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H-Diplo/ISSF Forum on Marc Trachtenberg's "Audience Costs in 1954?"

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Introduction by James McAllister, Williams College

Fredrik Logevall's Pulitzer prize-winning *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* has understandably sparked renewed interest in and debate over the origins of America's involvement in Vietnam.¹ As Lloyd Gardner and other historians have argued, the heart of Logevall's book is his analysis of the crucial events of 1954.² In sharp contrast to the image of President Dwight D. Eisenhower as a generally restraining force fighting off those who were committed to intervention, such as Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Logevall argues that the President's words and deeds "suggest a man who was fully prepared to intervene with force under certain circumstances and who sought to maintain his freedom of maneuver for whatever contingencies might arise."³

In this special H-Diplo forum, Marc Trachtenberg and Bob Jervis further explore the events of 1954 and their significance for larger questions of international relations theory. Both scholars agree that *Embers of War* is fully deserving of the scholarly praise it has so far received; Trachtenberg believes it is "remarkable" and Jervis argues that it is "marvelous." In addition to analyzing the actions of the Eisenhower administration in 1954, the focus of both Trachtenberg and Jervis is on examining the role of costly signaling and "audience costs" in the resolution of international crises. According to the highly influential work on audience costs by many international relations theorists, statesmen often try to convince their adversaries to back down by issuing public threats. Since these officials will presumably pay a high domestic price if they fail to uphold their word, audience costs theorists argue that adversaries are more likely to take them seriously and adjust their actions accordingly.⁴ Building on his previous work in this area, Trachtenberg suggests that a close examination of the events of 1954 does not reflect the causal mechanisms suggested by audience cost theory.⁵ The Chinese leadership was highly influenced by Eisenhower's threats and statements in 1954, but not in the way suggested by the literature on audience costs. Furthermore, while Eisenhower may have successfully coerced China in 1954, Trachtenberg argues that his success came at a very high cost.

¹ Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York, Random House, 2012).

² See Lloyd Gardner, H-Diplo Roundtable Review of *Embers of War*, 20 May 2012, <http://www.h-diplo.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XIV-32.pdf>.

³ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 472-473.

⁴ The crucial work that has inspired much of the research on audience costs is James Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (September 1994). See also Michael Tomz, "Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach," *International Organization*, vol. 21, Autumn, 2007, 821-840.

⁵ See Marc Trachtenberg, Audience Costs: A Historical Analysis," *Security Studies*, vol. 21, January-March 2012, 3-42, as well as the subsequent commentary on the article by Kenneth Schultz, Branislav Slantchev, Jack Levy, Erik Gartzke, Yonatan Lupu, and Jonathan Mercer in *Security Studies*, vol. 21, July-September 2012, 369-415.

Once again, we thank Professor Trachtenberg for submitting original and thought provoking scholarship to H-Diplo/ISSF. We hope that other scholars in both history and political science will follow his example.

Participants:

Marc Trachtenberg, an historian by training, is currently a professor of political science at UCLA. He got his Ph.D. at Berkeley in 1974, and then taught in the history department at the University of Pennsylvania for 26 years before moving back to California twelve years ago. He has written a number of books and articles dealing mainly with twentieth-century international politics, most notably *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963*, which came out in 1999. His book *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* appeared in 2006 and his collection of essays, *The Cold War and After: History, Theory, and the Logic of International Politics*, was published last year.

James McAllister is Professor of Political Science at Williams College. He is the author of *No Exit: America and the German Problem* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press) and several articles on various aspects of the Vietnam War.

Robert Jervis is Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Politics at Columbia University. His most recent book is *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Cornell University Press, 2010). He was President of the American Political Science Association in 2000-01 and has received career achievement awards from the International Society of Political Psychology and ISA's Security Studies Section. In 2006 he received the National Academy of Science's tri-annual award for behavioral sciences contributions to avoiding nuclear war.

“Audience Costs in 1954?,” an H-Diplo/ISSF Article by Marc Trachtenberg

In recent years the idea that international conflict results from a kind of communication problem has come to play a central role in international relations theory. Many scholars now take it for granted that rational states should be able to reach a bargain that would enable them to avoid the costs of war if they had a clear sense for how strongly their adversaries felt about the issue at hand. But information of that sort is hard to acquire, since states have an “incentive to misrepresent” how tough they are in order to improve their bargaining positions. “Absent such incentives,” Kenneth Schultz writes, that information problem “would be trivial to overcome through simple communication.” But because “each state expects its rival to engage in strategic misrepresentation,” communication is difficult: it is hard to distinguish “genuine threats from bluffs.”¹

The only way to overcome this kind of problem, the argument runs—that is, the only way to convincingly reveal one’s true preferences—is by engaging in what is called ‘costly signaling.’ If one could renege on one’s promises and draw back from one’s threats with utter impunity, why should anyone take them seriously? They would carry much more weight if one paid a price for failing to keep one’s word. In that way, one’s rivals could distinguish between real threats and empty ones; in that way, one’s true preferences could be revealed, and the two sides would have a much better chance of reaching an agreement.

And one particular form of costly signaling is viewed as playing a central role in determining how international conflicts run their course: governments could make their true preferences known by generating ‘audience costs’—that is, by creating a situation where they would pay a price with their own domestic political ‘audience’ for backing down and not doing what they had threatened.² What, however, are we to make of this theory? A number of scholars have recently argued that the audience cost mechanism does not count for much in the real world.³ But those arguments have by no means put an end

Note: a version of this paper with direct links to most of the sources cited here is available online at [http://www.polisci.ucla.edu/faculty/trachtenberg/cv/1954\(12\)\(online\).doc](http://www.polisci.ucla.edu/faculty/trachtenberg/cv/1954(12)(online).doc)

¹ Kenneth Schultz, “Domestic Opposition and Signaling in International Crises,” *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 4 (December 1998), 829. See also Kenneth Schultz, “Do Democratic Institutions Constrain or Inform? Contrasting Two Institutional Perspectives on Democracy and War,” *International Organization* 53, no. 2 (Spring 1999), 236: “When states have complete information about the political and military factors that determine each side’s expected value for war, it is relatively easy to identify those settlements *ex ante* and thereby defuse disputes before they escalate.” “Unless reliable mechanisms exist for credibly revealing private information,” Schultz writes later in that paragraph, “bargaining can fail to reach an efficient, peaceful solution”—suggesting that bargaining cannot fail to reach such a solution when such mechanisms do exist.

² The seminal article here is James Fearon’s “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (September 1994).

³ See Jack Snyder and Erica Borghard, “The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound,” *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 3 (August 2011); Alexander Downes and Todd Sechser, “The Illusion of

to the debate, and there is in fact a good deal still to be learned by studying the issue in specific historical contexts. The goal in pursuing this issue has not been so much to ‘test’ the audience cost theory by seeing if it holds up in those cases as to use it as a tool for getting at some basic issues about how international politics works. If the audience cost mechanism does not count for as much as people think, then a study of that sort might give us some clues as to why the theory does not adequately capture what was going on—that is, it might give us some sense for the sorts of things that might limit the effectiveness of the audience cost mechanism or help in other ways to determine how governments assess each others’ intentions.

The publication of *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam*, Frederik Logevall’s remarkable new book on the Indochina issue in the 1940s and 1950s, allows us to revisit these issues, especially since some of Logevall’s arguments have a certain audience-cost flavor.⁴ He refers in particular to a number of public statements made by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and President Dwight Eisenhower as the crisis in Indochina was coming to a head in the spring of 1954. It seemed increasingly likely that the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu would be overrun by the Communist Viet Minh forces, and a defeat there, it was believed, could easily lead the French to end their involvement in Indochina on what to the Americans were considered unsatisfactory terms. The question then was what the U.S. government could do to prevent events from taking that course. Would the United States intervene in the war, and if so, how would it get involved? Dulles gave a speech on March 29 called “The Threat of a Red Asia” which seemed to suggest that military action might be necessary:

Under the conditions of today, the imposition on Southeast Asia of the political system of Communist Russia and its Chinese Communist ally, by whatever means, would be a grave threat to the whole free community. The United States feels that that possibility should not be passively accepted but should be met by united action. This might involve risks. But these risks are far less than those that will face us a few years from now if we dare not be resolute today.⁵

If the Communists won in Indochina, Dulles said, they would not stop there, but would try to “dominate all of Southeast Asia,” an area President Eisenhower had said a few days earlier was of “transcendent importance.”⁶ The Dulles speech, in fact, as one press account

Democratic Credibility,” *International Organization* 66, no. 3 (July 2012); and Marc Trachtenberg, “Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis,” *Security Studies* 21:1 (March 2012).

⁴ Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012).

⁵ John Foster Dulles, “The Threat of a Red Asia,” remarks made before the Overseas Press Club in New York, March 29, 1954, *Department of State Bulletin*, April 12, 1954, 540.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 539-40.

put it, “marked a climax to a series of Administration and Congressional statements designed to point up the tremendous stakes involved in the Indo-chinese war.”⁷ And the President himself went on to take a very tough line in his April 7 press conference: he laid out his famous “domino theory,” referred to all the millions of people in Asia who had been lost to the Communists, and said pointedly: “we simply can’t afford greater losses.”⁸

In taking that sort of line, Logevall argues, Eisenhower and Dulles “risked hemming themselves in.” After “describing the danger in such grandiose terms,” they might have found it very hard to change course.⁹ And Logevall returned to this theme in commenting on the situation as it appeared in late April:

Having determined that Indochina must be held, and having stated publicly that failure to hold it could have disastrous consequences for American and Western security, [Eisenhower’s] administration felt pressure to act forcefully to prevent such a calamity from occurring. Its credibility was on the line, both internationally and at home—or so the president and his aides feared. The public information campaign launched a month earlier had achieved considerable gains domestically—Congress and the press largely bought the administration’s claims about Indochina’s vital importance, and its domino theorizing—but that very success also had the effect of reducing the president’s maneuverability. Fail now to prevent a Viet Minh victory, and a lot of powerful voices in American society would attack the White House for standing by as the Communists gained a crucial piece of territory.¹⁰

Logevall does not quite say (as we’ll see) that Eisenhower had locked himself into a hard-line position, but these sorts of comments do raise a series of questions that relate directly to the audience cost theory. To what extent, if any, were Eisenhower’s hands tied by the sorts of public pronouncements he and Dulles had made? What sort of political price would they have paid at home for backing off from those threats? And what kind of effect did those threats have on the policy of the Communist powers? To the extent that those public threats influenced their behavior, was this because the audience cost mechanism

⁷ “The U.S. and Indo-China,” *New York Times*, March 30, 1954, 26. On this campaign, see also Logevall, *Embers of War*, 459-61; John Burke and Fred Greenstein (with the collaboration of Larry Berman and Richard Immerman), *How Presidents Test Reality: Decisions on Vietnam, 1954 and 1965* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1989), 110-11; and Joint Chiefs of Staff Historical Division, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam: History of the Indochina Incident, 1945-1954* (originally completed in 1955; declassified in full in 1993, and now available on the JCS FOIA website), 378, 380, 386 [henceforth cited as *Indochina Incident*].

⁸ Eisenhower press conference, April 7, 1954, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower 1954*, 383. Henceforth cited in the form: PPP: Eisenhower 1954.

⁹ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 463.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 508.

had come into play—that is, did the Communists moderate their position because they understood that Eisenhower and Dulles would find it hard for domestic political reasons to back down after having taken such a strong position in public—or did other mechanisms play a key role?

American Threats and Communist Behavior

In taking the line they did in late March and early April, Eisenhower and Dulles were hardening their position, and that shift in policy was very clear at the time. Just a few weeks earlier, for example, Eisenhower had stated publicly that “no one could be more bitterly opposed to ever getting the United States involved in a hot war in that region than I am,” and that consequently every move he authorized was “calculated, so far as humans can do it, to make certain that that does not happen.”¹¹ And it is quite clear that that harder American line led to a softening of the Communist position, and in particular to an increased willingness on the Communists’ part to accept at least a temporary partition of Vietnam.

The Chinese especially had come to take a very moderate line—something which was particularly striking, given the Chinese leader Mao Zedong’s strong emotional attachment to the idea of revolutionary war. The Viet Minh were told (as one of their leaders, Le Duan, later wrote) “that if the Vietnamese continued to fight they would have to fend for themselves.” The Chinese “would not help any longer,” he said, “and pressured us to stop fighting.”¹² The Chinese position had in fact shifted dramatically—and that shift took place just after the Americans had made their threats. On April 3, for example, Mao was still thinking in terms of a military solution, one that would allow the Communists to take over all of Vietnam. But just a “few days later,” as the Chinese scholar Yang Kuisong writes, he “modified his policy of expanding the war in Indochina”—in large part, Yang thinks, because of the American threats—and opted instead for a policy of “seeking a cease-fire and peace in Indochina through negotiation and compromise.”¹³ Chen Jian, another historian who has closely studied the Chinese evidence, takes much the same view: the evidence shows, he writes, “that the thinking of CCP [Chinese Communist Party] leaders about Indo-China was strongly influenced by the American warning.”¹⁴ And Logevall

¹¹ Eisenhower press conference, February 10, 1954, PPP: Eisenhower 1954, 250. For evidence that the shift was noted at the time, see “‘United Action?’” *New York Times*, April 11, 1954, E1 (bottom of column 4).

¹² “Comrade B on the Plot of the Reactionary Chinese Clique against Vietnam,” introduced by Stein Tønnesson (who identifies Le Duan as the author) and obtained and translated by Christopher Goscha, in Priscilla Roberts, ed., *Behind the Bamboo Curtain: China, Vietnam, and the World beyond Asia* (Washington, DC, and Stanford, CA: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2006), 467-68.

¹³ Yang Kuisong, “Changes in Mao Zedong’s Attitude toward the Indochina War, 1949-1973,” Cold War International History Project working paper no. 34 (February 2002), 7-8; also in Yang Kuisong, “Mao Zedong and the Indochina Wars,” in Roberts, *Behind the Bamboo Curtain*, 60.

¹⁴ Chen Jian, “China and the First Indo-China War, 1950-54,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 133 (March 1993), 105.

agrees. “America’s tough words,” he says, “had had their effect. The threat of direct U.S. military involvement caused nervousness in Beijing and Moscow and helped persuade the Viet Minh to accept concessions in the final agreement”¹⁵

So it seems quite clear that the Communists were afraid the U.S. would intervene, and that this was a key factor explaining why they were willing to settle for half a loaf at Geneva.¹⁶ The American threats in late March and early April certainly intensified those fears and thus played an important role in the story. But was this because the audience cost mechanism had come into play?

If the audience cost theory were correct, U.S. threats would have been most credible during the period when domestic political accountability was greatest—that is, in the run-up to the midterm elections of November 1954. One would expect the Communists to calculate that the administration would have a freer hand and be more able to accept a compromise settlement in Indochina after the elections were over when it did not have to worry so much about a political backlash at home. But they saw things in exactly the opposite way. The Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, Chen Jian tells us, thought that domestic political pressure was actually holding the U.S. government back. “America’s non-intervention policy,” Zhou wrote to another top Chinese official at the time, “is only a temporary phenomenon, and this will only be maintained until the coming November, when the U.S. Congress holds elections. If a ceasefire is not achieved by then, the situation will change dramatically.”¹⁷ The implication was that the Eisenhower administration was not locked into a hard line because of the domestic political price it would have to pay if it drew back from its threats. The fact that the government had to worry about the public response to its threats was not viewed as adding to the credibility of what it was threatening, as the theory would suggest. Threats, in fact, would be more credible when, after the elections, the government did not have to worry so much about the public reaction to what it was doing.

Why So Weak?

So it is quite clear that the credibility of the American threats was not rooted in calculations about audience costs. This raises two questions. Why, first of all—and this question will be the focus of the discussion in this section—was the audience-cost mechanism so weak in

¹⁵ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 612. See also Burke and Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 99.

¹⁶ On this point, see also Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 36-37 (part of a chapter titled “The Communist Powers Appease the United States”) and Ilya Gaiduk, “From Berlin to Geneva: Soviet Views on the Settlement of the Indochina Conflict (January-April, 1954),” esp. 19, in *New Evidence on China, Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War: Papers from the Conference*, Hong Kong, January 11-12, 2000 (available through Interlibrary Loan from Cornell University Library).

¹⁷ Chen Jian, “China and the Indochina Settlement at the Geneva Conference of 1954,” in Fredrik Logevall and Mark Lawrence, eds., *The First Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 260.

1954? And, second, if the threats were not credible because of audience costs, why then *were* they credible? That issue will be considered in the next section.

So why was it that large audience costs were not generated in 1954? The first point to note here is that the Eisenhower administration deliberately refrained from making *explicit* threats; it was left to others to draw the implications.¹⁸ Dulles's March 29 speech, for example, as Logevall points out, "was carefully crafted—it went through twenty-one drafts—to sound menacing while remaining vague on specifics." As Dulles's aide Robert Bowie later pointed out, "it did not actually commit 'anyone to anything.'"¹⁹ And it is quite clear that the administration deliberately sought to avoid tying its hands. Thus Dulles, shortly after his March 29 speech, spoke on the phone with James Hagerty, the President's Press Secretary, about how Eisenhower should handle questions about what Dulles had had in mind by "united action." Dulles said that term covered "a very wide range of possibilities," and this his words were "deliberately chosen for that purpose." He said that if questioned on this point, it was important "for the President not to let him[self] get pinned down."²⁰ Direct threats—the sorts of threats from which it might be hard to back down—were to be avoided.

It was probably for that reason that the Secretary of State viewed as "unfortunate" Vice President Richard Nixon's famous April 16 statement that "if to avoid further Communist expansion in Asia and Indo-China we must take the risk now by putting our boys in, I think the executive has to take the politically unpopular position and do it." Nixon's comment—"the first direct statement from an Administration figure," as the *New York Times* put it, "that American troops might be committed to Indo-China"—was evidently too direct and too explicit for Dulles's taste.²¹

An audience cost theorist might be puzzled by Dulles's reaction. Wouldn't a political leader have to pay a bigger price for backing down from an explicit threat than from a vague one? And wouldn't that mean that the more explicit a threat was, the more credible it would be?²² But the Dulles view is not to be dismissed as totally irrational. He had good reasons

¹⁸ See Logevall, *Embers of War*, 463-64. Note also Senator John F. Kennedy's comment that (as the *New York Times* paraphrased his remarks) "by every indication Dulles meant the United States 'will take the ultimate step . . . and that is war.'" Arthur Krock, "In the Nation," *New York Times*, April 8, 1954, 26.

¹⁹ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 463.

²⁰ Dulles telephone conversation with Hagerty, March 31, 1954, Ronald Frankum Collection, box 5, folder 3, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

²¹ "Another Korea?" *New York Times*, April 18, 1954, E1. Dulles's comment is quoted in Richard Immerman, "Between the Unattainable and the Unacceptable: Eisenhower and Dienbienphu," in Richard Melanson and David Mayers, eds., *Reevaluating Eisenhower: American Foreign Policy in the 1950s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 138-39.

²² Zhou's interpreter at the Geneva Conference in fact told Fred Greenstein in 1986 (as Greenstein later paraphrased his comments) that "the Chinese pressed the Viet Minh to accept partition because American statements—notably the off-the-record statement by Vice President Nixon in April, 1954—

for taking the course he did. He needed to worry, first of all, about how the allies would react if he took too tough a line. He also had to worry about how U.S. freedom of action would be curtailed if threats were too explicit. And he had to worry about the political reaction at home if the administration came across as too bellicose: the Korean War had just ended a year earlier, and the country was by no means eager to get into a new war in Asia.

The point about the allies needs little elaboration; it is quite clear from Logevall's book, and from many earlier studies as well, that Eisenhower and Dulles understood that too tough a line might scare off the allies.²³ They knew that the British in particular were worried about the possibility of a new war, and especially about the possibility that the United States might use nuclear weapons in an area like Indochina or against China.

But what about the other two factors? Did it make sense, first of all, to rely on relatively vague threats? It was quite clear to Eisenhower and Dulles that to have a deterrent effect, threats did not have to be explicit. It might be enough to just create a big question mark in the enemy's mind. "It was important," Eisenhower felt, "that we not let the Russians think that we might not resist"; "it was not well to tell the Russians everything as to what we would or would not do."²⁴ Explicit threats, to be sure, might be more credible than vague ones. But the increased deterrent effect would come at the cost of reduced maneuverability, and there might be other costs as well. It thus might be perfectly rational in some situations to conclude that that price was simply not worth paying.

And when considering how tough a line to take in public, the domestic political situation also had to be taken into account. On the one hand, the administration might be blamed if Indochina were lost to the Communists. On the other hand, there was not much support at home for sending ground troops to Indochina, especially if it were done on a unilateral basis. Indeed, too hard a line might set off a firestorm of criticism in Congress and in the press; the very hostile reaction that Nixon's April 16 remarks received was a good indicator of what would be in store for the administration if it went that route.

In such circumstances, how could the audience cost mechanism come into play? The problem here was that the political incentives cut both ways. "If Indo-China were lost through lack of United States action," the *New York Times* reported at the time, "the Eisenhower Administration would be confronted with charges of 'another China.' But if the

persuaded them that the United States would fight in the event of a total Communist takeover." Burke and Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 99.

²³ Matthew Jones, for example, quotes the president in a meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff pointing out the importance of taking "care not to frighten our friends in negotiations by bellicose talk." Matthew Jones, "Targeting China: U.S. Nuclear Planning and 'Massive Retaliation' in East Asia, 1953-1955," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10, no. 4 (Fall 2008), 56.

²⁴ Quoted in Stephen Ambrose, *Nixon: The Education of a Politician 1913-1962* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 345.

United States openly intervened in Indo-China, the Administration might run the risk of involvement in 'another Korea.'²⁵ Logevall makes much the same point. After talking about how the Eisenhower administration "felt pressure to act" after "having stated publicly that failure to hold" Indochina could have disastrous consequences for the United States and for the West as a whole, he goes on to point out that a very different set of incentives was pulling Eisenhower in the opposite direction. The president knew that the "prospect of unilateral intervention involving U.S. ground troops carried its own political risks." "With memories of an unpopular war in Korea still fresh in people's minds and with Republicans facing midterm elections in the fall," an interventionist policy might not make sense in domestic political terms.²⁶

The key point to note here is that the two types of incentive tend to cancel each other out. The audience cost effect focuses on the first type of incentive: the administration's threats are credible, the argument would run, because of the price it would pay at home if it did not follow through on them. To avoid paying that price, it would thus be more likely to carry out its threats. But that would be true only if it did not have to pay the same or greater price for actually doing what it had threatened. If it would have to pay pretty much the same price no matter what course of action it took, there would be no domestic political reason to pursue one policy as opposed to another. The attitude might well be: 'if we're going to get criticized no matter what we do, we might as well just do what we think is best.' It is thus important to look at both sides of the ledger: to look not just at the price a government would pay in domestic political terms for backing down from its threats, but also at the price it might pay at home for implementing them. The public, after all, might be perfectly willing to see the government make threats for their deterrent effect (especially if those threats led to a compromise settlement the public could live with), but might be much less pleased if the government actually carried out its threats and went to war. In that case, the government would scarcely be raked over the coals for settling for half a loaf, no matter how tough a line it had taken during the crisis itself. And it does seem that the public as a whole in 1954 was not upset about the way the crisis had turned out—that it viewed the outcome as less of a defeat for the United States than the administration itself did.²⁷

Threat-making certainly has domestic political repercussions, but the way the political system reacts to that sort of behavior is anything but straightforward. A government makes a threat but then fails to follow through with it: the price it pays at home for that failure is by no means fixed or independent of context. Thus the Eisenhower

²⁵ "Another Korea?" *New York Times*, April 18, 1954, E1, col. 2.

²⁶ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 508.

²⁷ For the popular reaction, see Burke and Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 114-15. For the administration's own assessment, see, for example, Richard Immerman, "The United States and the Geneva Conference of 1954: A New Look," *Diplomatic History* 14, no. 1 (January 1990), 64 (for Dulles's view of the settlement as a "partial surrender"), and Ronald Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1985), 219-20.

administration had wanted to prevent any part of Indochina from falling into Communist hands, and had suggested that an arrangement of that sort would be disastrous. But at Geneva it grudgingly accepted, or at least half-accepted, a compromise that would have allowed the Communists to come to power in Hanoi. What sort of price would it pay for that? The left would not attack the government for going along with the Geneva settlement or for not having carried out its threats. If anything, the Democrats were inclined to criticize the administration for having been too bellicose in the first place.²⁸ There were, of course, right-wing Republicans who felt that the country should have intervened militarily, and on a unilateral basis if necessary, but after Geneva what were they supposed to do? Take a position which they knew the country as a whole would not support?²⁹ To attack Eisenhower as an appeaser would hardly have helped their own party at the polls—and the elections were only a few months away.

A government might declare that it intends to pursue a tough policy, and if its threats are revealed as hollow, it may well pay a price with the electorate. But the sort of price it pays, if any, depends on the way in which that policy is assessed, and the one thing that can be said is that those assessments are never made in a purely mechanical way. The assessment process is political at its core, and is far more subjective than the audience cost theory might lead one to think. The judgments made are not simply a function of the gap between what was said and what was done, and can vary widely depending on the perspectives and calculations of those making them.

Assessing Intent

We know the American threats had a major impact on Communist behavior. And it also seems fairly clear that they did not have the effect they did because the audience cost mechanism had come into play. That mechanism was too weak to play an important role in this affair. Why then were those threats credible?

I first want to again point out that the two specific threats alluded to at the beginning of this paper—the ones contained in Dulles's March 29 speech and in Eisenhower April 7 press conference—were not isolated utterances. They were key parts of a campaign the U.S. government was conducting to mobilize support for an interventionist policy (albeit one conducted on multilateral basis). Dulles's speech, according to a report published in the *New York Times* at the time, "marked a climax to a series of Administration and Congressional statements designed to point up the tremendous stakes involved in the Indo-Chinese war and to lay down the policy which the United States proposes to pursue at the

²⁸ The journalist Chalmers Roberts had suggested as much in his famous article "The Day We Didn't Go to War," an account based in large part on information Roberts had received from Democrats in Congress. The Eisenhower administration responded with leaks of its own. See George Herring and Richard Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu: 'The Day We Didn't Go to War' Revisited," *Journal of American History* 71, no. 2 (September 1984), 343-44, esp. notes 1 and 3.

²⁹ On the Republicans' dilemma, see Logevall, *Embers of War*, 553-54.

forthcoming Geneva conference.”³⁰ “Dulles,” Logevall writes (quoting from an account published in *The New Yorker* by Richard Rovere), “had undertaken ‘one of the boldest campaigns of political suasion ever undertaken by an American statesman,’ in which congressmen, journalists, and television personalities of all stripes were being ‘rounded up in droves and escorted to lectures and briefings’ on the crucial importance of achieving victory in Vietnam”³¹ A “centerpiece” of the campaign, Logevall points out, was Dulles’s March 29 speech; the Secretary of State, as one early but very well-informed study of this episode noted, was trying “to prepare the American people and world opinion for possible U.S. intervention in Indochina.”³² The U.S. government, as Dulles himself said, was “doing everything possible” to prepare the public “for united action in Indochina.”³³

One has the sense that the Communists took propaganda campaigns of this sort quite seriously. In one of Mao’s conversations with the Soviet ambassador from this period, for example, a recent letter from the Soviet Communist Party to its Chinese counterpart was discussed; the Soviets, in that letter, had been concerned with “the fact that the USA, France and England were heading towards making plans for nuclear war and so were rolling out their propaganda in favor of this type of war.”³⁴ But was it rational to consider campaigns to mobilize public opinion as important indicators of intent? One could approach the problem from a “costly signaling” perspective and argue that such campaigns deserve to be taken seriously because in raising expectations a government would have to expect a backlash at home if its real policy was more moderate than the public had been led to expect. If the Eisenhower administration, for example, talked about massive retaliation but tolerated the loss of one country after another to the Communists without ever retaliating massively, its policy would be revealed as bankrupt and it might have to pay a price for that in domestic political terms. That in turn would suggest that the rhetoric had to be taken seriously.

But this “costly signaling” approach is not the only way to deal with the problem. Suppose you are a Communist and you think democracy is a sham. Suppose you believe that the U.S. government can manipulate public opinion and that in America the ruling classes’ grip on power is secure. The price the government would have to pay for bluffing might then be fairly low. But even in that case it might still be rational to take what was being done to prepare the country for war seriously. Would a government that was determined to avoid

³⁰ “The U.S. and Indo-China,” *New York Times*, March 30, 1954, 26.

³¹ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 459-61.

³² *Indochina Incident*, 378; see also *ibid.*, 380, 386.

³³ Dulles to Ambassador in France, April 5, 1954, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954*, vol. 13, 1242. Henceforth cited in the form: FRUS 1952-54, 13:1242.

³⁴ Paul Wingrove, “Mao’s Conversations with the Soviet Ambassador, 1953-55,” CWIHP Working Paper No. 36 (2002), 26 (doc. no. 4, from the Journal of P. F. Yudin, 17 January 1955, Note of Conversation with Comrade Mao Zedong, 8 January 1955).

any military involvement in the Indochina affair be conducting such a campaign? To be sure, one might suspect there was a certain element of bluff in the American position. But the mere fact that the government seemed to be preparing the country for war would be an important indicator—that is, a key piece of evidence that needed to be taken into account when one was trying to figure out how likely it was that America would intervene in the war.

Such calculations would not be made in a vacuum. In making an assessment of that sort, all sorts of indicators would be taken into account. A general picture would gradually come into focus, and any particular indicator would be assessed in terms of how it fit into that larger picture. The fact that the Eisenhower administration did not want to enter into negotiations with the Communists that would lead to a compromise peace—that it wanted the war to continue until the Communists were defeated and tried hard to organize a coalition that would carry out that policy—certainly had to be taken into account.³⁵ And the military indicators were of even greater importance. The U.S. government seemed to be getting ready for direct intervention in Indochina. In late March, an American officer was sent to confer with the French commander in Saigon about “plans for American air support, should it be authorized,” and “a few days later the Department of Defense publicized the move of a carrier task force, including the *Essex* and the *Boxer*, into the South China Sea between Indochina and the Philippines.”³⁶ The U.S. Navy, moreover, began to conduct reconnaissance operations, even over areas across the border in southern China.³⁷

But could Eisenhower have been bluffing? Maybe he was just trying to scare the Communists in order to get them to moderate their position. The president was certainly capable of pursuing that sort of strategy. In April 1953, for example, in a discussion of tactics for ending the Korean War, he had “stated his belief that it was possible to handle the matter in such a way as, on the one hand, to impress the enemy with our determination, without, on the other hand, unduly alarming our allies or our own people. The matter, said the President, should be handled in such a way that a foreign G-2 [Army Intelligence], piecing together the bits of information on the transfer [of atomic weapons], would come to the conclusion that he had pierced the screen of the intentions of the United States.”³⁸ How then could adversaries tell whether the moves they observed were genuine indicators of American intentions, and not just part of a bluff strategy, aimed at manipulating their perceptions?

³⁵ See, for example, Immerman, “United States and the Geneva Conference,” 51, 54.

³⁶ *Indochina Incident*, 387-88. See also Edwin Hooper, Dean Allard, and Oscar Fitzgerald, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict*, vol. 1: *The Setting of the Stage to 1959* (Washington: U.S. Navy History Division, 1976), 247-48.

³⁷ Hooper, *Setting of the Stage*, 252-53.

³⁸ Discussion at the 141st Meeting of the National Security Council, April 28, 1953, Declassified Documents Reference System, record no. CK3100241247, 12.

Again, the basic principle here is that these things had to be assessed in the light of everything else that was known about American policy. The larger picture was of fundamental importance. The Communists looked at America and saw a country in a militantly anti-Communist mood. They saw a country that enjoyed a large measure of military superiority, above all at the nuclear level, thanks to the extraordinary buildup of U.S. military power that had taken place over the previous four years—and indeed a country that seemed determined to take advantage of that situation by building its policy on the threat of ‘massive retaliation.’ The general approach, as laid out in a series of major public statements, was quite clear. “The way to deter aggression,” Secretary Dulles said, in a famous speech he gave at the beginning of 1954 outlining that policy, “is for the free community to be willing and able to respond vigorously at places and with means of its own choosing.” Dulles went on to point out that if the Communists renewed their aggression in Korea, the response “would not necessarily be confined to Korea”—a policy the United States had already adopted, with allied support, the previous year. With regard to Indochina, he warned that “if there were open Red Chinese army aggression there, that would have ‘grave consequences which might not be confined to Indochina.’”³⁹ The administration, as the *New York Times* reporter James Reston said at the time, was telling the Communists “as clearly as Governments ever say these things, that, in the event of another proxy or brushfire war in Korea, Indo-China, Iran or anywhere else, the United States might retaliate instantly with atomic weapons against the USSR or Red China.”⁴⁰

We know now that the administration was not just bluffing. The declassified documents make it quite clear that U.S. leaders were really thinking along those lines at the time. The military authorities disliked the idea of a “static defense”—that is, they disliked the idea of having U.S. ground forces fight limited wars in places like Indochina—and would have preferred to deal with the problem by going after the sources of Communist power in China itself. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) laid out their basic thinking in a memorandum dealing with the question of how the rest of southeast Asia could be defended if Indochina was lost to the Communists. “The United States,” they argued, should in that case “adopt the concept of offensive actions against the ‘military power of the aggressor,’ in this instance Communist China, rather than the concept of ‘reaction locally at the point of attack.’”⁴¹

³⁹ John Foster Dulles, “The Evolution of Foreign Policy,” January 12, 1954, *Department of State Bulletin*, January 25, 1954, 108. In warning the Chinese against overt intervention in Indochina, Dulles was quoting from a statement he had made a few months earlier. See John Foster Dulles, “Korean Problems,” September 2, 1953, *Department of State Bulletin*, September 14, 1953, 342. For the text of what was called the “greater sanctions” declaration of July 27, 1953, see *Department of State Bulletin*, August 24, 1954, 247. On the “greater sanctions” policy in general, and for its origins in the previous administration, see FRUS 1952-54, vol. 15 (two parts); one can search for the term “greater sanctions” in both parts of the online version of that volume, and especially in the index. On these matters in general, see Jones, “Targeting China,” esp. 39-49.

⁴⁰ James Reston, “‘Massive Atomic Retaliation’ and the Constitution,” *New York Times*, January 17, 1954, E8.

⁴¹ JCS memo, May 21, 1954, FRUS 1952-54, 12:514-16, discussed in *Indochina Incident*, 453-54.

Indeed, it seems that if the Chiefs had had their way, they would have fought the Indochina war by attacking China, whether or not a large Chinese force actually moved into Vietnam. “The Joint Chiefs’ central philosophy,” according to a quite extraordinary study prepared shortly after the crisis by the JCS Historical Division—a study based on many highly classified documents (some of which have still not been declassified) and on extensive interviews with officers involved in this affair—was “that the real solution to Far Eastern difficulties lay in the neutralization of Communist China.”⁴² Even the Army Chief of Staff, General Matthew Ridgway, who is generally portrayed as a dove in the Indochina affair, seemed to favor this sort of approach.⁴³ Admiral Radford, the JCS chairman, apparently wanted to take advantage of the crisis to bring matters to a head with China: “The Chairman of the Chiefs believed that once the Indochinese incident was settled, there would be no further opportunity to cope with another military adventure on the part of the Chinese, at least until the Communists were ready for the ‘big show.’”⁴⁴

Eisenhower and Dulles did not see things in quite the same way, although they were more sympathetic to that sort of approach than one might imagine. They certainly shared the Chiefs’ aversion to “static defense”—to “fritter[ing] away our resources in local engagements,” as the President put it at an important National Security Council (NSC) meeting during the Indochina crisis.⁴⁵ And they certainly thought that in the case of “overt unprovoked Chinese Communist aggression” the United States would have to take action—with allies, if that were at all possible. But if America did intervene, Eisenhower said,

⁴² *Indochina Incident*, 429.

⁴³ Ridgway memo, April 6, 1954, FRUS 1952-54, 13:1269-70. Ridgway, according to Spector, later said he had “no wish for a war with China” but had “merely wished to point out, in the starkest terms, the magnitude of the decision confronting the country on the issue of intervention in Vietnam.” Spector, *Advice and Support*, 209. But Ridgway’s intentions at the time are by no means clear. The authors of the *Indochina Incident* history (388-89) certainly had a very different impression at the time. Ridgway, after all, did not call for a compromise peace in Indochina and signed on to various JCS memoranda that took the line that “the only acceptable alternative was military victory.” *Indochina Incident*, 374. The key document referred to here is JCS 1992/287 of March 11, 1954 (approved by the Chiefs the next day), in CCS 092 ASIA (6-25-48), sec 58, JCS Records, RG 218, U.S. National Archives, College Park, MD. Also in Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force [Pentagon Papers], Part 5.B.3.b, doc. 58, 266ff, and in the *Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, part 3, 1954-1960, *The Far East* (published by ProQuest on microfilm in 2006, and available through Inter-Library Loan from Yale University Library), reel 1, frame 382ff. David Petraeus, incidentally, is one of the few writers to take Ridgway’s April 6 memo at face value. With the exception of Admiral Radford, he notes, the Chiefs were not eager to intervene in Indochina. “They were not opposed to intervention per se; rather, they sought to avoid *limited* intervention, to avoid another Korea. Unless America was willing to intervene on a sufficient scale to achieve success, and to attack Communist China, which General Ridgway termed the ‘immediate and major source of Vietminh military power,’ most military leaders were opposed.” David Petraeus, “Korea, the Never-Again Club, and Indochina,” *Parameters* 17, no. 4 (December 1987), 66. Emphasis in original text.

⁴⁴ See *Indochina Incident*, 449. The document cited as the source for that claim was not available in the corresponding file at the National Archives when it was copied for the microfilm publication cited in the previous footnote, published in 2006.

⁴⁵ NSC meeting, April 29, 1954, FRUS 1952-54, 13:1442.

“there should be no half-measures or frittering around. The Navy and Air Force should go in with full power, using new weapons, and strike at air bases and ports in mainland China”; “possibly there should be a strike at Communist Russia,” he thought, “in view of her treaty with China.”⁴⁶

The discussion at that meeting dealt with the question of what the United States would do in the event of *overt* Chinese military intervention in the war, but it is important to note that the government was also thinking of taking action against China even if that country’s involvement in the Indochina war remained limited. The basic decision that America was not going to fight land wars in places like Indochina and Korea, but would instead feel free to attack the sources of Communist power in China itself, implied that if the Viet Minh did not give up, then America might escalate by attacking the PRC. As Dulles told his subordinates in October 1954, “in case of an all-out Vietminh attack, he foresaw American bombing of Tonkin and probably general war with China.” “Our concept,” he said, “envisages a fight with nuclear weapons rather than the commitment of ground forces.”⁴⁷ He had made much the same point in August. “We do not care to meet the aggressors’ third team,” he wrote, “by pitting our foot soldiers against those of [the] Vietminh in Indochina or those of North Korea in Korea.” Instead, the United States had to show Communist China, “the source of the past and potentially future aggressions in Korea and Indochina,” that it was “willing and able’ to make the aggressor suffer at places and by means of our choosing, i.e., where our sea and air power are preponderant.”⁴⁸

Eisenhower was at times even more extreme, and on occasion even seemed to contemplate war with the USSR. He was deeply opposed to the “prospect of American divisions scattered all over the world,” bogged down in endless local wars, unable to “get at the heart of the enemy’s power and support.”⁴⁹ Rather than face that possibility, it might make sense to take more extreme measures:

The President again repeated his conviction that if the United States were to permit its ground forces to be drawn into conflict in a great variety of places throughout the world, the end result would be gravely to weaken the defensive position of the United States. Before doing that, it almost appeared that we would have to choose between actually launching an attack on Soviet Russia or gradually permitting ourselves to be exhausted in piecemeal conflicts, as had been the fate of the British.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ NSC meeting, June 2, 1954, FRUS 1952-54, 12:530-31.

⁴⁷ Dulles meeting with key subordinates, October 8, 1954, FRUS 1952-54, 13:2125.

⁴⁸ Dulles to ambassador in Japan, August 20, 1954, FRUS 1952-54, 14:545-46. See also Logevall, *Embers of War*, 503, 505.

⁴⁹ NSC meeting, April 29, 1954, FRUS 1952-54, 13:1442; Net Evaluation Subcommittee briefing, January 23, 1956, FRUS 1955-57, 19:191.

⁵⁰ NSC meeting, April 29, 1954, FRUS 1952-54, 13:1441; see also *ibid.*, 1442.

As he put the point a few months later, “if we are to have general war, he would prefer to have it with Russia, not China. Russia can help China fight us without getting involved itself, and he would ‘want to go to the head of the snake.’”⁵¹ America, he seemed to feel, might have to go this route if the allies were not willing to stand up to the aggressor and the United States was forced to act unilaterally. “If our allies were going to fall away in any case,” he remarked at the April 29, 1954, NSC meeting, “it might be better for the United States to leap over the smaller obstacles and hit the biggest one with all the power we had.”⁵² And two months later, when he was told at another NSC meeting that America’s allies would not support a really tough policy, he said that “if this were indeed the situation, we should perhaps come back to the very grave question: Should the United States now get ready to fight the Soviet Union? The President pointed out that he had brought up this question more than once at prior Council meetings, and that he had never done so facetiously.”⁵³

The Communists, of course, had no way of knowing what the president was saying to his closest advisors, but they knew what Dulles and others were saying in public, they knew how American military forces were being deployed and armed, and they had a good sense (based on what was going on in NATO at this time) for what U.S. military strategy was and for the sort of thinking it was based on.⁵⁴ The mere fact that Admiral Radford had been made JCS Chairman was an important indicator. The *New York Times* published an article on Radford by James Reston when the admiral was appointed to that position in August 1953. Radford, Reston noted, had said “many times” that “the United States will never be secure so long as the Communists retain power in China.”⁵⁵ Radford also seemed prepared to go ‘all-out’ in Indochina. In May 1954, according to the *Times*, the JCS Chairman had told a “secret meeting of the House Foreign Affairs Committee on May 26” that “any United States intervention in Indochina should be on an all-out basis, including use of atomic weapons.”⁵⁶ The fact that this story was based on a leak of secret testimony might have made it particularly credible.

⁵¹ NSC meeting, September 12, 1954, FRUS 1952-54, 14:617.

⁵² NSC meeting, April 29, 1954, FRUS 1952-54, 13:1441. In a passage in his memoirs (cited in *ibid.*, 1449), Eisenhower said that he was referring to “Red China” as the head of the snake, but as the minutes make clear he was actually referring to the USSR.

⁵³ NSC meeting, June 24, 1954, FRUS 1952-54, 2:696.

⁵⁴ On U.S. NATO strategy at the time, see Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 156-78, and also Marc Trachtenberg, “The Making of the Western Defense System: France, the United States, and MC 48,” in Marc Trachtenberg, *The Cold War and After: History, Theory and the Logic of International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁵⁵ James Reston, “Asians Await Possible Shift of U.S. Policy under Radford: His Strong Views on Pacific Defense Go Beyond Limited-Commitment Attitude,” *New York Times*, August 12, 1953, 3.

⁵⁶ “Firm Indochina Step Held Radford View,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1954, 2.

Radford's colleague on the JCS, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Robert Carney, also took a very bellicose position at about that time—that is, just as the crisis in Indochina was coming to a head. In a speech he gave on May 27, he said America was approaching a fork in the road: “the simple alternatives are these: To do nothing; to rush around plugging the dike; or to take measures to lower the pressure against the dikes.” It was not enough, he believed, just to come up with “a succession of minor strategies to deal with brush fires.” Negotiations were hopeless: how could anyone believe that “ephemeral negotiations” would put an “end to all our troubles”? The Communists were on the march; the balance of world power was shifting against America; “we’re traveling at high speed and I don’t believe that much time will be vouchsafed us.” Carney concluded with a question: “Do we want to turn into the smooth dead-end”—that is, to pursue a relatively passive policy—“or take the rougher road that offers us a good destination if we have got the guts and strength to manage it?”⁵⁷ The press had little trouble seeing what the CNO was saying. “Carney Sees Choice: Fight or Yield to Reds” was the title of the *Washington Post’s* article on his speech. And the *Post* was careful to point out that Carney’s remarks “had been ‘cleared’ with higher authority.”⁵⁸

The Communists, in trying to see what American intentions really were, would certainly have wanted to take these sorts of things into account. They would of course not simply have assumed that Eisenhower and Dulles saw things the same way that Radford and Carney did. But the fact that Radford had been made JCS Chairman, and that Carney’s remarks had been approved in advance, told them something about what the limits of acceptable discourse were during the early Eisenhower period. The kind of thinking associated with the two admirals was evidently not viewed as out-of-bounds. The fact that their views could be expressed in public and semi-public venues implied that the political leadership might perhaps be thinking along somewhat similar lines, or at least that it was inclined to take that sort of thinking seriously.

Taken together with all the other indicators available to them, this sort of thing might well have suggested to the two major Communist powers that where there was smoke, there might be fire, and that they really should be worried about what the United States might do. It was not that they had concluded that the Eisenhower administration had decided on war—and in fact it is clear looking back that Eisenhower was by no means eager for war with China. But the U.S. political leadership had evidently not dismissed the idea of a preventive war against China, or even Russia, out of hand; there was a certain chance that the U.S. government might come to think that a major war of that sort was its least bad option, or at least that it would find a policy of bringing matters to a head with the Communist powers attractive. The administration, to be sure, had been careful to specify that it might attack China if that country *overtly* intervened in the war. But given the general thrust of its policy, given Dulles’s warnings that an aggressor’s “sanctuaries” across

⁵⁷ Text of Speech by Admiral Carney on Free World Perils, *New York Times*, May 28, 1954, 2.

⁵⁸ “Carney Sees Choice: Fight or Yield to Reds,” *Washington Post*, May 28, 1954, 10.

the border might not be respected, and given also that U.S. leaders were already talking about the Chinese as “aggressors in spirit,” even a local intervention in Indochina might easily escalate, first to limited and then to massive attacks on China itself.⁵⁹ The risk that events might take this course might have been viewed as relatively modest—say, only twenty percent or so, if the war was not settled. But given what was at stake, Russia and China might feel that a more moderate policy was in order. They would not want to poke the tiger too hard through the bars of the cage, given that the tiger was in an angry mood and that the bars were now quite bendable. It was not that they thought an American nuclear attack was imminent. They just would not want to come anywhere near the point where an American nuclear attack could become a real possibility. As Bernard Brodie put the point in 1963: “We rarely have to threaten general war. We threaten instead the next in a series of moves that seems to tend in that direction.”⁶⁰

So the Chinese not only resisted Viet Minh requests for a deeper military involvement in the war, but also put pressure on their Vietnamese comrades to accept a compromise settlement, one that would bring about a partition of their country. And after a settlement of that sort was worked out at Geneva, Zhou Enlai, as Le Duan later wrote, “pressured us into not doing anything in regard to southern Vietnam.” Mao Zedong himself made it clear that the Vietnamese Communists were not to take up “guerrilla war in the south”: “Vietnam cannot do that. Vietnam must lie in wait for a protracted period of time.” And, as Le Duan noted, he and his colleagues had little choice but to give way: “We were so poor. How could we fight the Americans if we did not have China as a rearguard base? [Thus], we had to listen to them, correct?”⁶¹ And why had the Chinese pulled back in that way? Not because they had suddenly lost their interest in promoting revolution abroad, and not because they were particularly worried about what the United States might do in Indochina itself. If the Americans came in and got bogged down in a long guerrilla war in the jungles

⁵⁹ News Conference Statement by Secretary Dulles, March 23, 1954, *Department of State Bulletin*, April 5, 1954, 513; Dulles statement before Senate Foreign Relations Committee, March 19, 1954, *Department of State Bulletin*, March 29, 1954, 465; John Foster Dulles, “Policy for Security and Peace,” *Foreign Affairs* 32, no. 3 (April 1954), 359.

⁶⁰ Bernard Brodie, “AFAG Talk: Political Impact of U.S. Force Postures,” May 28, 1963, p. 7, Digital National Security Archive.

⁶¹ “Comrade B on the Plot of the Reactionary Chinese Clique against Vietnam,” in Roberts, *Behind the Bamboo Curtain*, 468. The point is important because for years it was commonly assumed that China had little control over what the Vietnamese Communists did. See, for example, Morton Halperin, “China and Nuclear Proliferation I,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 22, no. 9 (November 1966), 10; compared to the crises in which it confronted the United States directly, Halperin writes, in the Indochina crises of both 1954 and 1964 “Peking has had less control over the situation and was not in a position to counsel the moderation that it may have desired.” In 1982, John Gaddis took much the same line. In Indochina, he wrote, “the French were half-heartedly confronting a totally committed revolutionary movement under little if any outside control: threats to use nuclear weapons could neither instill fighting spirit in the French, nor deter their adversaries from exploiting its absence.” John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 172. By 1997, however, Gaddis had come to take a see Chinese and Soviet pressure as playing a more important role. See John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 162-63.

of Vietnam, that in itself might not be the worst thing in the world from Mao's point of view. The real fear must have had to do not with what the Americans would do in Vietnam, but rather with what they might do to China itself.

As for the Soviets, as one scholar noted years ago, they "obviously took Dulles's speech on massive retaliation very seriously."⁶² They clearly did not view it as mere 'cheap talk.' And they had little trouble pointing to other indicators of what they saw as American aggressiveness—Radford's views, Carney's speech, Dulles's March 29 speech on Indochina, and so on.⁶³ They were, moreover, well aware of the fact that the strategic balance heavily favored the United States and that it was America's strategic edge that enabled the Eisenhower administration to threaten nuclear escalation.⁶⁴ Soviet leaders, looking back, referred to this period with obvious distaste as a time when (as Nikita Khrushchev himself put it in 1958) "the imperialists could act from 'positions of strength' with impunity."⁶⁵ A few years later Khrushchev was even more explicit. "There was a time," he said, "when American Secretary of State Dulles brandished thermonuclear bombs and followed a position of strength policy with regard to the socialist countries. . . . That was barefaced atomic blackmail, but it had to be reckoned with at the time because we did not possess sufficient means of retaliation, and if we did, they were not as many and not of the same power as those of our opponents."⁶⁶

The Fruits of the Exercise

"That was barefaced atomic blackmail, but it had to be reckoned with at the time because we did not possess sufficient means of retaliation"—what an extraordinary admission on Khrushchev's part! We have been told for over half a century now, by some of the most eminent authorities in the field, that nuclear threat-making cannot serve as an effective instrument of policy, except perhaps in the most extreme cases—that nuclear weapons are good only for deterrence, that nuclear coercion does not work, that the massive retaliation policy was essentially bankrupt from the start. We have been told that the massive retaliation policy is not to be taken seriously—that America would never have launched a full-scale nuclear attack, except perhaps in the most extreme circumstances, and in particular could not have credibly threatened to attack China in order to keep Vietnam

⁶² Herbert Dinerstein, *War and the Soviet Union: Nuclear Weapons and the Revolution in Soviet Military and Political Thinking*, rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1962), 106.

⁶³ Col. P. Vasil'ev, "On Bullitt's Provocative Article," *Red Star*, August 10, 1954, quoted in *ibid.*, 118.

⁶⁴ For Soviet awareness of U.S. nuclear superiority at the time, see, for example, William Zimmerman, *Soviet Perspectives on International Relations, 1956-1967* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 168, 172.

⁶⁵ Khrushchev speech of November 10, 1958, in U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Documents on Germany, 1944-1961* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1961), 339.

⁶⁶ Khrushchev speech of August 11, 1961, *ibid.*, 718-19.

from falling into Communist hands. As Kenneth Waltz put the point: to use nuclear weapons “to serve distant and doubtful interests”—and Waltz referred specifically to the 1954 Indochina crisis in this context—“would have been a monstrous policy, too horrible to carry through.” America’s “big words,” Waltz thought, were not to be taken seriously: given that the country’s vital interests were not being threatened, the administration’s threats were not credible. Nuclear weapons, in his view, simply do not deter adversaries from attacking “one’s minor interests.”⁶⁷ And yet it is quite clear that what the U.S. government was saying and doing in this area *did* affect the behavior of the Communist powers. It *did* lead them to draw in their horns and accept a political settlement in Indochina that was less advantageous to them than circumstances would otherwise have warranted.⁶⁸

So nuclear coercion ‘worked’ in 1954. The Communists had drawn back and an anti-Communist state was set up in South Vietnam. But to say that the American threats had a major impact on the behavior of the three Communist powers is not to say that U.S. policy should get high marks. Indeed, if it were obvious that nuclear threats of the sort the U.S. government made in 1954 could not be carried out, one would not have to worry much about the problem. It is only because they *can* affect the behavior of adversary powers that governments have an incentive to make them; and for that reason the problem has to be taken seriously. And the real problem has to do with whether it made sense for Eisenhower and Dulles to pursue the policy it did. For, whatever the short-term benefits, they came at a price: (a) American strategic overextension, which was bound to become increasingly obvious as the U.S. nuclear edge wasted away; and (b) the teaching to their adversaries, and even to some of their successors, of certain lessons, which were perhaps not quite the sort of lessons a world trying to figure out how to live with nuclear weapons needed to learn.

The problem of strategic overextension should have been obvious from the start.⁶⁹ The situation that resulted from the Geneva accords—a divided Vietnam, with the southern half under American protection—was viable only as long as the United States continued to enjoy a massive edge in terms of strategic nuclear power. When that situation changed—and it was universally understood that it would not last forever—the position the Americans had acquired in Indochina could easily turn into a major strategic embarrassment. When America could no longer threaten nuclear escalation and the Communists could no longer be cowed into acquiescence, the guerrilla war would start up

⁶⁷ Kenneth Waltz, “More May Be Better,” and “Waltz Responds to Sagan,” in Kenneth Waltz and Scott Sagan, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: Norton, 2003), 16-17, 132.

⁶⁸ See Logevall, *Embers of War*, 607-608.

⁶⁹ I can’t help but feel that part of the reason people were not as sensitive to this problem as they should have been was that American strategic culture had such a weak historical base. If people had had a better understanding, for example, of the way British overextension in the period before World War I affected the stability of the system, they might have been more aware of this sort of problem, and that awareness might have led to a rather different policy.

again in the south; and given popular support for the Viet Minh, it might be hard to maintain the Saigon regime as an anti-Communist bastion. But by that time America would be committed to South Vietnam, and it might be hard to walk away from that commitment. That situation could easily lead to disaster—as it in fact did. But all these things should have been foreseeable at the time.⁷⁰

The second problem, which has to do with basic choices that need to be made in a world where nuclear threats can be effective, is perhaps less obvious. The fundamental issue here is quite serious: should governments act selfishly and engage in nuclear threat-making when it is profitable to do so? Or should they hold back and try to build an international system that treats nuclear coercion as essentially illegitimate and unacceptable?

The approach that Eisenhower and Dulles adopted suggested that the first path was the way to go and other political leaders were prepared to follow their lead. Khrushchev in particular admired Dulles and his policy of “brinkmanship.” Dulles, he thought, was “a worthy and interesting adversary.”⁷¹ “He would reach the brink, as he himself put it,” the Soviet leader said, “but he would never leap over the brink, and [nevertheless] retained his credibility.”⁷² Khrushchev himself, as the principal maker of Soviet foreign policy in the late 1950s and early 1960s, ended up using those same tactics, especially during the long Berlin crisis period (1958-62). Those “with the strongest nerves will be the winner,” he thought. “That is the most important consideration in the power struggle of our time. The people with the weak nerves will go to the wall.”⁷³

This was by no means an absurd view. Bernard Brodie, in an important article written at the dawn of the thermonuclear age, pointed out that “all in all the situation is one that puts

⁷⁰ It was commonly understood at the time that the bulk of the Vietnamese population supported the Viet Minh and if free elections had been held, the Communists would have easily won. See the Dulles and Eisenhower observations quoted in Burke and Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 40, 45, 52, and also Dulles’s comment in *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Historical Series)*, vol. 6, Dulles testimony, July 16, 1954, 642-43. Note, finally, the famous passage in Dwight Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953-1956* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), 372, about how Ho Chi Minh would have gotten 80 percent of the vote if people had been asked in 1954 to choose between Ho and the non-Communist alternative Bao Dai, and also the well-known *Life Magazine* article about how Diem had “saved his people” from the “agonizing prospect” of Ho winning the elections; John Osborne, “The Tough Miracle Man of Vietnam,” *Life Magazine*, May 13, 1957, 164.

⁷¹ *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament*, trans. and ed. by Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 363.

⁷² Khrushchev’s Secret Speech on the Berlin Crisis, August 1961 [to the leaders of the Warsaw Pact countries], Cold War International History Project *Bulletin*, no. 3 (Fall 1993), 60 (158 in original document). Also quoted in Vladislav Zubok, “Khrushchev and the Berlin Crisis (1958-1962),” Cold War International History Project Working Paper no. 6 (May 1993), 26. See also *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*, ed. Sergei Khrushchev, vol. 2 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 522.

⁷³ Quoted in William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: Norton, 2003), 360. See also *ibid.*, 332, 359, 379.

a premium on nerves.”⁷⁴ That meant one could prevail by at least appearing to risk nuclear escalation, and in practice a number of major figures—not just Khrushchev but some U.S. leaders as well—were tempted to follow Dulles’s lead. Richard Nixon, having observed both Dulles and Khrushchev, sought as President to pursue that sort of policy. Nixon, in fact, considered Khrushchev “the most brilliant world leader” he had ever met; he was particularly impressed with the fact that “he scared the hell out of people.”⁷⁵ Lyndon Johnson did not go quite that far, but he took the view that the Dulles strategy had worked in southeast Asia, and that it was only after John Kennedy came to power and the Communists “concluded there wasn’t going to be any massive retaliation no matter what they did” that the insurgency in South Vietnam heated up.⁷⁶

The real issue, however, is not whether nuclear coercion can be effective, but rather whether we would want to live in a world where tactics of this sort are used as a matter of course. And I do think that one of the most amazing things about the way things have developed since 1945 is that despite the fact that nuclear threats can in principle be used for coercive purposes, such threats have come to be viewed as being largely out-of-bounds. A set of norms has come into being that has basically delegitimated all attempts to practice “atomic diplomacy.”⁷⁷ But it would be a mistake to think that this regime is either self-enforcing or rock-solid; norms can change, and often have changed, with surprising suddenness.⁷⁸ Cooperative systems are often vulnerable to exploitation by actors who accept the protections the system offers but who feel no obligation to reciprocate by accepting the constraints that lie at the heart of the system; indeed, if the system makes retaliation more difficult, that in itself would give such actors an incentive to exploit the regime in that way. Such systems can easily unravel; the collapse of the Locarno system in

⁷⁴ Bernard Brodie, “Unlimited Weapons and Limited War,” *The Reporter*, November 18, 1954, 18.

⁷⁵ “What the President Saw: A Nation Coming into Its Own,” *Time Magazine*, July 29, 1985. On this general issue, see Francis Gavin, “Nuclear Nixon: Ironies, Puzzles, and the Triumph of Realpolitik,” in Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, eds., *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 136-38. I also deal with it a bit in my article “Robert Jervis and the Nuclear Question,” in James Davis, ed., *Psychology, Strategy and Conflict: Perceptions of Insecurity in International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 109-15, and esp. (for Nixon) 112-15.

⁷⁶ Sulzberger diary entry for March 1, 1966 (recounting a long meeting with President Johnson), in C. L. Sulzberger, *An Age of Mediocrity: Memoirs and Diaries 1963-1972* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 234; noted in Edwin Moïse H-Diplo post, November 12, 2012.

⁷⁷ See Thomas Schelling, “As Astonishing Sixty Years: The Legacy of Hiroshima,” Nobel Prize lecture, December 2005, and Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁷⁸ One thinks in this context of how Americans reacted to counter-civilian bombing operations in Ethiopia in 1935, in Spain in 1936, and in China in 1937, and how dramatically U.S. attitudes in this area changed when it looked like the United States itself was about to enter the war. General Marshall’s famous threat about burning down “the paper cities of Japan,” made before the United States even entered the war, is particularly worth noting in this connection. See, for example, Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 109.

the late 1920s and of the Vienna system during the Crimean War period are good cases in point. What this means is that the 'moral firebreak'—the norms that keep states from using nuclear weapons and from making nuclear threats—might be breached more easily than we think. And if we are too complacent about these matters—if we are too quick to jump to the conclusion that nuclear weapons are unusable for purposes other than deterrence—than we might be headed for real trouble, perhaps sooner than we think.

So the analysis has come a long way from its starting point. These thoughts about nuclear coercion and nuclear norms have little to do with audience costs. But the goal of the analysis here was not so much to test a particular political science theory as to explore a set of issues about how intentions are assessed, about what makes threats credible, about how international politics and domestic politics interact with each other, and about how international politics works in crisis situations—and to explore those issues by looking at a single historical episode. The theory itself is essentially a vehicle for bringing those issues into focus. You can study even a single episode in the light of that theory, and when you do so, certain insights of a general nature emerge—but they take shape only because you have something specific to react to. That's why theories like the audience cost theory are of real value. They serve as powerful instruments of analysis—and that is true even when, or perhaps especially when, they turn out to be wrong.

Response by Robert Jervis, Columbia University

As usual, Marc Trachtenberg's contribution sparks a number of thoughts. As with most of his work, it sits fruitfully at the intersection of history and political science, and has much to offer in terms of both substance and method. As he notes, his paper covers several topics spinning off from U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower's decision not to intervene in the battle of Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954, and my comment will pick up on three parts of his exposition.

Like Trachtenberg, I will build on Fredrik Logevall's marvelous *Embers of War*.¹ Among its many contributions is the argument that Eisenhower sought to intervene at this vital juncture. As I understand it, this goes further than George Herring and Richard Immerman² in their classic article in arguing against the view that the conditions that Eisenhower laid down for intervening (most importantly, the approval of Britain and other allies) were ones he knew could not be met and were designed to provide political cover for letting Indochina fall. Logevall convinces me (unless I hear a good rebuttal) that this is wrong, that Eisenhower thought that airstrikes were preferable to seeing France defeated, and that we can tell this by the strenuous efforts he took to get Britain on board, or failing that, to construct another plausible coalition. The question I have concerning this is whether if Logevall is correct we need to revise the now-standard view that Eisenhower was extremely cautious and that, in contrast to subsequent presidents, he was extremely hesitant to use force. In other words, was this episode a strange exception, a case of Eisenhower not acting as he normally did, or do we need to reexamine much of his other foreign policy behavior? If the former, how are we to explain this deviation from his usual beliefs and approach? Does this tell us something about the degree to which leaders are, and are not, consistent? Or is there a form of consistency that we need to probe, such as the details of the cost-benefit calculus? If on the other hand this is the tip of an iceberg, what other views of Eisenhower should we revise? What evidence should we look for in other cases and how might we reinterpret some of what we know about his stance toward using force?

I think that the question of the degree and kind of consistency in the attitudes and behavior of leaders, if not of countries, is a central one for both historians and political scientists. Of course this question does not permit a simple and invariant answer, but it can be linked to debates in other fields, especially psychology, about the relative impact of the situation and a person's stable predispositions.

¹ Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War* (New York: Random House, 2012).

² George Herring and Richard Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu: 'The Day We Didn't Go to War' Revisited," *Journal of American History*, vol. 71, September 1984, pp. 343-63.

A second issue raised by the behavior of Eisenhower and his colleagues has been the subject of much attention by international relations [IR] scholars in recent years.³ This is that states can get a bargaining advantage by committing themselves to a particular course of action. By doing so they increase the costs they will pay in terms of their reputations in the eyes of domestic and international audiences (“audience costs”), thereby leading perceivers to increase their estimate of the probability that the state will live up to its word. Both foreign and domestic audiences can be involved. The older literature going back to the path-breaking work of Thomas Schelling stresses the importance of foreign audiences; the more recent variants focus on domestic ones (implying that leaders care more about their political fortunes than about the putative national interest or that domestic audiences are more attentive than foreign ones).⁴ The point here is that Logevall’s story reminds us that Eisenhower and his colleagues went far toward committing the U.S. to intervene. But, as Logevall and Trachtenberg show, Eisenhower did not want to fully close off his options and was annoyed when Vice President Richard Nixon removed what ambiguity Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had left. What is particularly interesting from the standpoint of the theory of commitment and audience costs is both that Eisenhower, while willing to go quite far, in fact did not go quite all the way, and, even more interestingly, that although his statements were quite strong, contrary to the theory, he did not seem to pay much of a price at home or abroad for backing away from them. As Trachtenberg argues, perhaps we should not be surprised: politicians are skilled at impression management and at affecting if not manipulating perceptions at home and abroad. Furthermore, domestic audiences are rarely fully attentive and so are not likely to notice when the President goes back on his word and also will pay more attention to whether they approve of the policy that is adopted than they do to whether it is consistent with what the President said before.⁵

The point here is two-fold. Historians and IR scholars need to more carefully attend to both the extent to which leaders are willing to commit themselves to a course of action and to the sort of repair work they do when they choose not to live up to their signals. Schelling’s argument for the efficacy of the strategy of commitment is very powerful. Indeed, it has never been refuted. But in fact decision-makers are loath to foreclose their options, which is what commitment requires. IR scholars, especially those studying deterrence, found the Schelling argument so compelling and apparently in line with American behavior that they

³ Trachtenberg himself has made a major contribution here: “Audience Costs: A Historical Analysis,” *Security Studies*, vol. 21, January-March 2012, pp. 3-42 and the subsequent symposium, “Do Audience Costs Exist,” *ibid*, vol. 21, July-September 2012, pp. 369-415.

⁴ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1960); Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1966); James Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 88, September 1994, pp. 577-592.

⁵ See, for example, Jack Snyder and Erica Borghard, “The Costs of Empty Threats: A Penny, not a Pound,” *ibid*, vol. 105, August 2011, pp. 437-56.

assumed it was true without carefully investigating cases.⁶ Is this an example (and I suspect not the only one) of IR theorists not only taking a powerful deductive claim as the baseline for investigations, but also believing that it simply has to be true? The second point is that I think both IR scholars and historians have not paid sufficient attention to what leaders do when they have had to pull back from their commitments. Sometimes they feel compelled to act more strongly the next time around in order to show that what just happened was a rare exception rather than behavior that revealed something about their consistent character. In other cases, they seek to skillfully cover their tracks. I would agree with the historians that what is done is likely to depend in significant measure on the particular situation and countries involved. But as a political scientist I suspect that there are interesting generalizations here as well.

Trachtenberg also appropriately questions the narrow focus of IR scholarship on audience costs, making two important points. First, and this partially explains the divergence between the evidence and the expectations generated by the models, decision-makers are fully aware of the tension between gaining bargaining leverage by making commitments as clear and firm as possible, and losing their flexibility, with the attendant risks of war if the other side is not persuaded. It is not as though any sensible leader can be confident that the adversary will believe threats, especially those that are based on the leader staking his reputation on them. Doing this is a gamble, one that is only sometimes worth taking. Second, the adversary almost always looks at a wide range of indicators to predict what the state will do. Signals of commitment are only one part of the picture, often (probably usually) less important than others. The balance of capabilities, the state's previous behavior, current military deployment, plans and activities that the other side's intelligence has picked up (especially if it thinks--incorrectly in the 1954 case, as Trachtenberg nicely shows--that the state does not know that the adversary has access to this information), and the adversary's general views about the state are very important, and scholarship that focuses only on audience costs will be misleading. In 1954, the Soviets and Chinese were indeed impressed by the danger that the U.S. would intervene, and the speeches by administration leaders were part -- but only part -- of the reason. Factors of the kind I have listed that Trachtenberg discusses created the context in which the speeches were heard. Even more than that, they created a sense of menace that might have produced the same outcome had the speeches been much weaker.

A third issue is raised by Trachtenberg at the end of his paper: "The real issue, however, is not whether nuclear coercion can be effective, but whether we would want to live in a world where tactics of this sort are used." The behavior Trachtenberg refers to includes commitment, the general tactic of going to the brink of war in order to get the other side to back down, and the related pattern that Shelling discerns (and at least partly advocates) of taking actions that have some risk of leading to an undesired war as a form of a 'war of nerves' to get the other side to retreat. Trachtenberg's provocation is an important one, and I hope others will take it up. Here I just want to make three points. First, we should separate prescription from description and explanation. That is, it is possible to argue that

⁶ Robert Jervis, "Deterrence Theory Revisited," *World Politics*, vol. 31, January 1979, pp. 302-24.

this behavior is too dangerous and even immoral to be sanctioned, and simultaneously to believe that the historical record shows that states do in fact behave in this way. Second, as Trachtenberg's analysis here and elsewhere clearly shows,⁷ these tactics were contemplated by American theorists and perhaps implemented by American policy for a debatable but good reason: with the advent of Soviet second-strike capability in the mid-1960's there was real fear that the Soviet Union could intimidate, coerce, and perhaps invade West Europe because nuclear parity would deter the American use of nuclear weapons, allowing Soviet conventional superiority to weigh heavily on the minds of West European policymakers and general publics.⁸ This view at first implied that Western security required either much larger conventional forces or an American ability to defeat the USSR at all possible levels of a nuclear escalation ladder, to use Herman Kahn's term.⁹ But to many analysts, this looked impossible, excessively expensive, or very dangerous in the threat it would pose to the USSR--if not all three. In the opinion of these people, brinkmanship and the willingness to take risky actions in some proximity to the brink of war seemed a much better way to protect West Europe.¹⁰ We might not like living in such a world, as Trachtenberg says, but the alternatives were not attractive either.

Finally, what does history tell us about the willingness of statesmen to engage in this behavior? It is a very open question, I believe. On the one hand, much of the behavior of both sides in the Cuban missile crisis can be seen in terms of the willingness to tolerate a certain level of risk, and the desire to end the crisis as quickly as possible when it appeared that events might escape control. More generally, whether American decision-makers fully understood this or not, many of their policies for defending West Europe, especially the promiscuous sprinkling of tactical nuclear warheads in the field, made even the limited use of force by the Soviet Union (or the U.S.) extraordinarily dangerous. In Vietnam, Nixon famously told his colleagues about his "madman theory"--i.e. his desire to do things like issue a nuclear alert that would convince the Soviet Union to put pressure on North Vietnam to end the war because it was too dangerous to be allowed to continue (in the event, the Soviets apparently didn't notice what the U.S. had done).¹¹ So clearly there are

⁷ See in particular his important "The Structure of Great Power Politics, 1963-1975," in Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Cold War*, vol. 2, *Crises and Detente* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2010), pp. 482-502.

⁸ This is what Glenn Snyder called the "Stability-Instability Paradox": Glenn Snyder, "The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror" in Paul Seabury, ed., *The Balance of Power* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), pp. 184-201.

⁹ Herman Kahn *On Escalation* (Baltimore: Penguin Books 1968).

¹⁰ For my own arguments on this point, see Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), chapter 3.

¹¹ William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, "Nixon's Secret Nuclear Alert: Vietnam War Diplomacy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test, October 1969," *Cold War History*, vol. 3, January 2003, pp. 113-156; Scott Sagan and Jeremi Suri, "The Madman Nuclear Alert: Secrecy, Signaling, and Safety in October 1969," *International Security*, vol. 27, Spring 2003, pp. 150-83.

significant instances of this kind of behavior. On the other hand, as with the tactic of commitment discussed earlier, my sense is that leaders avoided this kind of behavior as much as they could. It was, as Trachtenberg says, distasteful both because it was too dangerous and because leaders almost instinctively shied away from anything that took the fate of their country out of their hands. The difference here may be due in part to the sense of responsibility that weighs on decision-makers and that scholars simply cannot feel.¹² But presumably there is significant variation from one country to another, one leader to another, and one situation to another. As a political scientist, I seek parsimonious explanations and think there are important generalizations to be had, but they may not be simple ones.

In all of this, the signals that are perceived may differ from those that are intended to be sent.¹³ As I noted, Nixon's alert in October 1969 not only failed to impress Soviet leaders, it was barely noticed. Trachtenberg shows that in 1954, far from believing that the bellicose statements of the Eisenhower administration might trap them into using military force, Chinese leaders thought that public opinion was holding the administration back. There was no fear that Eisenhower would have to intervene lest he show domestic opinion that he was failing to live up to his word; rather the fear was that after the November elections the administration would be less bound by public opinion. To some extent the state can control the signals it sends, but it has much less influence over how they are received and interpreted. Those of us who have written deductive arguments about signaling¹⁴ make strong arguments about how signals *ought* to be interpreted, but, unfortunate as this is for decision-makers and theorists, the theories that matter are those held by the perceiving states, and these are often different from those of scholars and, more importantly for the conduct of foreign policy, different from those held by the state doing the signaling.

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¹² For a discussion of this in the context of the Cuban missile crisis, see James Blight and David Welch, *On The Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), pp. 107-08.

¹³ Robert Jervis, "Signaling and Perception," in Kristen Monroe, ed., *Political Psychology* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2002), pp. 293-314.

¹⁴ For my own attempt to do so, see Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970; 2nd ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).