

**Butter Versus Guns?
Electoral Disincentives to Defense Effort**

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Abstract: Empirical researchers are divided over whether or not democracies exert greater defense effort than non-democracies in times of war. Examining known tendencies from the democratic selection effects literature (“quagmire” and casualty aversion, economic issue salience, and a relative reluctance on the part of democratic leaders to initiate wars later in an election cycle), I find that political competition incentivizes democratic governing coalitions to lower their defense burdens by constraining the scope of their objectives and choosing casualty-averse strategies. I also recommend further avenues for research based on improved specification of conflict salience and regime type variables.

“Even though [governments] perceive that because of the balance of power a given foreign policy is certain to fail, nevertheless they may pursue that policy if they are convinced that national law, national tradition, or national public opinion is firmly committed to it. ... They may be obliged to attempt the impossible in order to retain office.”

- Quincy Wright, *A Study of War*¹

“The men in the Soviet politburo don't have to worry about the ebb and flow of public opinion. They put guns before butter, while we put just about everything before guns.”

- Margaret Thatcher, “Britain Awake” speech²

Decisions regarding the initiation of war are among the most contentious issues faced by democracies. Elected officials must weigh the national interest, military balance, public opinion, and their domestic agendas in considering when, where, and how to enter hostilities. Political scientists Dan Reiter and Allan Stam have shown democracies to be more risk averse than non-democracies in deciding whether to pursue or avoid conflicts.³ Simultaneously, electoral politics appears to constrain leaders' ability to choose cost intensive strategies. Could it be the case that democracies excel at picking their fights, but wage them inefficiently?⁴

¹ Quincy Wright, *A Study of War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 154.

² Margaret Thatcher, “Britain Awake” (speech, Kensington Town Hall, Chelsea, London, January 19, 1976).

³ Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 10-57.

⁴ Geoffrey F. Weiss, “The Efficiency Paradox: How Hyperefficiency Can Become the Enemy of Victory in War,” *Air & Space Power Journal* 26, no. 1 (January/February 2012): 32-49. In his title Weiss uses “hyperefficiency” in a negative sense to connote a misguided parsimony in the face of war’s inherent uncertainty.

The assertion that democracies win their wars more often than autocratic states has gained acceptance from a growing number of liberal international relations researchers.⁵ Two broad explanations, which may be called the democratic selection and war-fighting theories, are commonly offered to account for this apparent advantage.⁶ Democratic selection, associated with the work of Dan Reiter, Allan C. Stam, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Randolph Siverson, attributes the wartime success of democracies to their superior discretion in choosing which confrontations to initiate.⁷ Research by David Lake, Reiter, Stam, and others lends weight to the theory that democracies are also qualitatively better war-fighters.⁸ Of the several variations on the war-fighting explanation, the claim that democracies are able to exert greater defense effort than non-democracies has received much attention. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, James Morrow, Randolph Siverson, Alastair Smith, and Benjamin Goldsmith all make defense effort a key element of their war-fighting theories.⁹ However, the democratic selection literature draws attention to a number of factors that, while restricting elected leaders' willingness to initiate conflicts, also condition their strategic choices when wars do occur. The result is that, contrary to the expectations of defense effort theorists, democracies are incentivized to choose force

⁵ Reiter and Stam, 2; David A. Lake, "Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War," *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 1 (March 1992): 24-37.

⁶ William Reed and David H. Clark, "War Initiators and War Winners: The Consequences of Linking Theories of Democratic War Success," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44, no. 3 (June 2000): 380, doi:10.1177/0022002700044003005.

⁷ Reiter and Stam, 10-57; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Randolph M. Siverson, "War and the Survival of Political Leaders: A Comparative Study of Regime Types and Political Accountability," *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 4 (December 1995): 841-55; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., "Policy Failure and Political Survival: The Contribution of Political Institutions," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 43, no. 2 (April 1999): 147-61, doi:10.1177/0022002799043002002.

⁸ Reiter and Stam, 58-83; Lake, 24-37; Benjamin E. Goldsmith, "Defense Effort and Institutional Theories of Democratic Peace and Victory: Why Try Harder?," *Security Studies* 16, no. 2 (April 2007): 189-222. Besides the "defense effort" argument that this paper examines, some have proposed that democracies produce more flexible, better educated warfighters, with greater morale, and that democratic governments are better at building winning military coalitions. Reiter and Stam analyze both these arguments in *Democracies at War*.

⁹ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., "An Institutional Explanation of the Democratic Peace," *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 4 (December 1999): 791-807; Goldsmith, 189-222. Defense effort is typically operationalized in terms of material defense burden (measured as the percentage of Gross Domestic Product spent on defense) and human defense burden (the percentage of the population enrolled in military service), as in Goldsmith, 200-201.

structures and strategies that mobilize less defense effort than is militarily desirable, leading one career officer to lament an institutional “tendency to leverage minimum force to produce a result.”¹⁰

In this paper, I will survey the existing literature to establish three primary institutional factors that incentivize democracies to adopt less resource-intensive strategies: casualty and “quagmire” aversion, economic issue salience, and timing of conflicts with respect to the electoral cycle. I then build on the work of critics such as Michael Desch to argue that the defense effort literature is compromised by an overemphasis on competitive leadership selection and a failure to recognize important institutional differences among democracies.¹¹ Finally, I will propose several avenues of further research.

Literature Review

The relationship of democracy to warfare has been a staple of liberal political theory since the publication of Immanuel Kant's essay, "Perpetual Peace" in 1795. Kant proposed that "if the consent of the citizens is required in order to decide that war should be declared ... nothing is more natural than that they would be very cautious in commencing such a poor game, decreeing for themselves all the calamities of war."¹² The assertion that states' international behavior is conditioned by their domestic political institutions directly challenges the neorealist perspective, in which the distribution of power within the international system is the primary

¹⁰ Weiss, 36. Against this tendency, General Fred Franks (a Corps commander in Operation DESERT STORM) once remarked, “If you have to fight ... then 100 to nothing is about the right score for the battlefield. Twenty-four to twenty-one may be okay in the NFL on Sunday afternoon, but not on the battlefield.” Tom Clancy and Fred Franks, *Into the Storm: A Study in Command* (New York: Putnam, 1997), 20.

¹¹ Michael C. Desch, "Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters," *International Security* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 5-47, doi:10.1162/016228802760987815.

¹² Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," Documents of Diplomatic History, 1795, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/kant/kant1.htm>.

influence on state conduct.¹³ Kant's notion of a Democratic Peace was revived for the modern era by Dean Babst, who proclaimed in a 1972 business journal article that there had never been a war between two democratic regimes.¹⁴ His observation of a concrete divergence in the behavior of democratic and non-democratic states inspired a wealth of empirical literature.¹⁵ Since then, the belief that democracies generally do not fight one another has become axiomatic. During the 1980s and 1990s, the research agenda shifted to more nuanced studies that sought to determine the origins, conditions, and boundaries of the Democratic Peace. Areas of inquiry included the democratic propensity to fight wars with non-democracies,¹⁶ democratic aversion to casualties and protracted conflict,¹⁷ dispute resolution patterns between democracies,¹⁸ and the behavior of transitional regimes.¹⁹

¹³ E.g. Waltz's claim that multipolar international systems are more war-prone than bipolar systems. See William C. Wohlforth, "Realism," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 137.

¹⁴ Dean Babst, "A Force for Peace," *Industrial Research*, April 1972, 55-58.

¹⁵ Melvin Small and J. David Singer, "The War-proneness of Democratic Regimes, 1816-1965," *Jerusalem Journal of International Relations* 1, no. 4 (1976): 50-69; Rudolph J. Rummel, "Libertarianism and International Violence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 27, no. 1 (1983): 27-71; Michael W. Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1983): 205-35; Steve Chan, "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall... Are the Freer Countries More Pacific?," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 28, no. 4 (1984): 617-48; Erich Weede, "Democracy and War Involvement," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 28, no. 4 (December 1984): 649-64; Zeev Maoz and Nasrin Abdolali, "Regime Types and International Conflict, 1816-1976," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 33, no. 1 (March 1989): 3-35; Zeev Maoz and Bruce Russett, "Normative and Structural Causes of Democratic Peace, 1946-1986," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (September 1993): 624-38; John R. Oneal and Bruce M. Russett, "The Classical Liberals Were Right: Democracy, Interdependence, and Conflict, 1950-1985," *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (June 1997): 267-94.

¹⁶ D. Scott Bennett and Allan C. Stam, III, "The Declining Advantages of Democracy: A Combined Model of War Outcomes and Duration," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 3 (June 1998): 344-66, doi:10.1177/0022002798042003007.

¹⁷ Randolph M. Siverson, "Democracies and War Participation: In Defense of the Institutional Constraints Argument," *European Journal of International Relations* 1, no. 4 (December 1995): 481-89; D. Scott Bennett and Allan C. Stam, III, "The Duration of Interstate Wars, 1816-1985," *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 2 (June 1996): 239-57.

¹⁸ William J. Dixon, "Democracy and the Peaceful Settlement of International Conflict," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 1 (March 1994): 14-32; Gregory A. Raymond, "Democracies, Disputes, and Third-party Intermediaries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 38, no. 1 (March 1994): 24-42; Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Michael Mousseau, "Democracy and Compromise in Militarized Interstate Conflicts, 1816-1992," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 2 (April 1998): 210-30.

¹⁹ Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratization and War," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (May/June 1995): 79-97; Michael D. Ward and Kristian S. Gleditsch, "Democratizing for Peace," *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 1 (March 1998): 51-61.

The belief that democracies win disproportionately in their conflicts with non-democracies has produced its own distinctive literature. David Lake appears to have been the first to advance this claim, drawing on a statistical study of most wars fought between democracies and non-democracies since 1816. Lake found that democratic combatants, whether individually or as alliance members, won four times as often as autocratic regimes. Additionally, using the 11 point scale of democracy devised by the authors of the Polity II dataset, Lake found that the average Polity score of the victors in his sample was 3.05 points higher than the losers.²⁰ Reiter and Stam affirm Lake's central conclusion, and add that democratic war initiators are particularly more likely to win.²¹

Other authors have drawn attention to methodological flaws in these studies. Michael Desch points to the problem of democracies winning as part of mixed coalitions with authoritarian states; Lake's sample contains cases of non-democracies providing the preponderance of military forces, as well as instances where the historical data is missing or unclear. His dependent variable, war outcome, is the same for all participants, but independent variables such as military population and industrial capacity differ within these coalitions. Without a reliable methodology for distinguishing each combatant's contribution to the wartime coalition, it is impossible to establish regime type's role. Desch also showcases wars in which the winning coalition enjoys a greater than 2:1 advantage in certain measures of military power, and contends that—unless regime type is shown to have caused the power imbalance—it cannot be argued that regime type caused the military result.²² Alexander Downes sought to improve the

²⁰ Lake, 30-32. Lake intentionally excludes three conflicts that ended in draws, as well as the Spanish-American War. Relying on the Polity II dataset, Lake codes the Spanish regime as democratic, and hence considers the Spanish-American War a war between democracies. Spain's status as a democracy is disputed; see James Lee Ray, *Democracy and International Conflict: An Evaluation of the Democratic Peace Proposition* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).

²¹ Reiter and Stam, 27-33.

²² Desch, 9-16.

statistical analysis of Reiter and Stam by adding a third category (joiners, or third parties who joined a military coalition after a war began) of state combatants to their two (initiators and targets); historical analysis led him to recode many of Reiter and Stam's target states as joiners. Additionally, Downes added wars that end in draws to his analysis, reasoning that these stalemates can threaten the continuance of officeholders as well as defeats. After making these changes, the relationship between regime type and war outcome was no longer statistically significant.²³

Those who do affirm a relationship between regime type and wartime success have proposed various explanations (see note 6), of which the argument that “democracies try harder” is one of the most popular. In his initial 1992 study, Lake proposed that democracies are less prone to creating economic distortions through rent-seeking and are thus able to create more overall wealth, leaving them better equipped to prevail over autocratic states. Additionally, since democratic policies should enjoy greater social legitimacy, Lake suggests that democratic governments are better able to extract societal wealth in support of those policies.²⁴ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, James Morrow, Randolph Siverson, and Alastair Smith build upon Lake's theory by integrating his ideas about rent-seeking and wealth extraction into a game-theoretic model designed to explain democratic military success and other observed patterns.²⁵ They argue that democratic leaders, dependent upon the assent of a greater portion of society for continuance in office, are more sensitive to the costs of military defeat and therefore exert greater effort to win

²³ Alexander B. Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies? Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War," *International Security* 33, no. 4 (Spring 2009): 9-51.

²⁴ Lake, 24-37.

²⁵ Bueno de Mesquita et al. define democracy conceptually as a form of government where membership in the selectorate, or political class, is open to nearly all citizens and the size of the governing or winning coalition is large—“typically being a majority of” the selectorate. See Bueno de Mesquita et al., “An Institutional Explanation,” 793. Although their approach of building a game-theoretic model differs from empirical studies that analyze historical governments and wars, their emphasis on the openness and competitiveness of leadership selection is similar to that of the Polity dataset used in other studies.

their wars. Conversely, autocratic leaders face a choice between defense spending and affording private goods to their supporters. Since autocrats rely on a narrower "selectorate" for power, the cost of higher defense effort born by a member of the governing coalition should be proportionally greater in a dictatorship than in a democracy.²⁶ Benjamin Goldsmith's 2007 article "Defense Effort and Institutional Theories of Democratic Peace and Victory" empirically tested the relationship between defense effort and democratic institutions. Examining the period 1886-1997, Goldsmith supports Lake's central premise that democracies exert greater absolute and relative defense effort during war.²⁷

Michael Desch, Dan Reiter, and Allan C. Stam all find fault with the defense effort theory. Addressing Lake's claim that democracies are greater absolute wealth generators, Desch argues that the empirical literature is unsettled and that it is equally probable that wealth promotes democratization—in other words, the relationship may be the inverse of what “democratic triumphalists” suppose. Additionally, he credibly attacks the assumption that democracies are less given to rent-seeking than autocracies and cites earlier literature on wealth extraction showing that regime maturity, rather than regime type, is determinative.²⁸ Reiter and Stam make largely the same argument regarding absolute wealth, and find no empirically significant relationship between regime type and defense burden (whether human or material).²⁹ This directly contradicts Goldsmith, who suggests that the different findings may be due to data quality; Reiter and Stam's models used three different industrial variables as proxies for Gross

²⁶ Bueno de Mesquita et al., "An Institutional Explanation," 791-807. While Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, and Smith agree with Lake that democracies "try harder," their theories emphasize different causal mechanisms. For Lake, the democratic "arsenal of victory" is a benefit of democracy's salutary economic and social effects, whereas the selectorate school views democratic defense effort as an imperative of political survival.

²⁷ Goldsmith, 189-222. "Defense burden" is defined in note 7. Contrary to the expectations of the "selectorate school," Goldsmith finds little support for a relationship between the size of a state's governing coalition and that state's level of defense effort. However, both political competition and executive constraints were supported by his analysis as explanations for higher defense burdens.

²⁸ Desch, 5-47.

²⁹ Reiter and Stam, 114-143.

Domestic Product, whereas Goldsmith tested multiple GDP estimates from different sources for the period before reliable data was available.³⁰ However, even assuming Goldsmith's GDP data is more reliable, this does not account for the differing results regarding *human* defense burden.

In summary, the theoretical and empirical foundations of the “defense effort” school have been convincingly undermined by critics both within and outside what Desch calls the “democratic triumphalist” viewpoint. At best, the current empirical literature is inconclusive, and insufficient to affirm a positive relationship between democracy and defense effort. Improved specification regarding democratic *disincentives* to defense effort, along the lines suggested by Desch's rent-seeking argument, may help clarify the issue by suggesting testable hypotheses that could reveal a democratic disadvantage.

Defense Burden Disincentives

Both the proponents and critics of the “defense effort” school agree that democratic leaders’ primary interest is continuance in office. Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, and Smith base their model on the desire of all political leaders “to remain in office.”³¹ Reiter and Stam likewise conceive of elected officials as rational actors who “think about war the way they do about any other policy issue, seeking to capture benefits while minimizing costs,” and generally “prefer winning to losing, and to retain the offices of leadership.”³² Within the broader field of political science, the view of politicians as reelection maximizers is considered a standard predictive model.³³ Thus the “defense effort” school closely associates military defeat with policy failure as something to be avoided at great cost, because not doing so may lead to

³⁰ Reiter and Stam, 137-139; Goldsmith, 200.

³¹ Bueno de Mesquita et al., “An Institutional Explanation,” 793.

³² Reiter and Stam, 11-12.

³³ Kurt T. Gaubatz, *Elections and War: The Electoral Incentive in the Democratic Politics of War and Peace* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 17; 53-55. As an example, see E. Scott Adler, *Why Congressional Reforms Fail: Reelection and the House Committee System* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 19-21.

electoral defeat. However, it is not necessarily the case that all military conflicts are equally important to the electorate. The U.S. intervention against far-off Serbia in 1999, led by a lame duck chief executive in a presidential system, was less relevant to the political fortunes of the American Democratic Party than France's 1939 intervention against neighboring Germany (who France had fought major wars against in 1870-71 and 1914-18) was to Édouard Daladier's coalition government in a parliamentary system. In a relative sense, the Kosovo episode was likely more politically salient to the American electorate than last year's Libya intervention due to the primacy of the poor economy as an issue in 2011.³⁴

Presented with militarized foreign disputes of varying degrees of salience, democratic leaders must decide how to allocate scarce political and economic capital among a range of competing issue areas. They do not do so with a clean slate; rather, foreign policy crises interrupt established agendas. In addition to the transient programs of political leaders, defense effort must also sometimes compete with domestic institutions like Social Security in the United States, the National Health Service in the United Kingdom, or the *Kindergeld* child allowance in Germany. Therefore, it seems more reasonable to expect that politicians will respond to the reelection incentive through satisficing strategy-making behaviors, unless a conflict is particularly salient.³⁵

³⁴ Laron K. Williams, David J. Brulé, and Michael Koch, "War Voting: Interstate Disputes, the Economy, and Electoral Outcomes," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 27, no. 5 (November 2010): 442-60, doi:10.1177/0738894210379328.

³⁵ Satisficing is a term of art referring to decision-making that seeks the acceptable answer when an *ideal* answer is no longer possible. This observation raises the questions of how one measures salience, and at what level of salience are democratic leaders impelled to engage in optimal (versus satisficing) strategy-making. With regard to the latter, a war that poses an existential threat to the state's political institutions or existence would clearly exceed the threshold—but in this regard democracies would be no different than non-democracies. Prospect theory also suggests that decision makers would view conflicts as being more salient when faced with losses rather than potential gains; however, since this observation is rooted in behavioral economics it should also apply to dictators as well as democrats. See Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk," *Econometrica* 47, no. 2 (March 1979): 263-91; Jack S. Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War," *World Politics* 40, no. 1 (October 1987): 82-107. Regarding measures of salience, Bennett and Stam coded salience in an unrelated study as a dummy variable with conflicts involving survival, autonomy, unification, territory, and reputation as salient, and conflicts over empire, trade, and policy considered non-salient; however, they note the difficulty of constructing a truly robust operationalization of salience, citing an "inability to

Further, even issue salience can be insufficient to keep elected officials from choosing satisficing strategies if the logic of political competition suggests an advantage in doing so. In 2011, the negative consequences of a U.S. credit default were well known to both Republican and Democratic leaders. Rather than making a “grand bargain” to reduce the deficit, the two sides chose to adopt an interim measure delaying final resolution until after the 2012 election. As a result, the U.S. credit rating was downgraded by Standard & Poors, risking higher borrowing costs for both consumers and the government.³⁶ This episode suggests two things about democratic politics that are relevant to decisions about waging war: what is rational with respect to an officeholder’s partisan in-group may be irrational with respect to the preferences and interests of the electorate as a whole, and what is rational in the context of the short time horizon preceding an election may be irrational in the longer term.

Having considered the effects of issue salience, in-group rationality, and electoral time horizons, it becomes apparent that the electoral incentive in war is more complicated than the strong aversion to policy failure assumed by the “defense effort” school. I will now examine in turn three potential disincentives to optimal defense effort that are either attenuated or lacking entirely in non-democracies: “quagmire” and casualty avoidance, the salience of the economy as a political issue, and election cycles.

make a more sophisticated differentiation.” See D. Scott Bennett and Allan C. Stam, III, “The Duration of Interstate Wars, 1816-1985,” *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 2 (June 1996): 248.

³⁶ “Analysts Warn Downgraded U.S. Credit Rating Could Lead to Hiked Interest Rates and Borrowing Costs,” *Daily Mail*, August 7, 2011, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2023067/US-loses-AAA-credit-rating-S-Ps-downgrade-lead-hiked-rates.html>. This episode is indicative of how satisficing strategies can lead, over time, to “draws” that constitute policy failure just as much as “losses,” echoing the findings of Downes, “How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?,” 9-51 and Bennett and Stam, “The Declining Advantages of Democracy,” 344-66. Additionally, it may be that divided governments are more likely to engage in satisficing strategies than states governed by a single party—in which case democracies would be at a disadvantage to non-democracies, since non-elective systems rarely produce divided regimes (fleeting alliances such as the one between Chinese communists and Nationalists during World War II being a rare exception). This possibility warrants further examination.

“Quagmire” and Casualty Avoidance

In “The Use of Force in Our Time,” Andrew Bacevich compared the institutional lessons learned of the U.S. military in Vietnam with those of Germany following the Great War. In both cases, the eventual political response to years of stalemate led to ‘stab-in-the-back’ myths; in future conflicts “popular impatience might lead to the withdrawal of support, with devastating consequences for the war's outcome and for those who fought. Therefore, an overriding imperative in future conflicts was to win quickly.”³⁷ In American political culture, this imperative to avoid wars that could not be easily and definitively won led to the Weinberger and Powell doctrines, which included a focus on exit strategies, and disparagement of “nation building” by political elites.³⁸ By 2001, an antipathy to protracted conflicts had become so well established that the specter of “quagmire” haunted early press coverage of the Afghanistan conflict.³⁹

This aversion accords with the selection effects explanation of democratic success in war. Further, it is backed up by the results of empirical research demonstrating that democracies become more likely than non-democracies to accept draws and seek negotiated settlements to conflicts as they extend beyond 18 months in duration.⁴⁰ In a separate model of war outcomes, powerful states in general were shown to be more likely to suffer from longer war durations and eventual defeat or stalemate at the hands of a weaker opponent when their political objectives required the coercion and acquiescence of the weaker state (as opposed to “brute force” objectives like territorial gains); this implicitly affirms the rationale of the anti-“nation building”

³⁷ Andrew J. Bacevich, "The Use of Force in Our Time," *Wilson Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (Winter 1995), accessed November 19, 2012, Academic Search Complete.

³⁸ “Nation building” in this sense being typically defined in opposition to 1990s era U.S. interventions such as Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo that were criticized as not reflecting a vital national interest.

³⁹ Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 313.

⁴⁰ Bennett and Stam, “The Declining Advantages of Democracy,” 344-66.

rhetoric.⁴¹ However, Downes counsels that problems may emerge when democracies fail to recognize the implications of their ‘occupy and coerce’ objectives, or wish to hide those implications from the electorate, and under-resource their forces.⁴²

Afghanistan is one such case. According to RAND researcher Seth Jones, the U.S. effort there was compromised early on by Pentagon officials eager to minimize the American commitment. He quotes Bush administration appointee Douglas Feith as writing, “Nation-building is not our key strategic goal. ... The term ‘nation-building’ [has] baggage.”⁴³ This faction’s “light footprint” strategy ultimately prevailed over those in the State Department who wanted a larger peacekeeping presence. Jones writes that this plan “was based on the assumption that a heavy footprint would lead to a Soviet- or British-style quagmire.”⁴⁴ Given that non-democracies should be less sensitive to mass preferences regarding conflict duration, and thus better prepared to weather stalemate, we would expect democracies, following Downes’ logic, to be more prone to parsimony in the interest of avoiding quagmires.

Like stalemate-avoidance, casualty aversion became a popular subject of research following Korea and Vietnam. Heavy casualties—especially during the Tet episode—were popularly thought to have influenced President Johnson’s decision against seeking reelection in 1968, and certainly shaped his direction of the war effort, as evidenced by his remark that “the weakest chink in our armor is American public opinion. Our people won't stand firm in the face of heavy losses, and they can bring down the government.”⁴⁵ John Mueller demonstrated a

⁴¹ Patricia L. Sullivan, "War Aims and War Outcomes: Why Powerful States Lose Limited Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 3 (June 2007): 496-524.

⁴² Downes, 12.

⁴³ Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: W.W. Norton &, 2009), 112.

⁴⁴ Jones, 114-15, 131.

⁴⁵ James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 682-685; Darren Filson and Suzanne Werner, "Sensitivity to Costs of Fighting versus Sensitivity to

relationship between casualties and public opinion in both conflicts, and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Randolph Siverson found casualties to have a negative relationship with leader tenure in interstate wars fought between 1816 and 1975. A 1999 survey by a consortium of North Carolina universities actually showed that U.S. political and foreign policy professionals attribute greater casualty aversion to the electorate than do members of the general public. Importantly for the issue of defense effort in war, members of the political class widely believe in the existence of a casualty-averse electorate.⁴⁶ Like “quagmire” avoidance, this belief has consequences for force employment strategies.

Believing that democratic accountability gives elected leaders strong incentives to reduce the human cost of war, the authors of a 2010 study analyzed fatality patterns in interstate wars during the period 1900-2005; they found that the most democratic states suffered fewer fatalities, and that democracies were more likely to choose military strategies known to minimize casualties. Specifically, democracies were more likely to adopt maneuver strategies and less likely to use attrition or guerilla strategies.⁴⁷ Downes cites Iraq as an instance where that strategic

Losing the Conflict: Implications for War Onset, Duration, and Outcomes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 5 (October 2007): 691, doi:10.1177/0022002707304426.

⁴⁶ Mueller, John E. *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*. New York: Wiley, 1973; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Randolph M. Siverson, "War and the Survival of Political Leaders: A Comparative Study of Regime Types and Political Accountability," *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 4 (December 1995): 841-55; Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, "A Look at Casualty Aversion; How Many Deaths Are Acceptable? A Surprising Answer," *Washington Post*, November 7, 1999, sec. B, accessed November 17, 2012, LexisNexis Academic. Note that Mueller actually discounts Tet's influence on public opinion and that the historian Patterson attributes Johnson's decision to fatigue and an inability to advance his domestic agenda. The key here is that politicians have learned to be casualty averse, despite a great degree of nuance in the particulars of *public* casualty aversion, as demonstrated by Feaver and Gelpi.

⁴⁷ Benjamin A. Valentino, Paul K. Huth, and Sarah E. Croco, "Bear Any Burden? How Democracies Minimize the Costs of War," *The Journal of Politics* 72, no. 2 (April 2010): 528-44, doi:10.1017/S0022381609990831. This three-fold typology of strategies originated in John Mearsheimer's *Conventional Deterrence*. The authors also suggest that democracies bear a higher material defense burden in wartime in order to fund the technologies and maneuver strategies that reduce casualties; using three measures of military power, they "found that democracies increased their wartime capabilities above their peacetime levels significantly more than did nondemocracies." They agree with Goldsmith that democracies exert less defense effort in *peacetime* than non-democracies, so it may be that they are observing a peace dividend being converted to wartime spending. Unlike Goldsmith or Reiter and Stam, the authors did not attempt to ascertain whether

inclination overrode military reality, writing that “Leaders of democracies have incentives not to plan for the postwar era if the costs of regime change, occupation, and nation building are potentially high because divulging those costs to the people beforehand might dampen public ardor for war.”⁴⁸ The resulting campaign successfully removed the Saddam Hussein regime via rapid maneuver and combined arms, while using significantly fewer troops than were used to free Kuwait in 1991. However, the invading force proved ill-equipped to fill the security gap created by the regime’s elimination.⁴⁹

Here, as in the Afghanistan case cited above, “quagmire” aversion and casualty aversion are interrelated. A large invasion force exposes more soldiers to enemy action, and also signals that the government anticipates that the defending regime will be difficult to defeat. A smaller invasion force exposes fewer troops, and further signals that victory will be easy and a prolonged occupation will be unnecessary.⁵⁰ And since longer wars may never lead to *fewer* casualties, the same political logic that fuels casualty aversion also dictates the avoidance of “quagmires.” While politicians rationally seek policy success, they are imperfect judges, and the enemy also gets a vote: they will not always be able to balance the desire to attain their military objectives with the imperative to win quickly and bloodlessly. Two further electoral incentives complicate that balance, and serve as additional stumbling blocks to democratic defense effort.

democracies actually exert greater material defense effort—they only examined whether democracies exhibit a greater *change* in defense effort when transitioning from peacetime to wartime.

⁴⁸ Downes, 12.

⁴⁹ Antulio Echevarria comments: “Operation Iraqi Freedom saw an attempt to supplant mass with economy of force. That attempt succeeded well enough in the initial phases of the conflict, but it failed completely when military operations shifted from major combat operations to providing security for reconstruction efforts.” See Weiss, 35.

⁵⁰ Downes, 48. “The George W. Bush administration denied that there would even be an occupation of Iraq, arguing that Americans would be welcomed as liberators who would quickly turn over power to Iraqi exiles such as Ahmed Chalabi.”

Economic Issue Salience

Beyond the cost in human life, voters in democratic societies are also sensitive to the opportunity costs imposed by war. Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, and Smith emphasize in their “selectorate” theory of defense effort that democratic leaders depend on the successful provision of public goods to maintain office.⁵¹ However, military victories are not the only public good that voters expect to be provided. Returning to an earlier line of argument, foreign policy crises are not preordained as the most salient issue for the electorate. According to Laron Williams, David Brulé, and Michael Koch, one issue in particular regularly takes precedence over foreign policy. Their 2010 study of incumbent parties’ election returns in nine democracies (1960-2000) demonstrated that voters punish elected officials more for dramatic foreign interventions during periods of low GDP growth. They conclude that voters’ cost sensitivity is conditioned by both the overall context and the economy, and that the economy grows significantly in salience during hard economic times.⁵² This result accords with a body of political science research linking incumbent electoral success with economic performance.⁵³

Voters *do* expect successful foreign policy as a public good; however, they also place great value on robust income growth and employment opportunities. When these are threatened, voters exhibit greater cost sensitivity—in their eyes, the most successful foreign policies are those that maintain peace. The incentive for elected officials is to avoid war, or failing that, to minimize costs by limiting or understating the scope of their objectives and sharing the burden with allies. The temptation to play down the anticipated costs of war is particularly strong when that conflict is significantly more salient for elected officials than it is for the electorate. This

⁵¹ Bueno de Mesquita et al., “An Institutional Explanation,” 801.

⁵² Williams, Brulé, and Koch, 455-57.

⁵³ E.g. Thomas J. Rudolph and J. Tobin Grant, “An Attributional Model of Economic Voting: Evidence from the 2000 Presidential Election,” *Political Research Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (December 2002): 805-23, doi:10.2307/3088080.

may explain in part the Bush administration's decisions regarding the size of the Iraq invasion force: the U.S. experienced a recession in 2001, followed by lingering slow GDP and labor market growth. In March 2003, the same month as the Iraq invasion, it was reported that GDP growth had slowed from 4% to 1.4% in the final quarter of 2002, and that unemployment had risen to 5.8% the previous month.⁵⁴ The campaign for the Democratic nomination to run against President Bush had begun in earnest, and the state of the economy was a daily feature of news programs. Bob Woodward, apparently drawing on an interview with Karl Rove, attributes Bush's decision to take the Iraq disarmament issue to the United Nations in September 2002—against Bush's instincts and the desires of his conservative base—to a need not to appear rushing to war amidst the background of a poor economy.⁵⁵ In that environment of economic issue primacy, President Bush had to settle for the war that was politically feasible in 2003 rather than one President Clinton might have been able to wage during the most recent peak in GDP growth.

Election Cycles

A final democratic disincentive to optimal defense effort is the recurring cycle of campaigns and elections. Economic researchers first noted in the 1970s that politicians will adopt inflationary policies in election years in order to garner the benefits of short term economic stimulus. Since then, scholars have observed election cycle effects in other areas of domestic policy, such as accelerated government contracting clustered geographically around strategically important states in U.S. presidential elections.⁵⁶ Kurt T. Gaubatz studied patterns of war involvement for liberal regimes dating back to the 19th century and found that democracies tend

⁵⁴ Jeannine Aversa, "Growth Rate Slows in U.S.; Some Analysts Worry That the Sluggish Economy Could Slide Back into Recession," *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), March 28, 2003, accessed December 3, 2012, LexisNexis Academic.

⁵⁵ Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 179.

⁵⁶ Kenneth Rogoff and Anne Sibert, "Elections and Macroeconomic Policy Cycles," *Review of Economic Studies* 55, no. 1 (January 1988): 1; Kenneth R. Mayer, "Electoral Cycles in Federal Government Prime Contract Awards: State-Level Evidence from the 1988 and 1992 Presidential Elections," *American Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 1 (February 1995): 162-164.

to fight fewer wars later in their election cycles. The relationship was even more pronounced when Gaubatz screened out wars where the democratic state suffered fewer than 1,000 battle deaths as a test of ‘seriousness.’ In fact, between 1815 and 1980 Gaubatz found only three examples of democratic states entering such wars in the year preceding an election.⁵⁷ These results affirm the democratic selection literature and the casualty aversion theory, inasmuch as they appear to show that liberal regimes make a greater effort to avoid wars with high levels of casualties. This further confirms that democracies have a greater incentive to constrain their military objectives and choose casualty-averse strategies.

Apart from Gaubatz’s observations, the election cycle also has demonstrable effects on issue salience. In his criticism of Reiter and Stam, Downes’ supplemented his statistical research with a process tracing study of President Johnson’s gradual escalation in Vietnam. He concludes with the majority of historians that Johnson recognized the futility of our intervention in Vietnam at an early date, but felt compelled to support gradual escalation to avoid the political consequences Truman suffered for ‘losing China’ to Mao’s Communists. To do otherwise would jeopardize the success of Johnson’s Great Society social agenda.⁵⁸ Filson and Werner write of Vietnam that “Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon [both] understood that leaders often cannot afford to lose but neither can they afford to pay the costs necessary to win.”⁵⁹ The implication here is that Johnson knew that regardless of whether he was succeeded by a Republican or fellow Democrat, avoiding defeat (or at least obvious defeat) in Vietnam would retain a certain amount of salience for the new president. On the other hand, he could assume no such commitment to his domestic agenda on the part of his successor. The recurring U.S.

⁵⁷ Kurt T. Gaubatz, "Election Cycles and War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35, no. 2 (June 1991): 212-44, doi:10.1177/0022002791035002004. Gaubatz uses Doyle’s list of liberal regimes, which included competitive elections as a criterion.

⁵⁸ Downes, 45-46.

⁵⁹ Filson and Werner, 691.

electoral cycle constrained his options: escalate in Vietnam, or risk triggering a blocking coalition of anti-Civil Rights southern Democrats and small government Republicans in the Senate; don't escalate too precipitously, or risk inviting greater Soviet and Chinese involvement in the war, which would threaten policy failure and aid Republican chances in 1966 and 1968.⁶⁰ Troublingly for those Desch terms "democratic triumphalists," the electoral cycle not only undermines defense effort, but sometimes selection effects as well.

Conclusion

Empirical research in the areas of democratic selection and the effect of duration on war outcomes for democratic combatants has clearly demonstrated a range of incentives for democracies to exert less defense effort in order to suit the preferences of the electorate.⁶¹ Electoral competition and the imperative to provide public goods therefore have a significantly more complex relationship to defense effort than that supposed by Goldsmith, Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, and Smith. Additional research, based on improved specification of conflict salience and better typologies of democracy, will be necessary to clarify these issues.

This new research will need to take into account what other public goods, besides economic growth, compete with defense effort for scarce financial and political capital, as well as identify how the electoral salience of these goods are to be measured. A more robust measure of conflict salience than that used by Bennett and Stam in "The Duration of Interstate Wars" must be developed, integrating the insights of prospect theory (see note 35), the relative military strength of one's adversary, and the geographic proximity of the conflict zone to the democratic state's capital, industries, and civilian population.

⁶⁰ Downes, 31-46.

⁶¹ Bennett and Stam, "The Declining Advantages of Democracy," 344-66; Valentino, Huth, and Croco, 528-44; Williams, Brulé, and Koch, 455-57; Gaubatz, "Election Cycles and War," 212-44.

Finally, the current empirical measures of regime type—which focus on the openness and competitiveness of leadership selection—must be supplemented by additional metrics that allow researchers to observe the effects of other institutional differences on wartime behavior. In a persuasive critique of Lake’s rent-seeking argument, Desch notes that Israel won multiple wars against its Arab opponents *despite* having both a smaller economy and significant government intervention in that economy.⁶² Although they all share the quality of having competitive elections, there are important structural and ideological differences between (for example) collectivist Israel, the Jacksonian United States, the post-New Deal U.S., and the Nordic welfare states. These differences affect the methods and priorities by which governments distribute public goods *and* private goods. Desch’s assertion that democracy is no bulwark against rent-seeking is convincing, as demonstrated by numerous debates over tax policy, regulatory capture, and interest group politics in the United States. It is not difficult to imagine that incentives are further conditioned by other structural differences, such as whether the legislature is controlled by the opposition party in presidential republic, or whether a parliamentary democracy has a coalition government. Defense effort decisions made in these domestic contexts also interact with an international context, as states face the “free rider” temptation to share their defense burden with a powerful ally—as in the conventional interpretation of low levels of defense spending among European NATO members.⁶³ An improved understanding of how democracy shapes security policy will therefore have to recognize institutional differences among democracies and the differing opportunities available to states for burden-sharing.

Future researchers could explore these issues in a number of ways. One approach would attempt to shed light on the statistical disagreement between Goldsmith and Reiter and Stam on

⁶² Desch, 27-28.

⁶³ Keith Hartley and Todd Sandler, "NATO Burden-Sharing: Past and Future," *Journal of Peace Research* 36, no. 6 (November 1999): 665-668, doi:10.1177/0022343399036006004.

whether democracies spend relatively more on defense than non-democracies. Their analysis of material defense effort should be reaccomplished, this time controlling for GDP growth rates to test whether the economic issue salience effects discussed above are observable in defense spending across a wide swath of cases. Another avenue of research would be to follow up Gaubatz's study of war initiation patterns relative to election cycles to see if defense spending follows similar patterns. Additionally, one might examine those initiation and spending patterns using a different measure of regime type than political competition, such as the percentage of GDP spent on transfer benefits, to assess the criticisms made above. Another potential area for statistical analysis that could negate the "defense effort" school of thought would be to assess national conscription policies relative to levels of democratization, as this directly speaks to the issue of human defense effort. Lastly, given the difficulty of constructing robust statistical tests that account for all the variables at play, case studies will play an important role in theory testing. One case warranting further examination (in addition to Afghanistan and Iraq, which deserve more thorough accounts) is the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which Downes cites as another potential example of "democratic leaders conceal[ing] the long-term costs of war to gain consent for fighting now."⁶⁴

In conclusion, while consensual government does not appear to make states more determined warfighters, the positive effects of the democratic selection incentive should not be discounted. Superior discretion in choosing which battles to wage appears to have contributed to the longevity and stability of liberal regimes, which in turn allows for greater human security for their citizens. Additional research based on improved specification of issue saliency and regime type may help policymakers avoid or mitigate negative electoral incentives that could lead to inadequate defense effort and policy failure when resorting to military force.

⁶⁴ Downes, 50.

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