “sleeping” voter.²⁶ But to the extent that the leader focuses on the “insiders’ game,” both mechanisms keep information and decision making behind the scenes, and empower certain elites with preferences that potentially diverge from those of voters. Although they are not the central concern of this paper, I include observable implications about the indirect costs that can be activated when elites cue the public and include empirical evidence about indirect costs in the Vietnam case. It is useful to include potential spillover effects to show that leaders are concerned about public opinion but that elite opinion can be more proximate and managing elite opinion serves as a way to keep the public quiescent.

The direct costs elites can impose on leaders could take several forms. In the US context, one important example is domestic legislation, which could be blocked or held hostage to concerns about crisis management. In theory, this mechanism could point in either direction: legislators with preferences more dovish than the leader could block legislation if the leader pursues more hawkish policies than they prefer; or conversely, hawks could threaten to stymie legislation if the leader does not fight or escalate. An actual vote on the legislation is not required; congressional influence is often felt indirectly through the mechanism of “anticipated reactions.”²⁷ Legislators could impose costs in other ways that do not directly involve legislation, however.

²⁶ On fire alarms, see Mathew D. McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz, “Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Police Patrols Versus Fire Alarms,” *American Journal of Political Science* 28, no. 1 (February 1984): 165–79; on the media as a “burglar alarm” that allows citizens to cheaply monitor government, see John Zaller, “A New Standard of News Quality: Burglar Alarms for the Monitorial Citizen,” *Political Communication* 20, no. 2 (2003): 109–30.

²⁷ In the context of the use of force, see especially William G. Howell and Jon C. Pevehouse, *While Dangers Gather: Congressional Checks on Presidential War Powers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 18–19.

For example, members of Congress could use their oversight function to investigate or thwart other executive branch policies. Congress could also bottle up or influence nominees for key positions. Such moves reduce the leader's political capital, which in turn affects his ability to accomplish his goals at home and abroad.

Elites inside the government or military who are displeased with the leader's policy choice or strategy could also impose costs. These might take the form of implementation costs, for example if officials drag their feet in carrying out a policy or actively try to subvert or undermine it, reducing its probability of success and increasing the material or political costs to the leader. As discussed below, elites could also impose costs, or contribute to the process of imposing them, by providing information to other elites (for example, by testifying before Congress). Some of these direct costs, particularly the legislative motive, have been raised in an empirical context (perhaps most prominently in the context of Vietnam and the Great Society), but rarely in theoretical terms.²⁸

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF ELITE AUDIENCES

A key question is how an elite democratic audience might alter the predictions of crisis bargaining models. If elites faithfully represent or serve the interests of the voters, then a model that focuses on elites would not make different predictions. In this section, I outline four features that distinguish elite audiences. Each of these features alters the political logic for leaders compared to a world in which they confront a mass audience more directly (or in which elites serve merely as conduits for voter preferences).

Elite Preferences

Elites have a different distribution of preferences. For example, there is significant evidence that there are large and persistent gaps between elite and mass preferences about the use of force, both in surveys, and in empirical cases, where as Slantchev notes, democratic publics are often less hawkish than elites.²⁹ In many instances, large segments of the public may not have well-defined preferences, especially over policy implementation or strategy.

²⁸ Two exceptions are Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?" and Christopher Gelpi and Joseph M. Grieco, "Competency Costs in Foreign Affairs: Presidential Performance in International Conflicts and Domestic Legislative Success, 1953–2001," *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 2 (April 2015): 440–56. Although Gelpi and Grieco explore how foreign policy affects presidents' ability to pass domestic legislation, their argument still relies on public approval of the president's handling of foreign policy as the driving force behind legislators' behavior.

²⁹ On survey evidence, see Benjamin I. Page and Marshall Bouton, *The Foreign Policy Disconnect: What Americans Want from Our Leaders but Don't Get* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006),

Furthermore, elites are likely to have diverse preferences about the use of force itself, both among civilian elite groups and between civilian and military elites.³⁰ If elites have diverse preferences—which is especially likely in crises where the costs and benefits of making or resisting threats are debatable—then leaders will need to balance escalatory pressure from hawks with pressure to deescalate or stay out from doves.

Concentrated Power

Elite power is by definition more concentrated than voter influence, so that even a few key elites can carry significant weight. This concentrated power can lead to overrepresentation and disproportionate empowerment of certain preferences, such as hawkishness. Constitutional and procedural features of democratic institutions can amplify these effects, as in the case of the United States Senate, which overrepresents certain voices. To the extent that different regions exhibit distinctive international preferences—as research on Southern concern for honor and its influence on support for war suggests—then the political power afforded by Senate representation would magnify those preferences.³¹ Additionally, party leaders or legislators who are key to the success of a given bill or policy will have particular leverage. Models of legislative politics in the United States, for example, highlight the importance of “pivotal” legislators, such as those at the filibuster point, who are more critical than those who represent the median voter.³² Within the bureaucracy or military, those who implement policy (and thus could increase its costs to the president or undermine its success) are particularly important.

Information and Intra-Elite Cues

Apart from their direct role in approving or blocking policies, certain elites have informational advantages not only over the public but also over other elites themselves. The informational advantage of elites over the public is

chap. 7. On the tendency for publics to be more dovish than elites, see Slantchev, “Politicians, the Media, and Domestic Audience Costs,” 449.

³⁰ On differing civilian and military preferences about the use of force, see, for example, Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). On differences in beliefs among leaders, see Elizabeth N. Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

³¹ On honor and war in the context of the South, see Allan Dafoe and Devin Caughey, “Honor and War: Southern US Presidents and the Effects of Concern for Reputation” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, Montreal, 2011); Rachel M. Stein, “Crime, Punishment, and War,” PhD diss. (Stanford University, 2012), chap. 5.

³² Keith Krehbiel, *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

well established, as is the president's advantage over Congress, at least at the beginning of crises.³³ But there is also important variation among elites that yields leverage for those in the know. Even within Congress, some members have special expertise on foreign policy and defense issues; others largely ignore foreign policy and may be looking to the leadership or to the highly informed for their own cue to provide information or political cover. Bureaucrats and military officials are, of course, insiders, but even here there will be variation given that information is a form of power.

Intra-elite cuing dynamics are thus important. Just as voters may be looking for a shortcut or cue to help them form an opinion without paying the direct costs of gathering information, so some elites may be looking for low-cost information shortcuts. Some elites will serve as more effective sources of information than others and thus will be more important players in the elite coalition game because they could trigger a cascade of criticism (or help build a chorus of support). The literature on cue taking in the public opinion context suggests that people look to those whom they perceive to be trustworthy and knowledgeable (such as their own co-partisans, and those who are perceived to be authoritative on an issue) and that surprising or costly cues that go against expectations will be particularly informative.³⁴ Party leaders, or those with strong reputations on foreign policy, will be important and authoritative information sources, as will military leaders or key bureaucratic officials. In terms of costly signals, we would expect that criticism from within the leader's own party or administration, or from top military officials (especially those perceived to be close to the leader), will be particularly damaging, and that support from opposition party leaders will be especially helpful.³⁵

Coalition Size

Elites are, by definition, smaller in number. International relations theorists have emphasized coalition size as important for understanding how democracies select and fight wars. In Bueno de Mesquita et al.'s selectorate model,

³³ See Baum and Potter, "The Relationships between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy."

³⁴ Arthur Lupia and Mathew D. McCubbins, *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chap. 3; Matthew A. Baum and Tim J. Groeling, *War Stories: The Causes and Consequences of Public Views of War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), chap. 2.

³⁵ Opposition party support and same-party criticism are well established as more informative cues in the literature on public opinion and foreign policy. See Baum and Groeling, *War Stories*, chap. 2. But signals from other elites such as bureaucratic or military insiders have been less frequently explored, not only in terms of direct public cuing but in terms of intra-elite cuing dynamics. One exception that explores military elites as cue givers is Kyle Dropp, Peter Feaver, and James Golby, "Elite Military Signals and the Use of Force" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC, 2014).

for example, smaller winning coalitions mean that leaders can buy off members with private goods, whereas when the winning coalition grows large, leaders can only provide public goods to keep their coalition happy. Since they argue that the selectorate in a democracy is the mass public, the larger coalition size gives democratic leaders an imperative to provide the public good of fighting only wars that are likely to result in victory and to fight well.³⁶ Building on this logic, Jonathan Brown and Anthony Marcum go so far as to argue that autocracies' smaller coalitions of "highly placed regime insiders" result in greater accountability because smaller coalitions can more easily monitor and sanction leaders.³⁷

If, however, democratic elites are the main audience, then democracies share both the advantages and disadvantages of small coalitions. In general it is easier for smaller coalitions to overcome collective action problems, and any given elite will have more concentrated leverage than individual voters.³⁸ But on the other hand, leaders who wish to avoid even the small possibility of foreign policy-related punishment can more easily target such elites for policy concessions or side payments to keep elites on board. It may be simpler for leaders to convince other elites to support their policies relative to trying to persuade the voters directly, especially in light of evidence that the "bully pulpit" is not very effective.³⁹

POLITICAL LOGIC OF AN ELITE AUDIENCE

These four features of an elite audience—different preferences, concentrated power, informational advantages, and small coalition size—mean that the political logic of facing an elite audience is distinct from the public-driven logic of traditional models. This logic yields observable implications that help distinguish whether leaders are concerned about direct political costs imposed by elites or the costs imposed by voters. Although each of these implications is important, I pay particular attention in this section to the role of information, since it is critical to existing arguments about democratic distinctiveness.

First, we would expect to see leaders invest significant effort in persuading or bargaining with elites who could be particularly influential in imposing costs, such as holding up the leader's legislative agenda, damaging

³⁶ Bueno de Mesquita et al., *Logic of Political Survival*, chap. 6.

³⁷ Jonathan N. Brown and Anthony S. Marcum, "Avoiding Audience Costs: Domestic Political Accountability and Concessions in Crisis Diplomacy," *Security Studies* 20, no. 2 (April 2011): 143.

³⁸ Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965); in the context of audience costs, see Brown and Marcum, "Avoiding Audience Costs."

³⁹ On the ineffectiveness of the bully pulpit, see George C. Edwards, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

other policy initiatives, or harming the implementation of the leader's preferred policy. Keeping key elites on board may involve tactics that do not affect the policy itself but increase the political costs of pursuing it, such as using threats, calling in favors, or engaging in negotiations on other policy dimensions. Alternatively, leaders can make concessions on strategy or implementation, which may affect the policy itself.⁴⁰ The need to accommodate a potentially diverse coalition of elites may result in military strategies that reflect cross pressures from both doves and hawks.

Second, we would also expect to see leaders attempt to co-opt potential opponents or those who could bring other groups of elites along with them. Such co-optation not only helps directly neutralize opposition by reducing the political cost to others of supporting the leader (and increasing the costs of dissent), but also serves an informational function by signaling surprising information to other elites, thus helping with intra-elite cuing (as discussed below). Attracting the support of powerful or well-informed legislators known to be skeptical, for example, is especially helpful. Patterns of bureaucratic appointments may also take concerns about political cover into account. On the one hand, there are benefits to including members of the opposition in key positions—as both Johnson and his predecessor, John F. Kennedy, did with Republican presidential hopeful Henry Cabot Lodge. On the other hand, giving such figures access to information and a platform for sharing it can be dangerous, suggesting that such appointments will be rare.

Third, there are especially critical implications of an elite audience for the role of information in democratic foreign policymaking. The free flow of information is central to democratic advantage arguments. Kenneth Schultz, for example, argues that access to information is a foundational requirement of democracy. He argues that opposition parties can gain sufficient access to judge a democratic leader's policy because parties rotate in office, crises usually stem from long-running disputes, institutions like specialized committees engage in their own information gathering, and parties themselves aggregate information.⁴¹ Similarly, Reiter and Stam's argument about democratic advantages in selecting and fighting wars relies in part on open discussion and debate, or the "marketplace of ideas."⁴² On the other hand, some scholars point to democratic leaders' ability to deceive but focus mainly on deception of the public or the domestic audience writ large.⁴³

But these arguments do not account for variation in elite information and attention to foreign policy, and especially, for the strategic incentives this

⁴⁰ I explore this process elsewhere in detail. See Saunders, "The Political Origins of Elite Support for War."

⁴¹ Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*, 62–65.

⁴² Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, 23–25.

⁴³ See, for example, Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War*; Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie*.

variation affords the leader.⁴⁴ Elites' need for information creates incentives for the president to manage intra-elite information channels and cues, possibly leading to the suppression of information not only from the public, but also from other key elites themselves. Even elites with an interest or stake in a policy need access to information. Military leaders and key administration officials, for example, can provide information both within the executive branch and to Congress. In the case of Congress, testimony that conveys information that is unfavorable to administration policy (for instance, military officials signaling that a war is going poorly) can serve as a "fire alarm," in the classic sense of information that helps Congress play its oversight role without direct "police patrol" oversight.⁴⁵ Even within the bureaucracy, some officials have access to critical information that, if shared, would inform others with known biases or with control over aspects of policy. Civil-military relations also suggest that both the military and its civilian overseers have information that, if shared, might increase political and material costs. The leader knows his own war aims and intended strategy, but the military may have different preferences (and could share its displeasure with politically relevant elites).⁴⁶

Elites need information if they are to impose costs on the leader, but leaders, in turn, can manage or block information flow. Leaders can close information channels to legislators, for example by managing who testifies before Congress. More direct information management and secrecy, even inside the bureaucracy or between the bureaucracy and the military, can help leaders prevent elites from imposing costs. Leaders can cut certain elites out of the information chain, or co-opt others by bringing them into the inner circle. Though they risk the displeasure of elites who are cut out of the loop, controlling information helps keep certain elites from serving as negative cue givers, as well as keeping them from influencing decision making itself. Even more ominously, as Alexander Downes notes in the context of civil-military relations and the marketplace of ideas, leaders can make disingenuous promises of future policies that the bureaucracy or the military would prefer in exchange for cooperation now.⁴⁷ Certain elites may thus be relegated to a role similar to the uninformed public—they will follow the lead of key cue givers and without those cues remain largely in the background.

⁴⁴ One exception is Chaim Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War," *International Security* 29, no. 1 (Summer 2004): 5–48.

⁴⁵ McCubbins and Schwartz, "Congressional Oversight Overlooked."

⁴⁶ On military compliance with civilian preferences in the context of a principal-agent problem, see Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁴⁷ Alexander B. Downes, "The Myth of Choosy Democracies: Examining the Selection Effects Theory of Democratic Victory in War," *H-Diplo-ISSF Roundtable* 2, no. 12 (July 2011): 71–72.

Suppression of information inside a democratic government suggests that information does not necessarily flow freely enough to satisfy Schultz's criteria.⁴⁸ Opposition parties are likely to see a biased sample of information that the leader takes care to manage. Furthermore, the surprising (and therefore credible) nature of dissent from the leader's own party, in turn, may also provide an incentive to manage information that the leader shares even with co-partisans. Johnson's co-optation and even deception of J. William Fulbright during the Tonkin Gulf crisis highlights how even administration allies can be misled in the service of building an elite consensus. There may be incentives to bottle up or partition information within the bureaucracy or in civil-military interactions, particularly to keep information from flowing to those who could affect policy implementation or to Congress. Notably, these incentives to suppress information are much broader than those expected by existing challenges to the marketplace of ideas mechanism. Although Reiter discusses secrecy in decision making and admits that it can shortcircuit the marketplace of ideas, he assumes that in private debates information flows relatively freely within the government, and restrictions on the decision-making group generally arise from the imperative to avoid diplomatic or military leaks to foreign adversaries (rather than domestic political actors).⁴⁹ Downes highlights pathologies in civil-military relations (including information suppression) but does not explore other intra-elite cueing dynamics theoretically.⁵⁰

Finally, although I am mainly concerned here with the direct costs elites can impose on leaders, it is important to consider how these elite dynamics might affect public opinion. Even leaving aside deliberate attempts to cue public attention, there remains the risk that intra-elite wrangling and bargaining will find its way into public debate. The possibility of spillover into the public domain will make leaders especially careful to accommodate those elites who would be effective cue givers to the public (that is, surprising or costly cues from inside the leader's administration or party, or those from particularly powerful figures). The most damaging combination for leaders is elite division and high public salience, because it undermines support for government policy on an important issue, as Zaller and Berinsky demonstrate.⁵¹ In rare cases, high enough salience can trigger the possibility of electoral consequences. Elite division and salience are not completely independent, of course, since significant elite dissent can garner media attention. Thus while the shadow of public opinion looms even in the case of direct

⁴⁸ On this point, see Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?" 35n68. My argument goes further by suggesting which voices leaders are most likely to try to silence.

⁴⁹ Dan Reiter, "A Closer Look at Case Studies on Democracy, Selection Effects, and Victory," *H-Diplo-ISSF Roundtable 2*, no. 12 (July 2011): 10–12.

⁵⁰ Downes, "The Myth of Choosy Democracies," 70–74. Downes does discuss administration suppression of information in the context of Vietnam, however. See *ibid.*, 81–87.

⁵¹ Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, chap. 6; Berinsky, *In Time of War*, 66–71.

costs imposed by elites, a crucial distinction between an elite-based account and a more direct role for a public audience is that leaders can short-circuit the process of engaging public attention.

Overall, the argument suggests that the nature of elite audiences introduces imperatives that are features rather than pathologies of democratic institutions. Democratic elites vary in power and preferences in ways that do not merely reflect the population; they exist in hierarchical relationships and require information to engage in political behavior. Leaders make bargains with some, while shutting out or co-opting others, in ways that can effectively relegate some elites to the background while elevating others to pivotal roles. The public is still the ultimate arbiter, but its voice is a blunt instrument that can be further muted by a leader's strategic behavior.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION: LATENT PUBLIC OPINION?

It is important to consider alternative explanations for the elite audience argument. One alternative is that leaders are responsive more directly to public opinion. If the elite audience model is correct, we might expect that leaders will not be responsive to public opinion as expressed in polling and that public dissatisfaction is likely to follow elite dissent. But if elites lead mass opinion, then we would expect elite and mass opinion to track relatively closely, making inferences difficult. One can look at opinion prior to crises, and indeed such evidence is useful in the Vietnam case. But another issue is that electoral arguments are usually based on retrospective punishment, rather than contemporaneous responsiveness to public opinion.

A more plausible alternative argument, then, is that leaders are responsive not to contemporaneous or even precrisis opinion but to "latent" public opinion, an important but elusive concept first articulated by V. O. Key.⁵² As Zaller summarizes, "latent opinion is opinion that might exist at some point in the future in response to the decision makers' actions and may perhaps result in political damage or even the defeat at the polls."⁵³ If leaders believe that latent opinion will disapprove of failure to act, then current or precrisis opinion may not be particularly informative. Indeed, Zaller suggests that Johnson feared latent opinion on Vietnam. Zaller goes further, arguing that in Vietnam, both Kennedy and especially Johnson responded to what they saw as latent public sentiment that would not tolerate Vietnam's loss, but also would not support a lengthy military effort to prevent it. The public, in this view, wanted a "free lunch"—to save Vietnam at low cost—and had a

⁵² V. O. Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1961), chap. 11.

⁵³ John Zaller, "Coming to Grips with V. O. Key's Concept of Latent Opinion," in *Electoral Democracy*, ed. Michael B. MacKuen and George Rabinowitz (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 311.

propensity to avoid painful tradeoffs.⁵⁴ This argument suggests that the median voter might affirmatively prefer compromise strategies that escalate at relatively low cost, as in the Vietnam case.⁵⁵ A policy that appears to average the preferences of hawkish and dovish elites, then, could also represent an appeal to the anticipated reaction of the median voter.

A first consideration in assessing whether elite or median voter preferences drive strategy in cases like Vietnam is whether latent public opinion is an underlying preference of the mass public, or instead would require an elite cue to trigger public disapproval of the president, as Zaller himself hints.⁵⁶ Leaders could therefore try to co-opt other elites and build a coalition to shape latent opinion or share blame with political opponents. Furthermore, there are several more direct ways to distinguish an elite audience argument from a latent public opinion model. If leaders are trying to simultaneously appease two wings of elites with divergent preferences, rather than anticipate the reaction of the median voter (or the elites who represent them), we would expect to see leaders appealing to or accommodating elites on the extremes, rather than building a coalition in the middle.⁵⁷ If leaders are concerned about legislation, then they may be particularly focused on the war preferences of those who are veto players on the relevant issue (as in the Great Society case).⁵⁸

To distinguish between latent public preferences and elite influence over strategy, we can also look at patterns of secrecy and internal elite debate. If the public had a more direct preference for middle-of-the-road policies (for example, an escalation strategy that did not go all-in) one might expect that information would still flow relatively openly within government in the service of this basic strategy. If the goal is simply not to lose and informed elites understand this approach, then the incentives to mislead elites and manage intra-elite information channels should not be as strong. If, instead, leaders are balancing between pressure to do more from hawkish elites and pressure to do less from dovish elites, then we would expect leaders to have incentives to mislead or placate both groups of elites and, in some cases, keep information from flowing between them so that the hawks do not learn the limited nature of the strategy and the doves do not understand

⁵⁴ Ibid., 317.

⁵⁵ Jonathan Caverley makes a different argument with a similar prediction: that the voters prefer strategies that shelter labor (troops) with capital (firepower) and thus have an affirmative preference for fighting insurgencies like the one in Vietnam with strategically dubious firepower-intensive strategies. Caverley, "The Myth of Military Myopia: Democracy, Small Wars, and Vietnam," *International Security* 34, no. 3 (Winter 2009/2010): 119–57. For a contrary view deemphasizing the role of public opinion, see James McAllister, "Who Lost Vietnam? Soldiers, Civilians, and U.S. Military Strategy," *International Security* 35, no. 3 (Winter 2010/2011): 95–123.

⁵⁶ Zaller, "Coming to Grips with V. O. Key's Concept of Latent Opinion," 313–14.

⁵⁷ On "pivotal" elites who do not represent the median voter, see Krehbiel, *Pivotal Politics*.

⁵⁸ George Tsebelis, *Veto Players: How Political Institutions Work* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

how far the war will be escalated. In essence, the pattern of secrecy and decision making when leaders must appeal to two wings of the elite, rather than a mass audience with a single preference, will look different even if the average policy predicted by both arguments might be similar.

JOHNSON, ELITES, AND THE VIETNAM WAR

In the remainder of this paper, I illustrate the argument by looking at the nature of the democratic audience a leader confronts and its influence on escalation decisions. Many of the observable implications discussed above involve strategic behavior by the leader, which is traceable in case studies.⁵⁹ A complete exploration of the theory is impossible here, but as a first step the Vietnam case offers an opportunity for a “plausibility probe” of the role of intra-elite bargaining and direct elite political costs.⁶⁰ Examining a significant use of force by the United States is helpful because we might expect public opinion to play a particularly significant role in a relatively “weak” state, in the sense of a government characterized by greater decentralization and openness to societal actors, and to be especially relevant in matters of war and peace.⁶¹ The Great Society-Vietnam connection has been analyzed empirically but lacks theoretical grounding in the debate about domestic politics and war. Although domestic political motives are difficult to trace because leaders rarely admit such motives (even in private), Johnson’s candor sheds more than the usual level of light on how domestic politics mattered in Vietnam. Interestingly, aspects of the US escalation in Vietnam are mentioned in the original audience cost literature, but the political dynamics are rarely examined closely.⁶²

⁵⁹ Schultz makes the argument that audience cost logic, for example, may best be traced in case studies. See Kenneth A. Schultz, “Looking for Audience Costs,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 1 (February 2001): 53; for recent explorations using case studies, see Snyder and Borghard, “The Cost of Empty Threats”; Marc Trachtenberg, “Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis,” *Security Studies* 21, no. 1 (2012): 3–42.

⁶⁰ Harry Eckstein, “Case Studies and Theory in Political Science,” in *Handbook of Political Science*, ed. Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson Polsby (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 79–138.

⁶¹ On the United States as a “weak” state, see Thomas Risse-Kappen, “Public Opinion, Domestic Structure, and Foreign Policy in Liberal Democracies,” *World Politics* 43, no. 4 (July 1991): 479–512. On public opinion and war, see Lawrence R. Jacobs and Benjamin I. Page, “Who Influences U.S. Foreign Policy,” *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 1 (February 2005): 118.

⁶² See, for example, Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences,” 581, 590n11. Schultz also mentions Vietnam several times; see Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*, 47–48, 167, 242. See also Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 256. In the recent literature critiquing audience costs, Vietnam is included in Downes and Sechser’s reexamination of crisis data to include only those crises that involved a coercive threat. On the qualitative side, Marc Trachtenberg and Bronwyn Lewis have also explored Vietnam in the context of audience costs but have focused on presidents other than Johnson. See Trachtenberg, “Audience Costs in 1954?” *H-Diplo-ISSF Forum*, no. 1 (2013); Trachtenberg, “Kennedy, Vietnam, and Audience Costs,” *H-Diplo-ISSF Forum*, no. 3 (2014); Lewis, “Nixon, Vietnam, and Audience Costs,” *H-Diplo-ISSF Forum*, no. 3 (2014). On the Johnson era, Philip Arena makes a related argument that emphasizes elite rhetoric and opposition

This discussion is not a complete account of the domestic politics of the Vietnam War. Instead, I highlight implications derived from the theoretical discussion: the fear of elite political costs; attempts to accommodate or co-opt key elites; intra-elite information dynamics, including suppression of information from elites; and concern about spillover into the public arena. The reasons that US signals did not result in North Vietnam capitulating are beyond the scope of this discussion. There are complications in studying the Vietnam case, of course, including Johnson's fear of intervention by the Chinese or Soviets, and his strong personal concern with credibility.⁶³ My purpose here, however, is to explore how Johnson navigated domestic politics as he tried to walk the tightrope of escalation, which, despite constraints on the high end, nonetheless required, from his perspective, strong demonstrations of resolve.

Elite Political Costs

Much scholarship on Vietnam accepts that domestic politics played a role in Johnson's decision to escalate. As Downes succinctly puts it, "Johnson feared political punishment if he withdrew from Vietnam more than if he engaged in war."⁶⁴ Yet there remain significant questions about exactly what type of political punishment Johnson feared. As Vice President Hubert Humphrey wrote Johnson in early 1965, "It is always hard to cut losses," but "1965 is the year of minimum political risk for the Johnson administration."⁶⁵

Despite his landslide victory in 1964 over a more hawkish candidate, Barry Goldwater, many historians have argued that Johnson was motivated by fear of criticism for insufficient toughness in Vietnam.⁶⁶ A related but distinct argument is that he feared this criticism would derail the Great Society legislation he sought in Congress.⁶⁷ There has been significant historical debate over these propositions, particularly the role of the Great Society. In a recent restatement of the Great Society thesis, Johnson's deputy national security advisor, Francis Bator, argues that "Johnson believed—and he knew how to count votes—that had he backed away in Vietnam in 1965, there would have been no Great Society. . . . It would have been stillborn

signaling, as well as the desire to avoid punishment for staying out, as key to Johnson's decision to fight when he knew the prospect of victory was unlikely. See Arena, "Crisis Bargaining, Domestic Opposition, and Tragic Wars," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 27, no. 1 (January 2015): 108–31.

⁶³ Among others, see Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁶⁴ Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?" 44.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Fredrik Logevall, "Comment on Francis M. Bator's 'No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection,'" *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 3 (June 2008): 358.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961–1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 100, 244.

⁶⁷ See especially Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*; VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, 60; Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?" 45.

in Congress.”⁶⁸ Bator asserts that “Johnson thought that hawkish Dixiecrats and small-government Republicans were more likely to defy him—by joining together to filibuster the civil rights and social legislation that they and their constituents detested—if he could be made to appear an appeaser of Communists who had reneged on Eisenhower’s and Kennedy’s commitment of U.S. honor.”⁶⁹ Bator goes so far as to argue that Johnson had “no good choices” and could not have backed down from the Vietnam commitment. In a direct response to Bator, Fredrik Logevall builds on his own argument that the 1965 escalation was not inevitable. Logevall notes that especially after the 1964 election, Johnson had a dominant domestic political position and there were many members of Congress in both parties who opposed escalation.⁷⁰ But the key is that Johnson *believed* he would suffer politically if he backed down. Even Logevall acknowledges that Johnson “worried about the harm that failure in Vietnam could do to his domestic agenda.”⁷¹

Although there were certainly dovish voices, Johnson’s fears seem to have been asymmetrically focused on hawkish criticism. At one of his first meetings on Vietnam in November 1963, Johnson declared, “I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went.”⁷² Brian VanDeMark reports a White House official remembering Johnson saying, “If he had a problem, it was the hawks, not the doves, whom he dismissed as a band of ‘rattlebrains.’”⁷³ That a Democratic president would be concerned about criticism from hawks and a repeat of the “Who lost China?” debate comports with research showing that Democratic presidents face more political risk from staying out of a conflict.⁷⁴ Johnson was concerned about Republican criticism; indeed, recent scholarship by Andrew Johns on the Republican party’s role in the escalation—long a blind spot in the historiography of Vietnam—makes clear that Kennedy, Johnson, and Richard Nixon were “preoccupied with the fear of a right-wing backlash if Vietnam ‘fell’ to communism.”⁷⁵

Johnson faced a particularly difficult version of this problem, however, because there were powerful congressional hawks in his own party who were also critical to the success of his legislative program. The argument that Southern Democrats would punish Johnson if he did not escalate is

⁶⁸ Bator, “No Good Choices,” 309 (emphasis omitted).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 329.

⁷⁰ Logevall, “Comment on Bator,” 357; see also Logevall, *Choosing War*; Logevall, “Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (March 2004): 100–12.

⁷¹ Logevall, “Comment on Bator,” 359.

⁷² Quoted in Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 99.

⁷³ VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, 75. Robert Dallek also notes that “in the winter of 1964–65, Johnson felt pressured much more by hawks than doves.” Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 244.

⁷⁴ Trager and Vavreck, “The Political Costs of Crisis Bargaining,” 541–42.

⁷⁵ Andrew L. Johns, *Vietnam’s Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 7. See also Gary Stone, *Elites for Peace: The Senate and the Vietnam War, 1964–1968* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007).

especially relevant. As Randall Woods notes in a response to Bator, Johnson wanted these Democrats to at least “refrain from obstructing” key civil rights bills and vote for other parts of the Great Society, and “he could not at the same time ask them to acquiesce in the neutralization of Vietnam.”⁷⁶ VanDeMark notes that Johnson’s civil rights positions “risked provoking southern conservatives in Congress who, if unwilling to challenge the President publicly on this issue, would exact their political revenge should LBJ stumble and lose Vietnam.”⁷⁷ Furthermore, consistent with research on the distinctiveness of Southern foreign policy preferences, public opinion polls showed Southerners to have disproportionately hawkish views.⁷⁸ In addition to the damage these members of Congress could do to the Great Society, criticism from within Johnson’s own party would be particularly credible.

Hawkish sentiment thus had a magnified role—especially given its representation among Southern Democrats in the Senate—as contrasted with public opinion more generally. As Downes notes in an analysis of public opinion before the Tonkin Gulf incident in August 1964 and the initiation of bombing (when rally effects are confounding), the public did not know much about Vietnam, and those that did were split among many options.⁷⁹ Berinsky argues that polling understated dovish sentiment early in the war, because the dominant elite messages in this period were pro-escalation and the “don’t know” respondents were more likely to be “uncertain doves” with no elite message to give their sentiments voice.⁸⁰ Johnson understood the lack of public attention to Vietnam and focused on the elite threat. In a May 1964 conversation, Johnson told his former mentor and Senate colleague Richard Russell that the public did not “know much about Vietnam and I think they care a hell of a lot less.”⁸¹ In an often-quoted line, he asked, “Well, they’d impeach a President though that would run out, wouldn’t they?” He followed this rhetorical question with a discussion of congressional opinion, noting that “outside of [Democratic war opponent Wayne] Morse, everybody I talk to says you got to go in. . . including all the Republicans. . . . And I don’t know how in the hell you’re gonna get out unless they tell you to get out.”⁸² Johnson put it more colorfully in another discussion: “If I don’t go in

⁷⁶ Randall B. Woods, “Comment on Francis M. Bator’s ‘No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection,’” *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 3 (June 2008): 344. On the South and Vietnam, see also Joseph A. Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad: The South and U.S. Foreign Relations, 1789–1973* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), chap. 8.

⁷⁷ VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, 60.

⁷⁸ Woods, “Comment on Bator,” 344; Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 269–70.

⁷⁹ Downes, “Myth of Choosy Democracies,” 94–97.

⁸⁰ Adam J. Berinsky, *Silent Voices: Public Opinion and Political Participation in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 105–8.

⁸¹ Johnson with Russell, telephone conversation, 27 May 1964, in Michael R. Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963–1964* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 365.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 369. Beschloss notes that “they tell you to get out” refers to the senators Johnson was concerned about. See *ibid.*, 369n3.

now and they show later that I should have, then they'll be all over me in Congress. They won't be talking about my civil rights bill, or education, or beautification. .. they'll push Vietnam up my ass every time."⁸³

In addition, there were pressures from within the administration and the military to go forward, and dissent from these quarters could cause political damage to Johnson and his legislative program. Although Johnson was not beholden to his advisers or to the military, once his basic decision had been made, he had incentives to keep them on board. Inside the administration, Johnson was careful to orchestrate the debate over escalation to make those involved feel as if they had received a fair hearing, even as he strategically managed the audience for his own internal administration debate.⁸⁴ For example, on 1 July 1965, just prior to a high-level discussion of several key memoranda including a paper by George Ball urging a compromise that would allow the United States to cut its losses, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy wrote to Johnson that "both [Dean] Rusk and [Robert] McNamara feel strongly that the George Ball paper should not be argued with you in front of any audience larger than yourself, Rusk, McNamara, Ball, and me. They feel that it is exceedingly dangerous to have this possibility reported in a wider circle."⁸⁵ Johnson did agree to keep the meeting highly limited, managing the elite audience even within his administration.

Johnson also took pains to keep the military on board with the escalation. As H. R. McMaster has detailed, Johnson worked to keep the support of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), which was in turn crucial to the effort to keep the escalation from upsetting Congress and the public.⁸⁶ The military favored a more aggressive approach, although there were interservice differences in opinion over strategy.⁸⁷ McNamara "politicized" the JCS itself by appointing men who would defer to the civilians.⁸⁸ As George Herring describes, Johnson knew that his limited war approach would not please the military and generally excluded them from crucial decisions. But Johnson also "made enough concessions to their point of view to keep them on board, and he left the impression that more might be obtained later."⁸⁹ In one key meeting

⁸³ Quoted in VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, 60.

⁸⁴ On Johnson's attempt to manage consensus in July 1965, see, especially, Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, chap. 4.

⁸⁵ Bundy to Johnson, 1 July 1965, *Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS] 1964-1968* vol. III, doc. 42 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office [GPO]), available at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments>. David Kaiser notes that while there were other reasons to restrict the meeting, one of them was to keep key Rusk and McNamara subordinates from expressing skepticism in front of Johnson. David E. Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 460-61.

⁸⁶ H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).

⁸⁷ For a useful discussion, see Downes, "Myth of Choosy Democracies," 88-93.

⁸⁸ George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 39-40.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 40; see also McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*; Downes, "Myth of Choosy Democracies," 88-93.

in July 1965, Johnson stood directly in front of the chairman of the JCS, Earle Wheeler, known to be unhappy with the failure to call up the reserves, and obtained his nodded agreement for the escalation plan, leading one observer to call it “an extraordinary moment, like watching a lion-tamer dealing with some of the great lions.”⁹⁰ Johnson’s attempts to adjust policy so that he could simultaneously circumvent and appease the military had real consequences. As Herring notes, “sharp divisions on strategy were subordinated to the tactical necessity of maintaining the façade of unity,” and even when the military approach was obviously failing, there was no high-level discussion of a change in strategy for fear of triggering debate.⁹¹ The military itself continued to demand more resources, leading to a gradual but steady increase in the US commitment.

Though more concerned about the hawks, Johnson was well aware, of course, that there were many elites exerting pressure in the opposite direction and that escalation could also end up damaging the Great Society. Notably, in addition to Humphrey, many Democratic senators expressed private reservations to Johnson prior to the escalation. Significant Southern Democrats, including Russell and Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Fulbright, also expressed doubts about getting into the war. Many Southern Democrats, however, believed that once the United States was committed, it should follow through with an all-out effort, leading even initial skeptics like Russell to oppose Johnson’s limited war approach and join calls by other Southerners like John Stennis to increase the war effort.⁹² Johnson thus faced the problem of managing a diverse elite coalition.

Johnson’s attempts to keep both the hawks and doves happy culminated in the escalation-at-minimal-cost strategy highlighted by many observers.⁹³ Once he decided to escalate, another Great Society dynamic kicked in: the need to keep American involvement in Vietnam limited enough to avoid overwhelming the domestic reform program in either salience or resources. Many historians agree that concerns about the Great Society legislation shaped the form of Johnson’s escalation, including the secrecy and the gradual military strategy. Even Logevall, who discounts the Great Society as the primary motive for initiating the escalation, nonetheless sees it as essential to understanding the nature of Johnson’s war.⁹⁴ McMaster calls the Great Society the “dominant political determinant of Johnson’s military strategy.”⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, 126.

⁹¹ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 33, 44.

⁹² See Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 283–87.

⁹³ On the escalation-at-minimal-cost strategy, see, for example, Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*. Both Trachtenberg and Lewis highlight the multiple audiences also faced by Kennedy and Nixon, although they mainly stress the public nature of the audiences. See Trachtenberg, “Kennedy, Vietnam, and Audience Costs,” 38; Lewis, “Nixon, Vietnam, and Audience Costs,” 64–67.

⁹⁴ Logevall, *Choosing War*, 391. For a discussion of the historical consensus, see Downes, “How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?” 44–45.

⁹⁵ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 309.

As Gordon Goldstein summarizes, Bundy later reflected that Johnson “conceived of military strategy as a function of political calculations, particularly the need to sustain a consensus among General William Westmoreland, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the civilian leadership of the Pentagon on the scope of the troop escalation in the summer of 1965.”⁹⁶ The strategy thus resulted from cross pressures from hawks and doves, rather than a desire to placate a more direct preference for a “free lunch” strategy.

Co-opting Potential Critics and Enlisting Opposition Supporters

Johnson also made strategic moves to co-opt or quiet potential critics, particularly those who could bring other elites along with them. Here he followed Kennedy, who had also tried to manage elite opinion as he deepened US involvement in Vietnam.⁹⁷ For example, Kennedy sought the counsel of the leading Republican foreign policy figure, former president Dwight Eisenhower. In the wake of the Bay of Pigs disaster, Kennedy got Eisenhower to serve as a “firewall for the administration.”⁹⁸ While Kennedy did not expect to prevent GOP criticism of his Vietnam policy, he took similar steps to seek Eisenhower’s counsel.⁹⁹ Another Kennedy decision that would have implications for Johnson was the appointment of Lodge, the 1960 Republican vice presidential candidate Kennedy had defeated in the 1952 Senate race in Massachusetts, as ambassador to Saigon. Kennedy wanted a strong figure in Saigon who could make forceful decisions and improve relations with the press. Arthur Schlesinger reports that Kennedy saw political advantage in “implicating a leading Republican in the Vietnam mess.”¹⁰⁰ After Kennedy’s death, Fulbright told Johnson he believed Lodge “was put there partly to conciliate the opposition.”¹⁰¹ The appointment did prove to carry real risks, however. While the president was eager to put pressure on South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem and was involved in the high-level consideration of Diem’s ouster, Lodge encouraged a coup on a faster timetable and more strongly than Kennedy might have liked, with a result Kennedy did not desire: Diem’s death, rather than exile.¹⁰² But Kennedy recognized that Lodge

⁹⁶ Gordon M. Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam* (New York: Holt, 2008), 219.

⁹⁷ On Kennedy’s cultivation of elites (especially journalists) as part of his attempt to manage public opinion, see also Trachtenberg, “Kennedy, Vietnam, and Audience Costs,” 39–40.

⁹⁸ Johns, *Vietnam’s Second Front*, 18.

⁹⁹ See *ibid.*, 18–20.

¹⁰⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York: Fawcett Premier, 1965), 902. On the political motive, see also Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 367–68.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Johns, *Vietnam’s Second Front*, 46.

¹⁰² Johns, *Vietnam’s Second Front*, 34–35; on the US consideration of the coup against Diem, see Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, chap. 39.

was “there and we can’t fire him so we’re going to have to give him directions.”¹⁰³

Like Kennedy, Johnson worked to keep Eisenhower in his coalition, consulting him on key occasions and continuing to provide him with briefings.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, Johnson kept a sharp eye on Lodge, a potential opponent in the 1964 election, aiming to neutralize him by accommodating him within the fold. Johnson complained about Lodge just days after Kennedy’s assassination, telling Donald Cook, the president of the American Electric Power Company, that Lodge was “just about as much an administrator as he is a utility magnate.”¹⁰⁵ In his May 1964 call with Russell, Johnson complained that Lodge was “one of our big problems” and “ain’t worth a damn. He can’t work with any-*bodd-y*.” But when Russell suggested Johnson “get somebody who’s more pliant than Lodge, who’d do exactly what you said, right quick,” Johnson retorted that “he’d be back campaigning against us on this issue, every day.”¹⁰⁶ In a discussion with McNamara, Johnson noted that if the administration backed Lodge’s recommendations “we’re not in too bad a condition politically,” but if they did not, they could be “caught with our britches down.” Accordingly, he wanted McNamara to “make a record on this thing,” wiring Saigon “nearly every day” and “either approving what Lodge is recommending” or “trying to boost them up to do a little something extra”—in other words, keeping a paper trail of support for Lodge so the Republican could not use administration foot dragging as a political issue in a potential campaign.¹⁰⁷ Johnson followed up this suggestion with Rusk later the same day, arguing that Lodge was “thinking of New Hampshire” and that he wanted to respond to Lodge’s cables with immediate cables back “complimenting him and agreeing with him. . . if that’s at all possible. . . . I think that we got to build that record. . . . I think we got to watch what that fellow says.”¹⁰⁸

That the president would even suggest, twice, that the administration uncritically support Lodge for political reasons speaks to Johnson’s desire for political cover. When Lodge did indeed resign in June 1964, Robert Kennedy offered to serve as ambassador in Saigon, but Johnson did not want to deal with another political rival and “worry hourly that Kennedy might resign the job in protest over his Vietnam policies.”¹⁰⁹ Instead, over the objections of key White House aides, Johnson appointed the chairman of the JCS, Maxwell

¹⁰³ Quoted in Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, 393.

¹⁰⁴ Johns, *Vietnam’s Second Front*, 87–88; H. W. Brands, “Johnson and Eisenhower: The President, the Former President, and the War in Vietnam,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 589–601.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson with Cook, telephone conversation, 30 November 1963, in Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge*, 74.

¹⁰⁶ Johnson with Russell, telephone conversation, 27 May 1964, in *ibid.*, 366 (emphasis in original).

¹⁰⁷ Johnson with McNamara, telephone conversation, 2 March 1964, in *ibid.*, 259.

¹⁰⁸ Johnson with Rusk, telephone conversation, 2 March 1964, in *ibid.*, 261–62.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 406.

Taylor, to the Saigon post, arguing that he “can give us the best protection with all the forces that want to make that a political war.”¹¹⁰ Only a year later, Johnson would reappoint Lodge largely, as Michael Beschloss argues, to “maintain Republican support for his actions in Vietnam.”¹¹¹

Johnson’s co-optation of potential critics also extended to his own party. In the lead-up to the vote on the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, for example, Johnson focused particular attention on Senate Democrats. He tasked Fulbright, his longtime ally, with ensuring that the resolution passed by a wide margin, knowing that many doubting Democrats “respected Fulbright and would listen to him.”¹¹² Fulbright himself was skeptical of the escalation but served Johnson faithfully, partly because he trusted Johnson and wanted to maintain his close relationship with him.¹¹³ As discussed below, Johnson’s deceptive selling of the resolution as a moderate measure helped co-opt Fulbright into playing a key signaling role.

Even after the 1964 election, Johnson took other direct steps to keep potential critics in Congress—including not only Republicans but also his fellow Democrats, many of whom expressed reservations about the war in private communications to the president—from expressing dissent. As Logevall reports, despite expectations that there would be a congressional debate in early 1965, the debate did not materialize “because Johnson and his senior aides worked hard to thwart it.”¹¹⁴ Johnson and his aides focused on key Democrats, again counting on Fulbright to lead the effort to squelch a debate. The administration used reminders of past political favors, flattery, and other tactics to keep key Senate figures from pressing for debate.¹¹⁵ As Gary Stone notes, keeping key senators like Fulbright and Russell on board was crucial, because they could cue other elites. That this rebellion did not happen, as Stone argues, was in large measure due to “the power and influence of the president himself.”¹¹⁶

Managing Elite Information Channels: Suppression of Information and Dissent

Johnson also worked to manage the flow of information among elites, a process that included concealment of information not only from the public but also from key elites themselves. Although Johnson wanted to avoid

¹¹⁰ Johnson with McNamara, telephone conversation, 16 June 1964, in *ibid.*, 410.

¹¹¹ Michael R. Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson’s Secret White House Tapes, 1964–1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 348n2.

¹¹² Logevall, *Choosing War*, 203.

¹¹³ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1969), 415; Randall Bennett Woods, *Fulbright: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 353.

¹¹⁴ Logevall, *Choosing War*, 306.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 307.

¹¹⁶ Stone, *Elites for Peace*, 46.

major decisions on Vietnam until after the 1964 election, Mitchell Lerner has noted that Johnson did not exactly hide his intentions from the public in the course of the campaign, stating clearly that he would not back down from US commitments in Vietnam.¹¹⁷ After the election, during key decisions in the late fall and early winter of 1964, Johnson concealed the escalation from both Congress and the public, issuing directions to his advisers on this score. After a key set of decisions in December 1964, for example, Johnson wrote to Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and CIA director John McCone, "I consider it a matter of the highest importance that the substance of this position should not become public except as I specifically direct," ordering them to "take personal responsibility" for ensuring that information was "confined as narrowly as possible to those who have an immediate working need to know."¹¹⁸

The litany of Johnson's obfuscating and deceptive actions as the escalation unfolded is too lengthy to recount here and has been ably chronicled by Downes and John Schuessler, among others.¹¹⁹ As Schuessler describes, Johnson took many steps that involved outright deception in the course of the escalation, to shift blame onto the Communists and to preempt debate within the United States.¹²⁰ The Tonkin Gulf incident illustrates the elite-centered nature of Johnson's deception, however. Johnson was wary of going to Congress for a resolution on Vietnam in 1964 for fear of increasing the conflict's salience.¹²¹ But as Logevall and Schuessler note, Johnson had been considering a congressional resolution for months and was looking for a way to both signal commitment to South Vietnam and to appear tough to preempt Republican criticism.¹²² Only when the North Vietnamese provided him with an external pretext, in the Tonkin Gulf in August 1964, did Johnson go to Congress. There is significant evidence that Johnson and other key officials rushed their assessments of the evidence and misrepresented the facts for political purposes.¹²³ On the evening of 4 August, Johnson, Rusk, McNamara, McCone, and Wheeler met with sixteen congressional leaders. Johnson not only asked for support for retaliation but also for a congressional resolution, telling the group, "I have told you what I want from you."¹²⁴ Johnson had assured key senators, including Fulbright, that he would come back

¹¹⁷ Mitchell Lerner, "Vietnam and the 1964 Election: A Defense of Lyndon Johnson," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Fall 1995): 751–66.

¹¹⁸ Johnson to Rusk, McNamara, and McCone, 7 December 1964, *FRUS 1964–1968* vol. I, doc. 440.

¹¹⁹ Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War*, chap. 3; Downes, "Myth of Choosy Democracies," 81–87.

¹²⁰ Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War*, chap. 3.

¹²¹ On this motive, see Johns, *Vietnam's Second Front*, 60; see also Logevall, *Choosing War*, 149.

¹²² Logevall, *Choosing War*, 198–99; Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War*, 79.

¹²³ See the discussion in Logevall, *Choosing War*, 196–203; see also Edwin Moïse, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

¹²⁴ Quoted in Logevall, *Choosing War*, 199.

to Congress for further authorization and did not plan to escalate; Fulbright himself did not have access to key information about the Tonkin incident.¹²⁵

Johnson also worked to keep the military's discomfort with the gradual escalation strategy from reaching Congress. The military did not need to go directly to the people to damage the president politically—it could also go to Congress to voice its displeasure. As Herring describes, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson were all concerned about the military's influence in Congress. McNamara took steps to limit JCS testimony before Congress as part of his “politicization” campaign.¹²⁶ Having cut the JCS out of the decision-making loop inside the White House, Johnson also tried to ensure that military displeasure would not provide fodder to Congress. As McMaster summarizes, “because he continued to deceive the Congress and the public, the president could ill afford dissent within his own administration that might reveal his actual policy decisions.”¹²⁷

Notably, Johnson's secrecy and even deception extended to his own administration as the war escalated. As David Kaiser describes, even in June 1965, “Johnson was now practicing deception upon dissenters within his own administration, as well as on the public. Not only did the policymakers continue to make only the minimum necessary decisions to go forward, but their deliberations apparently allowed the few remaining skeptics to believe that policy might still stop short of large-scale war.” Kaiser cites meetings in early June in which McNamara referred to more limited options and downplayed the potential size of deployments.¹²⁸

The management of information channels within and among elite groups—from suppression of information to co-opting opponents for signaling purposes—undermines the marketplace of ideas, as Downes notes.¹²⁹ But the particular pattern of information suppression, in which Johnson made promises of escalation to hawks (in the military, for example) while simultaneously keeping hawks from accessing information directly or sharing it with hawks and doves in Congress, suggests that Johnson was trying to placate both the left and right wings, rather than accommodating a latent preference for a middle course. Johnson did not try to craft a centrist coalition for doing “just enough” in Vietnam; instead he tried to appear hawkish to the hawks and dovish to the doves. For example, Downes cites Johnson's January 1965 “whopper,” in which he assured legislators that the Vietnamese must do the fighting, three weeks after he had cabled Saigon for options on introducing US ground troops.¹³⁰ If Johnson was giving the public the “free lunch” it wanted, and there was a shared mindset inside the government that Vietnam

¹²⁵ Woods, *Fulbright*, 348, 353.

¹²⁶ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 27–29.

¹²⁷ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 275.

¹²⁸ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 444–45.

¹²⁹ Downes, “Myth of Choosy Democracies,” 81.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

should not be lost but need not necessarily be won, then deception behind the Washington curtain might not have been necessary.

Avoiding Public Spillover

Finally, Johnson was concerned about the ultimate audience—the public—and worked to keep debate and dissent contained. Johnson's initial concern may have been preventing a relatively unified elite consensus that he was weak and had allowed Vietnam to fall to communism. Even if the public was not disposed to be hawkish, a chorus of criticism—including some hawks in his own party who he feared would use his weakness on Vietnam to damage the Great Society—might have been credible and informative to voters. Once the escalation was underway, Johnson's concern was keeping growing dovish sentiment at bay, while tamping down pressure to do more. Knowing that too dramatic an escalation could hurt his legislative agenda, Johnson's concern with elite cues extended to doves in his own party.

A basic issue is whether elites led or followed public opinion. Though Johnson attempted to keep the initial escalation as low profile as possible, by the end of 1965 there were nearly 185,000 troops in Vietnam, on the way to a peak level of over 500,000 in early 1969. Yet he was remarkably successful at maintaining public and elite support at least through early 1968. Scholars who have examined the pattern of elite and public opinion on the war generally conclude that elite leadership of mass opinion was highly significant. Both Zaller and Berinsky, for example, demonstrate that public opinion cued off elite unity in the period of escalation and, up through at least 1968, was largely supportive of the war.¹³¹ While overall public support dropped as the war progressed, support for withdrawal did not rise above 19 percent until after November 1968, and support for escalation actually peaked at 55 percent in November 1967, when troop levels were near half a million.¹³² John Mueller finds that Vietnam had no independent effect on Johnson's approval rating (while Korea did significantly affect Truman's approval). He attributes the difference to Johnson's assiduous attention to keeping elites like Eisenhower on board and generally trying to keep the war "above politics," while Truman's firing of MacArthur politicized Korea at the elite level.¹³³ Among elites in the Vietnam case, Republicans were generally

¹³¹ Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, 102, 204; Berinsky, *In Time of War*, 111–18. See also Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹³² William L. Lunch and Peter W. Sperlich, "American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam," *Western Political Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (March 1979): 30–31.

¹³³ John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973), 228–29.

(though not universally) supportive of the war, while Democratic opinion began to fracture earlier, particularly when Fulbright held hearings in 1966.

This elite consensus was not an accident but rather was actively shaped by presidential management. Such an argument is distinct from a process of direct public “education.” Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro find that “thousands of pages of White House public opinion analysis provide no evidence that Johnson. . . tracked public opinion to move policy in the public’s direction.”¹³⁴ Herring notes that Johnson did not make a major public relations effort on Vietnam until 1967, in line with his attempts to keep the war out of public view for as long as possible.¹³⁵ Instead, Johnson was careful not to allow debate in Congress, or military or internal dissent, to spill into the public domain, as illustrated by his squelching of the incipient 1965 debate. As Logevall notes, managing elite cues was an underlying motive: Johnson “knew that the anti-escalation side in the debate, with its formidable lineup of heavy hitters, could well draw a large proportion of the confused and the undecided to its side.”¹³⁶ His concern with criticism from within his own party is particularly important, given that voters are more likely to see cues from those who share their partisan affiliation as more credible.¹³⁷

What about Johnson’s fate in the 1968 election? To be sure, he pulled out of the race partly—though not solely—because he believed that Vietnam might ultimately doom his candidacy.¹³⁸ It is important to note that Johnson was especially concerned because a split on the war had emerged within his own party. In the election itself, Berinsky notes that, in the aggregate, Vice President Humphrey was punished for sharing a party with Johnson. But Berinsky cautions that this collective punishment was based on short-term considerations and can be viewed as a form of “blind retrospection” that does not necessarily indicate collective rationality.¹³⁹ Given how deeply involved the United States was in a failing war by 1968, it is unsurprising that the war had an impact on the election.

A more complicated pattern emerges when examining individual voting behavior, however. Benjamin Page and Richard Brody demonstrate that in the 1968 election, Vietnam did not shape individuals’ votes significantly,

¹³⁴ Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, “Lyndon Johnson, Vietnam, and Public Opinion: Rethinking Realist Theory of Leadership,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (September 1999): 600. On Johnson’s view of public opinion, see also Douglas C. Foyle, *Counting the Public In: Presidents, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 182–84.

¹³⁵ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, chap. 5.

¹³⁶ Logevall, *Choosing War*, 306.

¹³⁷ See, for example, Baum and Groeling, *War Stories*, 27.

¹³⁸ While highlighting the importance of Vietnam and McCarthy’s showing in New Hampshire, Dallek also notes that Johnson had been contemplating stepping aside for some time and was also concerned about his health and the political impact of domestic social unrest. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 519–30.

¹³⁹ Berinsky, *In Time of War*, 190–91. On “blind retrospection,” see Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, “Blind Retrospection: Electoral Responses to Drought, Flu, and Shark Attacks” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, 2002).

largely because the two presidential candidates had nearly indistinguishable positions. Indeed, they find evidence that many of those who did perceive a difference between the two candidates were “projecting” their own views onto the candidates so that “their perceptions were the result of intended vote, not the cause.”¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, while antiwar candidate Eugene McCarthy earned a stunning vote share in the New Hampshire primary, Philip Converse and colleagues find that McCarthy voters in New Hampshire were more likely to be angry with Johnson for not doing enough in Vietnam, rather than for doing too much.¹⁴¹ Notably, Nixon would be able to continue the war during his first term and was reelected handily.

IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIME TYPE, CREDIBILITY, AND ESCALATION

This paper has argued that democratic elites are a crucial audience with distinct political dynamics that have the potential to circumvent direct public accountability. Different preferences, concentrated power, information advantages, and small coalition size all contribute to a different political logic for democratic leaders. This different political logic yields incentives for leaders to bargain with or accommodate key elites who can impose direct costs but may not represent or serve the median voters’ interests, to co-opt opponents, to suppress information not only from the public but also from certain elites themselves, and to take special care to accommodate elites who could be credible cue givers to the public. I have argued that the fear of punishment for backing down in Vietnam did motivate Johnson but that he feared this punishment most proximately from an elite audience that could impose political costs.

Although the main aim of this paper is to explore the politics of elite audiences, the elite-centered argument has implications for theories of democratic credibility and escalation. Of course, any credibility effects ultimately depend on the ability of a foreign adversary to observe domestic politics in the democracy, a process about which we still know very little. But the information requirements of an elite audience may be effectively quite low. If the adversary believes that democratic foreign policy is made through (proverbial) backroom deals, then the details of those deals—while of interest just as democratic intelligence services take interest in the inner workings of autocracies—may be less important than knowledge that accountability for foreign policy may reside mainly with elites. On the autocratic side,

¹⁴⁰ Benjamin I. Page and Richard A. Brody, “Policy Voting and the Electoral Process: The Vietnam War Issue,” *American Political Science Review* 66, no. 3 (September 1972): 987.

¹⁴¹ Philip E. Converse et al., “Continuity and Change in American Politics: Parties and Issues in the 1968 Election,” *American Political Science Review* 63, no. 4 (December 1969): 1092.

Jessica Weeks makes a comparable argument that “visibility requirements” for accountability are low and require only credible sanctioning by elite groups, not knowledge of elite preferences themselves.¹⁴² In the Vietnam case, despite recent historiographical advances, more evidence is required to evaluate Hanoi’s reception of signals, and much remains clouded by imperatives that pushed in similar directions (particularly Johnson’s need to “calibrate” signaling by doing enough to signal resolve and yet not so much as to trigger an escalatory spiral).¹⁴³

Still, while the credibility implications cannot be fully explored here, there are theoretical reasons to hypothesize that elite political dynamics may make it more difficult for democracies to generate audience costs compared to a voter-driven model. First, a diverse elite coalition might weaken the position of democratic leaders as they contemplate escalation. To be sure, the ability to keep an elite coalition together might allow leaders to continue escalation and persist in failing or publicly unpopular policies longer than they might if the public were more directly involved. As Zaller and Berinsky have demonstrated, public support for the Vietnam War reflected elite consensus for a long time; US escalations in Iraq and Afghanistan similarly involved presidential efforts to manage and co-opt elites in the face of waning public support.¹⁴⁴ But elites might impose constraints on military strategy that may hold leaders back from the high end of escalation. If foreign adversaries know that democratic leaders have to placate a diverse elite coalition with a dovish flank, leaders may have a more difficult time making credible threats or credibly committing to escalation.

Second, the process of generating commitments is less public than democratic audience cost arguments appear to require. Although some aspects of elite bargaining may be public, much will go on behind the scenes, and even public aspects of bargaining may not engage voters’ attention. Indeed, in exploring the nature of democratic accountability, Fearon notes that “elected officials can do an enormous amount of business entirely out of public view.”¹⁴⁵ Several analyses note the importance of opposition parties and free media in cuing the public, but these informational mechanisms

¹⁴² Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs,” 43–44.

¹⁴³ Recent work focusing on the North Vietnamese side includes Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

¹⁴⁴ On managing elites in the Iraq “surge” decision, see Peter D. Feaver, “The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision,” *International Security* 35, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 87–125; on Afghanistan, see Saunders, “The Political Origins of Elite Support for War.”

¹⁴⁵ James D. Fearon, “Electoral Accountability and the Control of Politicians: Selecting Good Types Versus Sanctioning Poor Performance,” in *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, ed. Bernard Manin, Adam Przeworski, and Susan Stokes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 68. My argument is not that democratic leaders seek privacy by conducting foreign policy and international negotiations in secret or avoiding public scrutiny, although they can and do use such approaches. See, for example, Brown and Marcum, “Avoiding Audience Costs”; Matthew A. Baum, “Going Private: Public

can be subverted if leaders manipulate or suppress information among elites themselves. Thus foreign actors may need to engage in a certain degree of “Kremlinology” when dealing with democratic states in crises, just as they would if their opponent was an autocracy.

Third, if foreign adversaries know that leaders can effectively untie their hands by maintaining an elite coalition through bargaining and accommodation, signals may be weaker. Slantchev’s model, for example, assumes that “information is decisive” and that “no group of citizens can be bought off by selective disbursement of private or public goods.” He notes that “if audience costs are difficult to generate in this environment, then they will be even more so in more realistic ones.”¹⁴⁶ If it is elites—and certain elites in particular—who are at least partly responsible for informing the voters about foreign policy failures then leaders can try to suppress dissent or elicit support by making accommodations, side payments, or political threats, effectively co-opting the opposition into colluding with the government to hide information about bad outcomes. While other arguments have noted the possibility of deception or manipulation of public opinion, the distinctive nature of the elite audience that can serve as an intermediary between leaders and the public has received less attention. Coalition management may also erode the possibility of electoral punishment for backing down. If the leader can persuade other elites that backing down was the right decision, he can avoid paying audience costs precisely because the public will follow the unified elite cue.¹⁴⁷ These cues are, of course, transmitted through the media. If the leader can shape the cues reported in the media, the elite coalition game may make the generation of audience costs more difficult, since as Slantchev argues, the ability to generate audience costs decreases as the degree of political interference with the media increases.¹⁴⁸ On net, sincere elite support and support that is the result of bargaining may be indistinguishable. These implications do not mean that audience costs do not motivate democratic leaders. Leaders may fear the direct audience costs that elites can impose or may want to avoid even a remote chance of paying public audience costs. Yet the ability to maneuver around them through an intermediate audience may reduce their utility as a signaling device.

Finally, for democratic leaders who aim to engage the public, the process of generating traditional public audience costs may be more cumbersome and slow. Even elites who disagree with or disapprove of the leader may not

Opinion, Presidential Rhetoric, and the *Domestic* Politics of Audience Costs in U.S. Foreign Policy Crises,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 5 (October 2004): 603–31. Rather, in addition to secret channels, the regular, open conduct of foreign policy is so unlikely to result in sanctions that democratic leaders can often proceed as if the real audience is a small number of elites.

¹⁴⁶ Slantchev, “Politicians, the Media, and Domestic Audience Costs,” 468.

¹⁴⁷ Levendusky and Horowitz, “When Backing Down Is the Right Decision.”

¹⁴⁸ Slantchev, “Politicians, the Media, and Domestic Audience Costs,” 468. The media is also itself a strategic actor, as Baum and Groeling demonstrate.

be quick to pull the fire alarm. Legislators have their own electoral concerns and may prefer private bargains with the president to making political hay out of international crises. Bureaucrats or military leaders can use leaks or public criticism of the president or resort to resignation, but these strategies are risky and may come at significant personal cost with only a relatively small and indirect chance of leading to sanctions on the leader. Bargaining within the Beltway may be preferable to many elites, especially if they can satisfy other political goals or their own preferences on implementation. Even if criticism builds up, there may be a significant time lag; in both the Vietnam and Iraq Wars, for example, domestic dissent took a long time to rein in the president.

Much work remains to assess the degree to which democratic leaders concern themselves with elite and mass audiences. Yet even if the elite political logic outlined here operates only some of the time, the implications of an elite-based argument are potentially far-reaching, because an elite audience further narrows the divide between studies of democracies and autocracies, but from the democratic side. Notably, most theoretical work that attempts to explain recent quantitative findings that democracies and some autocracies may not differ in their conflict behavior has focused on expanding our understanding of the size of the autocratic audience, and rightly so given our general lack of understanding of domestic politics in authoritarian regimes.¹⁴⁹ The elite-based democratic argument suggests that shifting the audience to elites may reduce the degree of open political contestation and public accountability in democracies, potentially limiting some hypothesized democratic advantages. For example, the political logic of elite audiences may push in the direction of making traditional audience costs more challenging for democracies to generate, just as the recent literature has shown that some autocracies are less inhibited from generating audience costs than previously thought.¹⁵⁰ It remains an open question whether democracies or autocracies have an easier time generating audience costs in absolute terms, although this paper suggests reasons to think that both types of regimes may have difficulties.

But in an important sense, the politics of elite audiences adds another dimension to the nature of democracies in the international system. Democracies may yet have advantages, or even simply distinctiveness, in crisis bargaining. The elite-based account suggests that investigations of the impact of political institutions on crisis and conflict behavior, however, should explore elite audiences in both democracies and authoritarian regimes. Differences might thus arise not only from public political debate, but also from the nature of democratic elite interactions.

¹⁴⁹ A partial exception on the democratic side is Potter and Baum, "Looking for Audience Costs in All the Wrong Places," which emphasizes that the null findings may mask variation among democracies.

¹⁵⁰ Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs"; Weiss, "Authoritarian Signaling."

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