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From the “Red Juggernaut” to Iraqi WMD: Threat Inflation and How It Succeeds in the United States

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Of the powers entrusted by the people of the United States to their government, few are as important as the directive to “provide for the common defense.” The Constitution, however, leaves the door open to significant principal–agent problems by vesting national security decision-making power into the hands of one person and his handpicked assistants. Symptoms of these problems are intelligence “failures” of the type seen in the run-up to the U.S. overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Although of significant concern in and of itself, this incident is merely one episode in a larger pattern of executive branch threat inflation and policy manipulation since 1945. This essay discusses three instances of threat inflation: early estimates of the Soviet threat; the escalation of the Vietnam War; and the aforementioned case of Iraq. These cases are key because beyond their obvious importance, they were instances in which an administration had to make a substantive case on foreign policy to the people and Congress on national security grounds. They are examples of manipulation because the information presented stood in marked contrast to information held privately, giving the impression that administration policies stood a good chance of success or that alternatives were dangerous and impractical.

I theorize that the failure of Congress to challenge inflated threats is due to four factors. First, the relative ignorance of the average voter leaves the public, and therefore Congress, vulnerable to manipulation by the administration and its surrogates in civil society. This is especially problematic when doves are unable to use the mass media or when popular values are resistant to dove messages. Second, the bureaucracy has incentives to cooperate when an ad-

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ministration exaggerates threats, thus choking off a vital source of information to opponents. The third factor at work is the importance of trigger events that induce a “rally-’round-the-flag” effect and push the public into prospect theory’s domain of losses. Fourth, the politicization of national security makes it difficult to challenge administration claims.

I am not arguing that intelligence on these threats was wrong, inaccurate, or ambiguous. This may have been the case, but problematic intelligence was often further compounded by extensive, systematic exaggeration when it was conveyed to the public. Thus, I argue that intelligence was presented publicly in a manner that either flatly contradicted what the intelligence community reported or did not relay any significant doubts that the community may have had. These cases, therefore, are instances in which administrations selectively released information in order to manipulate the public. They are important institutional failures because they represent a break in the link between a controlling principal and an agent responsible for carrying out the principal’s wishes, which calls into question the system of checks and balances upon which the United States and other democracies function.

As such, threat inflation poses serious challenges that can potentially undermine U.S. values and security. It is doubtful, for instance, that foreign policy will reflect the will of the citizenry if it is the result of manipulation. While this is in itself undesirable, the possibility is raised that choices made by those determining policy will be incorrect and detrimental to U.S. interests. Psychologists, for instance, report that when decision-making power is kept within too small a body, “groupthink” can quickly set in, while rational-choice scholars note that small decision-making bodies face greater likelihood of reaching incorrect decisions in comparison with even relatively uninformed electorates.¹

Methodologically, concentrating on three instances of threat exaggeration opens one up to charges of selecting only on the dependent variable. That is, examining only cases in which threats were exaggerated ignores cases in which threats were presented accurately or were underplayed. This type of analysis brings with it several problems, the most notable of which is the doubt it casts on the power of one’s explanatory variables.² To overcome this problem, I briefly examine in pre–September 11 anti-terror intelligence and policy an extended episode during which a looming threat was largely ignored.

¹ Irving L. Janis, “Groupthink: The Desperate Drive for Consensus at Any Cost” in Jay M. Shafritz and J. Steven Ott, eds., *Classics of Organization Theory*. 4th ed. (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1996), 185–192; Dennis C. Mueller, *Public Choice III* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 128–133.

² Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 130.

THE “RED JUGGERNAUT”

Recent scholarship on the Soviet postwar threat to Western Europe notes that the situation presented to U.S. lawmakers and the public was a grim one.³ The administration of Harry S Truman argued that a well-equipped, well-trained army of 250 communist divisions could and would easily overrun Western Europe. So pervasive was this perception of Soviet superiority that the U.S. media reported that the overrunning of Europe by the USSR in a conventional war was taken for granted.⁴ Indeed, public perception of the Soviets at the time was consistent—nearly all media sources estimated that the Soviets had 2.5 million men and 175 combat-ready divisions, with most slated for an invasion of Western Europe.⁵ Furthermore, the threat posed by the Soviets was presented in sinister terms that made Soviet aggression and wider war seen inevitable.

Today, however, we know that this public perception of vastly superior Soviet forces and aggressive, rapacious expansionism was inaccurate. For instance, while the *official* view of the Soviet conventional threat *publicly* crumbled in the mid-60s,⁶ earlier intelligence had indicated that the conventional balance in Europe and the larger strategic balance were not so clearly in Moscow’s favor. These secret examinations of Soviet strength had cast the USSR as practically incapable of launching a successful offensive into Western Europe *at the same time* the Truman administration was maintaining that Soviet power was overwhelming. Nearly all estimates had concluded that the Soviet threat was political in nature, that the USSR suffered from fundamental weaknesses that could not be easily or quickly overcome, and that the primary risk of war stemmed from miscalculation over U.S. moves on the Eurasian periphery.

Intelligence obtained in 1946, for instance, indicated that the Soviets had retained the majority of their forces from the War, putting Moscow’s ground forces at 3.2 million men in 208 divisions, with 66 occupying Eastern Europe. These forces were judged as being “commensurate with immediate occupation and security requirements.”⁷ Two years after this estimate, however, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff reported that Soviet forces had fallen to the familiar 2.5 million men arranged in 175 divisions, with 31 in Eastern Europe. These new estimates represented a significant reduction in the number of forces

³ Matthew A. Evangelista, “Stalin’s Postwar Army Reappraised,” *International Security* 7 (Winter 1982–1983): 110–138; John S. Duffield, “The Soviet Military Threat to Western Europe: US Estimates in the 1950s and 1960s,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 15 (June 1992): 208–227.

⁴ Evangelista, “Stalin’s Postwar Army,” 110.

⁵ Duffield, “The Soviet Military Threat,” 209.

⁶ Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, *How Much is Enough? Shaping the Defense Program, 1961–1969* (London: Harper and Row, 1971).

⁷ Evangelista, “Stalin’s Postwar Army,” 114.

officials had earlier thought necessary for occupation duty. Now, they were the “offensively orientated” forces reported in the press.⁸

Thus, within the space of two years, officials went from believing that the Soviets would field an occupation army of 66 divisions capable of doing little more than holding down Eastern Europe to fielding a smaller *blitzkrieg* force with no occupation duties whatsoever. This was a serious contradiction of earlier and then-current estimates of Soviet occupation requirements. U.S. officials, for instance, believed that the political reliability of the satellites in the event of war was questionable and that large numbers of troops would be required to secure Eastern European rear areas.⁹ Occupation, reparations, and reconstruction duty, not military training in preparation for an invasion, were also cited as the primary activities of the Soviet postwar army. Yet, the reduction in overall Soviet troop strength was omitted in the story told to the public, as were the occupation and reconstruction duties in which the Soviets were primarily engaged.¹⁰

Outright subterfuge, however, was the direct comparison of U.S. and Allied ground formations with their Soviet counterparts. Official numbers cited by the press indicated the 175 Soviet divisions were “line” divisions, presumably combat-ready units. CIA reports, however, indicated early on that U.S. officials knew that the manning level of Soviet divisions was not at full strength. In fact, only a third were at 70 percent strength or more, the rest being partial-strength and “cadre” divisions.¹¹ Western divisions were, in contrast, closer to full strength. The fearsomeness of Soviet conventional forces was also questionable even when fully manned. The CIA, for instance, again *publicly* recognized by 1960 that Soviet divisions were considerably smaller than Western divisions, but Defense Department reports in 1950 estimated the average wartime size of a Soviet division to be 11,000–13,000 men, significantly smaller than a U.S. division. Peacetime manning levels for “combat-ready” divisions were less than wartime levels as well, and the CIA estimated that these divisions had 8,000 men each. In terms of overall manpower, Western and Soviet ground forces were roughly equivalent, with perhaps a slight lead by the USSR.¹²

Soviet forces, moreover, had inferior equipment and organization. Soviet divisions lacked organic logistics elements such as supply, transport, and maintenance units, while support units were smaller and less capable than their Western equivalents. This smaller “tail-to-tooth” ratio meant that Soviet units were relatively fragile and less capable of engaging in sustained combat. Mechanized units also were not fully equipped and were still dependent on

⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁹ Duffield, “The Soviet Military Threat,” 212–213, 217; Evangelista, “Stalin’s Postwar Army,” 116.

¹⁰ Evangelista, “Stalin’s Postwar Army,” 113, 119, 125–133.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹² Duffield, “The Soviet Military Threat,” 210–215; Evangelista, “Stalin’s Postwar Army,” 117–119.

U.S. lend-lease supplies obtained during the War. Reports indicated that Soviet ground forces relied on obsolete, World War II tanks well into the 1950s, while over half the Soviet army, 105 divisions, remained "foot" units or had so few vehicles as to make no difference. Perhaps most telling of how inaccurate public perception of the Soviet ground threat to Western Europe was were estimates by the Joint Chiefs of Staff that half of Soviet military transport was still horse-drawn as late as 1950.¹³

Critics of these revisionist accounts of the Soviet conventional strength in Europe note that U.S. intelligence got many things, such as the actual number of Soviet divisions, correct.¹⁴ Indeed, they note that the careful way in which U.S. intelligence tracked Soviet manpower levels, and then changed their estimates to reflect what they then believed to be true, is evidence that contradicts claims of deliberate exaggeration by U.S. officials. It is clear, however, that the counterclaim of "no exaggeration" by members of the Truman administration cannot be substantiated. Indeed, U.S. military officers intimately involved in estimating Soviet conventional strength at the time admitted as much years afterward. General Lucius Clay, the U.S. military commander of Berlin, for instance, believed that his famous 1948 cable that war could come with "dramatic suddenness" was solicited by his superiors in order to aid them in their congressional budget testimony, and was not, as was then claimed, based on any change in Soviet behavior or strategy.¹⁵ Similarly, a U.S. Air Force general attached to NATO in the early 1950s stated decades later that "there was no question" that the Soviet conventional threat was "intentionally overrated."¹⁶ U.S. intelligence sometimes did offer a picture of Soviet conventional strength in Europe that was inaccurate—such is the nature of intelligence work—but what was then relayed to the public was again greatly exaggerated.¹⁷

Other facets of the Soviet threat were similarly inflated. Claims that the USSR was capable of striking the United States with nuclear weapons after their first atomic bomb test in 1949, for instance, neglected to mention Moscow's complete lack of delivery systems capable of reaching the United States. To reach U.S. targets, Air Force intelligence admitted, Soviet bombers would have been forced to make one-way suicide missions. In fact, the notion that the Soviet Air Force was capable of hitting the continental United States

¹³ Duffield, "The Soviet Military Threat," 213–215; Evangelista, "Stalin's Postwar Army," 120–123.

¹⁴ Phillip Karber and Jerald Combs. "The United States, NATO, and the Soviet Threat to Western Europe: Military Estimates and Policy Options, 1945-1963," *Diplomatic History* 22 (Summer 1998): 103–132.

¹⁵ Jean Edward Smith, ed., *The Papers of General Lucius D. Clay* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), 568–569.

¹⁶ Matthew Evangelista, "Commentary: The 'Soviet Threat': Intentions, Capabilities, and Context," *Diplomatic History* 22 (Summer 1998): 447.

¹⁷ John S. Duffield, "Commentary: Progress, Problems, and Prospects," *Diplomatic History* 22 (Summer 1998): 431–437; Evangelista, "Commentary: The 'Soviet Threat,'" 439–449.

at all was discounted as “completely unrealistic” by the CIA between 1946 and 1949. The Air Force agreed, noting “subversion” was, at the time, the principle threat to the American homeland.¹⁸

As with the claims of overwhelming Soviet ground strength, Air Force estimates that the Soviets possessed a comparable aerial juggernaut of 40,000 long-range bombers, transport planes, and “modern” jet fighters as of 1947–1948 went “far beyond” their highest assessments of both Soviet aircraft production and technical capabilities.¹⁹ Public perception that the Soviets had or had nearly “caught up” to the United States in air power and technology was simply at odds with what was known privately. The Air Force, for instance, noted in the late 1940s that the Soviet Air Force remained primarily “tactical” in nature, and suffered acute problems in such areas as base construction, fighter development, military electronics, and engine design—all critical if the Soviets were to fight effectively in the air against a far superior United States.²⁰

In fact, nearly all secret estimates of both Soviet strength and intentions in the immediate years after the Second World War indicated that the USSR was neither prepared for war nor seeking a military confrontation. Intelligence noted that the USSR required at least fifteen years to overcome wartime economic losses, ten to build a scientific base, five to ten years to build a strategic air force, between fifteen and twenty-five to build a navy, ten to rebuild its military transport system, fifteen to twenty-five years to fortify the Soviet Far East, ten to pacify Eastern Europe, and three to ten years to develop an atomic bomb.²¹ Military analysts knowledgeable about Soviet capabilities after the Second World War believed that U.S. offensive capabilities were so manifestly superior to those of the USSR that war would be far more costly for the Soviets than for the United States. Even the conquest of Europe, noted analysts, would not ensure victory, owing to the manifest inability of the Soviets to strike the United States and to U.S. superior industrial capabilities.

U.S. officials even privately recognized that Soviet statements and moves abroad were less threatening than noted publicly. The Soviets, for instance, willingly withdrew their forces from northern Norway, Manchuria, and, after moderate U.S. pressure, northern Iran. Free elections were allowed in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, while representative governments were established in Finland and Austria. Intelligence also indicated that there was

¹⁸ Lawrence Aronsen, “Seeing Red: US Air Force Assessments of the Soviet Union, 1945-1949,” *Intelligence and National Security* 16 (Summer 2001): 103–132.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 122. See also Frank Kofsky, *Harry S. Truman and the War Scare of 1948: A Successful Campaign to Deceive the Nation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993).

²⁰ Aronsen, “Seeing Red,” 112, 115–116, 124; John Prados, *The Soviet Estimate: US Intelligence Analysis and Russian Military Strength* (New York: The Dial Press, 1982), 38, 41.

²¹ Melvyn P. Leffler, “The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945-1948,” *The American History Review* 89 (April 1984): 361–362; see also Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

no evidence that the Soviets were lending support to revolutionary movements in Greece, Southeast Asia, and China.²² Truman's Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, privately admitted that it was difficult to find "direct evidence of literal violations" of U.S.–Soviet agreements by the USSR.²³ U.S. military officials in Germany even acknowledged that the Soviets had largely kept their promises, while other officials indicated that Paris was the main source of U.S. problems in Germany, not Moscow.²⁴

This was not, however, the situation publicly presented by the administration. Indeed, regardless of Joseph Stalin's ultimate culpability in starting the Cold War,²⁵ the fact remains that the Truman administration's portrayal of Soviet military strength was grossly exaggerated and at odds with what administration officials privately read, wrote, and said to each other. Soviet consolidation of Eastern Europe and the attempt to pressure Turkey, for instance, were portrayed by U.S. officials as bolt-from-the-blue attempts by wild-eyed, fanatical ideologues at world conquest, not, as was acknowledged privately, as expected Soviet responses to U.S. moves in Germany.²⁶ Truman and his officials recognized that the public and their representatives needed to be "shocked" by facts that were "clearer than truth" if they were to support rearmament at home and Cold War abroad.²⁷

VIETNAM

The decision to expand the war in Vietnam is a canonical example of administration manipulation. Although dissembling by U.S. policymakers began before the Gulf of Tonkin Affair and continued long after, Tonkin and the subsequent Americanization of the war in 1965 are the crucial episodes. It was Tonkin that allowed Lyndon B. Johnson to argue that war was necessary by giving him the opportunity to cite long-standing U.S. commitments to South Vietnam, belief that the insurgency in the south was aggression directed by Moscow, and understanding that Tonkin was unprovoked aggression on the high seas as precedent for U.S. involvement. The image conveyed by Johnson was one of a North Vietnamese bully attempting to overthrow a regime deserving of U.S. help, while other hawks inside and outside of the government highlighted the struggle against international communism. All played down the roots of the

²² Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, 133.

²³ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 132–133.

²⁵ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Vojtech Mastny, "Stalin and the Militarization of the Cold War," *International Security* 9 (Winter 1984–1985): 109–129.

²⁶ Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, 123–125; See also Kofsky, *Harry S. Truman*, 92–100.

²⁷ Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, 145; Samuel F. Wells, "Sounding the Tocsin: NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat," *International Security* 4 (Autumn 1979): 116–158; Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: Norton, 1969), 374–375.

insurgency, the illegitimacy of the corrupt Saigon regime, and the nationalist character of Vietnamese communism, and simply lied about the context within which Tonkin took place and the prospects and consequences of intervention.

The Johnson administration, for instance, promoted the fraudulent claim that the Tonkin incident was unprovoked. At the time, U.S. officials maintained that North Vietnamese naval forces attacked U.S. ships while these were on routine patrol in international waters. Indeed, this was the story related to the American people during a televised address by Johnson himself on 4 August 1964.²⁸ Also stressing the unprovoked nature of the attack was Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, who skillfully avoided questions challenging administration accounts of the attack. Skeptics pointed to “South Vietnamese” raids on the North before the August 4 attack and the possibility that Hanoi believed the United States was involved.²⁹ McNamara avoided connecting the naval mission and the attack, claiming they were unrelated.

History reports this interpretation as simply untrue. The Tonkin affair was actually two incidents, one public, one secret, and both connected to covert U.S. raids on North Vietnam. In January of 1964, Johnson agreed to plans drawn up by the Defense Department for raids manned by the South Vietnamese but planned, directed, equipped, and supported by the United States. Raids on North Vietnamese targets began in February, concentrating on sabotage, kidnapping, and psychological warfare.³⁰ Covert attacks escalated to the point where Thailand-based fighter-bombers attacked North Vietnamese villages near the Laotian border on 1 and 2 August, nearly the same time events in the Gulf of Tonkin were unfolding.

Of direct significance was a covert raid by South Vietnamese patrol boats against the North Vietnamese offshore islands of Hon Me and Hon Nieu on the night of 30–31 July 1964.³¹ Days later, a U.S. destroyer arrived in the vicinity on an intelligence-gathering mission that, officially, was separate from the earlier raid. Although the North Vietnamese had reinforced the area with naval units in response to the raid, the U.S. mission continued and came under fire from the North’s patrol boats on 3 August. Despite later administration claims, radio intercepts cabled to Washington by the patrol commander indicated that the North Vietnamese believed the earlier raids and the U.S. intelligence mission were related.³² Once the North Vietnamese were repulsed, the U.S. patrol was

²⁸ Fredrick Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 199.

²⁹ Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 136–137.

³⁰ Neil Sheehan, “The Covert War and Tonkin Gulf: February – August, 1964” in Neil Sheehan, Hedrick Smith, E.W. Kenworthy, and Fox Butterfield, eds., *The Pentagon Papers* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 234–242.

³¹ Dale Andrade and Kenneth Conboy, “The Secret Side of the Tonkin Gulf Incident,” *Naval History Magazine* 13 (August 1999): 27–33.

³² David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 412.

reinforced and ordered to continue. On 4 August, the patrol reported that they were under attack, and aircraft were once again dispatched in support. Confirmation of the attack was slow in coming and details sketchy when Johnson ordered a reprisal strike on North Vietnamese naval facilities later that day. Indeed, eight months later, the President joked about the uncertainty, saying, “For all I know the Navy was shooting at whales out there.”³³

All of this went unreported in the debate over the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in Congress. McNamara evaded questions attempting to link the “South Vietnamese” raids with the attack on U.S. ships, and Congress remained ignorant of the truth. There is clear evidence, however, that major executive-branch decision makers with knowledge of the raids realized that Hanoi had connected the covert attacks with the Tonkin mission. CIA director John McCone, for instance, advised Johnson that the North was “reacting defensively to our attacks.”³⁴ When Johnson suspended the raids, Maxwell Taylor, U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk disented. Both believed the raids had put pressure on Hanoi.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident is unfortunately the most poignant example of deception and manipulation in a war where the public and Congress were consistently lied to by those charged with defending them.³⁵ From the earliest days of U.S. involvement, reports indicating the ineptitude of South Vietnamese units were ignored by the Pentagon, as were State Department analyses reporting that the insurgency was a continuation of the nationalist revolt interrupted by the 1954 Geneva Accords.³⁶ Indeed, the conclusion reached by the authors of *The Pentagon Papers* was that Hanoi did not come to directly control the insurgency until 1959, suggesting that the inept Saigon regime was responsible for creating the problems, insurgency included, that it faced.³⁷ Significant analyses by mid-ranking U.S. advisers in South Vietnam and the U.S. Department of State questioning the validity of Pentagon assessments on the progress of the war were buried.³⁸ Once the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Andrade and Conboy, “The Secret Side,” 31.

³⁵ 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); David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2000); Logevall, *Choosing War*; Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: Viking Adult, 2002); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991).

³⁶ Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 686–690.

³⁷ Fox Butterfield, “Origins of the Insurgency in South Vietnam” in Sheehan, Smith, Kenworthy, and Butterfield, eds., *The Pentagon Papers*, 67–79.

³⁸ Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 127–200, 267–386; Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 256–259.

United States had committed combat troops and began to bomb North Vietnamese targets, innumerable analyses predicted and then reported their ineffectiveness.³⁹ All was kept hidden.

IRAQ

Events leading up to the 2003 U.S. war with Iraq are still fresh, and information concerning it will remain uncertain until scholars examine classified documents decades hence. Evidence, however, suggests that the administration of George W. Bush was not honest about the Iraq threat and about what the United States could expect once it achieved military victory. In one of the best examinations of the march to war with Iraq, one analyst noted that “the administration supplied a steady stream of unreliable statements” that were contradicted by the press.⁴⁰ Another states that there is now “broad agreement” that Bush’s rationale for war was “exaggerated” and “wholly baseless.”⁴¹

A brief review of the administration’s behavior is illustrative. Public statements on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and purported Iraqi links to terror organizations, widely accepted by the public at the time, are now known to be false.⁴² Indeed, Bush himself considered intelligence on Iraq weak and unconvincing.⁴³ The administration claimed, for instance, that Iraq had purchased aluminum tubes and planned to use them to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons. However, UN inspectors and U.S. centrifuge experts had concluded before the war that the tubes were consistent with those used for rockets and could not easily be modified to serve as centrifuges; nor was there evidence that Iraq had purchased other equipment needed for a centrifuge.⁴⁴ Bush’s claim in his 2003 State of the Union Address that British intelligence had evidence that Iraq had sought to purchase uranium from Niger, which

³⁹ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 355–358; George Herring, ed. *The Pentagon Papers*. Abr. ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1993), 118–120, 134–137, 148–155, 186, 191, 200.

⁴⁰ Louis Fisher, “Deciding on War Against Iraq: Institutional Failures,” *Political Science Quarterly* 118 (Fall 2003): 389–410.

⁴¹ Chaim Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War,” *International Security* 29 (Summer 2004): 5; see also Jon Western, *Selling Intervention and War: The Presidency, the Media, and the American Public* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 175–219.

⁴² Fisher, “Deciding on War,” 400–401; Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation,” 16–29; John Prados, *Hoodwinked: The Documents that Reveal How Bush Sold Us a War* (New York: The New Press, 2004); James Bamford, *A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America’s Intelligence Agencies* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

⁴³ Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 247–249.

⁴⁴ Fisher, “Deciding on War,” 401; Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation,” 19–28; David Barstow, “How White House Embraced Suspect Iraq Arms Intelligence,” *The New York Times*, 3 October 2004; Bamford, *A Pretext for War*, 324, 325–336, 333–337, 360–361; Prados, *Hoodwinked*, 28–29; 95, 96–98, 171–170, 190, 193.

suggested that Saddam Hussein was already on his way to building nuclear weapons, was unsubstantiated and based on fabricated documents.⁴⁵

The administration also attempted to draw a direct link between al Qaeda and the terror attacks of 11 September 2001 and Iraq. On 25 September 2002, Bush claimed that Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda worked "in concert," and the following day, he claimed that Iraq had "long-standing and continuing ties to terrorist organizations," and that there were "[al Qaeda] terrorists inside Iraq." Similarly, on 7 October, Bush said that Iraq "trained al Qaeda members in bomb-making and poisons and deadly gasses." Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld also announced that the administration had "bulletproof" evidence of Iraqi links to al Qaeda, and indicated that al Qaeda members had recently been in Baghdad. Rumsfeld's claims later turned out to be unsubstantiated. Administration claims about Mohammed Atta, leader of the September 11 attacks, meeting with Iraqi intelligence in Prague in April 2001 were also without foundation. Czech intelligence and the CIA have since said that there was no evidence that the meeting took place. Even the 9/11 Commission Report, the official U.S. investigation into the tragedies of 11 September 2001, has been unable to substantiate claims that al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's Iraq worked closely together. What links there are point to a series of opaque meetings over the course of the 1990s that, as far as can be currently determined, resulted in no working relationship of the type suggested by the administration.⁴⁶

In addition to exaggerating the threat from Iraq, the administration also downplayed the difficulties and costs that an invasion and occupation would entail. According to the administration, there was no indication of the problems the United States would face after the war. Indeed, after the war, Pentagon hawks claimed there was no memo that "once written, that if we had only listened to that memo, all would be well in Iraq."⁴⁷ Numerous reports, studies, and analyses by groups within and outside the government, however, envisioned scenarios remarkably similar to what actually transpired after the war. All were available to Bush administration officials and ignored by them in their public argument for war. The administration, for instance, ignored the State Department's "Future of Iraq" project, a document commissioned a full year before the war and providing an extensive analysis on postwar Iraq.⁴⁸ Also ignored were CIA war games and planning exercises on

⁴⁵ Fisher, "Deciding on War," 402; Bamford, *A Pretext for War*, 298–307; Prados, *Hoodwinked*, 125–127, 155.

⁴⁶ Fisher, "Deciding on War," 399–400; Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation," 16–19; Prados, *Hoodwinked*, 113, 118–119, 236–237; National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 334–336; Bamford, *A Pretext for War*, 285–286.

⁴⁷ James Fallows, "Blind Into Baghdad," *The Atlantic Monthly* 01 (January/February 2004): 52–73.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 56–58.

postwar Iraq that had begun a year earlier and ran up to the beginning of the U.S. invasion. Indeed, top Pentagon officials had been reprimanded for attending these war games.⁴⁹ U.S. government relief agencies responsible for postwar reconstruction, in conjunction with nongovernmental relief agencies, also warned the administration on what might be expected.⁵⁰ Military officers responsible for planning for postwar needs and responsibilities were ignored, while the administration downplayed estimates of what war with Iraq would cost, although the Army and others privately estimated its costs would amount to “tens of billions” of dollars.⁵¹

There is thus substantial evidence that the Bush administration exaggerated the Iraq threat and downplayed the dangers and costs of an occupation in order to manipulate public opinion. Ambiguity or contrasting evidence reported by U.S. intelligence agencies was disregarded. Inconvenient facts were denied. Warnings about the likelihood of an insurgency developing were ignored. Intelligence regarding Iraq was, as is now acknowledged by the then head of Britain’s MI6 intelligence service, simply “fixed round the policy” of the Bush administration.⁵²

WHY THREAT INFLATION SUCCEEDED

How did these administrations get away with presenting a case that was either blatantly at odds with intelligence held secretly or was otherwise contradicted by the press? While a comprehensive answer is not possible here, I sketch out an explanation below involving four interrelated factors.

Ignorance, Values, and Cueing

Public ignorance and apathy is the first factor likely to have a large impact on an administration’s ability to engage in threat inflation. Studies consistently show the public to be ignorant of and apathetic toward foreign affairs, while the sources of what information they do have are generally of low quality.⁵³ Apathy, ignorance, and the cost of acquiring quality sources of information are disincentives mitigating public willingness to examine an administration’s

⁴⁹ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 62–63.

⁵¹ Ibid., 62–73.

⁵² Nick Fielding, “MI6 Chief Told PM: Americans ‘Fixed’ Case for War,” 20 March 2005, accessed on the website of *The Times Online* at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/>, 6 April 2005.

⁵³ Michael X. Delli Caprini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); Ole R. Holsti, “Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond-Lippman Consensus, Mershon Series: Research Programs and Debates,” *International Studies Quarterly* 36 (November 1992): 439–466; Matthew Baum, “Sex, Lies, and War: How Soft News Brings Foreign Policy to the Inattentive Public,” *American Political Science Review* 96 (March 2003): 91–109.

foreign policy in detail. Ignorance, however, does not mean the mass public is a blank slate. The public, for instance, uses “values,” or stable, individual-level ideological predispositions as cognitive aids to help bring new information or argumentation into line with what is already known, while research indicates that elites “cue” the public on what opinions they should hold on particular issues.⁵⁴ Being more informed than the mass public, elites represent a source that can signal what is or is not true about foreign affairs. Elites, however, often hold differing opinions about what the proper course of action should be or what the true state of affairs really is, and compete with one another to influence the public. Competing elites, therefore, convey information to the mass public that is then filtered through individuals’ “value” systems. Threat inflation can succeed if elites conveying the manipulative message are more effective than their opponents, or if popular values are at odds with content conveyed in dove cues, or both.

Bureaucratic Incentives

If an attempt at manipulation is to succeed, then dissent within the bureaucracy must be controlled or eliminated. This is crucial because the security bureaucracies are the primary collectors and analysts of intelligence and are ultimately responsible for national defense. As such, their expertise lends credibility to administration claims and their acquiescence limits information available to opponents. Since perception of threat is correlated with department budgets, prestige, and opportunities in the private sector, many bureaucrats have incentives to cooperate in order to advance either department or personal interests.⁵⁵ This is especially true for the Defense Department, as perceived threat is highly correlated with defense outlays. The Department of State and the CIA may be less inclined to present hawkish information, but their institutional relationship with the president and Congress and their small size give them few resources with which to sustain opposition. Bureaucrats thus have incentives to “play ball” in order to maintain their position and prospects when threat inflation is underway.

Trigger Events

Threat inflation cannot rely solely on hot air alone; it must incorporate and use accounts of menacing events abroad that make administration claims plausible. Such triggering events tend to produce a situation in which the public rallies

⁵⁴ Holsti, “Public Opinion and Foreign Policy,” 445–457; John Zaller, “Information, Values, and Opinion,” *American Political Science Review* 85 (December 1991): 1215–1237.

⁵⁵ Mueller, *Public Choice*, 359–385; Ronald Wintrobe, “Modern Bureaucratic Theory” in Dennis C. Mueller, *Perspectives on Public Choice: A Handbook* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Theodore Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic of the United States*.

around whoever is currently president, thus facilitating an attempt at manipulation. Although evidence on what presidents do with this short-term advantage is indeterminate, it is believed that they can use it to push through their preferred agenda.⁵⁶ Also critical is the way in which security issues are framed. Prospect theory suggests that individuals will risk and pay much to prevent losses, much more than is rational as predicted by rational choice theory, but will risk or pay little to make gains.⁵⁷ Security issues are presented to the public in terms that often promise to prevent damage or loss, suggesting that if hawks can frame policy as loss-preventing, then the public may accept it even if the price is high. The synergy created by the interplay of the rally-'round-the-flag effect and policy framing when a trigger event or events occur may thus make even extreme policy temporarily acceptable.

The Politicization of National Security

Finally, if manipulation is to succeed, political opponents must be neutralized. Despite claims that partisanship stops at the water's edge, national security is a contentious, politically incendiary issue, and ideologues in the United States have not shown great constraint in using it when attacking opponents. The Republican Party, for example, did little to restrain the politically useful demagoguery of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. The result is that doves are often painted as being sympathetic toward U.S. enemies or ignorant of world affairs, and when the public feels threatened, doves must combat these claims in a charged political environment. It is also difficult for legislators concerned with securing reelection to hold dove positions, because these are difficult to quantify, and the results are hard to identify and impossible to claim credit for. Negotiations, for instance, are risky, time-consuming exercises conducted by bureaucratic experts over whom Congress has little direct influence. The gains from these policies are not easily quantifiable or even readily tangible, and doves cannot point out "X-amount of peace produced" as evidence that dove policies are working. Hawkish policies are tangible, quan-

2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 139–144; C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵⁶ Bradley Lian and John Oneal, "Presidents, the Use of Military Force, and Public Opinion," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 19 (June 1993): 277–300; John R. Oneal and Annal Lillian Bryan, "The Rally Round the Flag Effect in US Foreign Policy Crises, 1950–1985," *Political Behavior* 17 (December 1995): 379–401; Patrick James and James Rioux, "International Crises and Linkage Politics: The Experience of the United States, 1953–1994," *Political Research Quarterly* 51 (September 1998): 781–812; David H. Clark, "Agreeing to Disagree: Domestic Institutional Congruence and US Dispute Behavior," *Political Research Quarterly* 53 (June 2000): 375–400.

⁵⁷ Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk," *Econometrica* 47 (1979): 263–291; Miroslav Nincic, "Loss Aversion and the Domestic Context of Military Intervention," *Political Research Quarterly* 50 (March 1997): 97–120.

tifiable, and distributable, and therefore serve as convincing props and lucrative pork for reelection purposes.

EXPLAINING INSTITUTIONAL FAILURE

To what extent were these factors present in these cases? Were advocates of hawkish policies in the media more capable of spreading their message, and was the audience receptive to that message? Was dissent in the bureaucracy stifled? What role did the framing of issues by the administration and rally-'round-the-flag effects play? Were doves in Congress pressured to accept hawkish policies for political reasons?

Ignorance, Values, and Cueing

The Red Juggernaut. Public knowledge regarding the USSR was extremely limited during the early years of the Cold War. Information outlets taken for granted today simply did not exist, and expertise was confined to Ivy League universities, elite think tanks, and, of course, government. Objective information on the USSR was only available in classified reports produced by and for the government. If quality information was scarce and the public ignorant, available sources were monolithic in their presentation. The press viewed the USSR as a danger, and major media outlets, including newspapers, radio and television networks, and movie studios, cooperated with the federal government to produce what was, in essence, propaganda that portrayed the Soviet Union as an imminent, mortal threat.⁵⁸ Media dissent was extremely limited and became even more so as the Cold War deepened after 1950. Whether it was the elite media, small-town newspapers, or leftist publications, the range and scope of media debate over the Cold War narrowed to the point where questioning the assumption that the USSR was a military threat was unacceptable.⁵⁹

The distribution of values among the members of the mass public also aided elite attempts to paint the Soviets as a threat. Contemporary polls that indicated the public's willingness to cooperate with Moscow masked an underlying historical mistrust and loathing of communism and the USSR.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Nancy Bernhard, *US Television News and Cold War Propaganda, 1947-1960* (Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 69–93.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 155–177; John Fousek, *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism & the Culture of the Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945–1954* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 419–462.

⁶⁰ Ted Morgan, *Reds: McCarthyism in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Random House, 2002); Lisle Rose, *The Cold War Comes to Main Street: America in 1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

These feelings, in turn, could be exploited to the full in a media environment that relegated dovish opinion to the fringes of acceptable political debate. Furthermore, the postwar demobilization of veterans also released into the general population large numbers of young men socialized to military life, trust in the state, and the necessity of using force, all attributes making them susceptible to the new ideology of national security being promulgated by anti-communist elites.⁶¹ The pump was primed, in other words, for the public to accept hawkish views of the USSR in a way that quickly transformed the public's perception of a recent ally into that of a recently defeated enemy.⁶²

Vietnam. The early years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam went surprisingly unnoticed by most of the major media outlets in the United States.⁶³ A few of the larger outlets had offices in-country, and, as admitted in *The Pentagon Papers*, produced objective pieces on U.S. involvement in South Vietnam.⁶⁴ Unfortunately, media presence in pre-Tonkin Vietnam was such that it was difficult to cover every aspect of the war in detail. Media reports on particular engagements, guerilla activity, and Saigon's corruption could only capture small slices of the war at any given time. Pre-Tonkin reporting failed to ask "big questions," such as the end goal of the U.S. commitment, whether the United States should have been in Vietnam at all, or whether Hanoi represented a legitimate form of Vietnamese nationalism.⁶⁵

After Tonkin and U.S. troop commitments in 1965, U.S. media presence in the country increased. Print outlets already in Vietnam expanded their bureaus to increase coverage, while newspapers previously content to use wire feed opened their own bureaus in Saigon. The introduction of widespread television news coverage also brought home the immediacy of the war to the American public in a way print and radio outlets had not been able to accomplish. The expansion of higher education brought on by the baby boom also opened up a source of information and expertise, the academy, to a larger, more diverse audience than had previously been the case. As the war went on and costs began to mount, an increasingly interested public was able to keep abreast of events in a way it had not been able to a decade earlier.

In 1964, however, the established print media still controlled public discourse on foreign policy, while television was restricted by technology in what

⁶¹ Hogan, *A Cross of Iron*, 1–22; Michael Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1–30, 353, 376.

⁶² Les K. Adler and Thomas Paterson, "Red Fascism: The Merger of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the American Image of Totalitarianism, 1930s-1950s," *American Historical Review* 75 (April 1970): 1046–1064.

⁶³ William Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War* (New York: Times Books, 1995); McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 37.

⁶⁴ Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 686–690.

⁶⁵ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 670; Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 685–686.

it could report. This meant that the voices of dissent coming from Southeast Asia did little to overturn entrenched hawkish views. Indeed, the major U.S. print and broadcast outlets uncritically parroted the administration’s line that the Tonkin incident was the result of an unprovoked attack by the North Vietnamese, showing that the established media’s dependence on official sources inside Washington and in South Vietnam, as in the Iraq case, meant it could not stray far from the official line when confronted by a seemingly united administration.⁶⁶ In terms of the public’s values, the generation that fought and came of age during the Second World War had now attained positions of influence within American society. The “silent majority” Nixon later appealed to represented not so much any one political party so much as the members of this generation who had committed to avoiding a repetition of the perceived mistakes of the 1930s.⁶⁷

Iraq. If information with which to judge the merits of policy was scarce in the previous cases, the same cannot be said about Iraq. Media coverage included 24-hour television news, widespread print coverage, and Internet-based reporting. Media sources were diverse, and the Internet provided a platform for the presentation and dissemination of views that might not have otherwise made it into the public domain. Experts were called upon to debate Iraq policy, and nongovernmental sources of information on the pros and cons of war with Iraq were widely available. The U.S.–Iraq war in 1991 and U.S. involvement there since also gave the public a sense of familiarity with Iraq.

Cracks in the established U.S. media first seen in Vietnam had by now, however, widened into a divide separated not so much by technology as by ideology. The reemergence of a political press in the United States provided more platforms for dissent, but also segmented recipients of news by political ideology. Individuals discount news and information coming from outside their ideological milieu, making it no surprise that press reports from “liberal” outlets that questioned administration evidence on Iraq had little impact on public opinion. Conservative media, in fact, insulated war supporters from these reports. One study, for instance, reported that viewers of conservative FOX News would not only be more likely to hold factually incorrect beliefs about the Iraq war after the war’s conclusion, but actually had become less informed the more they watched.⁶⁸ Finally, as in Vietnam, the U.S. media’s overreliance on government sources and relative lack of access to and expertise on Iraq meant that the media in general and conservative media in particular served as an echo chamber that reverberated “myths of empire” to a public

⁶⁶ Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

⁶⁷ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 7–9, 485–487.

⁶⁸ Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, and Evan Lewis, “Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War,” *Political Science Quarterly* 118 (Winter 2003–04): 569–598.

long comfortable with viewing U.S. power as a unique, righteous force for good in world affairs.⁶⁹

Bureaucratic Incentives

The Red Juggernaut. The Soviet threat created the modern U.S. national security bureaucracy. Previous U.S. wars had been followed by periods of foreign retrenchment; thus, those wishing to prevent this needed to highlight potential postwar threats to national security.⁷⁰ The effort to identify the USSR as the nation's primary enemy coincided with the passage of the National Security Act of 1947 and the creation of new institutional arrangements for the nation's military services. Defense unification under a weak defense secretary and the emergence of an independent Air Force resulted in acute interservice rivalry, leading to services that could neither agree on basic strategy nor coordinate their budget requests to Congress. When rearmament was authorized in the crisis atmosphere of the Korean War, these interservice disputes were transferred from an environment of financial scarcity to one of financial plenty, with funds lavished on services that still had not reconciled their policy differences. What resulted was a process of capabilities-resources ratcheting, a situation wherein an expansion of capabilities brought with it an expansion of responsibilities that due to service-defined military necessity, required the acquisition of new resources. This, along with secrecy that prevented outsiders from reviewing military planning, and the sidelining of bureaucratic economizers opposed to massive rearmament, produced the atomic Air Force, overkill, and a tripling of the annual military budget from \$13.5 billion to \$45 billion between 1949 and 1951, of which only a portion went to support the war in Korea.⁷¹

Vietnam. The acute interservice rivalry that facilitated the massive expansion of the U.S. armed forces in the late '40s and early '50s similarly prevented the military chiefs from effectively opposing Johnson's policy in Vietnam. Instead, the chiefs accepted Johnson and McNamara's policy of "gradual escalation" despite their misgivings about its ultimate efficacy, and

⁶⁹ Michael Massing, *Now They Tell Us: The American Press and Iraq* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2004); Paul T. McCartney, "American Nationalism and US Foreign Policy: From September 11th to the Iraq War," *Political Science Quarterly* 119 (Fall 2004): 399–423; Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

⁷⁰ Leffler, "The American Conception," 348–349.

⁷¹ David Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960," *International Security* 7 (Spring 1983): 3–71; Benjamin O. Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus: The Political Economy of US National Security Policy, 1949–1951* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 25–74; Hogan, *A Cross of Iron*, 23–68, 159–208, 264–366.

instead fought to increase their respective shares of the Vietnam “pie.”⁷² The bureaucracy, furthermore, buried those who disagreed with or documented the failure of U.S. policy in Vietnam. Indeed, military officers and administration officials expressing doubt were often ignored and punished, as were Vice President Hubert Humphrey, CIA director McCone, and even Defense Secretary McNamara.

Iraq. The end of the Cold War brought significant budget cuts in national security spending, while bureaucratic inertia and the lack of a clear threat prevented resources from being reallocated quickly or efficiently.⁷³ This general malaise in the intelligence community, especially the perception that the CIA was mired in decline, provided hawkish policy entrepreneurs newly ensconced within the bureaucracy the unique opportunity to influence policy on Iraq. These individuals and their associates outside government were able to collectively direct attention toward Iraq after the attacks of September 11 and then use their influence and the low reputation of U.S. intelligence agencies to suppress doubts about the veracity of administration statements on Iraq. Once it became apparent that war was inevitable, there were few incentives, despite uneasiness among many military and civilian officials, for bureaucrats to voice dissent. Those expressing doubt as to the viability of the postwar occupation plan or the cost of the invasion were, like in the Vietnam case, fired or reprimanded.

Trigger Events

The Red Juggernaut. Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe, the loss of China to Mao Zedong in 1949, and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 contributed to a hardening of public opinion toward communism in general and the USSR in particular. These events confirmed in the minds of the U.S. public that the communist threat was real and gaining strength, framing future policy toward the Soviet Union in terms of loss prevention. The “Long Telegram” and “X” article in *Foreign Affairs* articulated containment’s loss-prevention strategy,⁷⁴ while U.S. policymakers focused on denying communism further strategic gains regardless of whether local circumstances, such as in Indochina, suggested that a looser interpretation of containment might be more appropriate. Indeed, the Korean War allowed the conflict in Indochina

⁷² McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 327–328.

⁷³ 9/11 Commission Report, 71–134; Bamford, *A Pretext for War*, 129, 157–161.

⁷⁴ George Kennan as “X,” “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs* XXV (July 1947): 575–576; U.S. embassy (Moscow) cable, “Answer to Department’s 284, Feb 3 [13]” (Sources of Conduct), 22 February 1946, Secret, accessed at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>, 4 October 2005.

to be reinterpreted as a free-world struggle against worldwide communism relatively quickly. Less than a month after the outbreak of hostilities on the Korean peninsula, the Truman administration authorized the dispatch of military aid and advisers to aid the French in Vietnam. By 1954, what effectively had been a colonial war between aspiring Vietnamese, albeit communist, nationalists and French colonialism had been transformed into a front in the U.S. “global war” on communism, resulting in the eventual deployment of over 4,600 troops to French Indochina and the supplying of 80 percent of French war materiel at a total cost of over \$3 billion.⁷⁵ Finally, the bunker mentality permeating containment, moreover, necessitated tracking U.S.–Soviet relations as a win/lose situation in which the slightest loss might lead to catastrophe. Direct involvement in Korea also facilitated this change in framing, and dramatically recast public perception of the Cold War. Indeed, the dispatch of troops to the peninsula made questioning U.S. Cold War policy unpatriotic and dangerous because it signaled weak resolve.

Vietnam. The Tonkin incident similarly refashioned public perception of the conflict in Vietnam. Whereas before Tonkin, U.S. commitments to Saigon were seen in terms of efficacy of policy, the attacks recast the conflict as a direct challenge to the United States. U.S. forces had been attacked, and honor dictated a response behind which a patriotic public rallied. Questioning the wisdom of bombing or troop deployments manifested itself in public only well after U.S. actions had proven both ineffective and costly.⁷⁶ Avoiding defeat in Vietnam in order to avoid an even larger loss through the fall of the whole of Southeast Asia was also an important factor in galvanizing support.

Escalation, however, was painstaking and slow, and the invasion and occupation of the North was never considered for fear of widening the conflict. Intervention on the ground in South Vietnam thus represented a risky, costly gamble that was undertaken to avoid a loss.

Iraq. Consideration of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq cannot be made without reference to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. The public rallied behind the President, and opposition to the campaign to topple the Taliban was nonexistent. Measures taken to combat terrorism at home, such as creation of the Department of Homeland Security and passage of the Patriot Act, were widely supported. Crucially, consensus that the root cause of Islamic terror threatening the United States could be found in the oppressive regimes

⁷⁵ Robert Mann, *A Grand Delusion: America's Descent into Vietnam* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 87–92; Tim Kane, *Global US Troop Deployment: 1950–2003. Center for Data Analysis Report #04-11* (Washington DC: Heritage Foundation, 2004).

⁷⁶ Frank Newport and Joseph Carroll, “Iraq versus Vietnam: A Comparison of Public Opinion,” *The Gallup Poll*, 24 August 2005, accessed on the website of The Gallup Poll at <http://gallupole.com/content/?ci=18097>, 5 September 2005.

of the Middle East laid the foundation for war against Iraq. The “enemy” was not merely al Qaeda, but had expanded to include most of the regimes in the region. Arguments for the invasion were also cast in “loss-prevention” frames during public debate, that is, Saddam Hussein posed a threat that in the future the United States *might* suffer devastating losses. Implicit in this assertion was a link between Iraq’s alleged WMD possession and the Iraqi state to al Qaeda. The administration carefully crafted its war message to argue that war would remove an imminent danger. An argument not emphasized in the public debate before the war, however, was the notion that installing democracy and freeing the Iraqi people from Saddam’s rule was a legitimate justification for war—which the consensus over the root cause of the September 11 terror attacks would have suggested. Instead, officials apparently decided that the public reason for war would be the potential WMD threat and the future losses that it could entail, rather than the gains from removing Saddam and installing a democratic regime.⁷⁷

The Politicization of National Security

The Red Juggernaut. The early Cold War saw the heavy politicization of national security in a manner that still affected U.S. politics decades later. Politicians advocating dovish positions on foreign policy and a lessening of Cold War tensions were targets for slanderous attacks by both the right and the political center. The atmosphere of paranoia and cheap political demagoguery permeating the late ’40s and ’50s made it difficult for politicians and others to openly question the nature of the Soviet threat.⁷⁸ Policies adopted to mitigate the threat—political and security ties abroad and rearmament at home—were also more lucrative and substantive than negotiations and peaceful coexistence. Military spending brought jobs and income to districts and states containing defense industries and bases, while Marshall Plan aid to Europe invigorated U.S. industry.⁷⁹ The benefits of lessened tensions with the USSR, in theory no less substantial, were diffuse and hard to measure or verify, while the costs were concentrated on groups benefiting most from competition with Moscow.

Vietnam. Johnson was keen on avoiding a defeat in Vietnam for fear of what defeat abroad would do to his prospects for reelection and, after re-

⁷⁷ Rodger D. Hodge, “Weekly Review,” 28 May 2003, accessed on the website of *Harpers Magazine* at <http://harpers.org/WeeklyReview2003-06-03.html>, 15 April 2004.

⁷⁸ Morgan, *Reds*; David Cauter, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978).

⁷⁹ Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus*; Kofsky, *Harry S. Truman*; Ann Markusen, Scott Campbell, Peter Hall, and Sabrina Dietrick, *The Rise of the Gunbelt: The Military Remapping of Industrial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

election, his chances to pass his Great Society legislation. While Johnson's *machismo*, strident anti-communism, his and his advisers' misguided desire to project credibility, bureaucratic lethargy and policy inertia, and global power imbalances in favor of the United States may all have ultimately been responsible for his decision for war, domestic political considerations played a crucial role in the way he went about committing the United States in Southeast Asia.⁸⁰ Johnson, for instance, had little foreign policy experience upon taking office after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, and he banked upon the credibility of Kennedy advisers like McNamara, Maxwell Taylor, and McGeorge Bundy in order to lend himself legitimacy on national security. Indeed, Johnson was well aware of the perils that awaited a president when confronted with a seemingly unsuccessful foreign policy, having witnessed the diminishment of Truman's political capital after the loss of China in 1949 and the stalemate in Korea.

As the front-runner in the 1964 election, Johnson desired to keep Vietnam on the back burner, avoiding decisions that might force him into a position of either losing Vietnam or stumbling into war. To do this, Johnson adopted a "holding" strategy that kept pressure on the North through covert action in order to hide the growing scale and depth of the U.S. commitment. When Barry Goldwater, his Republican challenger, attacked Johnson for being "soft" and "irresolute" in dealing with the communist North, the President deftly used the opportunity presented by Tonkin to rebut those charges. Indeed, it is clear that domestic political considerations topped Johnson's list of concerns when he ordered the strike. Retaliatory options, for instance, were judged according to how the Republicans, the Congress, and the press would react, and the President's announcement of U.S. retaliation was timed so as to not miss the deadlines of the Eastern papers, not for reasons of operational security; the announcement came well before U.S. planes hit their targets.⁸¹ The political motivation for the Tonkin air strikes is highlighted by the fact that a month later, a similarly ambiguous naval action in the Gulf of Tonkin failed to elicit a military response from Johnson. Having already proven his credibility, Johnson had no desire to spook voters so close to the November elections when, in his opinion, "those dumb, stupid sailors were probably just shooting at flying fish."⁸²

This concern with credibility and the calculus of domestic politics laced Johnson's decision making throughout the period of deepening U.S. involvement after the election. Throughout 1965, Johnson kept the growing commitment in Vietnam hidden, skillfully using the credibility of McNamara, the

⁸⁰ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 485–493; Logevall, *Choosing War*, 375–413; McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 300–322; Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

⁸¹ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 128, 132–133.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 161.

Joint Chiefs, and even former Presidents Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower to deflect criticism. The Viet Cong attack on the U.S. installation at Pleiku was used to justify troop deployments and an aerial bombardment of the North that had been planned but was delayed because of the election.⁸³ Johnson always sent enough troops and materiel to Vietnam to meet immediate needs—but only enough—to avoid a real debate on Vietnam that might have undermined support for his expensive Great Society reforms and threatened the political coalition he and his party had built.⁸⁴

Iraq. Despite the end of the Cold War, national security remained a topic for vitriolic debate. Conservatives claimed that the Ronald Reagan-era military buildup had “defeated” the Soviets, thus giving them credibility with the public when advocating *realpolitik*. Those advocating dovish policies were discredited by the seeming success of the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush in dealing with the Soviets. In this environment, doves advocating multilateralism and international institution building were cast as being “soft” on defense, and willing to expend American lives in unfruitful nation-building exercises abroad.

Critics described liberal policies as “weakening” the military, and painted doves as unwilling to use force to protect American interests abroad. The Bill Clinton administration’s response to terror attacks against U.S. targets were, in particular, painted as being “soft” despite the lack of realistic alternatives then acceptable to the U.S. electorate. The attacks of September 11, therefore, did not occur in a political vacuum. Rather, they occurred at a time when dovish positions were castigated by hawks as being ineffective and dangerous. Since the fruits of multilateral diplomacy and global institution building were not readily measurable or easily discernible to an ignorant and skeptical public, doves could not point to an “X-amount of peace and security” produced. Hawks, on the other hand, used this inability to measure the product of dovish policy as being an indicator of failure, and were able to cite terrorist attacks as evidence of that failure. The attacks of September 11 made this standing critique more poignant and difficult to deflect.

NEGATIVE CASE: PRE-SEPTEMBER 11 ANTI-TERROR POLICY

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 were the largest mass-casualty attacks in U.S. history, and warnings collected by the bureaucracy in the years, months, and weeks preceding them indicated that the al Qaeda threat was real, growing, and likely to strike U.S. soil. Why was so little done to prevent these attacks? It is surprising that the threat from al Qaeda and the specter of mass-

⁸³ Ibid., 174, 240–241.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 312, 316–317, 320.

casualty terrorism didn't move officials to do anything, let alone use it as the leading prop in an attempt at threat inflation and policy manipulation. Why was inaction, possibly even threat deflation, the result?

First, terrorism, unlike the threats in the previous cases, was something of which even U.S. elites, let alone the public, were only dimly aware. The nature of terrorism and the lack of a clear enemy presented the public and cueing elites alike with a subject that could not be easily incorporated into the old state-centered threat matrix of the Cold War. Terrorism's amorphous nature, multiple players, and differing goals presented no consistent theme that could be used to justify rearmament, bureaucratic reorganization, or an aggressive foreign policy. If terrorism was a threat far distant from the everyday experience of the U.S. public and elite to begin with, then Islamic fundamentalism and groups like al Qaeda were almost exclusively the preserve of dedicated government and academic experts and policy entrepreneurs. Terrorism prior to September 11 and, specifically, al Qaeda's distant exoticness made them too implausible an enemy with which to either galvanize support for an anti-terrorism campaign abroad or as the central character in any scare story peddled by a manipulative administration.

Second, the bureaucratic agents responsible for tracking and defending against the terrorist threat were ill-prepared to handle a transnational organization like al Qaeda, while rivalry over jurisdiction, assets, and information prevented bureaucratic coordination. The CIA and State Department, for instance, suffered from budget cutbacks, morale problems, and a critical lack of assets and expertise in transnational terrorism, while the Department of Defense was institutionally averse to taking on counter-terrorism missions that held potential for significant mission creep. The FBI, although skilled in investigation of terrorist incidents, remained focused on law enforcement activities that could lead to legal prosecution, not on threat detection and prevention. With no agency or department having much to gain from focusing national attention on terrorism, it is not surprising that the pre-September 11 national security bureaucracies did not focus on the threat, absent White House direction.

Third, although there were a series of terrorist attacks against U.S. targets by Islamic fundamentalist groups in the 1990s, there was no dramatic attack on the scale of September 11 that could galvanize a rally-'round-the-flag effect or push the population into the domain of losses. Without either, risky and expensive loss-avoiding policies that could have been sold to the public as effective in either containing or eliminating al Qaeda before September 11 were never floated, for lack of obvious public support. This was, again, probably owing to the fact that the most dramatic al Qaeda attacks, such as the attempted sinking of the USS Cole in October 2000 and the U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, were far away and failed to kill more Americans than the bombing by domestic terrorists of the Oklahoma City federal building. There were no terror attacks prior to September 11 powerful enough to make threat inflation centered on terrorism credible.

Fourth, the relaxation of international tensions brought about by the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union made political attacks on liberal-leaning foreign policy far less acute. Without an enemy, charges that doves were weak or soft on national security simply had far less traction with the public. Indeed, with no clear enemy, foreign affairs was even more absent than usual during the 2000 election. Furthermore, the only significant use of U.S. military force abroad at the time was in the Balkans, a situation that led traditional defense hawks to criticize a military intervention led by a liberal internationalist on the grounds that the conflict posed no threat to U.S. security and might develop into an open-ended nation-building exercise.

ANALYSIS

Table 1 summarizes the cases and factors discussed above. The limited number of cases, of course, necessarily requires a significant degree of caution when interpreting and drawing inferences from them, but analysis suggests that the conditions under which threat inflation occurs are varied and the results of inflation dependent upon the context in which it takes place. So how and why does threat inflation succeed?

First, the public’s lack of knowledge is, surprisingly, relatively unimportant. The public was arguably best informed on Vietnam and Iraq, but threat inflation still took place and succeeded, whereas the public was arguably least informed about the Red Juggernaut and pre–September 11 terrorism, yet threat inflation occurred in the former case but not the latter. Clearly, public knowledge is only relevant within the context of elite cueing and existing public values. Here, we see the polar cases of monolithic cueing and monolithic values in favor of opposing communism crystallizing into the Cold War consensus and the domestic “Red Scare,” while divided elites and divided values prior to September 11 are associated with policy inaction and apathy. Iraq and Vietnam were middling cases. Vietnam can best be characterized as a time when both elites and the mass public were weakly monolithic as to the need to confront and contain communism in Southeast Asia, with division occurring over the proper policy to adopt and whether military intervention by U.S. forces was practical. Iraq, on the other hand, was a case in which both elites and the public could be characterized as weakly divided over the need, practicality, and appropriateness of a U.S. invasion of Iraq in the wider campaign against terrorism.

Second, executive branch capture of the bureaucracy occurred in all three cases of threat inflation, although the extent to which and the method of how control was established differed. The case of the early Cold War saw the complete capture of the bureaucracy by hawks, which was facilitated by the congruence of agency incentives with administration policy and coupled to heavy policing of dissent. Vietnam saw strong but not complete capture of the bureaucracy, largely because, despite heavy policing, not all bureaucratic agents or agencies were in agreement on the efficacy of U.S. intervention. The

TABLE 1
Threat Inflation in Four Cases

	<i>Red Juggernaut</i>	<i>Vietnam</i>	<i>Iraq</i>	<i>Pre–September 11</i>
Information Availability	1	2	3	1
Elite cueing	Monolithic	Weakly monolithic	Weakly divided	Divided
Public values	Monolithic	Weakly monolithic	Weakly divided	Divided
Bureaucracy	Total capture	Strong capture	Modest capture	No capture
Trigger event	2–3	1–2	3	1
National security politicization	3	2	2	1
Threat inflation	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Result	Cold War consensus	Gradual escalation	Iraq invasion	September 11

1, weak/little; 2, medium/some; 3, strong/a great deal.

Iraq case, on the other hand, saw only moderate capture of the bureaucracy, largely owing to the inability of the administration to adequately police those unhappy with either the invasion itself or the manner of its implementation. In the pre–September 11 case, on the other hand, not only was there wide bureaucratic disagreement over the proper U.S. response to terrorism, there were few attempts to police the bureaucracy through either coercion or cooptation. Weak coordination at the top failed to bring either order or consistency to U.S. anti-terror policy.

Third, the occurrence of a precipitating trigger event or events that sets the stage for a later attempt at threat inflation is, unsurprisingly, a critical precondition. Iraq arguably had the strongest precipitating event, September 11, while the Red Juggernaut case saw a string of menacing events abroad culminate in the invasion of South Korea. Vietnam and the pre–September 11 era had the weakest precipitating events, but these differed in context. Tonkin and subsequent guerrilla attacks against U.S. advisory forces in South Vietnam occurred during the Cold War and could plausibly be linked to U.S. rivals. Terrorism prior to September 11, on the other hand, did not occur during a period of geopolitical rivalry and could not be linked to a plausible enemy.

Finally, the politicization of national security was a significant factor in all three cases of threat inflation. Opposition to hawkish policy was the most politically dangerous in the early Cold War era for several reasons. The USSR appeared menacing, elite cueing and public opinion indicated anti-communism abroad was both popular and legitimate, bureaucratic allies were few, and, finally, massive military spending was useful for reelection purposes. Vietnam and Iraq likewise saw the politicization of national security, but politicization was less heavy than during the initial years of the Cold War for different reasons. Vietnam had significant elite and popular support, as evidenced by the weakly monolithic consensus over Vietnamese policy, and there were initially few bureaucratic agents that dovish lawmakers could use as allies, but the weakness of the precipitating events that contextualized U.S. involvement and

the paucity of electoral pork that came with Vietnam did not turn opposition into a political dead end. The precipitating event in the Iraq case, on the other hand, was such a shock that even a weakly divided elite and mass public, a fair degree of bureaucratic opposition, and next to no political pork were unable to overcome the political disadvantages of opposition. The pre-September 11 era, in contrast to all three positive cases, saw relatively little politicization of anti-terrorism policy because widespread disagreement among elites, the bureaucracy, and the mass public provided ample space for political opposition.

These differences, in turn, explain the relative success of threat inflation in each case, and answer the question of how these administrations "got away with it." Truman's threat inflation was an overwhelming success; it literally brought into existence the modern U.S. national security state and legitimized a half-century of Cold War. It succeeded because of a unique set of circumstances: monolithic elite and popular opinion that was mutually agreeable on foreign policy, an almost complete absence of bureaucratic dissent, and a series of menacing events abroad that first pushed the public into the domain of losses and then created a rally-'round-the-flag effect during the Korean War. The Truman administration may have produced the play, but events abroad provided the stage, bureaucrats the script, and elites the direction, while the public largely applauded. Political opposition was simply impossible in such a situation.

Vietnam and Iraq, in contrast, were far less successful instances of threat inflation. In Vietnam, moderate consensus over the legitimacy of U.S. actions in Southeast Asia allowed Johnson to use Tonkin as a pretext for further U.S. intervention, but the weakness of Tonkin as a precipitating event did not allow him to send hundreds of thousands of troops immediately nor, in the end, invade and occupy North Vietnam. Capturing the bureaucracy, in turn, merely allowed administration policy to go farther and lies to be hidden for longer than might have otherwise been the case. Vietnam was a case in which commitment increased secretly and slowly, while initial support dwindled over time.

Threat inflation in Iraq was, in the end, even less successful than in Vietnam. True, the Bush administration was able to spin lurid tales of Iraqi WMD in the hands of terrorists into a successful invasion, but it has not been able to sustain support in the face of significant opposition from large segments of the elite, the public, and the national security bureaucracy itself. Indeed, support has dwindled far more quickly for the Iraq intervention than it did for Vietnam. Thus, Iraq is something of a fluke, largely caused by the shock of September 11. Without September 11, it is doubtful whether threat inflation and invasion would have been remotely feasible. Finally, the lack of all these factors contributed to the absence of threat inflation, possibly even contributed to threat *deflation*, in the years prior to September 11. Elite and public values were divided, the threat indistinct and shadowy, and the bureaucracy uninterested and weakly policed. In such an environment, political opposition could thrive and thwart any attempt to use terrorism as the central prop in threat inflation.

CONCLUSION: TRUST ... BUT VERIFY

The picture presented here as to the efficacy of U.S. institutions in preventing threat inflation or rationally confronting threats to U.S. security is not a pretty one. Given strong enough trigger events and the presence of some degree of elite and popular consensus, secrecy, and the president's commanding position over the security bureaucracies provide significant opportunities to engage in threat inflation. More disturbing still is that threat inflation has succeeded not just once, but at least three times in the past half century and has resulted in the unneeded expenditure of vast amounts of blood and treasure. A communist Vietnam proved inconsequential to U.S. security, while Iraq, as of yet, has increased antipathy toward U.S. policy abroad, failed to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has not brought significant political liberalization to the Middle East, and has, moreover, increased terrorism and unleashed chaos in the heart of the world's most important oil-producing region. The Cold War, although probably inevitable, was made more dangerous and more expensive by fear mongering that demonized the Soviet Union. All this suggests that the way in which the United States formulates its foreign policy is deeply flawed. Current emphasis on intelligence reorganization will probably solve little, because the ultimate sources of threat inflation or deflation lie outside the purview of intelligence collection and analysis. Threat inflation or deflation occurs and succeeds because it is politically feasible, even beneficial, to instigate or go along with it. It is at heart a political act, and only political reform will make engaging in it more difficult.

First and fundamentally, Congress's devolution of power and deference to the executive branch in the area of national security is unconscionable, yet its subservience continues because it is politically expedient. Its committee system has produced a large number of oversight committees on national security and foreign affairs that do little other than promote legislative baronies that create inefficiency, produce pork, contribute to legislative shirking, and provide bureaucratic agents numberless opportunities to play congressional actors against one another. It makes little sense to have separate committees and subcommittees for intelligence, foreign affairs, and the armed services when, in the real world, a substantive grasp of foreign policy requires expertise in all three areas. Consolidating these into one expanded, strictly bipartisan committee with significant oversight and funding authority for all the national security bureaucracies is a first step that would simultaneously expand and make accountable congressional power. The adoption of a rotating chairmanship, in addition to strict bipartisanship, would also help promote partisan comity and cooperation in an area that has far too often been politicized at the nation's expense.

These particular reforms would no doubt be difficult to enact, as they would ruffle the feathers of the many vested interests that would lose influence if the current system of congressional oversight were to be significantly changed. However, expecting congressional members to suddenly find under

the current system the political will to overcome the entrenched disincentives to overseeing executive branch stewardship of national security is simply putting hope before experience. A good deal of the president’s legitimacy, for instance, is derived from the fact that he or she is clearly the head of the executive branch. If something goes wrong, he or she can be held accountable. Who is responsible for congressional oversight, on the other hand, is not evident at all. Congressional oversight, as a collective endeavor, is susceptible to collective-action problems and, obviously, has failed quite often. Committee consolidation would clearly delineate who is responsible and, indeed, increase overall expertise. The same committee determining whether the army should be increased will also hear testimony from intelligence officials as to what threats that army will have to face. Furthermore, institutionalized bipartisanship will make substantive congressional oversight more credible and, therefore, a greater deterrent to administration malfeasance. No one, for instance, expects a congressional inquiry into executive branch activities to amount to more than a televised whitewash when the same party controls both branches.

Expansion of congressional power and the institution of practices that are designed to increase bipartisanship, however, will only help constrain the executive if lawmakers are more informed. Congress, at present, receives a hodge-podge of information through its oversight committees that presents lawmakers with, at best, a highly biased overview of U.S. intelligence assessments. Indeed, it is apparent that the oversight hearings in the above cases rather quickly devolved into meaningless dog-and-pony shows wherein bureaucratic and administration officials easily evaded answering tough questions by a Congress either too uninformed, too cowed, or too lazy to press further. Clearly, Congress needs better access to timely, high-quality information.

One way this might be achieved is to distribute to members of the relevant committee or committees congressional versions of the President’s Daily Brief, thereby giving legislative overseers as much information as is available to the president. Other remedies, however, should focus on weakening presidential control of bureaucratic agents in order to prevent retribution for informing Congress of malfeasance. Whistle-blower protection, for instance, should be strengthened even further, while bureaucratic agents should be given the right to anonymously give testimony to or otherwise secretly inform Congress of administration wrongdoing through a congressional–executive ombudsman. The extension of the length of service of the directors of central and, now, national intelligence beyond one presidential term, as well as the establishment of supermajority requirements for Senate approval of major appointments to the national security bureaucracy, would make these bureaucrats less creatures of the administration and more public servants accountable to both the president and Congress. Finally, a series of sunshine laws should be adopted that place limits on what documents can be classified, require that public and private papers of all high administration officials be made public, and make more-efficient Freedom of Information Act requests in the area of national security.

These reforms will not end the problem of threat inflation, but strengthening and depoliticizing congressional power and weakening the president's hold over the bureaucracy may free up information held in the deep recesses of these agencies that could make political opposition to threat inflation more feasible. Executive power would thus be curtailed, but the possibility that the president would be unduly subject to the will of the legislature is small. The president would retain the ability to command troops, would still set the national security agenda, and would still be responsible for the overall thrust of foreign policy. All that these initial reforms would do is ensure that the person hired to do the job is honest about the job needing to be done.