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Do Leaders Matter and How Would We Know?

ROBERT JERVIS

This paper will explore the ambivalence or conflict in the literature about the extent to which leaders matter in international politics, commonly linked to the level-of-analysis question. On the one hand, national leaders are often larger than life figures with strong preferences and distinctive personalities who seem to leave their stamp on events. On the other hand, most IR scholars place great stress on the incentives and constraints posed by the environment, be it domestic or international. I will proceed in four sections. The first discusses the essential claims at stake, the kinds of evidence that could be adduced to support one position or the other, and the pathways by which individual differences can make themselves felt. The second section examines the implications for morality, responsibility, and democratic theory. This discussion too will point to relevant methods, including ones that are contested. I will then turn to post-Cold War American foreign policy, skeptically examine the claim that individual presidents, even George W. Bush, mattered as much as is generally believed and close by discussing the implications for democratic accountability and control.

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The question of the extent to which leaders matter in international politics is as familiar as it is impossible to fully answer.¹ Ambivalence is common and, I believe, appropriate. On the one hand, national leaders are often larger than life figures with strong preferences and distinctive personalities who seem to leave their stamp on events. Who could doubt that the world would have been very different without Woodrow Wilson, Winston Churchill, Josef Stalin, Franklin Roosevelt, Mao Zedong, Richard Nixon, and George W. Bush? On the other hand, most IR scholars place great stress on the incentives and constraints posed by the environment, be it domestic or international. When Harold Macmillan was asked what caused him to alter his policies, he famously replied “events, dear boy, events,” and Abraham Lincoln said “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.”²

An interesting probe would be to write the history of the Cold War without mentioning the name of either side’s leaders and see if a naïve reader could determine when personnel changes occurred. Consistent with arguments that democracies maintain steadier foreign policies than autocracies, I suspect that the changes would be more apparent on the Soviet side than on the American. At the end of this paper I will return to this exercise for post-Cold War American foreign policy, and here would just note the relevant ambivalence. On the one hand, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama are very different people with very different outlooks on the world. Almost all of us felt strongly that these people or their opponents should have been elected president in part because we felt that they would conduct a better foreign policy. On the other hand, the continuities throughout this period are striking, and the changes we find are more a product of the situation than the views of the person in office—or, to put it

¹ It is commonly approached as the “level-of-analysis” question. Systematic exploration began with Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959) who talked about the three “images” of the causes of war. The term “levels of analysis” was coined by J. David Singer in his review of Waltz, “The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations,” *World Politics* 14 (October 1961); for a recent argument that individual differences matter, see Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack, “Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In,” *International Security* 25, no. 4 (Spring 2001): 107–46; and for a good case study see Stephen Benedict Dyson, *The Blair Identity: Leadership and Foreign Policy* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2009).

² There is no original and verified source for this quotation and it may be apocryphal. Robert Harris, “As Macmillan Never Said: That’s Enough Quotations,” *Telegraph*, 4 June 2002, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3577416/As-Macmillan-never-said-thats-enough-quotations.html>; David Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 514. Indeed the study of leadership has fallen out of favor in political science, but for a recent and very interesting study, see Richard Samuels, *Machiavelli’s Children: Leaders and Their Legacies in Italy and Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). A good review of the literature is John Ahlquist and Margaret Levi, “Leadership: What It Means, What It Does, and What We Want to Know About It,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 14 (Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews, 2011), 1–24.

slightly differently, the situation (both domestic and international) may have changed the views of the presidents.

Because these debates tap into deep issues about agency, structure, and human behavior, they are to be found in many disciplines. Psychologists argue about whether situational or dispositional factors are more important in human behavior, and they have found that people are prone to overestimate the degree to which another's actions are to be explained by his or her internal predispositions and underestimate the role of the situation the person is in. Historians make less of a fetish of these theoretical arguments, but in practice enact them in arguments that give greater or lesser weight to individuals and to circumstances. Among political scientists, those who study personality point to the power of individual differences, but those who endorse structural models find this hard to accept. All these debates contain important but often underdeveloped implications for the responsibility that people bear for their actions, as I will discuss below.

I will proceed in four sections. The first discusses the essential claims at stake, the kinds of evidence that could be adduced to support one position or the other, and the pathways by which individual differences can make themselves felt. It unpacks the arguments and focuses on how we come to grips with them. The second section examines the implications for morality, responsibility, and democratic theory. This discussion too will point to relevant methods, including ones that are contested. The third section turns to post-Cold War American foreign policy and skeptically examines the claim that individual presidents, even George W. Bush, mattered as much as is generally believed. Finally, I discuss the implications for democratic accountability and control.

HOW AND WHY DO (AND DON'T) PRESIDENTS MATTER?

The argument that individual leaders do not matter and that the drivers of a state's foreign policy are to be found at the domestic or international level implies one of three things (which could operate in concert). First, all people who might come to power, at least in a particular country at a particular time, have roughly the same values and beliefs. This could be because the country is homogeneous on these dimensions or because those who think differently cannot rise to the top. Societies, of course, are not uniform, but many values and beliefs are widely shared, and people outside the mainstream will not be selected for leadership positions.

Second, leaders might be socialized once they take office. The tendency for people to become captured by the organization they join is well known. It is amazing how quickly leaders who come into a position with a pledge to make fundamental changes learn that the organization's ways of doing things make a great deal of sense. Academics all have seen the changes that

happen to their colleagues who become deans, something that cannot be entirely explained by self-selection. Bureaucracies are intellectually as well as politically powerful and provide the newcomer with information, a view of the world, and a home. This is more true for cabinet officers than for the president, but the White House has its own institutionalized interests and perspectives as well, and so it is not surprising that despite his criticisms of them when he was a candidate, President Obama did not relinquish the executive powers his predecessor had amassed, although he probably would not have expanded them as Bush did had he been president after 9/11.

Third, leaders are constrained. Even if they are not socialized or captured, they are likely to find that their freedom of action is sharply limited. Both the second and the third processes were at work when, two years after he became Dwight Eisenhower's secretary of state, John Foster Dulles responded to the argument for a more aggressive policy, if not preventive war, in the following way (in the words of National Security Council (NSC) minutes):

He could not help but have some sympathy for the general view of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in favor of greater dynamism in the American attitude toward the Soviet Union and Communist China. After all, during the course of the 1952 campaign he had himself called for a more dynamic U.S. policy vis-a-vis Communism. However, experience indicated that it was not easy to go very much beyond the point that this administration had reached in translating a dynamic policy into courses of action. . . .³

Perhaps Dulles should have been embarrassed, but as far as I can tell he was not, although he did claim—incorrectly and half-heartedly—that “in any case we had been more dynamic than our predecessors.” He had simply confronted the facts of international life.

As the Dulles quotation implies, the degree to which there is freedom of choice and room for individual preferences depends in significant measure on how compelling the external environment is. To use Arnold Wolfers' analogy, if the house is on fire we do not have to know anything about the individuals in it to predict that they will rush for the exits.⁴ But there are problems with this simple truth. While people may not only say but believe that they lack agency in order to politically and psychologically distance themselves from the unpleasant behavior they are undertaking, a

³ Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954*, vol. 2, *National Security Affairs*, pt. 1, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1984), 833.

⁴ Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), 13. For evidence that differences in perceptions among decision makers decreased as tensions increased, see Ole Holsti, “Individual Differences in ‘Definition of the Situation,’ ” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 14, no. 3 (September 1970): 303–10. For a different kind of argument about the role of context, see Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to George Bush* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

different person might have responded differently. Related, how compelling the environment is can be in the eye of the beholder, which makes this proposition dangerously circular: when the situation is compelling, people will behave in the same way, and we know the situation is compelling because people with different predispositions behave the same way. Even though some situations may seem objectively clearer than others, and most would agree that the current era offers American leaders much greater leeway than did the Cold War, the fact that the terms *hawks* and *doves* were coined in that period reminds us that agreement that the situation was grave did not preclude strong differences on what should be done. Nevertheless, not all situations are created equal. Not all people are either, and where one person might feel trapped another could see room for choice. There is an interaction between individuating and circumstantial factors.⁵ Andrew Polsky argues that at the start of a war presidents, and presumably leaders of other countries, have a fairly brief window to direct broad policy, and after that their room to maneuver drastically shrinks.⁶

Sometimes continuity is produced by opportunity as well as constraint. Part of Barack Obama's campaign platform was that he would roll back the expansion of presidential power that had taken place under Bush. Presidential signing statements that declared some part of laws unconstitutional and not binding, infringements on civil liberties in the name of keeping the country safe, the use of government power to keep information from courts, and other abuses were to be foresworn. Although it may be dismaying to some of us because of our political views, as political scientists we should not have been surprised that once in office Obama found that these tools were too alluring to renounce. Presidents like presidential power no matter what their personal preferences.

Some foreign policy opportunities seem too good to pass up as well. Again Obama provides an example, albeit a less clear-cut one. Because he was sharply critical of the invasion of Iraq, it appears that Obama's general predilections were against intervening except where it was necessary to fight terrorism. Yet the Libyan case seemed too tempting to resist: not only was there some (overstated, I believe) danger of a massacre, but intervention was supported by the Arab League and the UN, and most of the work was to be done by Britain and France. If he had been a really committed anti-interventionist he probably would have resisted, but people of a wide

⁵ For a brief but suggestive discussion of this question, see James Rosenau, "Pre-Theories and the Theories of Foreign Policy," in *Approaches to Comparative and International Politics*, ed. R. Barry Farrell (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 47–48.

⁶ Andrew Polsky, *Elusive Victories: The American Presidency at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); for instances in which a powerful leader chose not to act in a way that might have altered the situation, see Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 361, 364–65.

range of views would see Libya as an atypical case that merited military action.⁷

Differences and Discontinuities

The basic way we try to determine whether the identity of the president or any other leader matters is by using comparisons and counterfactuals. With the former we try to see if different leaders or different kinds of leaders follow different policies in similar circumstances, and whether the same person or similar people behave in ways that are consistent over time, especially when the context changes. This is not easy in practice, of course. It is hard to determine whether the situation is different and, less remarked upon, it is difficult to be sure that a particular kind of situation is not responsible for the rise of a particular kind of leader. Methodologically, the deaths of leaders (especially from natural causes) are a godsend because they usually eliminate this possibility of endogeneity.⁸ Very close elections (2000 is the obvious one) are also useful in this regard. When a new president comes to power with greater support and changes the previous policy, however, this may reflect an alteration of the external environment or changed domestic interests and outlooks as well as that new president's preferences.⁹ The president may be more a carrier of these forces than an independent causal factor. But when a leader comes to power through an accident or what comes as close as we can get to a random assignment, we are on firmer ground in attributing changed policies to factors we can associate with that president.

This is firmer, but not entirely firm. No matter how presidents come into office, if their predecessor was popular, they may have to continue his or her policies, at least for a while. If their predecessor was unpopular, leaders may need to institute changes even if they would prefer not to. Most newly elected presidents want to differentiate themselves from their successors. If George W. Bush was a bit extreme in his commitment to follow the ABC rule

⁷ Robert Pape, "When Duty Calls: A Pragmatic Standard of Humanitarian Intervention," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 41–80.

⁸ For an example, see Benjamin Jones and Benjamin Olken, "Hit or Miss? The Effects of Assassination on Institutions and War," *American Economic Journal* 1, no. 2 (July 2009): 55–87. I am grateful to Elizabeth Saunders for this citation. For attempts to deal with endogeneity in the context of determining the efficacy of the strategy of killing leaders of insurgencies, see Bryan Price "Targeting Top Terrorists: How Leadership Decapitation Contributes to Counterterrorism," *International Security* 4, no. 36 (Spring 2012): 9–46 and Patrick Johnston, "Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns," *International Security* 4, no. 36 (Spring 2012): 47–79.

⁹ Much of the political economy literature can be read in this way. See, for example, Peter Trubowitz, *Defining the National Interest: Conflict and Change in American Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Benjamin Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus: The Political Economy of U.S. National Security Policy, 1946–1951* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); and, for grander but flawed claims, Mark Brawley, *Liberal Leadership: Great Powers and Their Challengers in Peace and War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

(Anything But what Clinton did), the impulse is a common one. Furthermore, the transition itself is a cause to be reckoned with. It takes any administration at least a year to find its legs, and this period is almost always rocky. To the obvious examples of the Bay of Pigs and John F. Kennedy's performance at the Vienna Summit meeting, we can add Bush's flirtation with extending an unambiguous deterrent umbrella over a Taiwan that could move toward independence (quite contrary to what he did when he had more experience) and Obama's demanding that Israel impose a complete freeze on the settlements to start negotiation with the Palestinians.¹⁰ These rookie errors plague every administration. Even the Eisenhower administration, which was well-organized and had an experienced team, floundered when Stalin died three months after it took office.

We can also look for discontinuities, not between presidents, but between their views and those of their advisors. At first glance, this seems close to a smoking gun—many people want to do one thing, but the president decides to do another. There are cases like this, including ones in which the president seems to act on gut instinct, as Deborah Larson argues was true of Harry Truman in the decision to stay in Berlin in the face of the Soviet blockade and, in parallel, when he refused to forcibly repatriate Chinese and North Korean POWs even though doing so could have ended the Korean War (and greatly increased the chance that a Democrat would be elected in 1952).¹¹ But, good as this evidence is, it is not perfect. Even when presidents do not have more and different information than their colleagues, they hold a different position and feel different pressures. Especially when they know that the final decision is the president's, advisors have more freedom in what they advocate. It is far from certain that a secretary of state who calls for one course of action would take the same advice if he or she were president. Role rather than individual difference can explain the discrepancies.

Continuities speak against individual differences, but sometimes they can mask the deep impact of the policy a president adopted and that others at the time would not have. One does not have to endorse an extreme version of path-dependence to argue that there are turning points or windows of opportunity when a situation is in flux. How the state acts then can have great influence for years to come, making it difficult to move off this track in subsequent years. One possible—and debatable—example is Bush's refusal to explore the possible feeler from Iran in late 2002 to negotiate the fundamental issues between the two countries, especially Iran's nuclear program.

¹⁰ A thorough and fascinating discussion of the Bay of Pigs decision-making is Piero Gleijeses, "Ships Passing in the Night: The CIA, the White House and the Bay of Pigs," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27, no. 1 (February 1995): 1–42.

¹¹ Deborah Larson, "Truman and the Berlin Blockade: The Role of Intuition and Experience in Good Foreign Policy Judgment," in *Good Judgment in Foreign Policy: Theory and Application*, eds., Stanley Renshon and Deborah Larson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 127–52; Larson, "The Origins of Commitment: Truman and West Berlin," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 180–212.

If we assume for the sake of argument that this was a genuine overture, rejecting it may well have confirmed Iran's leaders in their fears that the United States would settle for nothing less than regime change and that it was imperative to resume the quest for the capability to produce nuclear weapons as soon as it was safe to do so. While the inability of the Obama administration to reach an agreement with Iran and its decision instead to ratchet up the sanctions may at first glance seem to illustrate the power of the external environment, if this story is correct, the environment was decisively influenced by what Bush had done, and another president might have acted in a way that would have set US policy and relations with Iran on quite a different path.

Of course none of these comparisons will be perfect, and the number of them that are most appropriate will remain small. So we can also use counterfactuals, although the rules of this game are easy to dispute.¹² Nevertheless, the claim that the characteristics of an individual leader matter implies that the state's policy would have been significantly different had someone of different characteristics been in power. This is always true if we make an extreme mental substitute—had Adolf Hitler been president, American foreign policy would have been enormously different. But this could not occur unless the United States had been transformed into a fundamentally different country. More illuminating counterfactuals would replace a president with one of his or her main challengers or with someone who was a plausible candidate but chose not to run.¹³ During the Cold War the range of foreign policy views that a person who might be elected to office could hold was narrower than it is now, but even in the previous period temperaments and styles could vary considerably. Thus it could be argued that the Cuban Missile Crisis might have ended in war had Nixon been president (assuming that Fidel Castro still would have been in power in 1962—i.e., that Nixon would not have carried out a successful invasion of the island—and that Khrushchev would have enacted the same policy) because he was more headstrong than Kennedy. More obviously, but still debatably, had Kennedy not been assassinated, his distrust of the military might have led him to reject the advice to fight in Vietnam.

¹² The relevant literature is very large. See, for example, James Fearon, "Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science," *World Politics* 43, no. 2 (January 1991); George Breslauer and Aaron Belkin, eds., *Counterfactuals in World Politics: Logical, Methodological, and Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Richard Ned Lebow, *Forbidden Fruit: Counterfactuals and International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Jack Levy, "Counterfactuals and Case Studies," in *Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*, ed., Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Henry Brady, and David Collier (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 627–44.

¹³ In other words, to be useful counterfactuals should be plausible and should rewrite history as little as possible. An excellent analysis that turns this method around and asks what would have had to have been different for World War I to have been avoided is Paul Schroeder, *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft: Essays on the International History of Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), chap. 8.

Mechanisms

The identity of the president can matter through four main channels or mechanisms. To start with, policy can reflect the outlook, values, and beliefs of a president that result in preferences that, if not unique to him, at least are different from those of others who had been or could be president. Second, presidents, like the rest of us, presumably have distinctive personalities and styles that can affect behavior.¹⁴ In some cases, of course, these can be closely linked to preferences. But this need not be the case, just as in everyday life knowing that a person is agreeable or compulsive may not tell us much about the substance of that person's views. Third, presidents vary in their political style and skill, which in turn influences their ability to mobilize support for their policies (and also affects their chances of being reelected). Fourth, less obviously and probably less importantly, different presidents generate different environments. My discussion will proceed in reverse order.

Different presidents face different domestic and international landscapes by virtue of who they succeed, what their domestic bases are, and how they are viewed by other countries. The basic points are well known even if we tend to overlook them when we focus on why and how presidents matter. Much is summed up in the phrase "Only Nixon could go to China." The fact that Nixon was seen as such a staunch anti-communist gave him the freedom to lead a rapprochement with the People's Republic of China (PRC), essentially selling out Taiwan in the way that no Democrat could have. Conversely, because in the 2008 campaign Obama criticized Bush over Iraq, he had to bolster his national security bona fides by calling Afghanistan "the necessary war" and pledging a greater effort there. But if presidents have some freedom and even incentives to play against type, they cannot afford to leave their bases too far behind. Nixon shrewdly calculated that by 1971 the "China Lobby" was a mere shadow of its former self; had he been elected in 1960, it is doubtful that he could have performed the same maneuver.

¹⁴ In the past few years scholars have paid increasing attention to the impact on political views of the "Big Five" dimensions of personality (openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability). See for example Jeffery Mondak, *Personality and the Foundations of Political Behavior* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Alan Gerber, Gregory Huber, David Doherty, and Conor Dowling, "The Big Five Personality Traits in the Political Arena," *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 14 (Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews, 2011), 265–87; Dana Carney, John Jost, Sammy Gosling, and Jeff Potter, "The Secret Lives of Liberals and Conservatives: Personality Profiles, Interaction Styles, and the Things They Leave Behind," *Political Psychology* 29, no. 6 (December 2008): 807–40. The classic study of the lines of division on foreign policy in the general public is Ole Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004). Holsti and James Rosenau authored a series of studies of elite opinion. See, for example, Holsti and Rosenau, "The Political Foundations of Elites' Domestic and Foreign Policy Beliefs," in *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy*, ed., Eugene Wittkopf and James McCormick (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 33–50; "Liberals, Populists, Libertarians and Conservatives: The Link Between Domestic and International Affairs," *International Political Science Review* 17, no. 1 (January 1996): 29–55; and *American Leadership in World Affairs: Vietnam and the Breakdown of Consensus* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1984).

A president's base can constrain him, and while Obama has disappointed his supporters in many ways, I think he would have found it harder than John McCain to leave a large residual force in Iraq—and indeed the other disappointments with him made it especially hard for him to do so.

International audiences can also view different presidents differently, presenting them with different opportunities and dangers. Obama certainly gained by being the non-Bush and could assert at least some leadership because of this. Many leaders who had opposed Bush not only wanted Obama to succeed, but wanted to be seen as helping him, in part because they needed to show that their previous stance was not a reflection of being anti-American. The result was to allow Obama to take a new path without being accused of giving in to foreign pressure, and this possibility would have been open for any new president. This means that to assert that different presidents follow different policies is not the same as to claim that the explanation lies in their personal characteristics and preferences.

The next carrier of consequential individual difference is political skill, about which it is difficult to theorize.¹⁵ Here we would find skillful presidents differing from less skillful ones not in the content of their policies, but in their ability to get what they want through their gift for reading the domestic political currents, appealing to public opinion, and maintaining coalitions. Related, some presidents are better at using the machinery of government than others. These people will suffer less from the slings and arrows of outrageous bureaucracy, thwarting the tendency for departments to implement the president's policies in ways that they want, but the president does not want, curbing the unruly and disruptive ambitions of cabinet officers, and drawing the best from the government in terms of information and options. A different kind of skill was displayed by Winston Churchill, whose most important contribution to victory in World War II may have been less the policy decisions he made (with the exception of convincing his colleagues to reject peace overtures in the wake of the fall of France) than it was in his fierce and unflagging determination that inspired the British government, armed forces, and nation. In a parallel fashion, the assassination of the chair of the Afghanistan's High Peace Council, Burhanuddin Rabbani, in September 2011 had deleterious effects not because of his preferences, but because of his unique connections throughout the contesting Afghan factions. Returning to a president, Jimmy Carter's self-righteousness may have both impelled him to try tasks like bringing peace to the Middle East that would have daunted more sensible people and harmed him by alienating some of those with whom he had to work. But evidence is difficult here. Although any book

¹⁵ The classic treatment is Richard Neustadt, *President Power: The Politics of Leadership from FDR to Carter* (New York: Wiley, 1980); also see Eugene Bardach, *The Skill Factor in Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); Mark Schafer and Scott Crichlow, *Groupthink Versus High-Quality Decision-Making in International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

about a particular president will comment on his strengths and weaknesses as a political leader, often the reasoning is circular: it is obvious that Carter had little skill because so much of his program failed and he was defeated for reelection; Lyndon Johnson's legislative successes attest to his skill within the government, but the steady increase in opposition to the war in Vietnam shows his inability to operate well with mass opinion. Causal inferences are also complicated by the possibility of anticipated reactions as less skillful presidents feel greater pressures to adopt policies they expect to be popular because if they understand their own limits, they will see that they could not get the country to follow any other course of action.

We usually expect a skill that is consistently displayed in one area to be found in others as well. But sometimes this is not the case, perhaps for psycho-dynamic reasons. Thus Otto von Bismarck was an outstanding diplomat in part because of his great ability to discern how others would react to what Prussia, and then Germany, would do. But in domestic politics and, even more so, personal relations, he was obtuse.¹⁶

There are many more studies of presidents' personalities. Although these may on occasion be systematically linked to preferences (e.g., a belligerent person may favor belligerent foreign policies),¹⁷ more often the dependent variable is less the content of the policy than the way in which it is reached and the president's general orientation toward his job and the world. These studies can be of an individual, gaining their explanatory power through showing patterns that persist throughout the president's career, bolstered by analyses of why this pattern arose and the psychological needs it met, or they can locate patterns across presidents who share certain characteristics, especially in terms of having egos damaged in specified ways. Thus Alexander George and Juliette George argue that Wilson would dig in his heels when challenged in an area that he believed fell within his core competence and that this explains his self-defeating stubbornness in the fight over ratification of the League Covenant, and Jonathan Steinberg argues that because of their childhoods, Johnson and Nixon, but not Eisenhower, had a pathological fear of being humiliated, and this explains why the former two but not the latter were trapped in Vietnam.¹⁸ More generally, James David Barber categorized

¹⁶ See Steinberg, *Bismarck*, 469. He attributes this and, more substantively, Bismarck's unwillingness to share power to his conception of a "sovereign self" that in part grew out of "the agony of his childhood, the little boy at the point of upside-down triangle and at the mercy of the struggle between the threatening woman and the weak man," a configuration that was recapitulated in his dependence on King and then Kaiser William I, who was both weak and the ultimate source of Bismarck's power.

¹⁷ See, for example, Lloyd Etheredge, *A World of Men: The Private Sources of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978).

¹⁸ 1 Alexander George and Juliette George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study* (New York: John Day, 1956); Blema Steinburg, *Shame and Humiliation: Presidential Decision Making on Vietnam* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996) (but for the argument that Eisenhower did want to intervene, see Fredrik Logvall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), 420–504). For a good argument that we probably can find

presidents by whether their coping styles were active or passive and whether they had a positive or negative orientation toward the office.¹⁹

Presidents, like ordinary people, differ on such traits as impulsiveness, tolerance for ambiguity, willingness (and even desire) to hear conflicting views, stubbornness, and, what is perhaps a cause of some of these, personal security or insecurity. Psychologists have explored the ways and extent to which characteristics like these are linked to basic political attitudes, especially along the liberal-conservative spectrum, although we should be a bit careful because the results that flatter liberals are produced by a discipline heavily populated by liberals. Nevertheless, the findings are at least suggestive and while they do not directly bear on foreign policy, there do seem to be links between a more closed intellectual style and a predisposition toward tough measures and the use of force.²⁰ Indeed, folk wisdom on both the left and right agrees here, although it puts a different evaluation on the description. Liberals say that contemplative leaders are more likely to be able to find peaceful ways to resolve conflict, while conservatives say that those who seem open-minded simply lack the stomach for standing up for their country's rights. Solid data is scarce, however, and it is not clear how much evidence from survey data would tell us about such links in the beliefs and behavior of the highly selected group of people who become national leaders.

Trust, assuming it is a stable characteristic that acts across domains, can have a more straightforward impact on policies. Presidents who are more trusting will be willing to enter into more and riskier agreements than will those who are low on this dimension. They will place a higher likelihood on others cooperating and will accept arrangements in which reciprocity is delayed and inexact, in part out of the belief that the other will see the long-run advantages of a sustained relationship. Inspection and verification will

patterns, but that tracing them to childhood experiences is usually beyond our reach, see Philip Tetlock, Faye Crosby, and Travis Crosby, "Political Psychobiography," *Micropolitics* 1, no. 2 (1981): 191–213.

¹⁹ James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972); for a vigorous critique of this book, see Alexander George, "Assessing Presidential Character," *World Politics* 26, no. 2 (January 1974): 234–82. Also see Fred Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to George W. Bush* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Robert Dallek, *Hail to the Chief: The Making and Unmaking of American Presidents* (New York: Hyperion, 1996); Dean Simonton, "Presidential IQ, Openness, Intellectual Brilliance, and Leadership," *Political Psychology* 27, no. 4 (August 2006): 511–26. The role of emotion in determining a person's style is generally neglected, although it is implicit in Barber's formulation. For interesting studies of emotion in this context, see Barbara Keys, "Henry Kissinger: The Emotional Statesmen," *Diplomatic History* 35, no. 4 (September 2011): 587–610; Frank Costigliola, "Broken Circle, The Isolation of Franklin D. Roosevelt in World War II," *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 5 (November 2008): 677–718; Frank Costigliola, *Roosevelt's Lost Alliance's* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012). On links between style and the way presidents have organized the foreign policy process, see Thomas Preston, *The President and His Inner Circle: Leadership Style and the Advisory Process in Foreign Affairs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

²⁰ For a summary, see John Jost, Christopher Federico, and Jaime Napier, "Political Ideology: Its Structure, Functions, and Elective Affinities," *Annual Review of Psychology* 60 (2009): 318–19.

not be neglected, but are not likely to be seen as insurmountable barriers, and multilateral endeavors will be seen as advantageous and possible. It would seem that trust and liberalism would be at least weakly correlated, but this might be a function not of underlying orientations, but of the context of post-World War II international politics.²¹

The most common approach here is to ask whether presidents have different, deep, and consistent preferences that deeply affect their responses to particular events. In their strongest form, we can ask about their ideologies.²² Of course our normal left-right spectrum does not directly apply to foreign policy, although there may be some correlations. Various typologies have been offered, and for recent presidents we would be concerned with dimensions like multilateralism versus unilateralism, isolationism versus involvement throughout the world, broad or narrow conceptions of national interest, belligerence, and the propensity to use force versus a more conciliatory outlook (or, in parallel, dispositions to see situations as resembling a security dilemma/prisoner's dilemma or as ones that require deterrence if not force)—dimensions which have some overlap with each other—and perhaps with trust.

Although it would be an exaggeration to say that everyone is born into this world a little hawk or a little dove, whether because of personality characteristics or lessons learned about politics, political leaders do vary in their predispositions to see foreign threats and the propensity to believe that they require a forceful if not forcible response. It is not likely to be an accident that most of those who believed that deterrence and arms build-ups were necessary to cope with the Soviet threat also believed that the post-Cold War world was filled with latent nemesis, and that after September 11, 2001 these people saw terrorism as an enormous threat, one that required a war. In parallel, most of those who thought that the Cold War, at least by the 1980s, was in large measure a security dilemma also believed that the United States confronted few security threats after the Soviet Union disintegrated, did not greatly worry about a resurgent Russia, thought that the rise of China could be best coped with by conciliation, and in the wake of 9/11 not only opposed the war in Iraq, but felt that the threat from terrorism was being exaggerated and would be best countered by police and sharply focused

²¹ Brian Rathbun, "The 'Magnificent Fraud': Trust, International Cooperation, and the Hidden Domestic Politics of American Multilateralism after World War II," *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (March 2011): 1–22; Paul Brewer et al. "International Trust and Public Opinion About World Affairs," *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 1 (January 2004): 83–109; Paul Brewer and Marco Steenbergen, "All Against All: How Beliefs about Human Nature Shape Foreign Policy Opinions," *Political Psychology* 23, no. 1 (March 2002): 39–58; Kevin Binning, "It's Us Against the World: How Distrust in Americans Versus People-In-General Shapes Competitive Foreign Policy Preferences," *Political Psychology* 28, no. 6 (December 2007): 777–99; Eric Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²² For a good recent study of the role of ideologies in mass political opinion, see Jost, Federico, and Napier, "Political Ideology," 307–37.

intelligence operations. There are few logical links here, which means that it is more a psychological predisposition than a clear theory of how the world works that links these preferences. Perhaps past fear of the Soviet Union and the belief that Islamic terrorism is a fundamental challenge are part of an underlying belief in the power of ideology or a focus on troubling transitions to modernity,²³ but the former could not explain why China or Russia would be seen as likely to use force to change the status quo, and the latter would lead to fear of many countries.

A parallel difference stems from the fact that levels of analysis not only is employed in academic papers, but is part of the mental furniture of many leaders.²⁴ That is, they differ in the causal weight they place on the characteristics of individual leaders, the domestic sources of foreign policy, and the external environment. Realists stress the latter, but this cuts against the grain of many Americans, members of the general public, and leaders alike. Ronald Reagan believed that the Soviet Union was much less of a menace once it moved toward becoming more pluralistic; George W. Bush and many of his colleagues believed that if countries in the Middle East became more democratic, they would adopt more benign foreign policies. Elizabeth Saunders shows that how and where American presidents intervene abroad is strongly influenced by their beliefs about whether and how domestic arrangements shape others' foreign policy. This crosscuts many of our standard categorizations as it groups together Eisenhower and Johnson as externally focused leaders who, while caring about whether other countries were about to "go communist," did not view other variations in domestic arrangements as a source of threat or believe that domestic reforms were essential to stability, in contrast to internally focused leaders like Kennedy who were more finely attuned to others' domestic regimes and who saw internal reforms as important.²⁵

These arguments have to show that the resulting beliefs were powerful and autonomous. Powerful in the sense that they were consistent with the behavior and inconsistent with most alternative courses of action; autonomous in that they were long-standing rather than being merely the product of the immediate international or domestic situation. In other words, we need to try to establish causation and rule out the counter-claim that the beliefs are mere window dressing or rationalizations by looking for consistency and showing

²³ Adam Ulam, *The Unfinished Revolution: An Essay on the Sources of Influence of Marxism and Communism* (New York: Random House, 1960).

²⁴ Anthony D'Amato, "Psychological Constructs in Foreign Policy Prediction," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 11 (September 1967): 294–311.

²⁵ Elizabeth Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011). For an argument that uses a different approach but also stresses the importance of individual presidents in decisions to intervention, see Michael Groh, *us Presidents and Latin American Interventions: Pursuing Regime Change in the Cold War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

that the beliefs were formed before the behavior we are seeking to explain. Careful biographies seek to do this, although there is the obvious danger that the author's treatment of the earlier beliefs will be influenced by his or her knowledge of the later behavior. Quantitative studies of a president's operational code or personal needs similarly use material written before he became president.²⁶ In the same way, some studies examine the integrative complexity of leaders' speeches early in their careers and find connections to later behavior.²⁷ Many observers were puzzled when President Reagan was quicker than his advisors to reach out to Mikhail Gorbachev and seriously explore far-reaching arms agreements because he seemed at least as hard-line as they were. Keith Shimko unravels the puzzle by demonstrating that years before Gorbachev came to power, Reagan's belief system was much more open to the possibility of Soviet-American cooperation than were those of his advisors.²⁸

One might expect those presidents who have had the most foreign policy experience to have the most developed and strongest worldviews that would leave the strongest imprint on their policies when they took office. But it is also possible that an inexperienced president (e.g., George W. Bush) could be strongly moved by a few basic instincts, such as the duty to try to spread democracy abroad. Indeed, as Bush may exemplify, preferences can be both ad hoc and powerful. This is likely to be more difficult to demonstrate, however. With a well-formed ideology, one can show that the

²⁶ See, for example, Alexander George, "The 'Operational Code': A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision Making," *International Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (June 1969): 190–222; Ole Holsti, "The 'Operational Code' Approach to the Study of Political Leaders: John Foster Dulles's Philosophical and Instrumental Beliefs," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 3, no. 1 (March 1970): 123–57. Also see Richard Hermann and Michael Fischerkeller, "Beyond the Enemy Image and Spiral Model: Cognitive-Strategic Research after the Cold War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 415–50. Stephen Walker and Mark Schafer, "Belief Systems as Casual Mechanisms: An Overview of Operational Code Analysis," in *Beliefs and Leadership in World Politics: Methods and Applications for Operational Code Analysis*, ed., Mark Schafer and Stephen Walker (New York: Palgrave, 2006); Walker, Schafer, and Michael Young, "Systematic Procedures for Operational Code Analysis: Measuring and Modeling Jimmy Carter's Operational Code," *International Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (March 1998): 175–90. On needs, see David Winter, "Personality and Political Behavior," in *Oxford and Book of Political Psychology*, ed., David Sears, Leonie Huddy, and Robert Jervis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 110–34; David Winter, "Power, Affiliation, and War: Three Tests of a Motivated Model," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65, no. 3 (September 1993): 532–45. Also see Margaret Hermann, "Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior Using the Personal Characteristics of Political Leaders," *International Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (March 1980): 7–46; Margaret Hermann, Thomas Preston, Baghat Korany, and Timothy Shaw, "Who Leads Matters: The Effects of Powerful Individuals," *International Studies Review* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 83–132.

²⁷ Philip Tetlock, "Cognitive Style and Political Ideology," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45, no. 1 (July 1983): 118–26; Tetlock, "Monitoring the Integrative Complexity of American and Soviet Policy Rhetoric: What Can Be Learned?" *Journal of Social Issues* 44, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 101–31; for an extension of this approach see Tetlock, "A Value Pluralism Model of Ideological Reasoning," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50, no. 4 (April 1986): 819–27.

²⁸ Keith Shimko, *Images and Arms Control: Perceptions of the Soviet Union in the Reagan Administration* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

policy was consistent with the beliefs that had been formed earlier, and that it was inconsistent with contrary beliefs. We could also demonstrate that people with the same ideology supported the same policies. But with ad hoc preferences the danger of spuriousness is likely to be greater because it will be harder to rule out a possibility that both the belief and the policy were the product of some exogenous event, such as the attacks of 9/11.

A good example is provided by Fredrik Logvall's recent argument that president Eisenhower wanted to intervene to save the French position at Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam in 1954 and did not do so only because even strenuous efforts could not overcome allied and congressional opposition.²⁹ This view clashes not only with much previous scholarship on the question, but also, more importantly for our purposes here, with the prevailing view of Eisenhower as cautious in foreign policy and, more than his predecessor and successors, loath to see American soldiers engaged in combat. This does not mean that either is wrong, but if we accept both of them we have to see Eisenhower's stance here as an anomaly. This in itself is not a problem—it might be helpful to us as scholars if leaders always were consistent, but the world does not have to conform to our convenience. It does make it harder to establish causation, however, because we cannot demonstrate that his preferences were consistent with the outlook he held throughout most of his life. But neither does it mean that we can automatically attribute them entirely to the external pressures that he felt because this would require showing that others would have reached the same conclusion, an argument that is rendered suspect by the widespread opposition in Congress (and, to a lesser extent, within the executive branch) to intervention.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The way we answer the level-of-analysis question has important implications for whether—or rather in what sense—we regard individuals as responsible for their behavior. If a president decides on a certain policy, in one obvious sense we can say that he is responsible for it. But does this mean that he deserves credit or blame? What if we can show, or at least argue, that other leaders would have done the same thing had they been in power? This would mean that causation resided on a different level of analysis and that while the policy may have mattered, who was president did not.³⁰ Why praise or blame the president when anyone else would have done the same thing?

²⁹ Logvall, *Embers of War*, 420–504.

³⁰ For the differentiation between actor dispensability and action dispensability see Fred Greenstein, *Personality and Politics* (Chicago: Markham, 1969), chap. 1. Here I will concentrate on the former. For a further discussion in terms of necessary and sufficient causes, see Robert Jervis, "Causation and Responsibility in a Complex World," in *Back to Basics: State Power in the Current World*, ed., Martha Finnemore and Judith Goldstein (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

While it would not be right to say that he was not responsible for his own actions, neither would it be correct to say that he made a difference.

I want to explore these questions by looking at some of President Truman's key decisions in 1945 and 1946 since they raise important questions of morality as well as causation. His decision to use atomic bombs against Japan and his rigid position on the conditions under which these weapons would be put under international control have been the subject of heated debates. To start with the former, the two obvious and somewhat related questions are whether his actions were morally justified and whether his main motive was to end the Pacific War or to intimidate the Soviet Union. Most of the discussion is conducted by historians, and true to the strengths and weakness of their approach focuses in great detail on what Truman heard and believed. This makes intuitive sense: the decision was Truman's and to understand it we must look at what information he had and sought, who he consulted, how he went about deliberating, and the considerations that seemed to weigh on him. But while such an approach can describe how the decision was made, it cannot establish causation. For this, we need to look at changes over time and, even more, at comparisons to other people and other situations. At first glance this seems to strengthen the case that Truman mattered because some other American decision makers and many scientists opposed dropping the bomb on a Japanese city without warning, and it is particularly telling that those who opposed Truman's decision did not perceive a Soviet threat. But the comparisons are not entirely apt because the advisors, and especially the scientists, were not responsible for preserving American lives. This is not to say that they were callous or did not care, but only that this consideration was not as salient to them as it was to Truman, and I believe as it would have been to any American president. Furthermore, the views of the scientists, and of at least some of the advisors, would have disqualified them from higher offices.

A related approach is to look at Truman's decision in the light of an important historic generalization. Do countries ever refrain from using very powerful and destructive weapons when the costs of doing so are low? The only case I can think of is the American decision not to use poison gas to take Okinawa, when there was no danger of enemy retaliation. If this is correct, then it is clear that the desire to intimidate the Soviets was not a necessary condition for dropping the bomb. Of course this does not mean that this motive was not present, or even that it alone would not have been sufficient. But it does mean that we cannot use Truman's decision and the associated claim that the loss of Japanese life was not worth the gain in terms of ending the war quickly as evidence that Truman was anti-Soviet. The moral objection also does not disappear but is recast. The fact—assuming that it is a fact—that all leaders would have behaved in the same way does not make the behavior moral. One can argue that it is immoral to value the lives of one's own soldiers so much more than the other side's soldiers and

citizens,³¹ but it is hard to see Truman (or the United States) as particularly immoral. Truman may have committed a grave sin, but we are all sinners. If he is damned while we are not, it is only because of his position.³²

A parallel argument can be made about Roosevelt's and Truman's failure to share the secret of the bomb with Stalin and Truman's associated refusal to compromise in order to reach an agreement for the control of atomic weapons. Even leaving aside the difficult question of whether Stalin ever would have agreed (which I very much doubt), we can ask whether any other leader or country had ever given up such a perceived military advantage. A reply in the negative does not mean that Truman's stance was in the best interests of the world or even of the United States. One could argue either that other leaders should have reached arms control agreements in other eras or that nuclear weapons were of such unprecedented destructiveness that Truman should have broken the pattern and done so. But the latter position, which I think is quite reasonable, implies that it would have taken an extraordinary leader to have taken this path. Truman can be condemned for not having been such a person, but his behavior cannot be explained by preferences or characteristics that are unique to him or even unusual. Although he may have been parochial or rabidly anti-communist, these factors were not necessary for the policy.

A final bit of comparative evidence indicates some of the methodological difficulties. At first glance, my position is bolstered by the fact that Churchill strenuously opposed sharing information with Stalin, agreed that the bombs should be dropped on Japan, and that his successor Clement Attlee did not take a different position on the control of nuclear weapons. But Churchill's stance, especially on dropping the bomb, may have derived from his desire to please the United States rather than being an independent judgment,³³ and with the United States reneging on its agreement to maintain atomic cooperation with Great Britain, Attlee was in no position to further annoy the United States.

The dispute over Truman's decision to use atomic bombs also points to strong linkages between judgments about individual cases and broader (and often deeply held) theories. When Gar Alperovitz seized scholarly attention by claiming that Truman sought to intimidate the Soviet Union and that his policy was a sharp break from Roosevelt's, objections were not long in

³¹ This leaves aside the argument that dropping the bomb saved countless lives of Chinese citizens as well as Japanese who would have died from prolonged conventional bombing or been starved by a continuation of the American blockade.

³² A Maryland judge explained his light sentence to a man who killed his wife after coming home unexpectedly and finding her in bed with another man by saying: "I seriously wonder how many men married, five, four years would have the strength to walk away without inflicting some corporal punishment." "Punishment Is 18 Months For Killing Cheating Wife," *New York Times*, 19 October 1994. But this was almost a generation ago in a less enlightened era.

³³ Jacques Hymans, "Britain and Hiroshima," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32, no. 5 (October 2009): 769–97.

coming.³⁴ Most obviously, those who held to the traditional view of the Cold War rejected his thesis (and his scholarship, which indeed was badly flawed). It is not that they had any particular reason to disagree with his focus on Truman and his advisors. Indeed, many of them blamed Truman for other things—especially for being too slow to recognize Soviet aggressiveness. Rather, because they saw the Soviet Union as being driven by the internal impulse to wage the Cold War, they not only denied, but had to deny, that Truman's dropping the bomb was responsible for this conflict. Although the claim that Truman was strongly and indeed provocatively anti-Soviet does not logically imply that Stalin was willing to settle for the status quo, because it undermines the argument that it was Stalin who made the first moves and that American hostility was the result rather than the cause of Soviet actions, it called for rebuttals. It made sense for traditionalists to pay less attention to Gar Alperovitz's argument that Truman broke sharply with FDR's stance because the truth or falsity of this claim did not affect the central tenets of their beliefs about the United States, the USSR, or the Cold War.

But it did go to the heart of the views of most Cold War revisionists, and this accounts for the vehemence with which they turned on Alperovitz.³⁵ For them what was objectionable was the attribution of responsibility to an individual leader because this contradicted their broadly Marxist argument that the causes of American foreign policy in this as in other incidents lay in the requirements of the American capitalist economy. If it was the case that the health of the capitalist system required that societies founded on different principles be contained if not destroyed, then while it was predetermined that Truman would quickly move against the USSR, it could not be the case that Roosevelt would have behaved differently. While these scholars would reject the view that Truman was simply behaving as the normal leader of a normal great power in seeking to win a war quickly, they would have to join with traditionalists in denying Truman's individual agency because for them he was acting as a normal capitalist president. Truman was not and could not be more of a villain than his predecessor.

These examples illustrate the propensity to attribute responsibility to a particular leader or a particular country when we believe that the policy is misguided or immoral. Methodologically, this makes sense, but only as long as a key assumption is made explicit and defended: the behavior was unusual. This reminds us that comparisons and generalizations are a necessary part of the argument, even if they are often submerged. Our focus on failures is not only a product of our fascination with disasters (who has

³⁴ Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam: The Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with Soviet Power*, 2nd expanded ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965; Boulder, CO: Pluto, 1994). For a better argument that Roosevelt's death made a great difference, see Costigliola, *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances*.

³⁵ See, for example, Joyce Kolko and Gabriel Kolko, *The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945–1954* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

not craned to look at a car wreck in passing by?), but also of the implicit belief that they do not follow in the normal course of events and so need a special explanation. This same claim comes up in the less frequent cases when individuals are given credit for a decision. Thus those who would praise Obama's decisions that led up to the raid that killed Osama bin Laden draw contrasts with his predecessor and point to the many risks it entailed. In a relatively small and interesting set of cases there may be agreement that the leader drove the policy (i.e., that others would have behaved differently), but one group gives credit while the other gives blame. The obvious case is Bush's decision to overthrow Saddam Hussein, which I will touch on below. While the numerous critics see this as a disaster that needs to be explained by Bush's misguided style and preferences, his supporters argue that only an unusually courageous and clear-eyed leader would have taken such a dramatic but necessary step. Both camps are bolstered by the extent to which the policy drew fire within the United States and around the world. Although the valences of the analyses from the two camps are opposite, the basic empirical assertion and implied comparisons are the same.

POST-COLD WAR PRESIDENTS

Because the post-Cold War international environment provides American presidents with a wider range of choice than was the case for the earlier period, we would expect a larger role for individual differences. In fact, although the comparisons are difficult, I think that what is striking are the continuities, and the changes that did occur are due at least as much to external events as to the presidents' views. But note that this claim excludes comparisons to how people who were not elected president might have behaved. One can argue that the nature of American politics restricts potential office holders to a somewhat narrow range in terms of personalities and substantive views. It is probably true that Ron Paul, for example, would behave very differently were he to become president, but this is one of the reasons why he will not become president. Nevertheless, I believe that if we were to apply the test I mentioned at the start of this article of writing the history without mentioning the name of the serving president, it would be hard to infer when a new person entered the Oval Office.

There is a significant change from Reagan to his successor, however. Quite contrary to the view common at the time that Reagan was an unredeemable hard-liner from the start, most scholars now believe that he moved quite quickly to recognize change in the Soviet system (even if he was not quick to reciprocate Gorbachev's concessions), and that he did so in part because his preexisting beliefs were more nuanced than his critics had

thought.³⁶ The main difference between Reagan and George H. W. Bush was not that they had fundamentally different worldviews and preferences, but that Bush (and his national security advisor, Brent Scowcroft) were by their natures cautious.³⁷ This difference in intellectual styles was compounded by the newly felt weight of the responsibility of the office. The break with the previous approach did not last long, however. By the time the Berlin wall fell in November 1989 and Chancellor Helmut Kohl moved toward German unification, Bush was bolder, and both pushed ahead with dealing with Gorbachev and, like Reagan, refused to make many substantive concessions. A student of Reagan's rhetoric might have seen that it was not he who gave the (in)famous "chicken Kiev" speech in August 1991, but the fundamental policy of friendly gestures, little concrete assistance, and waiting to pick up the pieces of the crumbling Soviet empire was shared by the two presidents.

Bill Clinton, of course, came into office after the Cold War was over, and he brought little experience or interest in foreign policy to the job. Although the first several years were distinct in his lack of involvement in the subject and the concomitant tendency for us policy to drift, after that he became fully engaged and I think the burden would rest on those who would argue that there was a sharp break between his policy and that of Bush, his predecessor.³⁸ Although I doubt if the internal records will be complete enough to allow us to find a statement paralleling Dulles's that I quoted earlier, in the same way that was true then the domestic and international environment and the policy of the Bush administration provided a better basis of predicting how Clinton acted than did his campaign platform. For example, Clinton strongly criticized Bush for being too soft on China, especially about human rights, just as George W. Bush said that the Clinton administration did not stand up to the PRC. But in both cases the president soon came to see that he was wiser trying to build good relations with China and downplaying human rights.

This brings us to George W. Bush. At first glance, he is the poster child for the importance of the president's views and modes of behavior. Somewhat like Truman, his style was to be—or at least to seem to be—decisive.³⁹

³⁶ Shimko, *Images and Arms Control*; Melvyn Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), pt. 5.

³⁷ Bush was strikingly cautious during Poland's democratic transition: Gregory Domber, "Skepticism and the Stability: Reevaluating U.S. Policy during Poland's Democratic Transformation in 1989," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 52–82.

³⁸ For good accounts, see Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008); Hal Brands, *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008). For somewhat different views, see Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Second Chance: Three Presidents and the Crisis of American Super Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2007) and Elizabeth Saunders, "Changing Threats or Changing Leaders? Threat Perception and us Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Era," (unpublished manuscript, 2011).

³⁹ For a superb argument that the common impression that Truman was decisive is quite incorrect and a product of his seeking to overcome his decisiveness by deciding quickly, even if he later changed

He also was averse to compromise and had great trouble getting his subordinates to work together or to bring up their differing views on issues that he himself had to decide. Some of these characteristics may explain why he never held a meeting to thrash out whether to invade Iraq, although it is interesting that this failed to occur in Great Britain as well. Because I have discussed the role of Bush's outlook and preferences in his foreign policy elsewhere, I will be telegraphic.⁴⁰ While there is room for debate on many points, the applicability of Macmillan's quip seems clear. Before 9/11 Bush was set on lowering the American profile abroad, or at least minimizing efforts at peacekeeping and nation-building. It is hard to argue that from the start he was set on invading Iraq and that 9/11 was a mere pretext; offhand remarks are all that can be mustered for this view, and there were no moves to update the war plans for Iraq.

But saying that 9/11 made an enormous difference only tells us that the external environment matters, something that only the most extreme internalist would deny. It does not tell us whether others would have responded in the same way. Most of the focus has been on the overthrow of Saddam, but it is worth noting that perhaps the most consequential decision was to treat the terrorist attack as an act of war, which set in motion a wide range of policies not only in foreign affairs, but in domestic and legal policy as well. From this followed the decision to overthrow the Taliban regime in Afghanistan rather than first deploying diplomatic and coercive tools to pressure it to dismantle al Qaeda and turn over Bin Laden. The fact that few people urged this course of action indicates but does not quite prove that here Bush's preferences were widely shared. In his place a different president might have paused, examined the alternatives, and decided to try something else first. Would another president have immediately defined the situation as a war? Many observers did object to this, but it is interesting that many people in the administration seem to have immediately and spontaneously adopted this definition of the situation. Douglas Feith, under-secretary of defense, who was not in the United States at the time, reports that he and his associates immediately saw that this had to be treated as a war.⁴¹ Furthermore, even before the Bush administration developed the war frame, the media adopted it.⁴²

his mind. See Alonzo Hamby, "An American Democrat: A Reevaluation of the Personality of Harry S. Truman," *Political Science Quarterly* 106, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 33–56; also see Deborah Larson, *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985). For an argument linking Bush's personality and decision-making style to the decision for the change of strategy and surge of additional troops to Iraq in 2007, see Stephen Benedict Dyson, "George W. Bush, the Surge, and Presidential Leadership," *Political Science Quarterly* 125, no. 4 (Winter 2010–11): 557–85.

⁴⁰ Robert Jervis, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era* (New York: Routledge, 2005), chap. 4.

⁴¹ Douglas Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: Harper, 2008).

⁴² Brigitte Nacos, Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, and Robert Shapiro, *Selling Fear: Counterterrorism, the Media, and Public Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2–5.

Most discussions of the decision to invade Iraq and the general Bush Doctrine place much of the responsibility on the president's personality and beliefs.⁴³ This is often supplemented by arguments that Bush embodied typical American approaches and values. Defenders of the president and his policies see the United States as reacting boldly to challenges and as having a "second image" belief that countries that tyrannize over their own people will be troublemakers abroad and that democracies behave much more benignly.⁴⁴ I believe there is much to this, but realism urges us to start with the external environment and those who focus on Bush or the United States generally fail to make the sorts of comparisons that would bolster—or undermine—their case. In fact, much of the way Bush and the United States behaved fits with standard realist expectations (but not prescriptions) of the way Great Powers behave.⁴⁵ To start with, moving the focus off Bush and keeping it on the United States, it is worth remembering that Clinton had pledged to remove Saddam from power and adopted as aggressive a stance as the international and the domestic climate would permit. Although in the end my belief (or rather intuition) is that neither he nor Al Gore would have invaded Iraq after these constraints were loosened and the incentives changed following 9/11, their public positions, while critical of what they saw as Bush's unilateralism, were ambivalent.⁴⁶

Indeed, there may be nothing particularly Bush-like, neoconservative, or American about the invasion of Iraq.⁴⁷ There are three facets to this argument. First and most general is the core of the realist outlook that power is checked most effectively if it is not checked only by counterbalancing power. States have a propensity to use the power at their disposal, and therefore those who are not subject to external restraints, tend to feel few restraints at all. As Edmund Burke put it, in a position endorsed by Hans Morgenthau: "I dread our *own* power and our *own* ambition; I dread our

⁴³ A range of arguments can be found in Jane Cramer and Trevor Thrall, eds., *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq?* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁴⁴ For an original discussion of the second image, see Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, chaps. 4–5. Although the literature on why this particular perspective has appeal for Americans is voluminous, two older studies have not been surpassed. See Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955); and Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration*, chap. 15.

⁴⁵ For discussion of the tension in realist and other IR theories in terms of their being both descriptive and prescriptive see Robert Jervis "Bridges, Barriers, and Gaps: Research and Policy," *Political Psychology* 29, no. 4 (August 2008): 572–74; Ido Oren, "The Unrealism of Contemporary Realism: The Tension between Realist Theory and Realists' Practice," *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 2 (June 2009): 283–302; John Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism," in *Realism and World Politics*, ed. Ken Booth (New York: Routledge, 2011), 124–40.

⁴⁶ For the argument that President Gore probably would have invaded Iraq, see Frank Harvey, *Explaining the Iraq War: Counterfactual Theory, Logic, and Evidence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁴⁷ Thus it is not entirely surprising that many of the beliefs mustered in support of us policy toward Iraq parallel those held by European expansionists in earlier eras. Jack Snyder, "Imperial Temptations," *National Interest* 71, (Spring 2003): 29–40.

being too much dreaded. It is ridiculous to say that we are not men, and that, as men, we shall never wish to aggrandize ourselves.”⁴⁸ With this as a driving idea, Kenneth Waltz saw the likelihood of America’s current behavior from the start of the post-Cold War era:

The powerful state may, and the United States does, think of itself as acting for the sake of peace, justice, and well-being in the world. But these terms will be defined to the liking of the powerful, which may conflict with the preferences and the interests of others. In international politics, overwhelming power repels and leads others to try to balance against it. With benign intent, the United States has behaved, and until its power is brought into a semblance of balance, will continue to behave in ways that annoy and frighten others.⁴⁹

Second and related, states’ definitions of their interests tend to expand as their power does.⁵⁰ It then becomes worth pursuing a whole host of objectives that were out of reach when the state’s security was in doubt and all efforts had to be directed to primary objectives. With increases in power and security, states seek what Wolfers called “milieu goals.”⁵¹ The hope of spreading democracy and liberalism throughout the world has always been an American goal, but the lack of a peer competitor made it more realistic—although perhaps not very realistic—to actively strive for it.

A third structural explanation for American behavior is that increased relative power brings with it new fears. The reasons are both objective and

⁴⁸ Quoted in Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 5th rev. ed. (New York: Knopf, 1978), 169–70, emphasis in original.

⁴⁹ Kenneth Waltz, “America as a Model for the World? A Foreign Policy Perspective,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 24, no. 4 (December 1991): 69; also see Waltz’s discussion of the Gulf War in “A Necessary War?” in *Confrontation in the Gulf*, ed. Harry Kriesler (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, 1992), 59–65. As Waltz noted much earlier, even William Fulbright, while decrying the arrogance of American power, said that the United States could and should “lead the world in an effort to change the nature of its politics,” quoted in *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 201. But as an empirical proposition this claim is supported mostly by searching on the dependent variable and we have paid little attention to cases in which states underutilize rather than overutilize their power. For good studies that do so, see Ernest May, “The United States’ Underuse of Military Power,” in *History and Neorealism*, eds., May, Richard Rosecrance, and Zara Steiner (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Randall Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Peter Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁵⁰ See, for example, Fareed Zakaria, “Realism and Domestic Politics: A Review Essay,” *International Security* 17, no. 1 (Summer 1992): 177–98; Robert Tucker, *The Radical Left and American Foreign Policy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 69–70, 74–77, 106–11; Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 86. This process is also fed by the psychological resistance to giving up any position once it is gained: see Jeffrey Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004). For a discussion of alternative possibilities suggested by American history, see Edward Rhodes, “The Imperial Logic of Bush’s Liberal Agenda,” *Survival* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 131–54.

⁵¹ Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration*, chap. 5.

subjective. As Wolfers explained in his classic essay on “National Security as Ambiguous Symbol,” the latter can diverge from the former.⁵² In one manifestation of this, as major threats disappear, people elevate ones that previously were seen as quite manageable.⁵³ But there is more to it than psychology. A dominant state acquires an enormous stake in the world order and interests spread throughout the globe. Most countries are primarily concerned with what happens in their neighborhoods; the world is the hegemon’s neighborhood, and it is not only hubris that leads it to be concerned with everything that happens anywhere. The result is a fusion of narrow and broad self-interest. At a point when most analysts were worried about the decline of American power, not its excesses, Waltz noted that for the United States, “like some earlier great powers . . . the interest of the country in security came to be identified with the maintenance of a certain world order. For countries at the top, this is predictable behavior. . . . Once a state’s interests reach a certain extent, they become self-reinforcing.”⁵⁴

This is not to say that the policies embodying these impulses were wise; indeed, scholars like Waltz who expected them thought they were foolish and would eventually fail. Such a judgment may change as events unfold, but the point here is that far from being particular to Bush, the pattern of states reacting to the lack of external restraint by overreaching and then being pressed to retract is a common one.

The argument for the importance of domestic and external restraints can be extended by the test of imagining writing the history of the post-9/11 period without mentioning the names of the two presidents. I would argue that if we did this, we would infer that a new president had been elected in 2007 or 2008. He (or, because this is hypothetical, she) drew back from Bush’s policies of vigorously seeking to export democracy and taking preventive actions (e.g., she declined to attack the nuclear facility in Syria), and also reformulated our policy in Iraq and Afghanistan. She finally took both of these wars seriously and sought to bring means and ends into alignment. In Iraq she both cut deals with the Sunnis who had been attacking us and staged a short-term surge to get the situation under control, following this with an agreement to bring all of our troops home. As this progressed and forces became available, she followed a parallel policy in Afghanistan of a surge, attempted negotiations with the enemy, turned the war over to the Afghans, and withdrew our forces. Rhetoric aside, I do not see how our observer could have detected the election of Obama, but he or she could not have missed the earlier change of policy, which would be easily attributed

⁵² Ibid., chap. 10.

⁵³ John Mueller, “The Catastrophe Quota: Trouble After the Cold War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 38, no. 3 (September 1994): 355–75; also see Frederick Hartmann, *The Conservation of Enemies: A Study in Enmity* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982).

⁵⁴ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 200.

to a change of leadership. As many commentators have pointed out, critics of Obama like Dick Cheney and John Bolton really are criticizing him for following the path laid out by Bush in his last three years in office. To put this another way, although Bush initially marked out a very different policy, after a few years both the recalcitrance of the world and the unwillingness of the American people to pay so much blood and treasure for the enterprise brought him to heel (or, as a realist would put it, led common sense to prevail). Presidents are not mere pawns, but neither are they masters of their own or their countries' fate.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC CONTROL AND ACCOUNTABILITY

This discussion brings up more sharply the question of democratic control and accountability that I have danced around in the body of this paper. Democratic control of foreign policy implies that the public can set at least the general contours of foreign policy by who it elects to be president. But if the external environment imposes both severe constraints and, on fewer occasions, offers great temptations, this is an illusion. People may have voted for Eisenhower partly because he and Dulles said that they would roll back Soviet control over Eastern Europe. But in the end they were thwarted, if not deceived (and I think it is more likely that Eisenhower and Dulles were relatively honest but had deceived themselves).⁵⁵ It may be that elections and public opinion cannot control foreign policy because presidents have the overriding responsibility to protect the nation, another democratic value. The lack of democratic control can coexist with rather than negate democratic accountability, however, as leaders and parties may be thrown out of office for their perceived foreign policy failings. Perhaps this is unfair if no feasible alternative policy or leader would have done much better, but punishment and the fear of it may still play a powerful role.⁵⁶ Putting the two pieces together and adding the element that the external environment is a difficult one and that policies often fail leads to the expectation that parties will alternate in power, with administrations often failing and being punished, to be replaced by new ones that have promised something new but find themselves unable to deliver, and so are themselves turned out of office.

⁵⁵ In fact, Truman pursued more of a roll-back policy than Eisenhower, although the reasons for this lie more in the changing external situation than in the president's preferences. Gregory Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin: America's Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947-1956* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

⁵⁶ See, for example, Dan Reiter and Allan Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), and the subsequent debate in the International Security Studies Forum Roundtable, vol. 2, no. 12, 1 July 2011, Roundtables at <http://www.issforum.org>.

There may be more to it than this, however. When looked at more carefully, the Bush/Obama example can be seen as showing a larger and different role for democratic control when we consider the role of domestic politics. One reason why Bush moderated his policy was that it was increasingly unpopular. Gaining popular support for it was becoming more difficult, and this affected his domestic as well as his foreign program in addition to making it less likely that he would be succeeded by another Republican. Democratic control then operated through anticipated reactions. The external environment was indeed recalcitrant, but the proximate cause of the change of policy was the realization that public opinion would not sustain it, and understanding this, Bush altered course. Second and related, continuities can reflect the contours etched out by domestic values, traditions, and interests. From the standpoint of democratic control of foreign policy, more significant than the failure of elections to produce great changes is that policy never strays too far and too long from what is desirable, or at least acceptable, to the public.