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John M. Schuessler. *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics, and American Democracy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-8014-5359-5 (hardcover, \$27.95).

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Introduction by James McAllister, Williams College

In a political climate characterized by daily claims of ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts,’ it is hard to think of a subject more relevant to our time than the American presidency and the politics of deceit. In his new book, John Schuessler demonstrates that the issue of deception and American foreign policy long predates the Trump era. *Deceit on the Road to War* examines three important case studies: Franklin’s Roosevelt’s maneuvering of the American people into support for the war in Europe, Lyndon Johnson’s deceitful efforts to justify greater American military involvement in North and South Vietnam, and George W. Bush’s overselling of the war in Iraq. Of course, not all cases of presidential deception are exactly the same and the results can also vary. Unlike Johnson and Bush, FDR’s use of deception was probably necessary given the situation he faced, and America’s victory in the war has subjected him to far less historical scrutiny than presidents whose deception ended in defeat.

All of the reviewers agree that this book makes an important contribution to several important debates in the fields of security studies and international relations theory. Jonathan Caverley argues that the author “deserves credit for making powerful claims while identifying a rich seam for more research.” Joshua Rovner finds that Schuessler’s case studies are both “detailed and persuasive.” Greenberg praises *Deceit on the Road to War* as a “thoughtful, patiently argued, and lucidly written tract.” This book will be of particular interest to anyone interested in debates over regime type and foreign policy. As Schuessler points out, his research “demonstrates that in the case of three important wars, presidents were drawn to deception not despite being democratic leaders, but *because* they were democratic leaders; that deception allowed those leaders to solve thorny political problems that otherwise would have bedeviled their efforts...”

Not surprisingly, all the reviewers raise some concerns about different aspects of Schuessler’s argument. Somewhat counterintuitively given the focus of the book, Caverley suggests that the author actually underestimates the level of deception by presidents in their efforts at blame-shifting and overselling the case for war. Rovner argues that Schuessler, as well as future researchers in this area of study, should devote more attention to “when and how leaders oversell threats.” It is interesting to note that both of the political science reviewers casually endorse the once very controversial ‘back door’ to war thesis about Roosevelt and American entrance into the Second World War. Like most historians, Greenberg believes that the verdict that Roosevelt manufactured pretexts for war is overstated: “There is a world of difference, however, between tactically hyping incidents like the *Greer* attack and “shifting blame,” which implies that blame properly resides with the United States as opposed to Germany.

H-Diplo/ISSF thanks Professor Schuessler and all their reviewers for their insights into this important debate over presidential deception and war.

Participants:

John Schuessler is an Associate Professor in the Department of International Affairs at the Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University. Previously, he taught at the Air War College. Schuessler received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Chicago. He has been published in *International Security* and *Perspectives on Politics* and is the author of *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics, and American Democracy* (Cornell University Press, 2015). He has been Chair of the Foreign Policy Section of the American Political Association as well as a contributing editor to *Strategic Studies Quarterly*.

Jonathan Caverley is Associate Professor of strategy in the Strategic & Operational Research Department of the Naval War College's Center for Naval Warfare Studies and a Research Scientist in Political Science and Security Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

His research identifies incentives at the international and domestic levels for increased defense effort and militarized conflict, with an emphasis on U.S. foreign policy. He is currently examining how states use the international arms trade and training of foreign militaries as tools of influence. His newest project explores civil-military relations during small wars, with an emphasis on the rhetoric of national security threats. His book, *Democratic Militarism: Voting, Wealth, and War* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), examines the distribution of the costs of security within democracies, and its contribution to military aggressiveness.

David Greenberg is a Professor of History at Rutgers University and the author of many works of history, including, most recently, *Republic of Spin: An Inside History of the American Presidency* (W.W. Norton, 2016). Formerly an acting editor of *The New Republic* and currently a columnist for *Politico Magazine*, he has also written for *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Daedalus*, *Raritan*, and many other scholarly and popular publications.

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Review by Jonathan Caverley, U.S. Naval War College

John Schuessler's *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics, and American Democracy* makes an important contribution to the growing security studies effort to explain the fiasco of the United States and its allies in Iraq by putting it in a larger theoretical and historical context. It joins a series of works, written largely from the perspective of realism, placing this intellectual tradition in the unfamiliar position of caring about explanatory variables such as executive power,¹ ethnic lobbies,² and liberal ideology.³

In this case, *Deceit* argues that one of the foundations underpinning liberal explanations for war and peace—democracies' superior marketplace of ideas—is easily undermined. American presidents have a number of tools, and the incentive to use them, to deceive the public into supporting the leader's preference for war.

A brisk summary of a brisk book

Deceit makes its case at a no-nonsense pace. While packed with rich detail, the argument and its empirical support are presented with great efficiency and can be summed up accordingly.

After making clear the considerable theoretical and policy stakes of his argument, Schuessler describes how U.S. presidents can deceive to get the war they want. Leaders do this not so much by out-and-out lying but by “spinning” and “concealment,” convincing voters to support a war that the leader believes will advance the country's strategic ends (10). This is most effective during the pre-war period when public information and interest are low (14).

Deceit identifies two types of deception. *Blame-shifting* occurs when the leader disingenuously convinces the public that the enemy has “forced the issue.” Blame-shifting breaks down further into sub-deceptions: leaders conceal that they are considering war and also seize upon pretexts to fight (up to and including provoking an attack from the target state). *Overselling*, on the other hand, artificially raises the stakes of a prospective conflict. The level of “political contentiousness” associated with the war under consideration determines whether and to what extent leaders will use either tactic. The more contentious the war, the more likely the leader will not only resort to more deceit, but will concentrate on blame-shifting rather than overselling.

Drawing on three important wars, each with a massive underpinning secondary literature, *Deceit's* empirical chapters tightly make their point even as they acknowledge where the theory misses. Anticipating a political fight over what he thought would be an inevitable war, President Franklin D. Roosevelt resorted to major league blame-shifting--“manufacturing” incidents via naval brinksmanship in the Atlantic and an oil embargo

¹ Chaim D Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War,” *International Security* 29:1 (2004): 5-48.

² John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006).

³ J Monten, “The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in US Strategy,” *International Security* 29:4 (2005): 112-156; Michael C Desch, “America's Liberal Illiberalism - The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in US Foreign Policy,” *International Security* 32:3 (2007): 7-43.

against Japan--to convince the American public to support a war primarily against Germany. President Lyndon Johnson's deceitfulness in Vietnam, where the geopolitical stakes were somewhat lower, took on a more "creeping" form of blame-shifting. On the other hand, President George W. Bush's relatively (some might say shockingly) uncontroversial invasion of Iraq, thought by its architects to be an easy war, was a clear case of overselling to a post-9/11 public receptive to bellicose arguments tied to terror.

When a politician's lips are moving

That leaders will say whatever it takes to get what they want could only be counterintuitive to political scientists. Schuessler points out "it should not be surprising...that democratic leaders regularly resort to deception to maximize domestic support for war" (3). I would go further; it would be astonishing if they did not. Politicians deceiving the public to maximize support for *any* policy, foreign or domestic, is as American as apple pie. It is also highly unlikely to be limited to the United States, or democracies for that matter.⁴

Schuessler observes that these leaders deceive because they believe they will be vindicated: "When resorting to deception, leaders take a calculated risk that the outcome of war will be favorable, with the public adopting a forgiving attitude after victory is secured" (118). In supporting this claim, Schuessler compellingly demonstrates that deceiving the public is essentially costless to presidents. Leaders are punished for failed wars, not lies.

And indeed, Schuessler shows that there are sound *strategic* reasons (in the international rather than the domestic political sense) for maximizing support. Deceit, Schuessler argues, will not only "provide political cover" but "increase the odds that the public will see the war through to victory" (10).

If there are few anticipated costs and considerable benefits, why not throw the rhetorical kitchen sink at any conflict? Lying, in other words, should be a constant. Although Schuessler argues that his dependent variable of "deception" changes in both degree and type (14), I was left wondering how much variation in degree we should expect to see (and how one would measure it). Similarly, while the ideal types of blame-shifting and overselling are very helpful analytical categories, it is not clear why they vary with contentiousness. I turn to *Deceit's* empirics to explore this further.

Empirics

As Schuessler shows, empirical investigations of untruth are challenging--the leaders are deceiving people after all. This review focuses on one particular aspect: measuring the dependent variable. Qualitatively showing variation in "degree" of deceit across these three cases is a demanding task. Schuessler therefore understandably focuses on variation in the "type" of deceit across these cases. Accordingly, for each conflict I will turn to this review's major point about lying as a near constant, along with identifying avenues for further research on deceit and democracies that have been opened up by the book.

⁴ Schuessler readily agrees that focusing only on the American case does not help us decide if there are systematic differences between democracies and non-democracies. While deception, according to Schuessler, is "a natural outgrowth of the democratic process" (117), it is probably more accurate to say it is an outgrowth of *all* politics. See Dan Reiter, "Democracy, Deception, and Entry into War," *Security Studies* 21:4 (2012): 594-623.

Given *Deceit's* empirical needs, the World War II chapter would benefit from further exploration of overselling. Granted, it is not easy to make the Nazi war machine appear worse than it was. But Schuessler underplays the continued alarmism of the Roosevelt administration, as in the observation that the President's "emphasis on hemispheric security was not entirely disingenuous" (40). The chapter presents tantalizing hints, such as Roosevelt citing Adolf Hitler's plan to "abolish all existing religions and establish an International Nazi Church," of real efforts to make the stakes higher (or at least more salient to an American voter) than they actually were. That many Americans believed Germany to be behind Pearl Harbor, and that a poll showed 90% of respondents wanting to declare war immediately after the attack (i.e. before Hitler's declaration of war), suggests that it worked (55). Indeed Schuessler's claim of thumbscrewing Japan to make war against Germany possible presupposes Roosevelt's confidence that he had successfully oversold the connection between the two threats.

Follow-on research on World War II stemming from *Deceit* should examine the international implications of a pacific public combined with a deceitful president. One could argue that Roosevelt wielded American reluctance for maximum leverage against his allies, dismantling the British Empire in the Western Hemisphere through the Destroyers-for-Bases deal, setting the stage for American post-war economic hegemony through Lend-Lease, and watching the Soviet hemorrhage on the Eastern front. Stalin, having been assured repeatedly that a second front would be opened first in 1942 and then in 1943, would have little problem believing in deceitful democratic leaders.⁵

In contrast to WWII, *Deceit* codes the Vietnam War as "medium-opposition, medium-deception." The former seems correct, but the latter is a tougher case to make. While it is difficult to compare relative amounts of deception between these two eras, a case could certainly be made that Johnson and his predecessors were much less transparent about Vietnam than was Roosevelt about Germany. Moreover, many of Johnson's positively baroque varieties of deception were neither blame-shifting nor overselling so much as a systemic *underselling* of the magnitude of American efforts, which does not fit neatly into *Deceit's* taxonomy.⁶

This highlights a curious omission of an endogenous factor given Schuessler's realist orientation: the size of the stakes should drive the level of scrutiny for any given war. While *Deceit* theorizes a linear relationship between contestation (which probably correlates to the potential costs of the war) and deceit, I wonder if it is not an inverted U. Johnson lied so much because he could get away with more in a low information environment relative to World War II, and had to deceive a more skeptical audience than the post-9/11 US public.

Moreover, as Schuessler acknowledges, Johnson's desire to maximize support for the war had real consequences for how the war was fought as well as the lies he told. He quotes Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's justification for not mobilizing the Reserves because it would "cause considerable debate, that a lot of minority votes would result, that there was certain to be a strong vote against a call-up, and that the Communists might get the wrong impression regarding division among our ranks" (76). This behavior is of

⁵ David M. Kennedy *The American People in World War II: Freedom from Fear, Part Two* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 148-150, 244-283. Mark A. Stoler *The Politics of the Second Front: American Military Planning and Diplomacy in Coalition Warfare, 1941-1943* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977).

⁶ One could argue that Roosevelt did this as well.

course equally damaging to democratic exceptionalism if not more so.⁷ Future research should explore what appears to be a puzzling tradeoff. Ostensibly, presidents maximize public support to ‘see the war through to victory.’ But Johnson (and other presidents I would argue) clearly fought the war in a way that maximized the breadth (if not the depth) of public support while making victory unlikely. If defeat is the cardinal sin in politics, why not sacrifice some support to maximize the chance of victory?

Whereas the World War II case gives short shrift to underselling, *Deceit* could more fully explore blame-shifting on Iraq by the Bush Administration. Turning a preventative war into a war of self-defense looks to me like a masterful example. Tying Saddam Hussein to the terror group that had just killed 3000 people in New York City seems a textbook example of a “justification of hostility crisis.”⁸ The alleged efforts to acquire Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) could also be easily construed as the Bush Administration’s attempt to provide “compelling evidence of the adversary’s aggressive intentions” (15). Finally, Schuessler describes the use of the United Nations as “setting a trap” for Hussein, which corresponds to blame-shifting more than overselling, as Schuessler himself acknowledges (105).

In terms of additional research, comparatively explore the deceit surrounding the decision to invade Afghanistan in 2001 as well as the first Iraq War in 1991 will provide useful post-Cold War complements to the Iraq invasion.

Stakes for Liberalism and Beyond

This review has tried to first show that, if anything, Schuessler underestimates the amount of presidential dishonesty when it comes to war. Second, it identifies the rich vein of research that *Deceit* has uncovered for future scholarship. I will conclude by exploring the implications for Schuessler’s theoretical target: liberal International Relations (IR) theory, specifically democratic exceptionalism.

Schuessler’s mechanism differs significantly in its starting point from the democratic exceptionalism he attacks. Much of liberal IR assumes leaders to be quite craven, entirely motivated to win and retain office. But *Deceit* starts out by letting the president decide to embark on war for the national interest (however misguided this notion might be) only then figuring out how to sell it to the public.

There is irony aplenty here: allowing presidents to identify and execute the national interest leads them to undermine a mechanism that liberals assert contributes to democracies’ superior ability to...identify and execute the national interest. But the liberals have their own ironic point: as realists realize, Johnson, Bush, and the United States would probably have been better served had the marketplace of ideas been allowed to work.

Of course, as a descriptive matter we can agree that leaders are motivated by a combination of policy preferences and electioneering. No scholar believes that domestic politics played no role in placing upper and

⁷ Alexander B. Downes, “How Smart and Tough Are Democracies? Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War,” *International Security* 3:4 (2009): 9-51.

⁸ Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 25.

lower bounds on the effort expended in Vietnam. Schuessler acknowledges, for example, that Johnson did not want to divert attention from his domestic agenda, the Great Society, which he intended to push through Congress before conservative opposition coalesced (73).

Good theory necessitates simplification, but given the tension between these two very different assumptions, the next wave of IR research cannot keep them hermetically sealed from each other. To begin examining the tension between elections and strategy, I suggest two questions. Why does the executive seem to have a systematically divergent sense, apparently robust across many wars, of U.S. grand strategy than public opinion, while counting on public opinion rewarding it later victory? How does the president choose between maximizing effort and maximizing public support in fighting wars, especially if it is losing the war that causes real electoral pain?

While this review wonders how the arguments *Deceit* could be extended, it also recognizes that theory is hard and demands simplification. *Deceit* deserves credit for making powerful claims while identifying a rich seam for more research. The reasons that presidents and other elected leaders deceive their publics are probably outnumbered only by the number of ways in which they do it.

Review by David Greenberg, Rutgers University

Fourteen years after President George W. Bush led the United States to war against Iraq, Americans are still suffering from buyers' remorse. During the 2016 presidential campaign, candidates were pressed about the decade-old invasion more than most other pressing foreign policy challenges. Academics, too, remain obsessed with the decision to invade, as seen in a continuing stream of literature on the topic. The Library of Congress subject heading, "Iraq War, 2003-2011—Causes" now lists some 150 titles.

The newest book to revisit the question of Bush's honesty in making the case for war is *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics and American Democracy*, by John M. Schuessler. A thoughtful, patiently argued, and lucidly written tract, it examines the role of presidential deception in the Iraq War, World War II, and the Vietnam War. Based almost entirely on the published research of others, its contents will be familiar to scholars of these wars and probably to many readers of popular history.

Yet Schuessler does not purport to be unearthing new information. He admits that his method "involves critically analyzing the secondary literature and supplementing with primary sources whenever the need arises" and he does just that (24-25). His purpose, rather, is to wade into a debate among political scientists: Are democracies less likely to start wars than dictatorships because they are constrained by public opinion and other checks on executive power? Schuessler's final answer is a bit murky but it seems to amount to 'not as much as we like to think.'

Schuessler begins with the conventional wisdom among political scientists that democracies, unlike dictatorships or other nondemocratic regimes, face institutional constraints on going to war. In the United States, presidents must sustain support from other branches of government, rival parties, the public, and the press. In practice, however, presidents resort to deception in advocating war, short-circuiting the ostensibly open debate by withholding, distorting, or exaggerating information. Schuessler is careful in his reasoning and not inclined to polemics, and so he stops short of claiming that democratic institutions and procedures provide *no* deterrent to unilateral executive war-making action. "It would be going too far to say that the marketplace of ideas poses no constraint on the ability of leaders to manufacture consent for war," he concedes (6). Yet he wants us to think twice before fancying that democratic leaders are as hindered as the theory would suppose.

Presidents escape the normal constraints on going to war, Schuessler says, through deception. Plucked out of context, this word sounds ominous, as if Schuessler is going to recite a litany of shopworn conspiracy theories or conjure up the specter of sinister leaders deliberately lying to take peace-loving citizens to war for nefarious purposes. But Schuessler's book is much more sophisticated than that. He even concedes that some cases of deception in the service of military intervention—such as President Franklin D. Roosevelt's shiftiness in the run-up to World War II—are justified. He also notes that leaders may believe the claims they present to the public, even if in retrospect those claims appear to us to have been distorted or false.

Schuessler defines "deception" broadly. For him, the concept includes not just lying but also the withholding of information and even garden-variety political spin. Oddly, however, Schuessler says that while "the deception campaigns featured in this book are characterized by a great deal of spinning and concealment but little outright lying," he nonetheless believes that "the cumulative effect is no less misleading" (10). This claim is open to question. Naked lying, though arguably permissible in certain circumstances, violates democratic

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norms in ways that spin does not. The challenge of political advocacy is to argue persuasively for a policy while staying within the bounds of defensibly truthful claims.

Schuessler's weakest case study is his first: the case of Roosevelt trying to increase support for intervention against Nazi Germany. On the one hand, Schuessler is correct that Roosevelt resorted at times to deception. Schuessler recounts, for example, the famous September 1941 case of the *USS Greer*, which was fired upon in the North Atlantic by a German submarine while the United States was still officially neutral. Although the Navy told Roosevelt that the Germans may not have known the nationality of the *Greer*, the President told the public that the incident was an unmistakable act of German aggression, and he leveraged the incident to revise the Neutrality Laws that were constraining American action. In another instance, Roosevelt told a campaign rally in 1940 that he would not send American boys to fight in foreign wars, conspicuously omitting his usual caveat, "except in case of attack" (40). As he impishly told his speechwriter, Sam Rosenman, "If we're attacked, it's no longer a foreign war."¹

While Roosevelt certainly sought pretexts to adopt a more aggressive posture toward Germany and Japan, it is hard to agree with Schuessler's conclusion, as articulated by the title of chapter 2, that Roosevelt was "shifting blame to the Axis." The concept of "blame-shifting," which Schuessler also invokes in his chapter on Vietnam, proves problematic. Were Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan blameless for World War II? To be sure, Schuessler does not endorse the extreme views of the politician Pat Buchanan or the novelist Nicholson Baker, who hold that the United States should not have intervened in the war at all.² But he does argue that Roosevelt "manufactured events" in order to hasten war (3). There is a world of difference, however, between tactically hyping incidents like the *Greer* attack and "shifting blame," which implies that blame properly resides with the United States as opposed to Germany.

At times Schuessler's evidence undercuts his arguments. For example, Schuessler quotes from the Fireside Chat that Roosevelt delivered after the Nazis overran France in June 1940: "If Great Britain goes down, the Axis powers will control the Continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, Austral-Asia, and the high seas. And they will be in a position to bring enormous military and naval resources against this hemisphere. It is no exaggeration to say that all of us in all the Americas would be living at the point of a gun—a gun loaded with explosive bullets, economic as well as military" (29). But this statement is really the opposite of deception. Roosevelt was being candid about the threat that German aggression posed to the United States and about the need to ramp up American opposition.

Similarly, after the 1941 *Greer* attack, Roosevelt told the public, "When you see a rattlesnake poised to strike, you do not wait until he has struck before you crush him," analogizing the Nazi submarines to rattlesnakes (45). Roosevelt fudged the details of a particular incident, but in that speech he was again being forthright

¹ David Greenberg, *Republic of Spin: An Inside History of the American Presidency* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016), 233.

² Patrick J. Buchanan, *Churchill, Hitler and the Unnecessary War: How Britain Lost Its Empire and the West Lost the World* (New York: Crown Books, 2008); and Nicholson Baker, *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008).

about his conviction that Germany constituted a mortal threat. This makes it hard to agree with Schuessler's larger argument that Roosevelt misled Americans about his willingness to go to war.

Describing U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Schuessler has an easier time showing that deception was used to circumvent constraints on presidential power, with damaging results. President Lyndon B. Johnson and his aides faced a dilemma. Johnson did not want to let the North Vietnamese Communists take over South Vietnam—an outcome he believed would hurt him politically at home and might (though this has always been fiercely debated) have negative repercussions in the region and for America's influence as a world power. But Johnson also did not want to declare a major military undertaking in remote Indochina. So he and other administration figures exaggerated and dissembled. Publicly, they mischaracterized both the events of the August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, which gave Johnson the congressional authorization he needed, and subsequent events like the February 1965 Viet Cong attack at Pleiku, which provided a pretext for escalation that year (85). Schuessler also demonstrates other forms of presidential deception, such as when the Administration deliberately obscured the shift from America's supplementary role in Vietnam to one of active ground combat.

A complicating factor here, Schuessler concedes, is that Johnson faced little dissent on his war policy in 1964 and 1965. He operated in what Schuessler calls a "permissive but fragile" public opinion environment (65). Notable opposition came from newspaper columnists such as Walter Lippmann, some powerful politicians, and even a few administration officials. But the early escalatory steps, such as the American air strikes that followed Pleiku, enjoyed robust public backing. It is hard to know whether the deceptions boosted support for the escalation, or whether that support encouraged Johnson—as democracy theory suggests it should have—in thinking his policies were sound. Perhaps both were the case. Complicating things further, public and congressional support for the war plummeted as it dragged on and the death toll rose. Schuessler's book does not take up the constraints on presidential war-making once a conflict is underway, but the mounting antiwar sentiment toward the end of Johnson's presidency suggests that ultimately the institutions of democracy are not powerless to restrain a strong executive. Of course, the late-blooming antiwar opinion provided no comfort to the thousands who died, but it does speak to Schuessler's concern about the ability of democratic institutions to rein in executive-led war-making.

The final case Schuessler examines is that of the Iraq War. He reminds us of several crucial points that confound the simple conclusion that the Bush administration lied America into war. For one thing, Bush, even more than Johnson, "faced a relatively permissive domestic political environment," with immense support for action against Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein visible immediately after the attacks of September 11, 2001 (93): "Clearly, the public was ready to draw a connection between Iraq and the war on terror well before the Bush administration explicitly cultivated it" (103). Schuessler also argues convincingly that public and congressional support for intervention was strong "because of the widespread expectation that victory over Iraq would come cheaply and easily" (93). The recent experiences of freedom's triumph in Eastern Europe and the successful Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan interventions led most people to believe that the costs of an invasion would be minor. This logic seems to have encouraged some Democrats, including several potential presidential aspirants, to approve Bush's request for a congressional authorization to force Saddam Hussein to readmit the weapons inspectors he had illegally evicted in 1998. The most important of these Democrats was Representative Dick Gephardt of Missouri, the House minority leader, who scuttled a bipartisan bill that would have given Bush a much more limited authorization than he sought. Here, political opportunism, and not deception, appears to have been key.

Yet even with the wind at his back, Bush clearly engaged in a form of deception that Schuessler calls ‘overselling.’ Schuessler grants that Bush and his top aides may well have believed the faulty intelligence on which they decided to invade Iraq, especially since after 9/11 they were disposed to trust evidence that might otherwise have struck them as shaky. “We acted,” Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld explained in 2003, “because we saw the existing evidence in a new light through the prism of our experience on 9/11 (96).” Vice President Dick Cheney similarly said that even a 1 percent chance of terrorists gaining weapons of mass destruction at that time had to be treated as a certainty (97). Nonetheless, Schuessler reviews (following books like David Corn and Michael Isikoff’s 2007 *Hubris*)³ the concerted campaign of pro-war rhetoric that made cloudy intelligence seem clear-cut and uncertain threats seem imminent.

Although his Iraq chapter is generally strong, Schuessler makes a few dubious claims. Like many before him, he blames the “neoconservatives” within the administration for urging war, even though none of the most powerful enthusiasts for war—neither Bush nor Cheney nor Rumsfeld—was considered a neocon beforehand. He also understates the opposition to war. Contrary to popular recollections, pundits galore argued against war in every possible medium, and reporters cited weapons experts and intelligence officials to cast doubt on various administration claims. Leading Democrats such as Senators Ted Kennedy and Robert Byrd vocally opposed intervention, and others, such as Senator Hillary Clinton, supported Bush’s authorization bill only provisionally. It would be more accurate to say that the Democrats were divided than to claim, as Schuessler does, that Congress “largely abdicated its oversight role” (113). Relatedly, the core problem was not that the marketplace of ideas failed, in Schuessler’s terms, but rather that the wrong ideas won. Indeed, Schuessler highlights the insightful argument of Chaim Kaufmann of Lehigh University, who found that the public supported war because, among other reasons, “the shock surrounding the 9/11 attacks meant that the public was more receptive to threat inflation than it otherwise might have been” (21). That insight, unfortunately, isn’t fully integrated into Schuessler’s larger analysis.

How, then, do we assess Schuessler’s pointed challenge to the theory that democratic institutions constrain their presidents from going to war? He certainly achieves his goal of undermining any simple faith in democracy to prevent ill-advised wars. But beyond that it’s hard to say. For all the careful argumentation and helpful thinking in *Deceit on the Road to War*, it doesn’t yield any larger, generalizable claims. For one thing, the book comprises only three case studies, all from one single democracy—probably not enough to build a theory on. For another, the book does not take up cases where the institutions of democracy *did* constrain presidents from going to war, such as President Barack Obama’s retreat from bombing Syria in September 2013 in the face of ample hostility. Without such examples, Schuessler’s book is open to the charge of selection bias. Schuessler also omits a discussion of any war-making decisions of non-democracies. As a result, we can’t render the comparative judgments that are at the heart of Schuessler’s argument.

One final omission: Schuessler never explains why presidential “deception” in going to war is substantially different from “deception” in advocating other policies. If, like Schuessler, we define deception to include the selective release of information and even ordinary spin, then we can easily think of lots of times when presidents used “deception” in selling health care plans or in pushing economic legislation. For deception in this sense—exaggeration and blame shifting, advocacy and partiality, hype and spin—is an intrinsic part of democratic discourse. “No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each

³ David Corn and Michael Isikoff, *Hubris: the Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006).

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other,” Hannah Arendt wrote in her 1967 essay, “Truth and Politics.”⁴ We do not expect, she explained, that the political realm will adhere to the same standards of truth-telling as the courtroom, the newsroom, or the seminar room. Which is to say, maybe the answer to Schuessler’s question can be framed this way: Of course presidents deceive. When influential voices oppose a president’s goals in sufficient numbers or with enough passion, he’ll be called out on it. But if the electorate is largely in agreement with his purposes, chances are we will let it pass.

Please add a brief autobiographical sketch here:

David Greenberg is a Professor of history at Rutgers University and the author of many works of history, including, most recently, *Republic of Spin: An Inside History of the American Presidency* (W.W. Norton, 2016). Formerly an acting editor of *The New Republic* and currently a columnist for *Politico Magazine*, he has also written for *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Daedalus*, *Raritan*, and many other scholarly and popular publications.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, “Truth in Politics,” in Peter Baehr ed., *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 545-575.

Review by Joshua Rovner, Southern Methodist University

“All warfare,” the classical strategist Sun Tzu wrote, “is based on deception.”¹ Lying is important for commanders seeking to outwit and outmaneuver their enemies without having to engage in bloody combat, and generations of military theorists have explored the use of feints and frauds for battlefield purposes. Operational lies include everything from minor misdirection to elaborate hoaxes designed to camouflage whole armies and befuddle enemy forces. Covert warriors, who deliberately hide their own roles in operations, are also in the business of lying, and the vast literature on covert action speaks to the enduring interest in wartime deception.

But, as John Schuessler points out in *Deceit on the Road to War*, the lying starts long before the shooting. Political leaders lie to their allies and adversaries alike. They make extravagant promises in order to win over friends, even if they have no intention of keeping them. States have strong incentives to pass the buck to alliance partners – and to lie about their level of effort so that buck-passing may continue. Sometimes states exaggerate the danger posed by common enemies in order to convince allies to join in a shared struggle. They also lure allies with the promise of the spoils of war, even if the probable costs of fighting vastly exceed the benefits. States deceive adversaries to discourage prewar mobilization and other military preparations, to exploit their domestic political fissures in order to reduce morale and unity of purpose, and to lull them into submission before launching surprise attacks.

Schuessler focuses on a different kind of deception. Rather than focusing on the lies that leaders tell each other, he is interested in the lies they tell their own constituents. He argues that democratic leaders are not bound by institutional constraints that limit their ability to go to war. Instead, he shows why and how leaders deceive domestic audiences in order to overcome antiwar opposition and rally support at home. The argument has far-reaching implications for democracies at peace and war. Democratic peace theory is partly based on the notion that liberal institutions stop leaders from rash decisions; democracies are especially unlikely to fight one another because they are similarly constrained. A related theory is that democracies are more successful in war because they are smarter about choosing which wars to fight. Both theories rest on the notion that democratic institutions promote the kind of rational discourse that injects sobriety into decisions about the use of force.

Schuessler believes that this is wishful thinking. Liberal institutions do not always encourage healthy debate. Sometimes they encourage lying. Leaders who want war will not simply accept institutional constraints and moderate their preferences accordingly. When they decide war is in the national interest, they can lie about their actions in order to create the façade of deliberation and restraint. They keep their true intentions close to the vest, all the while choreographing phony pretexts for military action.²

¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 66.

² Schuessler argues that lying is a particularly egregious form of deception, an umbrella category that includes everything from exaggeration to concealment. I use the terms interchangeably here, and see no reason why the commonsense understanding of lying is substantially different from Schuessler’s definition of deception as “deliberate attempts to mislead the public about the thrust of official thinking.” [Is it possible to add the page citation for this quotation here?] In any case, he concedes that the cumulative effects of subtle deception are the same (10-11). For other recent works exploring these issues, see Chaim Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas:

Schuessler describes two kinds of lying: shifting the blame on others in what are actually wars of choice, and overselling the need for war in the first place. The type of deception in any given case depends on the intensity of domestic opposition and the expected costs of fighting. When decisions to intervene are particularly contentious and the expected costs of war are high, leaders shift the blame onto foreign adversaries. This is deception because it suggests that leaders do not want to go to war; that violence is the last resort; and that enemies bear the burden of responsibility for forcing them into conflict. According to Schuessler, such blame shifting characterized President Franklin D. Roosevelt's effort to move American the public to support intervention in World War II. Strong antiwar sentiment made it politically difficult for Roosevelt to seek a full repeal of the Neutrality Acts and a declaration of war against Nazi Germany. Instead, he maneuvered the United States into the conflict under "the guise of nonbelligerency," increasing aid to Great Britain while searching for an incident in the Atlantic that might provide a pretext for overt U.S. entry in the war (39). Ultimately he used the escalating diplomatic crisis with Japan as a back door to war in Europe. The administration had implemented a potentially crippling oil embargo on Japan, which it promised to lift only if Japanese forces ended their occupation of China. But abandoning China was a non-starter for Tokyo, and the longer the embargo remained in place, the more likely that Japan would lash out. Because the administration had intelligence indicating that Germany would declare war in the event of an attack, picking a fight with Japan was a reliable, albeit roundabout, way of joining the European war (54-55).

Schuessler describes President Lyndon B. Johnson's effort to sustain domestic support for the war in Vietnam as a "creeping form of blameshifting, exploiting a series of pretexts to justify the bombing of North Vietnam and the insertion of ground forces into South Vietnam" (60). Attacks on U.S. forces, real or imagined, provided a vehicle for rallying congressional and public support for deeper U.S. involvement. Johnson realized that he was operating in a permissive political environment in 1964-1965, when he made the critical decisions leading to a major escalation of the war. Nonetheless he did not reveal his intentions publicly because he feared that domestic support was brittle and likely to vanish if U.S. forces appeared to get stuck in a Korea-style quagmire. In the short-term the deception worked. In the long-term it ruined his presidency.

Sometimes domestic opposition may be less intense because the expected costs are low. While leaders benefit from more freedom of action in these cases, they also may face criticism for leading the country into an unnecessary war. Under these conditions they are likely to oversell the risks of inaction. Schuessler argues that the George W. Bush administration vastly exaggerated the danger posed by Iraq in 2002-2003 in order to make the war seem like a necessary effort to preempt an imminent threat. In reality the administration was fighting a preventive war against a badly weakened enemy. The administration enjoyed extraordinary domestic flexibility after the September 11 attacks. Still, some high-profile critics questioned the wisdom of attacking Iraq rather than continuing to focus on al Qaeda. In response to these critics and to forestall opposition as the post-9/11 effect wore off, the White House cast the invasion of Iraq as part of the broader war on terrorism. It suggested links between Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda leader Osama bin

The Selling of the Iraq War," *International Security* 29:1 (2004); Jon Western, *Selling Intervention and War: The Presidency, the Media, and the American Public* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Jane Kellert Cramer and A. Trevor Thrall, eds. *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear: Threat Inflation Since 9/11* (New York: Routledge, 2009); John J. Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth About Lying in International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

Laden, and warned that the nexus of tyrants, terrorists, and ‘weapons of mass destruction’ represented the ultimate danger for the United States and its allies. Regime change was the only solution.

Schuessler’s case studies are detailed and persuasive. His conclusions about Vietnam and Iraq are not controversial. His discussion of Roosevelt’s ‘back door to war’ maneuver with Japan is more contentious, as it involves two layers of deception: baiting the Japanese to attack, and then using that attack as a pretext for going to war against a third party. Nonetheless Schuessler joins Marc Trachtenberg in arguing that Roosevelt knew the risk he was taking with the embargo, and indeed welcomed Hitler’s declaration of war after Pearl Harbor.³ Given the President’s clear ‘Europe first’ priority, it is hard to find a compelling alternative explanation for his belligerent approach to Japan. Other arguments, including the claim that clever mid-level bureaucrats tricked him into sustaining the embargo, strain credulity. Schuessler is careful not to indulge conspiracy theories about the Pearl Harbor attack itself, but he is not shy about making the broader point about the causes and consequences of Roosevelt’s actions toward Japan.

The book’s theory is plausible but also somewhat underspecified. It begs several questions. At what point, for instance, does domestic opposition become sufficiently intense that leaders make the fateful step from overselling threats to shifting the blame? This transition seems to matter a great deal, because the process of blame shifting suggests that conflict is inevitable. War seems like the only answer in the presence of an incorrigible adversary, an aggressive rival who has already turned down opportunities for peace. Overselling a threat implies that something bad might happen in the future; shifting the blame means that it already occurred. But Schuessler’s book does not make it easy to identify this threshold, either in past or present cases.

Schuessler describes the factors influencing public opinion very briefly (11-13). His basic argument is that wars are most contentious when the threat is low but the prospects for victory are also low (11-13). We should expect to see blame shifting in these cases. This is plausible, to be sure, but the line between a permissive and contentious political environment is unclear. Must a majority of the public oppose military intervention? Must a majority of elites? Is opposition from key domestic groups sufficient to change how leaders characterize threats? The theory is certainly plausible but it is not clear how one would apply it to other cases.

Another problem is that blame shifting and overselling are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the confluence of factors leading to blame shifting (low threat, poor prospects) suggests that leaders should engage in both kinds of deception on the road to war. Shifting the blame may absolve leaders of responsibility and convince domestic audiences of the need to fight, and overselling the threat might take the air out of arguments about unnecessary wars of choice. It is hard to think of many cases in which leaders have *not* shifted the blame to their enemies. They certainly did in all three of the case studies, including the Iraq War, in which the Bush administration repeatedly tried to cast the war as a necessary response to Iraqi deception about its weapons programs, as well as its refusal to adhere to United Nations (UN) resolutions. We should expect blame shifting, given that any war is potentially costly even against much weaker enemies, and because leaders pay few, if any, political costs for doing so.

³ Marc C. Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), chapter 4.

If blame shifting is normal, then the more interesting question is when and how leaders oversell threats. As Schuessler correctly notes, the existence of weaker rivals puts policymakers in a quandary (16). The lower the threat, the lower the anticipated costs of fighting. At the same time, the very fact that enemies are probably pushovers makes war seem unnecessary. Inflating the threat also raises the expected costs, which creates a different reason for the public to oppose the war. Schuessler argues that leaders overcome this problem because they have a first mover advantage. Political leaders set the terms of the debate by emphasizing national security dangers, forcing opponents to respond before they have the chance to reframe the question. The result is a marketplace of ideas that operates sluggishly at best. Leaders are able to marginalize opposition by overselling threats to national security, confident that it will take some time before a new line of criticism emerges. In other words, this kind of lying creates a grace period for leaders who are bent on war.

The book would be stronger if it explored this process in more detail. Blame shifting is normal and cost-free. Overselling threats, on the other hand, is sporadic and risky. Such exaggerations can lead to a wartime investment of blood and treasure that vastly exceeds the value of the object. This is a recipe for strategic disaster. In addition, overselling threats leads to heightened public expectations of comprehensive victory against truly dangerous foes, who cannot be tolerated in any form. Such victories may prove elusive, leading to public recriminations. Policymakers (and their successors) may find themselves inhibited by their previous commitments. This is a recipe for strategic inertia.

Consider the Obama administration's treatment of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). Initially the President downplayed the threat, deriding ISIS as a 'JV [junior varsity] team' in early 2014. Later that summer, the administration completely changed its rhetoric about ISIS.⁴ The President cast the threat as a global and generational conflict against a uniquely dangerous enemy. Speaking at the UN, he declared that it was "no exaggeration to say that humanity's future depends on us uniting against those who would divide us along the fault lines of tribe or sect, race or religion," and called on like-minded nations to join the struggle against the ISIS "network of death."⁵ Schuessler's theory suggests that in the time between the ISIS summer offensive and the President's public statements, the administration decided on a difficult and costly war against the group. Convincing the public to go along meant exaggerating the threat, especially given popular disillusionment with another Middle Eastern campaign after many frustrating years in Iraq.

The administration did not take large risks in its war against ISIS, however. Obama's strategy focused overwhelmingly on air strikes, complemented later by a small ground presence. Thus there was a strange mismatch between the administration's rhetoric about the gravity of the ISIS threat and its investment in the war against it. It may be that the President privately thought the war would be easy, and that for various reasons airpower alone might be enough against an enemy lacking the benefits of natural cover or air defenses. But if this were the case, why resort to threat inflation? Did Obama fear major opposition to a bombing campaign? Was he concerned about a public backlash, despite widespread revulsion at ISIS for its habit of posting horrendous executions of innocent civilians on social media? Or did he believe that ground forces

⁴ Steve Contorno, "What Obama said about Islamic State as a 'JV' Team," *Politifact*, 7 September 2014; <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2014/sep/07/barack-obama/what-obama-said-about-islamic-state-jv-team/>.

⁵ Joshua Rovner, "The Strategic Value of Threat Deflation," *Lawfare*, 4 October 2014, <http://www.lawfareblog.com/foreign-policy-essay-strategic-value-threat-deflation>

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might be needed later? Such a belief would be consistent with Schuessler's argument, especially given the President's repeated promises to keep the United States out of another land war in the Middle East. Overselling the threat might be necessary to break that promise and set the political conditions for a future expansion of the U.S. effort. Indeed, Schuessler's theory might tell us something about the curious decision to send a division headquarters to Iraq in fall 2014, which could accommodate far more than the 3,400 troops Obama sent thereafter.⁶

If this is correct, then Obama was playing a dangerous game. Overselling the threat enabled a slow expansion of the ground war, but it also restricted his ability to scale down the U.S. campaign. He might also have inadvertently laid a path for escalation by his successor.

More broadly, the use of overheated domestic rhetoric, whether in the form of exaggerations or outright lies, may have long term consequences for strategy, counterterrorism, and the problem of war termination. Most wars end in a coerced settlement. When enemies are incorrigible and unwilling to concede under any circumstance, however, then war ends through their destruction. But neither coercion nor brute force is likely to succeed against enemies like al Qaeda or ISIS. They are beyond coercion and uninterested in any kind of negotiated peace. At the same time, while brute force is useful at depleting their resources and eroding their control of territory, such ideological movements are capable of attracting far-flung followers. Even as their material resources diminish they may be able to inspire would-be martyrs to carry out attacks against the United States and its allies. Any disgruntled individual, after all, can claim fealty to a foreign terrorist group and claim to act on its behalf.

As a result, ending the war on terrorism requires a different calculation. Instead of determining what it will take to convince an enemy to surrender, or figuring out how much firepower it will take to destroy it in detail, the question is a matter of risk tolerance. The more that the United States commits publicly to total victory against a group like ISIS, the more it stays in the headlines and potentially attracts new recruits. Individuals may be tempted to join ISIS because it claims to be on the vanguard of some revolution, especially if U.S. leaders continue to speak about the group in epochal terms. If U.S. leaders ratchet down the rhetoric, on the other hand, then ISIS may be less capable of drawing support outside of Iraq and Syria. This will require talking less about the group, and learning to accept the risk of some terrorism. Debates about war termination would not start with questions about how to achieve a wholly satisfying victory, but whether the risk of future terrorist attacks justifies the costs of an open-ended counterterrorism campaign. Making such a calculation will be inherently difficult. It will almost certainly be much harder given the public rhetoric surrounding ISIS. In some ways, Obama's exaggerated claims about the stakes involved may have constrained the United States from ending the war. This is a terrible irony for a president whose grand strategy rested on limiting U.S. operations in the Middle East and refocusing U.S. attention to East Asia. It was also the price of overselling threats, a short-term political expedient with lasting strategic effects.

⁶ Michelle Tan, "Army Chief: Division Headquarters Heading to Iraq," *Army Times*, 24 September 2014.

Author's Response by John Schuessler, Bush School, Texas A&M University

What a privilege to have my book reviewed by three such capable scholars! Each of them has made their mark in areas related to those I write on in *Deceit on the Road to War*, in some instances providing direct inspiration for the thinking therein.¹ To repay the reviewers for their efforts, I do my best to engage the core issues that they raise, starting with how to define and measure deception itself.

Key Concepts: Deception and Domestic Opposition

David Greenberg asks whether it is right to lump lying and spin under the same heading of deception. Does not lying violate democratic norms in ways that spin does not?² Yes, it does. I suspect this is why lying is less common in practice than other, subtler forms of deception. My intent was not to imply that lying is no worse than spinning, but to underline that leaders can do a fair amount of deceiving even while never lying outright. If one were to focus only on lies, one would miss the more artful ways that leaders mislead the public.

Jonathan Caverley is more interested in how deception is measured, charging that *Deceit on the Road to War*, if anything, underestimates the amount of it we find in the cases. Specifically, Caverley suggests that there is as much overselling as blameshifting in the World War II case; as much blameshifting as overselling in the Iraq War case; and as much deception overall, if not more, in the Vietnam War case as in the World War II one. The correct conclusion to draw, according to Caverley, is that deception is a constant, found at high levels whenever a democracy goes to war.

Let me concede up front that it is difficult to measure variation in deception, both in degree and type. Even distinguishing blameshifting from overselling is not straightforward (a point that Joshua Rovner raises as well). A leader could blameshift to an adversary by overselling the threat that it poses, for example. And overselling has the effect, at least, of shifting blame to the adversary. Why go to the effort of distinguishing between the two? And is blameshifting really more deceptive than overselling?

In the dissertation that inspired *Deceit on the Road to War*, I did not distinguish between blameshifting and overselling.³ Rather, I argued that one found elements of both in any case where a democratic leader had incentives to preempt debate surrounding a war. And, indeed, one does find elements of both in the cases featured in the book: World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War.⁴ However, I ultimately concluded

¹ Jonathan D. Caverley, *Democratic Militarism: Voting, Wealth, and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); David Greenberg, *Republic of Spin: An Inside History of the American Presidency* (New York: W.W. Norton 2016); and Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

² While Greenberg wants a sharper distinction drawn between lying and spin, Joshua Rovner feels the terms can be used interchangeably.

³ John M. Schuessler, "Doing Good by Stealth? Democracy, Deception, and the Use of Force" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2007).

⁴ In each case a leader adopted a dominant strategy of blameshifting *or* overselling, complemented by selective use of the other strategy.

that there was a qualitative difference between blameshifting and overselling, as evidenced by the contrast between the World War-II case and the Iraq War case. In the former, President Franklin Roosevelt concluded that no amount of rhetoric on his part could rally a divided country around a declaration of war against Nazi Germany. Thus, he felt he had no choice but to coax events along, with the hope that the public would blame the Axis (and not Roosevelt himself) if matters were brought to a head. In the latter, President George W. Bush was much less coy about his determination to unseat Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, using force if necessary. This was partly because the 9/11 attacks had created a political opening for action against Iraq and partly because the coming war was expected to be quick and easy. Yes, members of the Bush administration did embellish the details of the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)-terror threat, to make it appear more pressing than it was. But they did not have to lay low while waiting for a pretext. The fundamental difference between the cases, in other words, concerns how transparent each leader was about their intention to go to war, with Roosevelt less transparent than Bush on this dimension and thus less deceptive. The blameshifting/overselling distinction, however imperfect, is an attempt to sort this issue out analytically, so that deception is not treated as a constant when there is potentially important variation to explain.

As far as the Vietnam case, I cannot agree with Caverley that President Lyndon Johnson was less transparent than Roosevelt. Indeed, I would argue that Johnson's deceptions were less subtle than Roosevelt's, which makes sense given that he faced a more forgiving political environment in the short term.⁵ More important, though, is that Johnson's political strategy was like Roosevelt's in its fundamentals, which is why I describe it as a (creeping) form of blameshifting. Like Roosevelt, Johnson exploited a series of pretexts to escalate the Vietnam War, all the while denying that a major change in policy was in the offing.

Turning from the dependent variable to a key independent variable, Joshua Rovner asks how domestic opposition should be measured. Most importantly, what threshold of domestic opposition triggers a change from overselling to blameshifting? Domestic opposition, like deception, is a broad concept that makes precise measurement a challenge. In coding cases for the book, I considered political trends at both the mass and elite levels. Public opinion polling was obviously relevant, but so too was grassroots activism, media commentary, legislative activity, and bureaucratic politics. The intent was to capture the myriad indicators that contemporary leaders used to gauge domestic sentiment, as it was their perceptions that ultimately mattered most.⁶ Returning to the contrast between the high-opposition World War II case and the low-opposition Iraq War case is helpful here. In the former, Roosevelt faced an energized anti-interventionist movement, an obstructionist Congress, and a public that could not fully reconcile itself to war. In the latter, there was no equivalent to the anti-interventionist movement; the debate in Congress was relatively subdued; and the public was inclined toward war, albeit with caveats.⁷ It is difficult to specify in the abstract exactly how polarized elite and mass opinion have to become before overselling gives way to blameshifting, but generally the higher the level of contention surrounding a war, the more leaders will be inclined to obscure their intentions and seek out pretexts, lest they court a backlash. The Vietnam-War case, at least, suggests that

⁵ There is something brazen about Johnson's refusal to admit that there was even a debate to be had about Vietnam in 1964-1965. To hear him tell it, he was simply pursuing the same policy as his predecessors.

⁶ See 135, footnote 106.

⁷ Greenberg says that I understate opposition to the Iraq War. Perhaps, but surely it is reasonable to argue that Bush faced a much less contentious political environment in 2002-2003 than Roosevelt did in 1940-1941.

blameshifting will be attractive even when domestic political opposition is more latent than realized, if it threatens to be substantial enough.

Blameshifting and Overselling Redux

Greenberg objects to the use of the term blameshifting to describe Roosevelt's approach toward Nazi Germany before World War II. Does that mean that the United States was more to blame (or as much to blame) as Nazi Germany for the war between them? No, I would not go that far. Nazi Germany triggered World War II as part of a bid for regional hegemony. The United States wanted to stop Nazi Germany short of that goal, which meant intervening in the war once it was clear that front-line allies could not do the job on their own. What Roosevelt obscured was the extent to which he had made a political choice to intervene in the war, as opposed to having his hand forced by events outside his control. This is the sense in which Roosevelt blame-shifted. And while he could be candid about the seriousness of the threat that Nazi Germany posed, as Greenberg alludes to, he was less so about the implications for U.S. policy: the public simply did not want to hear that stopping Nazi Germany meant full entry into the war, which directly shaped Roosevelt's approach.⁸

Rovner, in turn, argues that overselling is more risky than blameshifting. Specifically, overselling is a recipe for overstretch, entrapping leaders in wars whose benefits do not warrant the costs that are ultimately incurred. As evidence, he points to Barack Obama's overheated rhetoric about the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the complications this posed for prudently managing the war in Iraq and Syria and, more broadly, keeping the fight against terrorism within reasonable bounds.

As a general matter, I am not insensitive to the potential for blowback. In the book, I discuss deception as a calculated risk, backfiring in the event that a war goes badly.⁹ I just do not see blowback as a serious problem in the Obama case because he was not among the more egregious oversellers. Rather, he was determined from the beginning to limit liability in the war against ISIS, by making the U.S.'s primary contribution one from the air (with a training and advising effort on the ground). Setting the right rhetorical tone was admittedly tricky. If I had to reach for a historical analogy, I would point to the Korean War, with President Harry Truman having to strike a balance between justifying a limited war while tamping down on escalatory pressures coming from hawks.¹⁰ It is fair to criticize Obama for conceding too much to such pressures at times, but I would argue that he held the line fairly well on ISIS. Certainly Obama's hawkish critics felt he was not bold enough in articulating the stakes in the war against 'radical Islamic terrorism.'

Empirical differences aside, Rovner raises a version of a point that Caverley makes about the Vietnam War, one that poses a challenge to the logic in *Deceit on the Road to War*: if leaders rely on victory to evade accountability for deception, what are we to make of situations where deception itself makes victory less

⁸ Warren F. Kimball, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and World War II," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34:1 (March 2004), 98.

⁹ See 16-17.

¹⁰ Steven Casey, *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion, 1950-1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

likely? In the case of Vietnam, did Johnson's decision to escalate the war by stealth further reduce the odds of an acceptable outcome?¹¹ In the case of the war on terror, has the exaggerated rhetoric surrounding the threat undermined the U.S.'s ability to keep it appropriately limited? These questions remind us that short-term political success and long-term strategic success do not necessarily go together and may sometimes work at cross purposes.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Greenberg wonders whether *Deceit on the Road to War* yields any larger, generalizable claims. He fairly points out that the three case studies involve the United States; that none are instances in which democratic institutions did constrain a president from going to war; and that explicit comparisons are not made with non-democracies. Based on the evidence in the book, one cannot conclude, for example, that deception is a feature of war-making in all democracies; or that leaders are able to circumvent democratic checks and balances in every instance; or that deception is more or less prevalent in democracies than non-democracies. Future research could, of course, shed additional light on these issues.¹² In the meantime, what *does* the book show? Simply put, it demonstrates that in the case of three important wars, presidents were drawn to deception not despite being democratic leaders, but *because* they were democratic leaders; that deception allowed those leaders to solve thorny political problems that otherwise would have bedeviled their efforts to secure broad support for war; and that they largely got away with it, or at least would have gotten away with it if each war had ended in decisive victory. All of this should stir doubt among those who point to the efficient operation of institutional constraints as grounds for larger claims about democratic exceptionalism.

More consequentially, if Caverley and Greenberg are right and the dynamics that I engage with in the book are operative more broadly in U.S. politics, the implications for American democracy are potentially stark. Indeed, I fear that the situation is much worse than we have alluded to thus far. Until recently, I had always assumed that leaders would pay a political price for being exposed telling outright lies. The argument in the book, at least, depends on the marketplace of ideas rewarding at least surface adherence to the truth. Otherwise, why be subtle about one's deceptions? Why go to the effort to blameshift or oversell when one can say anything one pleases without political cost? Donald Trump's presidency forces us to ask whether even a minimal respect for the truth is necessary for political viability.¹³ If we have indeed entered a "post-truth" era,

¹¹ Of course, the issue of whether the United States could have prevailed in Vietnam at any acceptable cost remains highly contested. See Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009).

¹² Interested readers can also consult the excellent scholarship I survey in the concluding chapter of the book, covering topics such as the origins of World War I; Israel and the Suez and Lebanon wars; the politicization of intelligence; counterfeit diplomacy; and covert intervention in the Korean War.

¹³ John Schuessler, "Why Does Donald Trump Have So Much Trouble with the Truth?" *H-Diplo* | ISSF Policy Series, "America and the World—2017 and Beyond" (28 February 2017).

then we may come to look back with nostalgia on the touching care with which leaders like Roosevelt, Johnson, and Bush skirted the facts.¹⁴

¹⁴ As has been widely noted, the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year for 2016 was “post-truth,” an adjective defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” See <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>.