

Live and Learn: Availability Biases and Beliefs about Military Power

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Do leaders learn more about military force from firsthand experience with the armed forces or their nation's last war? Despite a resurgence of interest in the effects of leaders and their beliefs on international conflict and war, we still know little about which mechanisms cause what beliefs. I theorize that although personal experiences in the military may provide less normatively probative lessons for a leader contemplating the initiation of armed conflict than the nation's last war, personal military experiences will have a greater impact on beliefs because they are directly experienced, cognitively accessible, and vivid. I argue that this availability bias should make leaders who have experience in the military but not combat operations develop beliefs that make them more likely to use force than leaders with combat experience. I test this hypothesis on the beliefs of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson with archival evidence and secondary studies. These cases control for the nation's last war because both Kennedy and Johnson experienced the second World War but allow variation in military experience because Kennedy but not Johnson experienced combat. The results suggest that further attention to leaders' personal military experiences will offer better predictions about their beliefs and foreign policies.

Nikita Khrushchev learned from the Suez crisis that nuclear ultimatums were potent political tools. According to his son Sergei, he "became convinced that the mere mention of nuclear-armed missiles had a powerful effect." Khrushchev's lessons from Suez, Sergei claimed, influenced the Cuban Missile Crisis (2000, 211–12, 264). International Relations scholars have recently displayed renewed interest in leaders, not only showing that leaders matter but addressing the conditions when they do and showing that variation in beliefs causes variation in policies. We know much less, however, about the causes of their varying beliefs. But a key reason that leaders are presumed to be so important is their beliefs regarding military strategy and the role and limits of military power and coercive diplomacy, values such as human rights and democracy and other leaders. Yet, we currently know very little about why leaders develop different beliefs. Despite the high plausibility of a causal relationship between personal military experiences and later beliefs about military force, the relevant causal mechanisms remain unclear.

In this paper, I develop a theory that explains variation in a central set of beliefs: those about the efficacy and utility of military power. I propose a theory about the relationship between a leader's military experience and her beliefs

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about the efficacy and limitations of the initiation of international conflict. The key insight is that leaders, as all people, tend to overlearn from those events that they have personally experienced and underlearn from events that are relevant but that they have not directly experienced. Leaders with experience in the military but not combat should be more likely to develop beliefs that military force can readily and perhaps unproblematically achieve desired geopolitical outcomes than leaders with combat experience.

Leaders who have experienced military combat will tend to learn from botched operations and unexpected escalation of the tendency for military operations to evade centralized control and their typical imprecision in achieving political outcomes. The horrors of war may exacerbate this effect. Such leaders should, at least in democracies where there are no additional institutional incentives to use force, develop circumscribed beliefs that prescribe the use of force under limited conditions and expect it to have mixed effects. Leaders who have experience in the military but not combat, however, will have learned from personal experience about the power projection and destructive capability of the armed services but will not have experienced the limitations, complexities, and horrors of armed conflict. They should develop much more optimistic beliefs about when force should be used and what it will achieve.

I explain why leaders who have military but not combat experience should be more likely to develop these beliefs with reference to what psychologists call the availability heuristic. Empirically, I show that Lyndon Johnson had military but not combat experience in World War II and maintained beliefs about the importance of developing, mobilizing, and often using military force to maintain US security throughout the twenty-five-year period before his decision to escalate the Vietnam War. I also show that John Kennedy had combat experience and believed that the utility of armed force was much more limited. Both leaders exhibited this variation in beliefs in the face of similar experiences of the 1930s. The analysis suggests that leaders are more likely to learn, at least regarding the utility of military power, from personal experiences in the military than otherwise significant national events that they were uninvolved in. The paper shows how leaders learn about a question at the core of International Relations—the utility of military power—and explains the origins of variation in beliefs documented elsewhere (Saunders 2011).

I first provide a review of the literature on leaders and their beliefs. I next develop a theory about the origins of beliefs about military force and, more specifically, the impact of a leader's personal experiences in the armed services regarding their beliefs about the use of force. In the third section, I test the theory on John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.

Literature Review: The Causes of Beliefs

Kenneth Waltz influentially argued that the balance of military and economic power explains more of the variance in the outcomes of international political contests than leaders (Waltz 2001, 1979). Subsequent research devoted much more attention to the distribution of power and regime types (Mearsheimer 2001; Brooks and Wohlforth 2008; Levy and Thompson 2010; Brown, Lynn-Jones, and Miller 1996; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999; Goemans and Chiozza 2011). But if the distribution of military, economic, and political power shapes and shoves, scholars have begun to address when and how leaders push back. Early research argued that leaders matter by showing that leaders' strategic brilliance (or lack of it) substantially influenced the initiation, evolution, and/or resolution of international conflict (Byman and Pollack 2001; Jervis 2013). A growing body of research showed that leaders' beliefs caused policies regarding the use of military force

(Larson 1985, 326; Johnson and Tierney 2011; Kennedy 2012). We know much less, however, about the causes of these beliefs (Jervis 2006).

One might think that the question of how leaders learn would be one of the oldest in the discipline, but scholars came late to this party. Jervis first proposed that leaders are likely to learn most from events experienced firsthand, early in one's life, or which were politically formative to a nation (Jervis 1976, 2006, 239–69). Other scholars assumed that leaders, being rational, learn from all global or dyadic interactions or at least reach similar conclusions from the same data (Wagner 1989, 201; Tomz 2007; Crescenzi 2007, 384). Most others have questioned this on theoretical or empirical grounds. Reiter (1996) found some support for the formative event hypothesis, concluding that when it comes to alliances, leaders remain allied or neutral if that “succeeded” in a previous war but switch policy if it did not. Moreover, later generations of leaders also learned these lessons from such politically formative events. Khong (1992) also argued that leaders will learn from analogies associated with formative events. Andrew Kennedy (2012) found some support for the personal experience hypothesis, showing that leaders' experiences caused what he calls “national efficacy beliefs,” beliefs that a nation is especially adept at performing some political set of tasks. While Mao Zedong's personal successes in the Chinese civil war led him to the belief that coercive diplomacy would be effective in international disputes, Jawaharlal Nehru's successes with nonviolence led him to believe in the effectiveness of diplomacy, nonviolence, and nonalignment. The source of such different beliefs lies in the different experiences of Mao and Nehru, but without further specification one cannot explain why Liu Shaoqi developed different national efficacy beliefs than Mao from the same revolution. Whether variation in beliefs about military power comes from personal experiences or politically formative events remains unclear.

Some research supports the personal experience hypothesis by showing that combat experience correlates with military restraint. Gelpi and Feaver (2002) examined the US executive branch and legislature over an almost two-hundred-year period and found that higher numbers of serving war veterans correlated with a reduced probability of U.S. military dispute initiation but a higher probability of escalation with higher levels of force in ongoing disputes. Horowitz and Stam (2014) conducted a statistical analysis on more than two and a half thousand leaders between 1875 and 2004 and found that military service without combat experience increases the probability of military dispute and war initiation. Combat experience with no prior military service, however, substantially reduces this probability. Horowitz and Stam (2014, 533) proposed that “direct exposure to combat is a logical trigger for the type of conservatism that would accentuate planning and arms build-ups but not the use of force.” However, they did not examine the causal mechanism linking variation in military experience to variation in beliefs about the use of military force: how military combat causes different beliefs, and why this experience seems to trump politically formative events in influencing beliefs, remains unclear. Developing and testing causal mechanisms about the source of beliefs regarding the use of force surely looms as the next step in the leaders' research program and an important next step for research on the causes of interstate war. Leaders' wartime experiences are a likely source of their beliefs but remain mostly unexamined. This paper fleshes out the causal mechanism between these beliefs and combat experience in greater detail through a core insight from social psychology.

The Availability Heuristic and Beliefs

A key finding from cognitive psychology is that people tend to be profoundly influenced by events that they have personally experienced. Otherwise relevant

information that is not personally experienced tends to be neglected or ignored. The availability heuristic causes people to assess the probability of an event or outcome not by a systematic empirical analysis but rather its ease of mental accessibility. The empirically correct inferential procedure would be to direct sufficient attention to many current, past, or plausible data points to estimate subjective probabilities that are close to objective probabilities. But psychological research has shown that data that are personally experienced and salient, dramatic, and/or vivid absorb much attention and cause misinterpretation or neglect of often important but less accessible information (Kahneman and Tversky 1982). According to Fiske and Taylor, “Such data profoundly influence the encoding of external stimuli into internal cognitive representations, and guide interpretation and mental representation of relevant, moderate, and ambiguous stimuli (Fiske and Taylor 2008, 74).” Kahneman and Tversky explain that the availability heuristic “uses strength of association as a basis for the judgement of frequency.”

Availability is an ecologically valid cue for the judgement of frequency because, in general, frequent events are easier to recall or imagine than infrequent ones. However, availability is also affected by various factors which are unrelated to actual frequency. If the availability heuristic is applied, then such factors will influence the perceived frequency of classes and the subjective probability of events. Consequently, the use of the availability heuristic leads to systematic biases. (1982, 164)

People with more divorced friends tend to estimate the divorce rate at higher levels than those with fewer divorced friends. People tend to overestimate their own contribution to household maintenance and underestimate that of their partner. In the original experiment, subjects could think of more words with specific letters in the first rather than third position although the number of words with the letter in the third position is larger: the first letter of words is more cognitively available than the third letter (McDermott 2002, 31–32). The availability heuristic is used consciously and unconsciously (Kahneman 2011, 130–31). It has important implications for international politics. Jim Goldgeier, for example, showed that Soviet leaders in the Cold War learned about foreign policy from their successes in consolidating power and neutralizing adversaries when succeeding a dead or deposed leader. The more they relied on coercion and force domestically, the more likely they were to rely on it internationally—often with undesirable and dangerous consequences—because they learned from their cognitively accessible domestic experiences (Goldgeier 1994).

Service in the armed forces exposes people to the means to project enormous military power and inflict significant destruction across long distances. Military combat is about as direct and cognitively accessible an experience regarding the use of force as one can have and tends to involve the loss of control, unexpected escalation, shocking and often very costly screw-ups, and bloody horrors of war that all pose severe constraints on the use of military force to realize political objectives. Of particular importance are the often costly, unintended effects and failed missions that military operations frequently exhibit. Costly shortcomings and screw-ups will likely be very vivid and cognitively accessible, teaching direct participants of the limits inherent in and imprecise nature of military operations. Leaders who have experienced military combat should develop beliefs that the use of force, at least during peacetime or crises, is rarely a cure-all to a nation’s security challenges and may have limited effects under only some conditions. There are strong reasons to expect that, although a leader’s combat experience may provide less guidance regarding decisions to initiate a conflict or war than her nation’s last war, leaders who have experienced combat will believe that the use of military force will tend to have mixed or at least complicated effects on national

security. Thus, Eisenhower explained that “I fought in the war but I fear war very much and would like to do everything possible to avoid it” (Khrushchev 2007, 171). In Janowitz’s survey of military personnel, for example, one respondent attributed “intimate knowledge of the horrors of modern warfare” to “recent combat experience” (Janowitz 1960, 230).

Of course, beliefs about the use of force *during* wartime should be different because calculations to strike first involve raising the probability of escalation and destruction, whereas ongoing conflicts have already escalated. It is unclear whether combat experience makes leaders less likely to escalate ongoing conflicts. Thus, while Winston Churchill had extensive military experience by May 1940, Britain had already entered a world war in which Nazi Germany had conquered Poland and Denmark. Moreover, beliefs about the initiation of armed conflict are distinct from coercive threats that may be cheaper. Dwight Eisenhower issued several threats that he might use nuclear weapons under some conditions but was generally wary of authorizing the use of force. The effect of combat experience on the probability of issuing coercive threats rather than using force is not clear.

Leaders who have been exposed to the sheer destructive potential of the Armed Forces but not the complications of armed conflict should learn that military power has much greater potential. They will not learn about the limits of military power because combat experiences will be less vivid and cognitively accessible. While they will have been exposed to the same information, their exposure to military power but not combat will cause them to place much greater faith in military power and military operations. They should develop beliefs that prescribe military force, at least during peacetime, much more readily to solve more problems and expect it to have generally high or at least significant effects. Thus former President George W. Bush was commissioned into the Texas and Alabama Air National Guard but did not experience combat and authorized the 2003 military intervention in Iraq, and seems to have generally held high expectations regarding the promise of military power. Experiments have shown that providing information designed to influence one’s overall evaluation of nuclear power systematically influences its perceived risks and benefits (Finucane et al. 2000). Positive information causes people to believe the benefits are high and the risks low; negative information causes people to believe the benefits are low and the risks high. The availability heuristic suggests that leaders should learn much more from their own experiences with the military than their nation’s last war and suggests two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: *Leaders who have military but not combat experience should believe that displays and uses of military power will be central and effective tools to achieve security.*

Hypothesis 2: *Leaders who have military and combat experience should believe that displays and uses of military power will have limited and/or mixed effects.*

Leaders’ willingness to use force, however, depends not only on prior combat experience but also on whether leaders need to use force to remain in office. An alternative explanation is that regime type accounts for the effect of combat experience on dispute and war initiation. Leaders in autocratic and military regimes face greater institutional incentives for dispute initiation than those in democracies. Thus, Horowitz and Stam (2014, 546–47) found that the effect of military but not combat experience on conflict initiation is greater in autocracies and has a similar effect to no military experience as regimes democratize. But military but not combat experience still has an effect in democracies, and the causal mechanism remains unspecified. Moreover, it is possible that greater amounts of combat experience might trump any conflict-inducing effects of regime type because the

noneffect of combat experience on war initiation in autocracies is an aggregate effect. Nikita Khrushchev proclaimed that

I know what the word “war” means, I saw death in the eyes, in Stalingrad I saw squares filled with corpses of Germans starved to death. I participated in the battle of Kursker Bogen, which began on July 5, 1943 and was the most horrific battle of World War II. We oppose war and therefore we do not intend to attack anyone.²

Khrushchev rarely and begrudgingly used force abroad and, rather, issued many coercive threats. Horowitz and Stam suggest that leaders’ willingness to use force depends on combat experience and domestic institutional incentives, but Khrushchev’s case suggests that in some cases combat experience might trump institutional dynamics. The cases addressed here address the role of combat experience on beliefs about military power in democracies. Properly addressing the role of institutions and personal experience requires disaggregating combat experience to address the effects of different levels of different types of military service.

Do availability biases cause leaders’ beliefs about military force? Leaders’ prior military experiences offer a fertile ground for research on the causes of leaders’ beliefs but have surprisingly been mostly neglected. One way to test this is to address the sources of a belief that there are strong grounds to believe influenced a leader’s policy. Case studies allow an examination of beliefs and their role in causal mechanisms linking leaders and decisions to go to war that statistical approaches tend to neglect. I selected John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson for three reasons. First, extant scholarship has shown that leaders’ beliefs influence their policy choices (Khong 1992; Saunders 2011). While Saunders has addressed whether they believed threats emanated from domestic political institutions and the consequences of these beliefs on their intervention strategy, I address the causes of their different beliefs about the potency of military power through examining their prepresidential experiences in the early 1940s Pacific War. To show the effect of military experience, I also document other beliefs, such as the nuclear balance. Second, there is a rich archival record that documents beliefs shared with trusted advisers and friends about the use of force before and after combat experiences, controlling for the possibility that beliefs reflect other preferences or decisions (Levy 1994). Third, comparing Johnson with Kennedy offers a research design that controls for experiences in the last war but isolates the effect of military experience by allowing it to vary. One could try to directly test the effect of the nation’s last war on beliefs through controlling for military experience, but two leaders from the same generation would rarely exhibit different recent national wars. Johnson and Kennedy both experienced the “lessons of Munich”: both men were at their most impressionable ages by 1938. Johnson was thirty years old, and Kennedy twenty-one. Both served in the military in World War II in the Pacific, but only Kennedy experienced combat.

If the availability bias influences leaders’ beliefs about military force, Johnson should have had different beliefs than Kennedy. If the hypotheses are correct, Johnson should have consistently believed that the development, mobilization, and occasional use of US military power would be necessary to maintain US security, especially regarding Vietnam in 1965, where the threat of escalation to world war was relatively low and the United States possessed vastly substantial conventional military power (Betts and Gelb 1979; Kaiser 2000; Logevall 1999). He should have been deferential to the military regarding decisions to initiate conflict before and during his presidency. Kennedy, on the other hand, should have believed that the effects of military power were generally more mixed and should

² Italian Prime Minister Fanfani’s visit to Moscow, August 1961, Cold War International History Project, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113361.pdf?v=1fda073167a210c488c487cd831b57e0,9>.

have believed that military power was no cure-all to the South Vietnamese regime and US interests in the region.

John Kennedy's Pre-Presidential Beliefs

When Kennedy first saw the remnants of the US South Pacific fleet, including the carrier *Saratoga*, he apparently excitedly exclaimed, "What a sight!" (Hamilton 1992, 530). A Japanese attack on his transport ship at the beginning of his time in the Pacific theater almost killed him and was a typical example of the surprises, unexpected destruction, and limits of military power in armed combat. He seems to have learned about this from the incident. Kennedy's patrician background and Harvard education cannot explain why he became much more cautious about military power after experiencing combat:

They dropped all around us—and sank a destroyer next to us but we were O.K. During a lull in the battle—a Jap parachuted into the water—we went to pick him up as he floated along—and got within about 20 yd. of him. He suddenly threw aside his life-jacket + pulled out a revolver and fired two shots at our bridge. I had been praising the Lord + passing the ammunition right alongside—but that slowed me a bit—the thought of him sitting in the water—battling an entire ship. We returned the fire with everything we had—the water boiled around him—but everyone was too surprised to shoot straight. Finally an old soldier standing next to me—picked up his rifle—fired once—and blew the top of his head off. He threw his arms up—plunged forward + sank—and we hauled our ass out of there. . . . It brought home very strongly how long it is going to take to finish the war. (Hamilton 1992, 531; Donovan 2001, 3–4).

Dallek (2003, 90) concluded that Kennedy's seventeen months in the Pacific "dramatically changed his outlook on war and the military." He admitted to former lover Inga Arvad that his war experience shocked his "greatly illusioned mind" (Hamilton 1992, 533). Kennedy himself later admitted that "I was shaped by the hand of fate moving in World War II" (Renehan 2002, 2).

His first letter to his parents after a Japanese destroyer sunk his PT boat, written on September 12, 1943, revealed his disgust at war's human destruction and questions about the efficacy and utility of the military effort in the Pacific:

Losing those two men. . . it certainly brought home how real the war is. . . . When I read that we will fight the Japs for years if necessary and will sacrifice hundreds of thousands if we must—I always like to check from where he is talking—it's seldom out here. (Ballard and Morgan 2002, 120–21)

He wrote that observing the grave of his old friend near the beach was "about the saddest experience I've ever had" (Dallek 2003, 91). Kennedy's subsequent squadron commander believed that "there was a serious side to Kennedy that started evolving at that time that had not existed before":

We were kind of a happy-go-lucky bunch down there in the Solomons—"knights of the sea" and all that crap. . . . whereas in reality it had become a dirty, minor war. . . . His evacuation of the wounded marines off Choiseul. . . when one of the marines died on his bunk. . . it made him grow up emotionally at that time. (Hamilton 1992, 623, 656)

Kennedy wrote to his brother that I'd like to know what the hell I'm doing out here. They tell us. . . that our sisters and younger brothers will be safe and secure. Frankly I don't see it quite that way. (Donovan 2001, 186)

Hamilton concluded that since arriving in the Solomons, Kennedy had learned a great deal about war and the “futility that characterised so much of human conflict: the happy-go-lucky camaraderie of his early PT-boat days was over” (Hamilton 1992, 526, 631, 656). According to Arvad, whom he saw immediately after leaving the Pacific in 1944, he was “jaded by combat and embittered.” He had learned the “bitter reality of war” through the “firsthand experience of war that would probably never be erased” and suffered the “loss of many illusions” (Cahan 1992; Hamilton 1992, 637–38). He wrote to Arvad in September 1943 that

the war goes slowly here. ... Munda or any of those spots are just God damned hot stinking corners of small islands in a group of islands in a part of the ocean we all hope never to see again. ... To see that by dying at Munda you are helping to insure peace in our time takes a larger imagination than most men possess. (Hamilton 1992, 616)

He developed skepticism of the military and was deeply wary of MacArthur’s strategy, writing that “this island to island stuff isn’t the answer: if they do that the motto out here ‘The Golden Gate by ’48’ won’t even come true” (Hamilton 1992, 536). He believed that US strategy neglected the importance of air supremacy, writing to his parents that “the Navy’s hand was forced due to the speed with which the Japs were building Henderson [air]field: U.S. forces just moved in ready or not. The Marines took a terrific beating.”³ He complained about a “bureaucratic attitude,” pointing out that “they’re losing ships, in effect, by what seems from the outside to be just inertia up high.”⁴ He was also critical of the wider chain of command, writing that “they have brought back a lot of old captains and commanders from retirement and stuck them in as heads of these ports and they give the impression of their brains being in their tails.”⁵ He later recalled that some senior navy officers “left something to be desired in their leadership qualities,” which caused “the Navy to screw up everything they touch” (Dallek 2003, 93–94). He wrote to a friend that “God save this country of ours from those patriots whose war cry is ‘what this country needs is to be run with military efficiency’” (Dallek 2003, 99).

It is possible that Kennedy became frustrated with the use of PT boats. His fellow officer and squadron commander accurately noted that “PTs really didn’t do a hell of a lot, to be honest” and that by 1943 “their role had to all intents and purposes been taken over by surface ships and aircraft” (Hamilton 1992, 631). The PT boats’ torpedoes were no match for Japanese cruisers; their wooden hulls and highly flammable gas tanks made them vulnerable and ineffective, and in four months in the Solomons they sank only one Japanese destroyer and a submarine. Around the time of the sinking of PT-109, a commander had recommended their withdrawal from the area (Hamilton 1992, 608). Kennedy wrote to his sister that “the glamor of PTs just isn’t except to the outsider” (Dallek 2003, 94).

After returning home, Kennedy declared the limits of US power and questioned the further persecution of the war in his first public speeches. He emphasized that “I look at a map and think how long it took us to get from Guadalcanal to Bougainville, and I realize it’s going to be a long war” (“Long Pacific War” 1944). In early 1945, he declared that “the war makes less sense to me now than it

3 Joseph Kennedy Personal Papers. Family, 1888–1973. Family Correspondence, 1923–1968. 1943: January–May. JPKPP-002-007. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JPKPP-002-007.aspx>.

4 Papers of John F. Kennedy, Personal Papers, Correspondence, 1943–1952: Personal. Family, 1943, John F. Kennedy Library, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPP-005-001.aspx>.

5 Joseph Kennedy Personal Papers. Family, 1888–1973. Family Correspondence, 1923–1968. 1943: January–May. JPKPP-002-007. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JPKPP-002-007.aspx>.

ever made and that was little enough—and I should really like—as in my life’s goal—in some way and at some time to do something to help prevent another” (Hamilton 1992, 677–78). While he had written in May 1940 that “failure to build up her armaments has not saved England from a war, and may cost her one,” Kennedy’s father claimed in early 1945 that he “felt so strongly about the question of rearmament,” writing an article, “Let’s Try an Experiment for Peace,” that was a sharp departure from his earlier call to arms (Dallek 2003, 113; Hamilton 1992, 688). Reporting at the UN conference in San Francisco, he concurred with the claim that “if they just fix it so that we don’t have to fight any more—they can count me in.”

Kennedy committed a significant portion of his foreign policy effort as congressman and senator to the Third World and the challenges that weak political institutions there posed to communist guerilla insurgencies and takeovers. As early as 1954, he questioned how “the Dulles policy and its dependence upon the threat of atomic retaliation will fare in these areas of guerilla warfare” (Kennedy 1964, 994). This more careful attention to the logic of military operations that Johnson neglected would stay with Kennedy throughout his career and became a key theme in his approach to Vietnam. Dallek (2003, 167) noted that these beliefs were genuine interests and not politically motivated. A key theme throughout his speeches and writings is the limits of US military power in managing conflict. He proclaimed that “of equal importance to military action [in the Iran crisis] is the development of techniques by which we might adjust the internal instability that creates a special threat to the security of the Middle East.”⁶ He reported after returning home that “communism cannot be met effectively by merely the force of arms. It is the peoples themselves that must be led to reject it (Saunders 2011, 97).” He warned against neglecting the complex domestic roots of nationalism: communism had to be engaged, he argued, “not only through reliance on the force of arms. The task is rather to build strong native non-communist sentiment.”⁷

In 1957, he told Congress that if they ignored local desires for political autonomy “no aggrandizement of armaments, no new pacts or doctrines or high-level conferences can prevent further setbacks to our course and to our security” (Kennedy 1964, 511). In 1958, he noted that the Democratic Party had “tended to magnify the military challenge to the point where equally legitimate economic and political programs have been obscured” (Dallek 2003, 223). In a major Senate speech regarding India in 1958, he claimed that “a purely military response” to the Middle East and Asia would be an “illusory breakwater” (Kennedy 1964, 593). He argued that “political balance and social stability... provide the true defense against Communist penetration” (Kennedy 1964, 607). In 1959, he announced in a major speech that the “economic gap” was an “equally clear and present danger to our security” as the missile gap (Kennedy 1964, 789). He elsewhere stated that military support “could be wiped out overnight by popular discontent with the effects of overemphasis on military preparedness” (Saunders 2011, 100). He pointed out that if military contributions were channeled toward political development “our military assistance can leave a permanently good social impress” (Saunders 2011, 101). As ever, he cautioned against a heavy reliance on military power and emphasized the local and nationalist roots of Washington’s Third World threats. A Secret Service agent on Kennedy detail from 1960 to 1963 claimed that Kennedy’s combat experience taught him

6 John F. Kennedy, Speech to Massachusetts Federation of Taxpayers Associations, April 21, 1951, Pre-Presidential Papers–House Files, Box 95, John F. Kennedy Library, 1–5, http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/JFK-Speeches/Boston-MA-Mass-Federation-of-Taxpayers_19510421.aspx.

7 Radio Speech reporting on Middle and Far East trip, http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/JFK-Speeches/United-States-Senate-Indochina_19540406.aspx.

that at a moment's notice things can go from better to worse. It really made him understand how a group that big has to work together to be successful at whatever they're doing. . . . He knew what it was like to be in combat, and under fire, and I'm sure that made him apprehensive about putting anybody else in that position. (Doyle 2015, 257–58).

John Kennedy's Presidential Beliefs

Kennedy's beliefs regarding the imprecision of military operations were reinforced by the failed operation to topple Fidel Castro's regime in Cuba and the dangerous hawkish preferences of his military advisers during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The former reinforced his mistrust of the military, causing him to isolate the Joint Chiefs of Staff, whom he blamed for bad information about the probability of its success, and appoint his trusted adviser Maxwell Taylor, who as chairman had called for a more flexible posture in the face of the limits of military power. In 1961, he claimed that "they always give you their bullshit about their instant reaction and split-second timing, but it never works out. No wonder it's so hard to win a war" (Doyle 2015, 257). As late as 1963, he told Mike Mansfield that, regarding test ban negotiations, "the chiefs have always been our problem" (Dallek 2003, 622). Speaking of the U-2 crisis, he noted that "there's always somebody who doesn't get the message" (O'Donnell 1983, 393). While Johnson urged a tough line on Berlin to display resolve, Kennedy told a close aide in August 1961 that "it seems particularly stupid to risk killing a million Americans over an argument about access rights on an Autobahn" and admitted that he was "almost a peace-at-any-price President" (O'Donnell 1983, 299; Schlesinger 1978, 430).

While both Kennedy and Johnson spent heavily on defense, Kennedy had very different views on Vietnam and wondered whether propping up the government in Saigon was a key US interest (Kaiser 2000, 247). In a message to Congress in May 1961, Kennedy noted that the United States "would be badly mistaken to consider their problems in military terms alone."⁸ As early as 1954, Kennedy told the US Senate that "no amount of American military assistance in Indochina can conquer an enemy which is everywhere and at the same time nowhere": a military intervention would be "dangerously futile and self-destructive."⁹ During the Dienbenphu crisis, he argued that American intervention would be useless without independence and reform (Kennedy 1964, 284–94). He insisted that development of the Vietnamese army was not enough and that the United States had to offer "a political, economic and social revolution far superior to anything the Communists can offer" (Froman 1991, 24).

Fredrik Logevall pointed to a shift whereby problems went from being perceived by the president as "political and in the South" to "military and in the North" (Logevall 1999, 122–23). Howard Jones boldly argued that Kennedy's withdrawal plan was not "contingent on military victory: it was unconditional" (Jones 2003, 383; Porter 2005, 175). For Logeval (1999, 40, 43–49), while Kennedy sought victory in Vietnam from day one to the end, he "always had deep doubts about the enterprise, and deep determination to keep it from becoming an American war."

Kennedy was attentive to the local roots of the insurgency and saw a limited role for more conventional displays of force. Johnson was prepared to commit American troops as a show of resolve to the Soviet Union and China

8 John F. Kennedy, "Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs," May 25, 1961, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1961*, 399–400, http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/JFK-Speeches/United-States-Congress-Special-Message_19610525.aspx.

9 John F. Kennedy, "The War in Indochina," http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/JFK-Speeches/United-States-Senate-Indochina_19540406.aspx.

independently of the pace of Saigon's domestic reforms that were themselves widely believed to be necessary for the legitimacy and autonomy of the South Vietnamese government. Kennedy viewed such reforms as necessary for a legitimate government that could stave off challenges from the North and a prerequisite for any further US troop commitments (Logevall 1999, 398).

While Kennedy saw the Korean War as "clear aggression," he viewed Vietnam in 1961 as "more obscure and less flagrant." He said he could "make a rather strong case against intervening in an area 10,000 miles away against 16,000 guerillas with a native army of 200,000, where millions have been spent for years with no success."¹⁰ Despite being informed by the outgoing Eisenhower administration that Laos was the hotspot worth focusing on, he declined to intervene there in 1961 despite repeated warnings that this would influence his reputation in Vietnam. He often resisted calls for conventional deployments and demonstrations of strength in Vietnam and ordered the preparation of counterinsurgency options designed to address the local sources of the conflict. He frequently questioned assumptions about the ability of conventional military power to stop the violence and display resolve, was often frustrated by the military's lack of experience with counterinsurgency, and refused repeated requests by the military in 1961 for combat troops in Vietnam (Kaiser 2000, 3–5). In fall 1961, he specifically instructed Walt Rostow and Maxwell Taylor when they visited Vietnam to examine not only military considerations but also political, social, and economic issues (Kaiser 2000, 102). Where Johnson frequently thought the best analogy to Vietnam was Korea, Kennedy often referred to the counterinsurgency experiences in Greece and Malaya. By early 1962, Kennedy had decided to establish a village government that would inform and allow higher authorities to fulfill village needs.¹¹ Kennedy wrote to Robert McNamara in 1963 that the outcome of US efforts hinged on "important political improvement in the country" because the military effort and political situation were "closely connected in all sorts of ways."¹²

Would Kennedy have expanded the war after Diem's assassination if he had survived November 1963? Tom Wicker argued that a careful analysis of Kennedy's public statements leaves no doubt that he "had no plan or intention to withdraw without victory" (Wicker 1995, 168). But the gap between Kennedy's public statements and private deliberations was striking. While the core consensual goal of postwar US foreign policy in the region was that South Vietnam could not be allowed to fall into Communist hands, there are strong grounds to argue that Kennedy was determined to withdraw after the 1964 election (Betts and Gelb 1979, 2; Newman 1992, 322, 455–56). By 1963, he had expanded the number of Americans in Saigon from 685 when he took office to 16,700, and shifted their role from advice to operational assistance. However, in the fall, he ordered 1,000 advisers home, although this may have been primarily designed to pressure Diem into reforms. He intimated a possible total military withdrawal to advisers after the 1964 election (Dallek 1998, 98). Roger Hilsman claimed that Kennedy told him that "he did not expect victory, and that he intended to withdraw anyway" (Moise 2002, 170; Porter 2005, 330; Goldstein 2008, 235–36, 283). According to Richard Reeves (1993, 660), Kennedy authorized National Security Council aide Michael Forrestal to manage "an in depth study of every possible option, including how to get out of there." Kennedy exhibited much more concern in 1963 with Laos, India, and the Middle East than Vietnam (May, Naftali, and Zelikow 2001).

10 National Security Council Meeting notes, November 15, 1961, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, Vol. 1, Doc. 254, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d254>.

11 Hilsman, "A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam," February 2, 1962, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, Vol. 2, Doc. 42; NSAM No. 111, November 22, 1961, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, Vol. 1, Doc. 272.

12 JFK to McNamara, September 21, 1963, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, Vol. 4, Doc. 142. See also record of the 519th Meeting of the National Security Council, October 2, 1963, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, Vol. 4, Doc. 169.

During the last days of Kennedy's life, Johnson noted that Kennedy was planning to leave Vietnam and that he disagreed with this (Blight and Lang 2005, 276).

Lyndon Johnson's Prepresidential Beliefs

In spring 1940, Johnson was appointed lieutenant commander in the US Naval Reserve despite having "not trained a day to qualify for it" (Dallek 2004, 48). Douglas MacArthur apparently said to Johnson, "God only knows what you're doing here" (Dallek 1991, 237). He secured permission to participate in a combat mission, but the aircraft lost power in one engine and returned home after no more than an hour through a group of attacking Japanese fighters. He was apparently "as cool as ice." He wrote that his service was "very brief," and noted the "little part I played for a short time in learning and facing with them the problems they encounter all the time" (Dallek 1991, 241). He learned from a 1945 tour to war-torn Europe of the military chiefs' self-serving use of resources but not of the limitations of military power (Dallek 1991, 271). Given Johnson's lack of combat experience, the most probative evidence for the hypotheses are crises where the use of force was considered. The hypotheses expect that he should have advocated this or been deferential to military expertise and/or preferences. We see this most clearly in 1954, 1962, and throughout his presidency.

During the Dienbenphu crisis in April 1954, Johnson responded to Dulles' request for permission to use military force in Vietnam by asking about the extent of allied support for intervention. Because allied consent was not forthcoming, Congress rejected a unilateral US military gambit. Many have used this episode to argue that Johnson was opposed to and partly prevented the US use of force in Vietnam (Dallek 1991, 444; Logevall 1999, 22; Wicker 1991, 202; Khong 1992, 73, 76). But as John Prados and Elizabeth Saunders have shown, Johnson was already sympathetic to intervention. He wrote that the crucial factor was not if but "where, when and how to make a stand" and emphasised the utility of an "all out effort" and "the language of strength" (Prados 1995, 13–16; Saunders 2011, 144–45).

In the Cuban Missile Crisis, Johnson favored an unannounced air strike rather than the blockade, although by the end he had come around to the blockade camp. McCone wrote that "the Vice President finally agreed reluctantly but only after learning... of the support indicated by General Eisenhower" (McAuliffe 1992, 245). Johnson's hawkishness came out most strongly during the crucial Saturday, October 27, meeting when Kennedy left the room. The group was debating the public trade of the Turkish Jupiters for the immediate inoperability and withdrawal of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Johnson believed that attacking Cuba would overcome any credibility deficits in Turkey: "We could say, 'now we're going to come.' But we've got to hit Cuba." He worried that US inaction to the shooting down of a U-2 over Cuba would embolden Khrushchev (May and Zelikow 2002, 370–80, 374–75). Kennedy was acutely aware of the dangers of inadvertent escalation that such policies risked throughout the crisis. The latter justified his policy on the grounds that "what we want to do is avoid, if we can, nuclear war by escalation or imbalance... We've got to have some degree of control" (May and Zelikow 2002, 120). There is no evidence in the extensive archival records of Johnson making any such statements about the dangers of inadvertent nuclear escalation. While Johnson was still toying with attacking Cuba as late as October 27, Kennedy dismissed this option early in the crisis. While he left the possibility of an attack on Cuba on the table after he had issued his coercive demand, Kennedy's thinking and behavior during the Cuban Missile Crisis was reflective of more complex beliefs about the utility of specific forms of coercive behavior under specific conditions and contrasted sharply with Johnson's more simplistic belief in the importance of demonstrating resolve through the use of

force. While Johnson was heavily swayed by the military, Kennedy kept evading their requests to attack Cuba.

The 1954 and 1962 episodes are not outliers but fit Johnson's general worldview. Before the first Berlin blockade, Soviet atomic bomb test, and Communist takeover in China increased American suspicions of Stalin's intentions and exacerbated Cold War tensions, Johnson believed that amassing US military power was crucial to dealing with the Soviet Union. He consistently supported greater military spending and defense efforts (Dallek 1991, 245). He privately described the 1950 North Korean attack as part of a Soviet design for world domination (Dallek 1991, 383–84). He wrote that "the survival of the ruling clique in Russia depends upon conflict," and that "Russia needs...and wants war" (Dallek 1991, 383–84). After Chinese troops crossed the Yalu River and routed American forces back below the 38th parallel, Johnson proposed a full mobilization to avoid "being engulfed by a gathering darkness" (Dallek 1991, 389). He believed in the importance of displaying resolve through the preparation and willingness to use force. In a typical formulation, he said that "it is foolish to talk of avoiding war; we are already in a war—a major war. The war in Korea is a war of Soviet Russia." He scribbled during a meeting in the 1950s that the "world looks upon us as strong power—we must not appear to be afraid—must appear to be confident—know we are going to win—totalitarian states appear strong."¹³ Unlike Kennedy, he supported Eisenhower's intervention in Lebanon. In February 1960, he wrote that "I certainly don't believe we ought to let our guard down as long as Communism maintains its policy of world conquest and exploitation of freedom loving nations."¹⁴

Johnson stated after returning from Saigon in May 1961 that "I cannot stress too strongly the extreme importance of following up this mission with other measures, other actions, and other efforts." He told the House Foreign Affairs Committee that "we either decide that we are going to support him and support him zealously or that we are going to let South Vietnam fall."¹⁵ He argued, consistently with his beliefs about the causes of the expansion of communism and the dangers of appeasement, that "the battle against Communism must be joined in Southeast Asia with strength and determination...or the United States, inevitably, must surrender the Pacific and take up our defenses on our own shores" (Dallek 1998, 17). He elaborated that others would infer from the fall of South Vietnam that "we don't live up to our treaties and don't stand by our friends."¹⁶ He wrote to Kennedy upon returning from Berlin in August 1961 amid the second Berlin crisis that "if we failed to rise to the level of these somber events, all would be lost, for there would be no one who could remove the sense of failure created by our default."¹⁷

There is only scattered evidence of Johnson's beliefs about nuclear weapons, but very numerous are his emphases on nuclear superiority and statements that the use of conventional force to display resolve and prevent falling dominoes

13 Pre-Presidential Handwriting File, LBJ–Notes, White House 1953–1959, LBJL.

14 LBJ to Mrs. Evelyn Morris, Feb. 20, 1960, Senate Papers, 1949–1961, 1960, Subject Files, Foreign Relations–Cuba, January–March, LBJL.

15 Statement before House Foreign Affairs Committee, June 5, 1961, VPSF, Box 11, "Proposed Statement of VP Before House Foreign Affairs Committee, June 5, 1961," folder, LBJL, 14.

16 LBJ to JFK, "Mission to Southeast Asia, India and Pakistan," May 23, 1961, VPSF, Box 1, Vice-Presidential Travel, Vice President's Visit to Southeast Asia, May 9–24, 1961 (I) [1 of 2] folder, LBJL: 1–6.

17 Memorandum, Vice President to President, August 21, 1961, Vice Presidential Travel, Berlin, Germany, Berlin Papers for the Vice President, p. 2, VP Security File, Box 2, LBJL. See also report by VP Johnson on his visit to Germany, August 19–20, 1961, *ibid.*

remains relevant despite the possibility of escalation. In October 1961, he wrote that “we cannot allow an enemy to build up atomic superiority.”¹⁸ About five weeks later, he claimed that “if we refrain from all testing, we automatically give the Russians a weapons system advantage which we cannot afford to let them have.”¹⁹ That month he insisted that American unilateral nuclear arms reductions would be dangerous without Soviet reciprocity and repeated his belief that “we cannot allow an enemy to build up nuclear superiority” numerous times.²⁰ In March 1962, he wrote that “we cannot permit the security of this nation to be jeopardized through failure to maintain strength achieved through further development and testing.”²¹ Kennedy, on the other hand, maintained in December 1962 that “there is just a limit to how much we need. How many times do you have to hit a target with nuclear weapons?” (Dallek 2003, 607–8).

Lyndon Johnson’s Presidential Beliefs

One of Johnson’s first decisions as president was reversing Kennedy’s decision to withdraw 1,000 troops from Vietnam and reaffirming unconditional US assistance to Saigon. Johnson never seriously challenged the assumption that perceived weakness in Vietnam would embolden Moscow and/or Beijing elsewhere (Burke and Greenstein 1989). His belief that North Vietnamese aggression required a forceful response inhibited him from questioning how autonomous the Vietcong and North Vietnamese government were from Beijing and Moscow and whether his commitment to Saigon undermined the autonomy, political stability, and resolve of the South Vietnamese government. Johnson’s Press Secretary, Bill Moyers, recalled him expressing recognition of the dangers in saving South Vietnam and his beliefs about the consequences of its fall: “They’ll think with Kennedy dead we’ve lost heart...and don’t mean what we say. They’ll be wondering just how far they can go... I want ’em to...whip hell out of some Communists” (Dallek 1998, 99–100; Wicker 1991, 205).

In the first week of his presidency, Johnson told the president of the American Electric Power Company that “we’ve got to either get in or get out, or get off” (Beschloss 1998, 74). He was aware of the dangers but always maintained that the reputational costs of letting Saigon fall were worse than a long and costly ground war (Beschloss 1998, 88, 95). On December 23, he defended his beliefs; he did not want “people around the world worrying about...whether we’ve got a weak President or a strong President” (Beschloss 1998, 124). Johnson’s simple upbringing and concern for his Great Society program do not explain his beliefs about force: many with similar upbringings have more sophisticated beliefs, and military but not combat experience is necessary to explain why he believed he had to invade a country to save his welfare program. While one can argue that Johnson’s involvement in the selection of bombing targets suggests limited faith in the military, the fact is that he authorized the bombing as his best bet that a military commitment to defend a weak and corrupt regime would deter alleged Sino-Soviet expansion. He told McNamara that “I always thought it was foolish for you to make any statements about withdrawing...but you and the President thought otherwise and I just sat silent” (Beschloss 1998, 258).

18 LBJ to Terence Grieder, October 31, 1961, VP Papers, Box 61, 1961 Subject File, Armed Services–Production, Weapons, LBJL.

19 LBJ to Royal Davis, December 8, 1961, VP Papers, Box 61, 1961 Subject File, Armed Services–Production, Weapons, LBJL.

20 LBJ to R. G. Smith, December 19, 1961, LBJ to James W. Hillesheim, December 19, 1961, VP Papers, Box 61, 1961 Subject File, Armed Services–Production, Weapons, LBJL.

21 LBJ to Elna Van Essen, March 17, 1962, VP Papers, Box 61, 1961 Subject File, Armed Services–Production, Weapons, LBJL.

In 1964, he told the chairman of the *Miami Herald* that leaving Vietnam would “let the dominoes start falling over.” The other options would be “to fight, as we are doing” or to “sit down and agree to neutralize all of it,” which was “totally impractical” (Beschloss 1998, 214). He told his Senate mentor Richard Russell in May 1964 that “I just haven’t got the nerve to do it, and I don’t see any other way out of it” (Beschloss 1998, 363–70). In June, he emphasized the importance of using force: “We can’t retreat because... it’ll be very dangerous to the United States to give up all of our interests in Southeast Asia... If we show some strength, we may have a chance to hold on (Dallek 1998, 146).”

In a long conversation with McGeorge Bundy in May 1964, he questioned the value of Vietnam but claimed that “if you start running from the communists, they may just chase you right into your own kitchen” (Beschloss 1998, 370). He authorized a study that addressed “whether Malaysia will necessarily go and India’ll go and how much it’ll hurt our prestige if we just got out” (Beschloss 1998, 401–2). Assistant Secretary of State John McNaughton noted that Johnson’s thinking on Vietnam left a large role for the use of force: “However badly [Vietnam] may go over the next 2–4 years,” the United States must have “kept promises, been tough, taken risks, gotten bloodied, and hurt the enemy very badly” (Gravel 1971, 582). He claimed that “we could solve the Vietnam thing if the North Vietnamese and the Chinese really felt that we were there to stay” (Beschloss 2001, 251). He told his advisers on July 21, 1965, that “we know it is dangerous and perilous, but the big question is, can it be avoided?” (Khong 1992, 124). Johnson ultimately sought not territorial expansion but the demonstration of his resolve to not allow Hanoi to forcefully unify Vietnam. But the only way to do this was a muscular US unilateral military effort.

Conclusion

The historical record confirms the above hypotheses. Throughout the Dienbenphu crisis, Cuban Missile Crisis, and Vietnam War, Johnson’s beliefs remained consistent: he adhered to the relatively simple belief that the mobilization and use of military power would have strong effects throughout the world, or at least was the best bet to achieve US security. He believed in mobilizing and entering conflicts to display resolve and believed that the Soviet Union and China would be deterred only by such uses of force. Kennedy, on the other hand, adhered to a more complex view about military power throughout his political career. Influenced by combat in the Pacific War, he was more skeptical of military interventions and believed that displays and uses of military power had a limited and mixed role, especially in Vietnam because the root of the conflict lay in the illegitimacy of the South Vietnamese government. He believed that establishing a reputation to Hanoi, Beijing, and Moscow of resolve to prevent the fall of Saigon through displays and uses of military power was unnecessary, unlikely to substantially change the status quo, and possibly counterproductive. This variation in beliefs cannot be written off to backgrounds or domestic politics.

While the literature on leaders and their beliefs has shown that they matter, this paper has moved beyond this question and addressed which experiences cause what beliefs. The paper showed that it is possible to operationalize leaders’ beliefs as the dependent rather than independent variable and use indicators that are measurable. It outlined a causal mechanism that specified how variation in personal military experience causes variation in beliefs about military power. One’s personal experiences with the military can, if one has not been involved in combat, lead to dangerous beliefs about military power that can make a country war-prone. Experience with combat can, at least in democracies, make a leader believe that the use of military force has mixed effects and is no cure-all to a nation’s security challenges. Johnson and Kennedy were both influenced by World

War II, but Johnson did not experience military combat. This profoundly influenced his beliefs about military power. Direct experiences with military power are a much stronger predictor of beliefs about it than an otherwise highly probative nation's last war and can explain variation in beliefs more extensively documented elsewhere (Saunders 2011).

Further research should provide additional tests of the hypotheses by examining decisions to intervene in ongoing wars. Further research should also move beyond looking at combat experience in binary terms, addressing whether higher levels of what types of combat experience influence beliefs about military power, and whether sufficiently high levels of combat experience can moderate the conflict-inducing effects of autocratic regimes. A career in the military should lead to more conflict aversion than shorter combat stints: perhaps Dwight Eisenhower was more conflict averse than John Kennedy, controlling for the external environment during their presidencies. Better specifying causal mechanisms between types of combat experience and beliefs and foreign policies will allow better models of international conflict onset.

Combat experience is very cognitively accessible and teaches leaders about the complexity of military operations and their limited role in addressing national security concerns. Leaders who have military but not combat experience are much more likely to view military power as a silver bullet, believing that displays of force and demonstrations of resolve are necessary and sufficient to address security challenges. Democratic publics should be aware of the significant impact of this variation in military experience when they vote. Decision makers should factor other leaders' military backgrounds into the foreign policymaking process.

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