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How elected leaders prolong unpopular wars: Examining American policy during the Vietnam War and French policy during the Algerian War

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Abstract: I seek to explain why democracies often maintain involvement in peripheral wars years after public support has dissipated. Using insights from literature on prospect theory and framing theory, I argue that when a war becomes unpopular (largely because the public perceives it to be too costly to achieve the original goal of the war) elites who favor prolonging the conflict seek to “reframe” the debate; here elites attempt to convince the public that a rapid withdraw is in fact a more costly choice. Specifically, leaders will emphasize the reputational and security costs of a loss, and convince the public that a risky gamble—namely an escalation or expansion of the conflict—is the only way to avoid such a loss. I examine these propositions in two case studies: the Vietnam War during the period of 1968–1975, and the Algerian War during the period of 1956–1962.

Subjects: Foreign Policy; War & Conflict Studies; International Security

Keywords: war; leadership; Vietnam; Algeria; public opinion; framing

1. Introduction

In Kant’s essay, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, he extolls the virtues of the republican form of government, arguing that this type of regime not only best represents the people, but also tempers the militaristic impulses of elected leaders. Specifically, Kant argued that since citizens pay the price of any war, in the form of blood and treasure, they would be “cautious in commencing such a poor game” and thus would be reluctant to elect or reelect bellicose leaders. Moreover, in

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This paper examines the central role of political elites in shaping public opinion during wartime, especially during long and costly wars. Using insights from economics and communications, the author argues that leaders have great ability to persuade the public that a risky and costly military strategy offers the only chance to avert an embarrassing defeat. The paper examines the wars in Vietnam and Algeria to illustrate this phenomenon, and argues that the findings can be extended to understand contemporary debates in US foreign policy. Overall, understanding the outcomes of wars requires examining not just events on the frontlines, but also the “war at home”, namely the political struggle to define stakes in the war, and ultimately, the meaning of victory and defeat.

democracies, since multiple parties compete to win public support, individual politicians, whatever their personal preferences, have an incentive to cater to popular preferences, or risk losing office. In contrast, in an undemocratic regime, where power is concentrated in a single, unelected official, a leader can “resolve on war [...] for the most trivial reasons” (Kant, 2010).

Although Kant was mainly concerned with explaining why democracies are hesitant to initiate wars in the first place, his argument can be extended to explain when and why democratic countries will cease involvement in a protracted and costly conflict. Consistent with his expectations about the power of the public’s will, we would expect that when a democracy finds itself embroiled in a failing military endeavor, the public will prevent a leader from continuing to pour resources into that conflict, and will instead demand a withdraw. In short, Kant’s argument expects that citizens are rational and consistent in their preferences. Although the public may have initially supported a war to achieve a well-defined goal such as gaining new territory, toppling a dictator, or promoting human rights, once it becomes clear that the achievement of that goal is prohibitively costly—or perhaps even entirely impossible—they abandon their support for the war.

Despite the intuitive logic of this argument, the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as many historical conflicts, call this assumption into question. More precisely, there are a number of instances of democracies not only maintaining involvement in a conflict after public support has dissipated, but in some case democracies actually *deepened* their involvement in these wars.

In this paper, I attempt to outline a theoretical framework to understand this phenomenon, and examine the ostensibly irrational response of democracies when faced with a costly and failing war. Using case study research, I find that once a war has become unpopular, leaders are able to temporarily revive support for the war by convincing the public that a last-chance military escalation offers a way for their country to avoid a disastrous defeat that would do long term damage to the state’s credibility.

To address this puzzling response, I employ literature on prospect theory. This is an approach from behavioral economics that examines the willingness of individuals to take risky gambles when they perceive themselves to be in a losing situation; they hope this gamble will return them to the status quo *ante*, even if it will not improve upon their original position. Prospect theory helps explain why the public would support a leader who proposes the escalation of a conflict they no longer support; as reluctant as the public is to pay the continued costs of a war, they are even more reluctant to accept a loss.

Prospect theory is a theory of individual choice, and as such, does not speak to how the public as a whole comes to understand the stakes in the war, and rally around the idea of a new strategy. Instead, it is leaders who convince members of the public to adopt this preference. To address this level of analysis, I employ insights from literature on strategic framing. This literature, derived from research in communications, examines how political elites are able to use speech acts to shape the public’s understanding of an issue, such as involvement in a military conflict. Studies in strategic framing demonstrate that the way elites frame an issue, especially a complex and esoteric issue such as a foreign military engagement, serves as a cue to the public, explaining how citizens should think about that issue.

Specifically, I argue that when a war becomes unpopular (largely because the public perceives it to be too costly to achieve the original goal of the war) elites who favor prolonging the conflict seek to “reframe” the debate; here elites attempt to convince the public that a rapid withdraw is in fact a more costly choice. Specifically, leaders will emphasize the reputational and security costs of a loss, and convince the public that a risky gamble, namely an escalation or expansion of conflict, is the only war to avoid such a loss.

The remainder of the paper will proceed as follows. I will first detail the key insights of prospect theory, demonstrating its applicability to understand risk-taking behavior in the foreign policy arena. Next, I provide an overview of strategic framing, illustrating how elites who seek to maintain involvement in a war strategically deploy loss aversion frames to convince the public to support continued engagement. I then examine two case studies, where leaders in democracies succeeded in winning public support for an escalation of an unpopular war. Specifically, I look at France's attempts to crush a nationalist rebellion in Algeria from 1954 to 1962, and the US' attempts to preserve a non-Communist government in South Vietnam from 1965 to 1973.

I argue that these cases demonstrate the persuasive power of loss aversion frames, with Charles de Gaulle and Richard Nixon successfully prolonging their respective conflicts by using arguments about the steep reputational costs of a precipitous withdrawal. This shift in public support was temporary, however, and I examine the process by which each country disengaged from its war. I conclude the paper by discussing the relevance of this argument for current policy debates.

2. Prospect theory

Prospect theory, an approach from behavioral economics, challenges the assumptions of expected utility theory. Expected utility theory anticipates that individuals behave in a consistent and predictable manner, irrespective of whether they are facing gains or losses. For instance, a person who prefers a guaranteed 500-dollar prize to a 50% chance of a 1,000-dollar prize and a 50% chance of receiving nothing should make the same choice when facing a loss. This means the individual should prefer a certain loss of 500 dollars rather than a 50% chance they will lose 1,000 dollars and a 50% chance they will lose zero dollars. In a series of groundbreaking experiments, however, economists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman found that people displayed a starkly different tolerance for risk depending on whether they were facing gains or losses (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981).

Specifically, people proved to be risk adverse in the realm of gains, preferring a smaller guaranteed reward to a mere chance of a larger reward. When people are facing losses, however, they become risk adverse, preferring to gamble; here, they hope to avoid a large loss, rather than take a guaranteed, smaller loss (Levy, 1996, p. 180). Contrary to the assumptions of expected utility theory, attitudes towards risk are reference dependent, and demonstrate that "losing hurts more than a comparable gain pleases" (McDermott, 2001, p. 29).

This willingness to take risks to avoid losses causes individuals to engage in ostensibly irrational behavior. For instance, when a person has lost a large sum of money gambling, and thus finds himself in the domain of losses, he will be reluctant to "cut his losses", and cease gambling. Instead, as expected by prospect theory, the person falls victim to the sunk costs fallacy, and continues making wagers in hope of winning back the money he initially lost. As Jack Levy explains, once a person has experienced a loss, they will "adopt risk-seeking behavior in an attempt to eliminate that loss, sometimes at considerable risk of incurring even greater losses" (Levy, 2003, p. 219).

Using prospect theory to analyze the behavior of individuals first requires that the researcher to understand a person's subjective view of their position (reference point), namely whether they consider themselves to be in the domain of gains (where they should be risk adverse) or the domain of losses (where they should be risk prone). Next, it is necessary to see how an individual understands the options that are available to redress the situation. Prospect theory conceptualizes this as a two-stage process.

First, is the "framing" or "editing" phase where an individual identifies the set of options available to reach his or her desired reference point (Levy, 1996, pp. 185–186). Psychologically, this stage serves to "simplify the evaluation of the choices that are available to a decision-maker" (McDermott, 2001, p. 22). Once the decision-maker has identified the available options, he or she must next weigh the costs and risk of each option as well as probability of success, eventually selecting among them; this is the "evaluation phase" (Levy, 1996, pp. 185–186).

In his essay on the applicability of prospect theory to international relations, Levy cautions, “prospect theory is a theory of individual choice under conditions of risk, not a general theory of politics” (Levy, 2003, p. 233). Specifically, prospect theory assumes that when people are making decisions about their day-to-day lives, such as the decision to undergo a medical procedure, or the decision to gamble money, individuals already have a clear understanding of their reference point, and that the options available to them are predetermined by the situation. In essence, “these basic parameters themselves are exogenous in the theory” (Levy, 2003, p. 233).

When dealing with political issues, however, this is unlikely to be the case. Individuals may understand what their political reference point is; both personal experience and news coverage can alert them to the fact that their country is losing a war or is in the midst of an economic recession. Average citizens, however, are unlikely to have independently developed an understanding of the policy options available to the country to redress the situation. Instead, the public is likely to look to elites to explain or “frame” the situation for them, and to articulate the logic of various policy options. In essence, the insights of prospect theory must be combined with a theory that explains how mass publics form collective beliefs; here I rely on literature from strategic framing.

3. Framing theory

Framing theory is based on the idea that most political debates are characterized by competing “frames” or narratives; as defined by Gamson and Modigliani, a frame is a “central organizing idea or storyline that ... suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue” (Gamson & Mogdalani, 1994, p. 376). In this view, a frame simplifies a complex issue, by highlighting what values and interests are at stake in a debate, as well as what policy options are available to redress the problems identified by the frame. As Chong and Druckman explain, “a speaker ‘frames’ an issue by encouraging readers or listeners to emphasize certain considerations above others when evaluating that issue” (Chong & Druckman, 2007). When promulgated to the public by elected officials and interest groups, framing is an attempt at “collective sense-making” (Pan & Kosicki, 2003, p. 36). As one scholar notes, in contrast to decisions in their personal lives, most political issues are “ill structured problems,” giving elites great leeway to shape public opinion (Druckman, 2011, p. 288).

The concept of framing is crucial for applying prospect theory to the research question, which seeks to explain how a majority of the public comes to see a risky military escalation as a viable policy option. Here, a frame serves as a justification for using force to achieve an affirmative policy goal. In this context, a frame must explain why a particular war is worth fighting—whether it is to defend the country from attack, promote human rights abroad, or guard key economic interests. Embedded in the frame is a cost-benefit argument; an elected official seeking to initiate a war must persuade the public that even though the war will be costly, in terms of both lives and money, the achievement of a valuable policy goal will offset those costs.

During a protracted conflict, however, public support for that initial frame is likely to slip, as the costs of the war rise and success appears elusive. A leader, especially the leader who initiated that war in the first place, will resist calls to withdraw, and will instead seek to “justify those [sunk] costs through a successful outcome”; this, in turn, will lead to the adoption of “riskier strategies that often prolong the war and increase its costs” (Levy, 2003, p. 227). Here, the leader’s motives for continuing the war are straightforward, as few leaders want to preside over a failed intervention. Convincing the public of the wisdom of continued involvement, however, may prove to be a challenge, as the idea of reputational costs is likely not in the forefront of the public debate. Instead, public support for a war may be tied to more conspicuous and concrete costs, such as the growing number of casualties or the implementation of tax increases or rationing to fund the conflict.

As such, to win public support for an escalation or expansion of the war, the leader must persuade the public that however unhappy they are about the costs of the war, withdrawing precipitously will have even greater, certain costs in the form of damage to the country’s reputation. Specifically, the

leader must convince the public that forfeiting the war will make the country appear feckless and weak, something that will ultimately be far more costly.

The logic of prospect theory demonstrates why such a loss aversion argument is likely to rally public support; moreover, past research has demonstrated that elites using loss aversion frames in policy debates have an inherent advantage over competitors, owing to the intuitive psychological appeal of these frames (Arceneaux, 2012). Leaders, however, do not have untrammelled ability to shape public opinion, and may face challenges in selling this interpretation of the conflict to the public. First, consistent with the expectations of framing theory, frames are only likely to win support if the person or group promoting the frame is seen as credible by the target audience. Past research in political framing demonstrates people view their co-partisans as credible sources of frames, while they will be skeptical of a frame promoted by an individual from another party or an unpopular official (Brewer & Gross, 2005, p. 941).

Moreover, an attempt to win support for a new frame is made much more difficult if other political elites respond negatively to the new frame, and instead rally around a counterframe that challenges, and ultimately rebuts, the logic of the first frame (Brewer & Gross, 2005, p. 930). The introduction of a second competing frame, or counterframe, will prompt a framing contest where “contestants manipulate, strategize and fight to have their frame accepted as the dominant narrative” (Boin, ‘t Hart, & McConnell, 2009, p. 82).

Boin et al. (2009) note that framing contests occurring in the wake of a political crisis or policy failure are fundamentally about assigning blame, and this placement of blame impacts the subsequent discussion of policy options. An official who outlines a loss aversion frame is placing blame internally; here the leader suggests that he (or his predecessor) failed to commit sufficient resources to win the conflict, and thus the country must redouble its efforts in order to avoid a costly loss (Boin et al., 2009, p. 87).

In contrast, a counterframe will make blame exogenous—it argues that the causes of failure stem from forces beyond the government’s control; this may be the involvement of another power in the conflict, or the inability of local proxies to act as efficient fighters. In essence, the logic of the counterframe suggests that there is nothing more the state can do to influence the outcome of the conflict.

Moreover, a successful counterframe will challenge the calculus of costs contained in the loss aversion frame, arguing that the outcome of the conflict has no real bearing on the state’s reputation for resolve. Here, the counterframe refocuses the debate on costs already spent, and argues that it is imprudent to commit further resources to an unwinnable war.

In sum, when faced with a war that appears to be failing war, elites do not automatically follow public opinion and withdrawal. Instead, in an attempt to preserve their own reputation and legacy, as well as the credibility of their state, they will attempt to devise a new strategy that will avert a costly loss. Although this new strategy is unlikely to achieve the original goal of the war articulated by elites at its onset, it is designed to eke out some semblance of a victory, avoiding an abject defeat.

This new strategy will likely be costly, requiring the commitment of additional soldiers and material resources. To convince the public to bear these additional costs, the leader will attempt to reframe the policy debate, using loss aversion arguments to convince the public that these additional costs are necessary in order to avoid a disastrous defeat that will do long term damage to the country’s reputation.

Prospect theory shows that when the policy decision is framed this way—between a withdrawal that has certain reputational and security consequences and an escalation, that however costly, can avert an outright loss—the public should favor the option of escalation. Framing theory, however,

adds two additional conditions. First framing theory expects that when a leader attempts to promote a loss aversion frame to the public, his or her message will be much better received if the leader is popular with the public. An unpopular leader is likely to have difficulty persuading the public; if the source of the frame is not viewed as credible, the frame itself is likely to be rejected.

Second, a leader will struggle to reframe the debate if political opponents outline a counterframe that offers an alternate narrative about the wisdom of continuing the war. This narrative is likely to exonerate blame for the state of the war and asserts that no matter how much the state commits to the conflict, forces beyond its control will dictate the outcome. Embedded in this counterframe will be the argument that not only is the war unwinnable, but also unimportant. More precisely, the frame will assert that the outcome of the war is irrelevant to the country's reputation and security; in this case, a withdrawal could in fact demonstrate strength.

In the next sections of the paper, I examine these arguments in two case studies: France's involvement in Algeria from 1956 to 1962, and the US' involvement in Vietnam from 1968 to 1975. These two cases provide fertile ground for an initial test of the insights of prospect theory in this issue area; each case examined a long and costly war that consumed the politics of the country that initiated it. Although there is no direct link between the decision-making during the two wars—the “lessons” of Algeria did not directly impact the decision-making of US officials during the Vietnam War—each war followed a remarkably similar trajectory. Specifically, in both wars, the leaders who initiated the conflict favored a massive commitment of resources, insisting that the achievement of the policy goal was essential to the preserving their state's physical security, as well as its reputation. After a few years, however, the initial policy consensus faded, and required pro-war elites to devise a novel set of justifications for continued involvement. Finally, in each case, after a protracted and costly conflict, each country abandoned its military commitment with relatively little fanfare. In essence, by the end of the war, a majority of elites, as well as the public, embraced the idea that the outcome of the conflict had little impact to their state's national security.

As such, for each war, I will focus on the initial frame used to justify involvement in the conflict; I will explain the core elements of the frame, and why it succeeded in swaying public opinion. Then, in each case, I will detail the factors that caused the frame to become weak, and explain the reasons that Nixon and de Gaulle succeeded in reframing the debate, using loss aversion frames to and purchase more time to continue unpopular wars.

Finally, in each case study, I will detail the policy debate leading up to the end of each conflict; I explain the factors that caused the public to reject the existing frame and endorse a counterframe that justified the abandonment of the original policy goal. In the Algerian case, this occurred in 1962, when France signed a peace treaty that effectively granted Algeria independence. For the Vietnam case, this occurred in 1975, when the United States terminated all support of South Vietnam, allowing it to fall to communism. Nixon's 1973 decision to sign the Paris Peace Accords constitutes only a partial policy shift. Although the treaty signaled that the United States was drastically reducing the amount of resources it committed to the war, it did not signal the abandonment of the policy goal, as the United States remained formally committed to preserving an independent, non-communist South Vietnam.

For each case study I use a variety of source materials to reconstruct the decision-making process and examine the interplay between leaders' policy choices and public opinion. Specifically, where available, I relied on primary sources, including declassified government documents and the memoirs of participants. I also use a variety of secondary sources including contemporaneous news articles and poll data, as well as the extensive collection of academic research on each conflict.

4. Framing in the Algerian War

4.1. The “French Algeria” Frame, 1954–1958

The Algerian War officially began on 1 November 1954, when the National Liberation Front (FLN), staged a series of coordinated attacks against the European population in Algeria. In a radio broadcast from Cairo, the FLN’s leadership claimed responsibility, and called for Algerian independence. At this time, Algeria was legally part of France; its inhabitants were represented in the French Parliament, and Algerian affairs were handled in the Ministry of Interior, as opposed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which presided over colonial matters (Connelly, 2002, p. 10; Wall, 2001, p. 10). In addition to having a distinct legal status from colonies like Tunisia and Morocco, Algeria was also unique because of the large European settler population residing there. By the mid-1950s, the number of Europeans living in Algeria stood at more than a million, out of a total population of approximately 10 million (Connelly, 2002, p. 11, 18; Wall, 2001, p. 10).

As a result, Premier Pierre Mendès-France outlined a simple argument for fighting. He asserted that Algeria was “irrevocably French,” and thus there was “no conceivable secession.” In accordance with this, the Premier, as well as the leaders of the major parties eschewed the idea of negotiating with the rebels; Francois Mitterrand, the Minister of the Interior, outlined the government’s policy, arguing, “The only possible negotiation is war” (Horne, 1978, pp. 98–99; Simmons, 1970, p. 19).

The “French Algeria” Frame, predicated on seeking a military victory to maintain France’s rightful control over its territory, offered the public a strong justification for fighting. Moreover, at the start of the war, there were no credible counterframes, arguing that France should negotiate with the rebels, or grant independence to Algeria. Specifically, during a parliamentary session on 13 November 1954, all parties, aside from the Communists, applauded Mendès-France’s decision to respond to the rebellion with force (France’s premier upheld on Africa, 1954). With a strong frame, and no counterframes, the decision to become involved in the conflict enjoyed public support; in a poll in 1955, 47% of the public agreed that France should keep control of Algeria, and only 26% favored granting the territory greater autonomy (Gallup, 1976, p. 181).

In 1956 and 1957, the costs of the conflict increased markedly. More precisely, when the war began in 1954, there were only 58,000 soldiers in Algeria; this number increased to 180,000 by 1956, and reached more than 355,000 by 1957 (Shrader, 1999, p. 41). As a result of this escalation, there was an enormous jump in fatalities after 1955. In 1954 and 1955, a total of 380 French soldiers were killed in the war; in 1956, 2,200 soldiers were killed, and this number increased to 2,650 in 1957 (Faivre, 2005).

During this time, the financial costs of the war increased, as well. In 1955, the total cost of the war was 137 million dollars. In 1956, the cost had increased to 900 million dollars, and increased again in 1957 to 1.8 billion dollars.¹ To pay for these growing costs, in 1957, Premier Guy Mollet proposed a tax increase; in the radio address announcing the proposal, he asked citizens to sacrifice, so that France could achieve “the great objectives the nation has set for itself in Algeria” (Mollet to stiffen taxes, cut budget, 1957).

Public support for the war dropped as its costs rose. In October of 1955, 47% of the public indicated that they favored fighting to maintain Algeria as part of France, while only 26% favored placating the rebels, by granting Algeria greater autonomy; the remainder had no opinion (Gallup, 1976, p. 211). By late 1957, for the first time, the number favoring looser bonds between France and Algeria was greater than the number who favored keeping Algeria as part of France; a 40% plurality now favored looser ties, with 36% favoring an Algeria under full French control (Gallup, 1976, p. 181). Additionally, by January of 1958, 56% of the public supported opening talks with the rebels to end the violence (Gallup, 1976, p. 22).

Initially, it appeared that public dissatisfaction with the costs of the war would catalyze a policy change. Specifically, during the 1956 parliamentary election campaign, many candidates on the left promised to seek a negotiated settlement to the war (Lacouture, 1984, pp. 354–356; Simmons, 1970, p. 40). Subsequently, a center-left government took power; the new Premier, Socialist Guy Mollet, had campaigned on a platform of ending the war, claiming it was a “stupid” conflict that “was leading nowhere” (Lacouture, 1984, pp. 355–356).

Once in office, however, Mollet faced a dilemma. Although his left-wing coalition won a plurality of seats in the National Assembly, they did not have an outright majority; in order to govern, he had to rely on the votes of center-right and far-right parties, who opposed any relaxation of the military efforts. In order to stay in power, and implement his domestic agenda, Mollet abandoned his campaign promises, and subsequently escalated the conflict (Rogers, 1987, pp. 263–268).

Absent any credible counterframes, this proved to be a politically expedient course, allowing Mollet to remain in power for more than a year. In May of 1957, however, Mollet resigned after several right-wing parties refused to endorse a tax increase to cover the growing expenses of the Algerian War (Giniger, 1957). After Mollet’s fall, a series of short-lived Premiers failed to rally a parliamentary majority in favor of a policy change (Rioux, 1989, pp. 452–468).

By spring of 1958, the French military, fearful that the Parliament would eventually abandon Algeria, facilitated de Gaulle’s return to power. This action was strongly supported by the French public; they believed that de Gaulle could overcome the prevailing parliamentary paralysis, and end the war. In a poll in August 1958, three months after de Gaulle’s return to power, 68% of the public expressed confidence in de Gaulle’s ability to “achieve a peaceful settlement” to the war (Gallup, 1976, p. 239).

4.2. The “Averting Chaos” Reframe, 1959

When de Gaulle assumed power in June of 1958, the “French Algeria” Frame remained weak, as there was little support for fighting to keep French control over the territory. Immediately after de Gaulle’s return to power, there was a temporary jump in the number of people who favored keeping Algeria under full French control, with 52% indicating this as their preference (Gallup, 1976, p. 239). By October of 1958, however, public opinion had stabilized to previous levels, with only 23% of the public indicating that they favored keeping French control over Algeria; in contrast, 35% stated that they favored looser bonds between France and Algeria, and 12% favored full independence for the territory (Gallup, 1976, p. 266).

At this point, however, de Gaulle held preferences that ran contrary to public opinion; although he accepted the idea that Algeria might one day become independent, he rejected any short-term change in Algeria’s relationship with France (Lacouture, 1993, p. 185). More precisely, de Gaulle feared that any major policy change before a military victory would constitute a capitulation; he asserted that it would be unthinkable to leave Algeria without first becoming “masters of the battlefield” (de Gaulle, 1971, p. 46).

In addition, de Gaulle wanted to ensure that when the French granted greater autonomy to Algeria, a pro-French government would assume power. Achieving this goal would involve both the implementation of a costly development plan for Algeria, as well as an enhanced counterinsurgency campaign to destroy the last vestiges of the FLN. As de Gaulle explained to US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in July of 1958, Algeria was not ready to govern itself; he believed that if France granted the territory more autonomy in the short-term, a leader like Gamal Nasser would emerge, and would turn Algeria away from the west. Instead, de Gaulle explained that he hoped to gradually modernize and develop Algeria over at 10-year period; at the end of this period, France would reassess Algeria’s status to decide if it was ready for greater self-government (Memorandum by Secretary of State Dulles, 1958).

Subsequently, in January of 1959, de Gaulle was elected President of France, with 78.5% of the electors supporting him (Hartley, 1971, p. 164). He remained popular during his first months in office; in April 67% of the public approved of his performance as President, and in July 64% indicated approval (Sondages, 1963, p. 3, 38). In sum, at this point, de Gaulle faced the ideal conditions for reframing the debate; although the Algerian War was unpopular, he was an enormously respected leader and enjoyed the unwavering support of almost all the major political parties.

In accordance with this, in a nationally televised address in September of 1959, de Gaulle sought to rally support for continuing the war, by reframing the debate and assuring the public that he had a long-term plan to secure a favorable outcome in Algeria. At the beginning of the speech, he explained that the situation in Algeria had greatly improved since his return to power, and noted the progress of the military campaign. de Gaulle argued, however, that the Algerian problem was not one that could be solved by military means alone; he stressed that it was necessary to fix the “human problem” in Algeria, by continuing with the costly economic development programs he had initiated in 1958. In his speech, he acknowledged that the costs of his current policy were onerous, but argued that this would facilitate a necessary “social evolution” in Algeria, transforming it into a modern, pro-French society.

Once this proposed transformation was complete, de Gaulle informed the public that he planned to open up talks with representatives of the Algerian people, to determine the territory’s future relationship with metropolitan France. At this point, he expected that the Algerians would choose to remain linked with France, having a “government of Algeria by Algerians [...] backed up by the help of France.” He concluded his speech by emphasizing his commitment to ending the war, but argued that he could not negotiate with the rebels before the violence had stopped. He accused them of attempting to intimidate their fellow Algerians through the use of force, with the goal of establishing a “totalitarian dictatorship.” In accordance with this, he rejected the idea of Algerian independence, arguing that it would result in “an abysmal political chaos, all out slaughter, and soon the warlike dictatorship of the communists” (Text of General de Gaulle’s statement on Algeria, 1959).

As expected, de Gaulle succeeded in reframing the debate. By inflating the costs of withdrawal and warning that a premature exit would result in a hostile, communist-dominated Algeria, he was able to convince the public to support his costly policies. In contrast to early 1959, when 63% of the public had favored opening up talks with the rebels to end the war, after de Gaulle’s speech, 57% now supported de Gaulle’s refusal to negotiate with the rebels (Gallup, 1976, p. 249, 270). Furthermore, the speech also succeeded in preempting any challenges to de Gaulle’s policy, as most parties elected to support the President; in a Parliamentary vote after the speech, 441 deputies voted in favor of de Gaulle’s plan and only 23 deputies opposed it (Kettle, 1993, p. 510). Overall, de Gaulle was able to prolong the conflict, by convincing the public that he had a plan to avert disaster in Algeria, albeit one that would require more time and higher costs.

4.3. de Gaulle’s “Emancipation” Counterframe, 1960–1962

In 1959, de Gaulle stridently rejected opening talks with the rebels; by late 1960, however, the French President had shifted his views. Although the French had achieved a military victory, successfully crushing the rebellion, de Gaulle recognized that the rebels had succeeded in winning the support of the Algerian population. In a conversation with one of his advisors, he conceded that the group represented “nine-tenths of the Algerian population, in sentiment at least” (Lacouture, 1993, p. 276). Consistent with this, in a meeting with several Algerian members of the National Assembly, he noted that given the choice, most Algerian Muslims would favor immediate independence from France (Connelly, 2002, p. 222).

As a result, by late 1960, de Gaulle decided that in order to secure a dignified end to the war, his only option was to open up talks with the rebels, aimed at granting Algeria independence. Before making such a dramatic policy shift, however, de Gaulle sought to cultivate public support; he wanted to convince the French population, as well as right-wing members of the National Assembly, that

he was not simply capitulating to the rebels. In pursuit of this, in November of 1960, de Gaulle made a televised address, announcing his desire to open up peace talks; he explained, however, that the government would first hold a national referendum in January of 1961, where the public could vote for or against the proposed negotiations (Text of de Gaulle's speech on Algerian question, 1960).

At this point, de Gaulle again successfully reframed the debate, outlining a counterframe to justify his abrupt decision to terminate French control over Algeria. The counterframe had two main components. First, in contrast to his earlier arguments that granting independence to Algeria would result in chaos, de Gaulle instead claimed that France had made great strides in pacifying and developing the territory, and thus Algerians were now ready to govern themselves. In accordance with this, he portrayed the decision to leave as a sensible, benevolent gesture on the part of France; in his speech announcing the referendum, he argued that leaving Algeria was consistent with France's mission of "emancipat[ing] populations, which previously, were dependent on her" (Text of de Gaulle's speech on Algerian question, 1960). This became a staple of his subsequent speeches, with the French President arguing in favor of "liberat[ing]" Algeria and allowing an "Algerian Algeria [to] be born" (Text of de Gaulle speech, 1961; Text of General de Gaulle's speech urging Algerian talks, 1960; Text of President de Gaulle's new year's eve talk's, 1961).

In addition, de Gaulle now suggested that exiting Algeria was in France's interest; he argued that Algeria was not an asset, but in fact a burden, holding back France from other, more important policy goals. He first made this point in his address on 21 December, arguing that colonialism was an outdated practice that no longer provided net benefits. In accordance with this, he asserted that France should become "wedded to her times," and quickly extricate herself from Algeria (Text of General de Gaulle's speech urging Algerian talks, 1960). He reiterated this point in his 1960 New Year's Eve Address, outlining a litany of domestic and foreign policy goals he could pursue after solving the Algerian problem. He implored the public to support the referendum, since emancipating Algeria was the "common sense policy" (Text of President de Gaulle's new year's eve talk, 1961).

In addition to outlining a strong counterframe, which deflated the costs of withdrawal, de Gaulle was still popular, with a 63% approval rating in November (*Sondages*, 1963, p. 3, 38). Furthermore, at this time, he faced no high-profile challengers who attempted to maintain the existing frame, and rally public support for continued French control over Algeria. Aside from the Communist Party and several small parties on the extreme right, all the major French political parties endorsed de Gaulle's decision to open talks, and encouraged their supporters to vote "yes" on the referendum (Doty, 1960).

When the referendum took place in January, more than two-thirds of those participating voted "yes" to open up peace talks (Henissart, 1970, p. 47). Subsequently, the French government began talks with representatives of the FLN. On 18 March 1962, after several rounds of negotiations, the two parties signed the Evian Accords; this treaty ended the war, and allowed the Algerian population to vote in favor of independence. On 3 July 1962, France recognized Algeria as an independent country (Bernstein, 1993, pp. 55–56).

5. Framing in the Vietnam War

5.1. *The rise and decline of the "Domino Theory" Frame, 1965–1968*

The US commitment to Vietnam dates to the 1940s, when the United States supported France's efforts to maintain control over its colony (Lawrence, 2005). After the French withdrawal in 1954, and the subsequent partition of Vietnam, the United States assumed primary responsibility for supporting the non-communist government in South Vietnam. During the following years, a series of Presidents gradually increased the US' financial and military commitment to the government. This escalating commitment culminated in Lyndon Johnson, 1965 decision to "Americanize" the war; this entailed the introduction of American combat forces into South Vietnam, coupled with a sustained air war against North Vietnam.

To rally public support for an escalation of the war, the President asserted that there were high stakes in the conflict; in a speech on 7 April 1965, he argued that if South Vietnam fell to communism, this would embolden China, “a nation which is helping the forces of violence in almost every continent.” Furthermore, he warned, “to leave Vietnam to its fate would shake the confidence of all these people in the value of an American commitment and in the value of America’s word. The result would be increased unrest and instability, even wide war” (Johnson, 1965).

Overall, the “Domino Theory” Frame qualifies as strong; Johnson argued that the costs of allowing China’s power to grow were high, posing a direct threat to the security of the United States. Furthermore, at this point, no other prominent political leaders outlined counterframes questioning the President’s catastrophic predictions about the consequences of allowing South Vietnam to fall under communist control. More precisely, historian William Conrad Gibbons estimates that in 1965, there were only 10–12 Senators and 40–45 Congressmen who were openly opposed to the war; the remainder tacitly or vocally supported the President’s Vietnam policies (Gibbons, 2005, pp. 32–38).

With a strong frame, and no prominent counterframes, the President enjoyed public support for his policy. In a poll in June of 1965, 79% of the public agreed that, “if we don’t stand fast in Vietnam the Communists will move in to take over the rest of Southeast Asia”.² In accordance with this, in another poll in June 65% of respondents supported US military efforts in Vietnam, and only 20% supported pulling out.³

By 1967, however, public support for the “Domino Theory” Frame had begun to weaken, with polls showing that a growing percentage of the public believed that the initial decision to become involved in the war was a “mistake” (Mueller, 1973, pp. 54–55). Despite the fact that they no longer endorsed the original rationale of containing communist influence in Southeast Asia, a majority of the public did believe that the United States was winning the war, and thus continued to hold hawkish policy preferences. For example, in December of 1967, 52% of the public considered themselves “hawks,” while 35% identified themselves as “doves.” In another poll in January of 1968 the number of “hawks” stood at 56%, and the number of “doves” 28% (Mueller, 1973, p. 107). In essence, even though the public wished the United States had never become involved in Vietnam, they rejected the idea of abandoning an ostensibly successful war.

5.2. The Tet Offensive and the demise of the “Domino Theory” Frame, 1968

Although the “Domino Theory” Frame persisted throughout 1967, owing to the fact that the public still believed the war was winnable, the Tet Offensive shocked the public and elites alike, and reoriented the policy debate. At this point, opponents of Johnson’s policy argued that the enemy’s ability to launch a major offensive, albeit an unsuccessful one, flatly contradicted the President’s optimistic rhetoric about the inevitability of a US victory.

More precisely, proponents of withdrawal outlined a “Stalemate” Counterframe. They argued that the continuing strength of the enemy demonstrated that the United States would never be able to achieve a military victory. Instead, they asserted that the United States should begin withdrawing troops, and devote its efforts to seeking a negotiated settlement. In addition to presenting a compelling logic for ending the war, the frame had a well-known, credible sponsor. In March, Robert Kennedy withdrew his support of Johnson, and entered the race for the Democratic Presidential nomination; he was now more strident in his criticism of the President, and premised his campaign on the idea that Johnson’s Vietnam policy was “bankrupt” (LaFeber, 2005, p. 89). These criticisms were also echoed by respected media figures; most famously, on 27 February, Walter Cronkite used the final three minutes of the evening news broadcast to speak out against the war. He argued, “The bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate. To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past” (Hallin, 1986, p. 170).

After weeks of media and Congressional criticism of Johnson's policy, there was a clear shift in opinion, with the public rallying to the "Stalemate" Counterframe. A poll in late February demonstrated that the public no longer believed the United States was winning the war; specifically, 42% thought the United States was "standing still" in the war, and 21% thought the United States was losing. Only 31% still believed that the United States was winning.⁴ In contrast, in November of 1967, 51% of the public believed the United States was winning in Vietnam, and only 8% believed the United States was losing.⁵ Consistent with this, by March, there was a sharp drop in the number of people identifying themselves as "hawks," with only 41% now preferring to escalate the war; in contrast, 42% favored reducing US involvement in Vietnam (Mueller, 1973, p. 107).

The existing weakness of the "Domino Theory" Frame, combined with the emergence of a credible counterframe, led the President to acknowledge that a policy change was necessary. As a result, on 31 March, in a televised address, Johnson accepted the demise of his frame; he announced that he would not run in the upcoming presidential election, and also promised to make a renewed effort to secure a negotiated end to the war (Johnson, 1968). The two men vying to succeed him both pledged to end the war. Republican nominee Richard Nixon promised "peace with honor," while the Democratic Party platform promised an "honorable and lasting settlement" to the war (Berman, 2001, p. 45; *Democratic Party Platform*, 1968).

5.3. Nixon's "Reputation" Reframe, 1969

By the time Nixon took office, the public was ready to begin reducing the US presence in Vietnam; a Gallup poll taken in January of 1969 indicated that 57% of the public favored initiating month-by-month troop reductions.⁶ In addition, the public was eager to set an end-date for involvement. In June of 1969, Gallup outlined a hypothetical policy, whereby the United States would allow the United Nations to supervise an election in South Vietnam; after the election, the United States would withdraw all its troops over a 12-month period. Fifty-six percent of respondents favored this policy.⁷

During the 1968 Presidential campaign, Nixon gave every indication that he intended to follow public opinion; although he refrained from outlining a detailed policy proposal, he insinuated that he had an ironclad plan for quickly ending US involvement in the Vietnam War (Berman, 2001, p. 45). Initially, Nixon hoped to secure a breakthrough in the peace talks initiated by his predecessor, and achieve a dignified end to US involvement in the war during his first months in office. By March of 1969, however, the President acknowledged that the talks were hopelessly deadlocked (Minutes of National Security Council Meeting, 1969a). At this point, Nixon faced two unpleasant options. He could follow public opinion, and exit the war without a peace treaty; alternately, he could renege on his campaign promise, and prolong US involvement in the war, in the hopes of weakening the North Vietnamese and forcing them to accept a peace settlement favorable to US interests.

Nixon quickly rejected the first option; both the President, and his National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, believed that the outcome of the Vietnam War would have far-reaching consequences for US foreign policy. More precisely, both men believed that withdrawing from the conflict without either a peace treaty or a military victory would make the United States appear weak; as Kissinger argued, it would give the United States a "credibility problem," calling into question its reliability as an alliance partner (Dallek, 2007, pp. 114–115). At one point, Nixon argued that the war was not only about the future of South Vietnam, but also about "the survival of the United States as a world power" (Memorandum of Conversation, 1969).

In accordance with this belief, the President had begun to gravitate towards a second option, the policy of "Vietnamization." This most prominent advocate of this policy was Nixon's Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird; he argued that the policy represented a compromise between the public's desire to quickly reduce the United States' commitment, and the President's desire to achieve a dignified end to the war. More precisely, to quell public dissatisfaction with the war and stave off pressure for a full withdrawal, the United States would begin gradually withdrawing its soldiers, and turning

over combat responsibilities to the South Vietnamese. This would buy the President more time to press for a negotiated settlement to the war, an outcome that he regarded as “honorable”.⁸

Although Nixon supported the idea of gradually withdrawing troops, he believed that if Vietnamization was to work, it would have to be stretched over several years, to ensure that the timing of troop withdrawals was contingent upon the ability of the South Vietnam to assume combat responsibilities. Overall, he expected that this would require at least two or three more years of US involvement in the conflict; polls showed that this was a far longer commitment than Congress and the public was willing to tolerate (Minutes of National Security Council Meeting, 1969b; Conversation between President Nixon and Kissinger, 1969; Memorandum for the Record, 1969).

Absent any other feasible options for averting a defeat, by the fall, Nixon decided to reframe the debate, in order to win public support for several additional years of US involvement in Vietnam. The President believed that the public would support a longer war, if they were convinced that the only alternative was an undignified retreat. As Nixon noted in an October 1969 meeting, although a majority of the public regretted the decision to become involved in Vietnam, “there is still a substantial proportion of the population which says that we should not take a bloody nose” (Memorandum of Conversation, 1969, p. 462).

At this point, Nixon faced the ideal situation for reframing the debate, as the threat of a counterframe had temporarily receded. More precisely, after Nixon’s election, William Fulbright, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and a leading proponent of the “Stalemate” Counterframe, announced that he would temporarily refrain from criticizing the President; he believed that Nixon was sincere about ending the war quickly, and did not want to impede the President in this task. Nixon received similar pledges of support from anti-war Senators Mike Mansfield and George McGovern. These Senators, however, were clear that if Nixon did not quickly break with Johnson’s policies and terminate the war during his first year in office, they would attempt to rally Congressional support for a withdrawal timetable (Mann, 2001, p. 627).

In addition, at this time, Nixon was generally popular with this public. In early October of 1969, he had an approval rating of 58%; in another poll, in late October, 56% of the public approved of his performance as President, and 24% disapproved.⁹

In order to preempt the reemergence of the “Stalemate” Counterframe and win public support for long-term involvement in Vietnam, on 3 November, Nixon delivered a major policy speech on the war, commonly known as the “Silent Majority Address.” The speech was an effort by Nixon to reframe the debate; the President acknowledged that the US was not winning the war, but asked the public to support a continued military effort. Early in his address, he cautioned that public that the “first defeat in our Nation’s history would result in a collapse of confidence in American leadership, not only in Asia but throughout the world.” Nixon argued that he could not accept this outcome, and instead, was prepared to keep US troops in South Vietnam until that country was strong enough to defend itself. Additionally, he rejected a timetable or a termination date for US involvement, arguing that this would only help the enemy, who could simply wait for the United States to leave.

Moreover, Nixon sought to silence his critics by arguing that there were no alternatives to his policy, aside from abject surrender. In fact, he suggested that criticism of his policy was tantamount to aiding the enemy, asserting, “North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.” At the end of the speech, he asked the “silent majority” of Americans to support the continued military options, so as to preserve the US’ standing in the world (Nixon, 1969).

As expected, with a popular leader and the absence of a credible counterframe, Nixon was able to rally public support for prolonging the war, by focusing the high costs of a withdrawal. A poll taken immediately after the speech showed that 77% of the public approved of Nixon’s handling of the Vietnam War, with only 6% indicating disapproval.¹⁰ This was a dramatic shift from a poll taken less

than two weeks earlier, when 57% of the public approved of his handling of the war, and 32% disapproved.¹¹ Additionally, in a poll taken in late November 74% of the public considered themselves part of the “silent majority” who “supported [Nixon’s] Vietnam policies”.¹²

In accordance with this, during the following months, the public no longer favored a rapid withdrawal of troops, and was willing to defer to the President’s judgment on this issue. In a poll in December, 56% of the public indicated that the current rate of troop withdrawals was “about right”.¹³ When Gallup asked this question again in April of 1970, a 47% plurality thought the rate of troop withdrawals was “about right”; notably, 8% thought the rate of withdrawals was “too fast,” and only 34% thought the rate was “too slow”.¹⁴

In addition to rallying public support, by reframing the debate, Nixon succeeded in putting his Democratic opponents in a “reactive mode.” In essence, by arguing that the only alternative to his policy was capitulation, the speech truncated the debate over Vietnam, and left the President’s opponents in Congress little room to maneuver. As a result, during the following years, the President faced no strong Congressional challenges to his policy, allowing him to prolong the conflict (Belasco, Cunningham, Fischer, & Nicksch, 2007).

5.4. The decline of the “Reputation” Frame and the triumph of the “Futility” Counterframe, 1971–1975

Nixon’s “Reputation” Frame proved durable; throughout 1970, the public supported continued involvement in Vietnam, so long as the United States was gradually withdrawing troops. Additionally, the frame weathered a strong test in April of 1970, when Nixon decided to expand the ground war into Cambodia, to eliminate enemy sanctuaries across the border. Specifically, on 30 April, when Nixon announced the invasion of Cambodia, he invoked reputational considerations; he argued that an aggressive response would convince the North Vietnamese, as well as other countries, that the United States was not a “pitiful, helpless giant.” In addition, Nixon underscored the stakes in the war, warning that the United States would become a “second rate power” if it did not triumph in Vietnam (Nixon, 1970).

Despite the public’s earlier reluctance to become involved in Cambodia, a poll taken after the President’s speech found that 56% of the public thought the intervention was justified; another poll showed that a 49% plurality thought the President’s decision “was right”.¹⁵

By 1971, however, support for Nixon’s frame had begun to slip again; by January of that year, 73% of the public supported a Congressional proposal that would bring all US troops home by the end of the year.¹⁶ In accordance with this, by late 1971, Nixon and Kissinger sought to secure a negotiated end to the war before the Democratic Party unified around a counterframe in the run-up to the 1972 Presidential election. As Kissinger noted in September of 1971, it was “essential that we leave Vietnam as an act of government policy and with dignity” (Berman, 2001, p. 97).

No peace deal, however, was reached before the 1972 elections. Although the Democratic nominee, George McGovern, did run on an anti-war platform, promising to withdraw troops within 90 days of taking office, the public simply did not trust the Democratic candidate, and thus his counterframe had little traction (McGovern, 1972). Specifically, polls showed that majorities of the public viewed McGovern as a “radical” who endorsed “way out ideas”.¹⁷ In line with this, polls showed that the public trusted Nixon on the issue of Vietnam; in a poll in July of 1972, 52% of the public preferred Nixon’s approach to ending the war, compared to only 33% who preferred McGovern’s approach.¹⁸ In addition, 54% of the public believed that Nixon was the “real peace candidate” in the race.¹⁹

Following his reelection, however, Nixon redoubled his efforts to gain a peace treaty. After several additional weeks of negotiations, a final US bombing campaign, and repeated assurances to the South Vietnamese government, on 23 January 1973, the parties initialed the Paris Peace Accords (Willbanks, 2008, p. 186). In a televised address, Nixon described the Accords as “peace with honor,”

since “[t]he people of South Vietnam have been guaranteed the right to determine their own future, without outside interference”.²⁰

5.5. The emergence of the “Futility” Counterframe, 1975

After the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, the Vietnam War faded from public consciousness. During 1973 and 1974, however, Congress and the President continued to struggle over the level of support the United States would provide to South Vietnam. First, in June of 1973, Congress enacted legislation that ended funding for combat operation in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam (Willbanks, 2008, p. 195). A few months later, Congress decreased the amount of military aid South Vietnam would receive in 1974 (Webb & Poole, 2007, p. 355). Nixon then appealed for supplemental aid, warning that the government of South Vietnam could not survive without US economic and military support. The Democratic majority in Congress was unmoved; they rejected this request, and again trimmed the President’s aid request for the 1975 fiscal year (Willbanks, 2008, pp. 214–216).

These clashes between the President and Congress foreshadowed the framing contest that occurred in spring of 1975. At this point, the South Vietnamese government was on the verge of collapse, after failing to repel a series of North Vietnamese offensives (Webb & Poole, 2007, p. 358). Nixon’s successor, President Gerald Ford, was still committed to Nixon’s “Reputation” Frame; he believed that the outcome of the war would reflect on the United States’ credibility as an alliance partner (Minutes of National Security Council Meeting, 1975). In accordance with this, the President sought to rally public and Congressional support for emergency aid to South Vietnam, to stave off its defeat. On 10 April, Ford appeared before a joint session of Congress to formally request continued aid. In his speech, he acknowledged the public’s desire to “shut our eyes and wash our hands of the whole matter.” Despite this, he implored Congress to provide more aid, since it was imperative to “keep America’s word good throughout the world” (Gwertzman, 1975; Rosenbaum, 1975a).

By 1975, however, the Democratic Party had overcome its internal divisions and was able to unify behind a “Futility” Counterframe that justified terminating all support of South Vietnam. In response to Ford’s assertion that South Vietnam could survive, with just a bit more support, in the days leading up to his Congressional address, the Democrats argued that it was futile to provide any more aid to that country, citing that corruption of its government and the incompetence of its army (Jespersen, 2002, p. 456).

For example, West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd, once an ardent hawk, argued that “three hundred million dollars can never instill will and determination and discipline” in the South Vietnamese (Rosenbaum, 1975a). Similarly, Morris K. Udall, Congressman from Arizona, argued that the President’s request “ignores the reality of a South Vietnamese Army on the run, its spirit broken, its leadership in shambles” (Apple, 1975). In addition, many Republicans rallied around the “Futility” Counterframe, and joined the Democrats in supporting of abandoning South Vietnam. In essence, proponents of the “Futility” Counterframe asserted that the United States had squandered enough resources propping up a hapless regime, and it was simply time for the United States to end its commitment (Jespersen, 2002, pp. 455–456, 463).

The “Futility” Counterframe qualifies as a credible counterframe; by deflecting blame onto the South Vietnamese, members of Congress made the termination of aid seem like a prudent choice, rather than a surrender that reflected poorly on the United States, as Ford sought to portray it. In addition, at this time, Ford had little influence with the public, owing to his unpopularity. In a poll in January, his approval rating stood at 40%, and in late February, it had slipped to 39%.²¹ In addition, in a poll in February, only 28% of the public indicated that they would like him to run for President in 1976.²²

Ultimately, the “Futility” Counterframe triumphed over the weak “Reputation” Frame, and the public supported a full termination of US involvement; in a poll in April, 75% of the public opposed Ford’s request for additional military aid.²³ In accordance with this, on 17 April, when the Senate Armed Services Committee rejected the aid request, Ford declined to make further public appeals (Rosenbaum, 1975b).

Polls taken a few weeks later, after the collapse of South Vietnam, provided further evidence of the degree to which the “Futility” Counterframe had won public support. More precisely, when asked why South Vietnam had fallen to communism, 54% of the public argued that the outcome of the war was attributable to corruption in the South Vietnamese government.²⁴ In contrast, when asked if the fall of South Vietnam could be blamed on a “lack of commitment on the part of the American people,” a 43% plurality responded “not at all”; a further 30% believed that the United States could be blamed only “a little” for the defeat of South Vietnam.²⁵

Finally, the public rejected Ford’s assertion that the collapse of South Vietnam would diminish the US’ standing in the world; when asked if the defeat of South Vietnam signaled that the United States had become a “second rate nation,” 60% of respondents disagreed.²⁶ Overall, in 1975, the Democrats succeeded in convincing the public that there were no costs associated with abandoning South Vietnam, and thus it was no longer reasonable to expend any more resources ensuring the country’s survival.

6. Conclusions

The two case studies demonstrate that the public debates during two distinct conflicts, initiated with very different goals, followed a similar trajectory. Although each war was popular at the onset, with the public supporting the achievement of an affirmative policy goal, as time passed and costs rose, public support began to slip. Political leaders in both countries, however, were unwilling to allow their state to exit the war without some semblance of a victory; to convince the public to support continued involvement and the expenditure of even more blood and treasure, each leader outlined loss aversion arguments.

At their core, these arguments for continued involvement did not posit that the country should work to achieve its original policy goal; instead, leaders asserted that it was necessary to continue fighting simply to avoid defeat. In 1956, de Gaulle warned the French public about the catastrophic consequences of leaving Algeria in the hands of the rebels; he cautioned that it would lead to a violent war, and perhaps even worse, cement France’s position as a post-imperial, second-rate power.

Nixon outlined similarly dire consequences in 1969, when warning against a hasty withdrawal from Vietnam. While acknowledging that the public did not care about the fate of South Vietnam, Nixon noted that what was really at stake was the fate of the US as a credible superpower, something that would have profound implications for the broader geopolitical struggle against the Soviet Union.

These appeals ultimately succeeded, and purchased de Gaulle and Nixon more time to try to secure face-saving outcomes to their respective wars. Public opinion was fluid, however, and citizens in each country eventually became receptive to counterframes about the wisdom of terminating involvement. These successful counterframes inverted the loss aversion arguments used earlier in the conflicts, and instead deemphasized the costs of ending the war.

de Gaulle himself promoted the counterframe that won public support for ending the Algerian war. Here, he assuaged public concerns about the reputational costs of leaving Algeria to the FLN, concerns he had taken pains to highlight only a year earlier. In a series of public addresses in 1960, de Galle argued that France had in fact already achieved its goal of developing Algeria, and could now leave the country. de Gaulle’s success in convincing the public to adopt this view of reality is a testament to his unique political status and considerable persuasive skills.

In contrast, the political debate leading to the end of US involvement in Vietnam represented a framing contest, with President Ford and a dwindling number of supporters in Congress attempting to resuscitate the idea that the US’ continued credibility as a global power was linked to the outcome in Vietnam. Democrats in Congress, however, tapped into widespread public dissatisfaction with the apparent fecklessness of the South Vietnamese. By placing blame exogenously, the “Futility” Counterframe made it acceptable to abandon the US’ long held goal of propping up a non-communist regime in South Vietnam.

Much more research needs to be done on the issue of loss aversion framing in wartime and its impact of policy-making. The cases addressed here are hardly unique, and loss aversion rhetoric continues to be a feature of wartime debates, most recently during the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (McHugh, 2015). Closer examination of political debates during other protracted conflicts involving democracies would likely yield similar findings.

The prevalence, and apparent success of loss aversion rhetoric as a tool for rallying public support raises questions about the role of the public opinion in wartime. In the comparatively esoteric realm of foreign affairs, leaders appear to have far greater ability to manipulate public perceptions of costs than they do with more familiar issues of social and economic policy. Overall, understanding the outcomes of wars requires examining not just events on the frontlines, but also the “war at home”, namely the political struggle to define stakes in the war, and ultimately, the meaning of victory and defeat.

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Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all *New York Times* articles were downloaded from the ProQuest Historical Newspapers Database, *The New York Times* (1851–2006) (Callender, 1957).
2. Harris Survey, Released June 28, 1965. Roper iPoll Databank.
3. Gallup Poll (AIPO), Released June 9, 1965. Roper iPoll Databank.
4. Gallup Poll (AIPO), Released February 27, 1968. Roper iPoll Databank.
5. Gallup Poll (AIPO), Released November 21, 1967. Roper iPoll Databank.
6. Gallup Poll (AIPO), Released January 6, 1969. Roper iPoll Databank.
7. Gallup Poll (AIPO), Released June 24, 1969. Roper iPoll Databank.
8. Laird's memo is attached to: Memorandum from Kissinger to President Nixon (1969a, 1969b).
9. Gallup Poll (AIPO), Released October 1969. Roper iPoll Databank.
10. Gallup Poll (AIPO), Released November 4, 1969. Roper iPoll Databank.
11. Gallup Poll (AIPO), Released October 22, 1969. Roper iPoll Databank.
12. CBS News Poll, Released November 26, 1969. Roper iPoll Databank.
13. Harris Survey, Released December 9, 1969. Roper iPoll Databank.
14. Harris Survey, Released April 1, 1970. Roper iPoll Databank.
15. Harris Survey, Released May 1, 1970; Harris Survey, Released April 1, 1970. All data from Roper iPoll Databank.
16. Gallup Poll (AIPO), Released on January 11, 1971. Roper iPoll Databank.
17. Harris Survey, released on August 28, 1972.
18. Harris Survey, Released July 17, 1972. Roper iPoll Databank.

19. Time/Yankelovich Voter Study Wave 1, Released August 1, 1972. Roper iPoll Databank.
20. “Text of a radio and television address by the President on an agreement ending the war and restoring peace in Vietnam,” printed in Berman (2001, pp. 285–287).
21. ORC Public Opinion Index, Released January 1975; Gallup Poll (AIPO), Released February 1975. Roper iPoll Databank.
22. Gallup Poll (AIPO), Released February 1975. Roper iPoll Databank.
23. Harris Survey, Released April 10, 1975. Roper iPoll Databank.
24. Time/Yankelovich, Skelly & White Poll, Released May 22, 1975. Roper iPoll Databank.
25. Time/Yankelovich, Skelly & White Poll, Released May 22, 1975. Roper iPoll Databank.
26. Time/Yankelovich, Skelly and White Poll, Released May 22, 1975. Roper iPoll Databank.

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