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1

Introduction

THE HISTORY OF DEMOCRACIES and war is filled with regret. Leaders have used force and regretted it. Leaders have used force and regretted that they did not use more, or less, or that they did not use it differently. Critics on all sides have regretted that leaders used force, failed to use force, or failed to use enough force with a particular strategy.

Perhaps the most consistently puzzling regret is the failure to heed dovish warnings. Hindsight is biased, of course: perhaps doves—those who tend to advocate for less militarized ways to resolve international disputes—actually have been more effective than we realize in stopping unwise military ventures before they started, or in the case of a failed military effort, war was a prudent choice and leaders simply got unlucky. But the decisions that we know about leave many puzzles. We look back on Cold War–era hot wars in Korea and Vietnam, and post-9/11 "forever wars" in Iraq and Afghanistan—all of which had contributions from multiple democratic countries—and wonder how so many leaders started, escalated, and perpetuated war efforts that observers argued at the time were risky at best and doomed at worst, and which the public turned against long before its leaders ended the conflicts. Hawks—those who tend to view the use of force more favorably—often get the blame, whether the hawkish views originated with the leader, advisers with the leader's ear, military leaders shaping the leader's options, or legislators arguing that the leader should use force.

But the puzzling question is not really about the hawks. Reasonable people can disagree about the wisdom of war, and hawks are part of the natural diversity of views one would expect in a democracy.

The real puzzle is, What happened to the doves? In many of these cases, powerful moderates and doves, sometimes including the leader, had serious doubts or would have preferred not to use or escalate force. When hawkish leaders made decisions in these conflicts, they often had relatively dovish advisers around them. And democratic publics, while not uniformly dovish, certainly have sizable contingents of doves and choose many doves to represent them in government.

In a democracy, who constrains a leader's ability to use military force? How much leeway do democratic leaders have to start, conduct, and escalate military operations? How do democracies hold their leaders accountable for their decisions in crises and wars? These are old questions, but they have gained renewed significance in an era of populist backlash against real and perceived failures of democratic elites in the United States and Europe, after the military interventions of the early post–Cold War period, the "forever wars" of the post-9/11 period, and the Iraq War in particular. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 also tested democratic leaders, especially in the United States and Europe, whose citizens bore economic and other costs of the Western effort to sustain Ukraine's resistance to Russian aggression.

Yet citizens in democracies who want to reward or punish leaders for their decisions about war and peace often find the effort frustrating. They can vote their leader out of office, but only if the leader is not term limited. They can punish the leader's party in midterm elections, as in 2006, when Republicans suffered dramatic losses at the nadir of the Iraq War. They can damage the leader's popularity, which may be a drag on his or her ability to accomplish other policy goals. But those effects depend on other elites and institutions. The public can also protest and agitate, although the costs of such collective action are high even without the threat of punishment that citizens face in authoritarian regimes. And there is no guarantee such efforts will work: the public can protest a war they did not choose or have turned against, as they did in the United States in 1968 during the Vietnam War, and in Europe on the eve of the 2003 Iraq War, only to see their leaders carry on with their war plans.

This picture of voter frustration is at odds with the traditional view of the voting public constraining democratic leaders' choices about war and peace. In this view, democracies have advantages in choosing wars because democratic leaders are constrained by the public. Theorists going back to Immanuel Kant would argue that the public, if fully informed, would not accept many of these wars, because democratic publics want to avoid unnecessary or unwise military ventures.[1] Public constraint, channeled through institutions and the free press, makes democracies more cautious about using force and thus more peaceful. When democracies face crises, open debate and electoral accountability force democratic leaders to be more careful when choosing fights and to be more effective at using the tools of war.[2] In recent years, international relations scholars have focused on public opinion, seeking to understand what missions the public will support, whether the public rallies around the flag, or the public's casualty tolerance.[3] The rise of experiments embedded in public opinion surveys has fueled renewed scholarly interest in studying public attitudes about war.[4]

But this voter-driven approach bumps up against several stark conclusions. First, the public does not pay much attention to foreign policy, a finding backed by decades of research on political behavior. The individual citizen's knowledge of foreign affairs is slight,[5] tends not to move much in response to leaders' speeches,[6] and can be changeable on particular issues.[7] Although voters have underlying predispositions, they are often shaped by values or demographic characteristics rather than policy knowledge or material self-interest.[8] Voters are busy people, and gathering information about political issues is costly and time consuming.[9] Foreign policy is rarely important to voters in an absolute sense.[10] Rather than carefully weighing and incorporating available information about policy, voters use shortcuts to evaluate the policies they do not or cannot pay attention to on a regular basis.[11] As they do on many other issues, voters look to elites for cues about the wisdom of war.[12]

Second, rewarding leaders for successful military operations is also not straightforward, as George H. W. Bush or Winston Churchill could attest. Foreign policy issues are rarely top of mind for voters, and even issues that dominate headlines may recede by the time an election comes around. For example, the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 gave Barack Obama an approval boost that lasted only a few weeks.[13]

Third, democratic leaders frequently make choices that are at odds with public opinion.[14] Democratic leaders not only start wars the public does not want but also frequently continue or escalate wars they know they are unlikely to win, as the revelations of the Pentagon Papers and the Afghanistan Papers made clear, decades apart.[15] Yet democratic leaders often act as if public opinion is important to their decision making, putting significant effort into their public message even when they make decisions they anticipate will lack public approval.

What explains this seemingly distorted decision making in democracies? Why do we see so many hawkish choices even without hawkish preferences? Why does public accountability often take so long to kick in even after widespread popular protests, as it did in the Vietnam and Iraq Wars? How are some leaders able to continue or even escalate wars in the face of strong or rising popular opposition, as George W. Bush did in Iraq and Barack Obama and other NATO leaders did in Afghanistan?[16] Why do leaders and elites risk public ire by continuing or escalating wars they know they are unlikely to win, often with halfhearted effort? Why do parties with dovish reputations on national security issues, such as the modern Democratic Party in the United States, fight or continue so many wars? In democracies, why don't doves get their way more often?

While many scholars have asked versions of the question "why hawks win,"[17] we can turn the question around and ask, "Why don't doves win?" Elite doves not only lose arguments but also frequently make or support hawkish decisions, despite having significant misgivings and significant power. Even if we make no assumptions about the public's preferences about using military force except that they want their leaders to act wisely, the muted doves pose a challenge to theories of "democratic advantage" in crises and wars that are rooted in electoral accountability. Such theories suggest that open political debate and the threat of voter punishment make democratic leaders think twice about military adventures, choosing their fights wisely, and when they use force, make them fight better and more effectively to deliver victory to voters.[18] Yet we have observed decisions about the use of force across time and space that seem contrary to what we would have expected voters to choose. If voters constrain their leaders, we would not expect to observe distorted decision making about the use of force so frequently.

Scholars and commentators have offered many explanations for distorted democratic decisions about the use of force, including information failures that keep voters from learning enough to constrain their leaders;[19] deception on the part of democratic leaders;[20] psychological bias among decision makers;[21] and what we might call "holidays from democracy," when public accountability mechanisms temporarily break down.[22] Yet none of these arguments explains the persistence of distorted decision making that takes place through regular democratic politics. Others focus on explanations specific to the United States, such as a US interventionist impulse that leads to a hawkish mind-set; a culture of "limited liability" that seeks to spread liberal ideas without committing excessive resources; or an approach that seeks to do just enough to avoid losing but not enough to win.[23] While it is true that US military power and global reach mean that it is the country most frequently able and asked to make these decisions, these questions are not confined to the United States, as illustrated by the dramatic protests in Europe on the eve of the Iraq War. Furthermore, there is significant variation across US presidential decisions about the use of force: some presidents have jumped into wars hastily, while others do so reluctantly or not at all. Many presidents have made their goal doing the "minimum necessary" to not lose, rather than seeking outright victory—an approach powerfully explained by Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts in their classic study of the Vietnam War[24]—while others do better at matching strategy to their preferred outcome, or even cut losses when they recognize failure. And in many US cases, there were plenty of doves or advocates of a more restrained approach involved in decisions to fight or extend wars.

In this book, I argue that we have been looking for the domestic politics of war in the wrong place. The theory I develop in this book posits that elites are a distinctive domestic audience with their own preferences and politics that change how we should think about democracies and war. I define elites as those with access to information and the decision-making process, and who could serve as cue givers to other elites or to the public.

While some elites represent voters, elites have a very different relationship to a leader's decisions about the use of force from that which citizens have. For example, leaders face voters infrequently, while leaders encounter at least some elites daily. Voters need to get information from other sources, usually the media, while elites have access to information and can share it with each other or directly with the press.[25] Elites and voters may also want different things, or want the same things with different intensity. Voters may want to fight and win only "necessary" wars, but they tend to have weak preferences about policy specifics. Elites, in contrast, tend to have stronger, sometimes intense preferences about specific issues that are highly salient to them.[26] And ultimately, what elites and voters can do to influence leaders' decisions also differs. Voters can throw the bums out. Elites have a much longer list of tools to impose costs on leaders: they can block a leader's future policies, they can sabotage existing policy, they can force the leader to consume political capital, they can cue other elites, and they can bring in public opinion by publicizing information about a policy or criticizing the leader's decisions.

All of this adds up to a different set of domestic constraints than we would expect if leaders responded primarily to the public's wishes. In a militarily powerful country like the United States, elites induce a hawkish bias in decisions about war and peace even when there are influential doves involved. But elite pressures do not always drive democracies like the United States to war. While elites can make it easier for democratic leaders to fight, they are also an important source of constraint and accountability. Leaders must bargain with elites or control information to secure crucial elite support for war. Even if they support war, elites can force presidents to alter military strategy or even end conflicts. Outward elite consensus can mask fierce elite politics that shape the timing, scope, strategy, and duration of military conflict.

Decision making about war and peace is thus an "insiders' game" even in democracies. While elite accountability is not as effective as some might hope, it is also not as dangerous as others might fear. Elite politics are a natural part of democratic decisions about the use of force, not a perversion of them. We cannot understand democracies at war—and the most militarily powerful democracy, the United States—without elite politics.

Argument in Brief

Public opinion on foreign policy presents a paradox. The public pays little attention to the details of most foreign policy. Even when they try to use the "bully pulpit," democratic leaders are rarely successful in changing the public's views.[27] Yet leaders frequently behave *as if* public opinion matters.[28] So why do they bother worrying about public opinion at all?

One answer is that elites lead mass opinion: citizens use elite cues as a shortcut, solving their "democratic dilemma" by getting information efficiently from those they perceive to be knowledgeable and trusted sources.[29] Many top-down approaches to American political behavior rest on similar arguments and emphasize elite leadership of mass opinion, depending on the presence or absence of elite consensus on an issue.[30] These arguments do not mean that elites can automatically manipulate the fickle masses, as classical realists like Walter Lippmann and Hans Morgenthau suggested.[31] Indeed, scholars of public opinion and foreign policy have found that the public does have coherent foreign policy attitudes and can update its views in response to events.[32] But even scholars who take a bottom-up approach to public opinion and foreign policy—that is, starting with mass public preferences—acknowledge that elite messages are often necessary to provide information or activate public attitudes.[33]

Yet the premise of elite cues as a shortcut to voter accountability—that citizens can "learn what they need to know," as Lupia and McCubbins put it—assumes that those cues point to policies that, on average, reflect what the voters want.[34] That is, democratic politics will generate good information about the wisdom of war, and that most of the time, following elite cues will lead to the kind of moderate policies that public-driven models assume the public seeks. While elites are not perfect, most theories expect elites to get it right most of the time, leading to relatively coherent and stable public preferences and responses to external events.[35]

But where does elite consensus come from? Why do some cues circulate in public debate but others do not? What explains the many instances in which elites had either knowledge or misgivings about the use of force that they did not share with citizens, or cases in which elites did not obtain relevant information to pass on to the public at all? Why does elite consensus sometimes persist in the face of rising public discontent—and conversely, why does the elite consensus sometimes fracture when public attitudes remain permissive? Why do we see so many leaders—including many from dovish parties—entering or prolonging risky wars, often fully understanding that the conflict is probably unwinnable?

I argue that the elite politics of war are the norm, not the exception, even in democracies. Elites are a distinct domestic audience for decisions to use force, and they confront democratic leaders with a different political problem than voters do. As recent international relations scholarship has shown, autocratic politics can generate both distortions in decision making when dictators use the spoils of war to keep elites happy, *and* constraints if the dictator strays too far from the elite audience's preferences.[36] I argue that the elite politics of war are different from mass politics in democracies, and that elite politics shape democratic leaders' decisions about war initiation, escalation, and termination. Elite politics are by no means the same in democracies as in autocracies, where disputes are often resolved with violence or loss of liberty.[37] But elite politics introduce their own democratic distortions into decisions about war and peace, as well as their own constraints on democratic leaders.

Why Elite Politics Are Different

If elites channel the foreign policy preferences of the public, either because voters select them to represent public preferences or because they respond to public attitudes, there would be no need for a separate theory of elite politics and war in democracies.[38] The theory must therefore address a threshold question: are elites in democracies really a distinctive audience, or are they simply what we might call "faithful intermediaries" for the voters?

The stakes of this question are high, not only for understanding democratic accountability for decisions about war and peace, but also for international relations arguments about the advantages of democracies at war. These arguments hinge on features of the public audience, such as its size, its preferences, or its attentiveness.[39] For example, in selectorate theory, developed by Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, and Morrow, a crucial concept is the size of what they term the "selectorate," or those who have a role in selecting the leader, relative to the "winning coalition," or the subset of the selectorate whose support the leader needs to gain or retain power.[40] In democracies, where the selectorate is a very large pool of voters, leaders cannot realistically dole out the spoils of war to individual citizens in the winning coalition. In contrast, dictators, whose winning coalition is typically a small, finite number of elite supporters, can keep their audience happy with private rewards even if a war is not going well.[41] This contrast in coalition size is vital to selectorate theory's conclusion that democracies select and fight wars more effectively than autocracies, because democratic leaders, unable to parcel out rewards to individual voters, instead focus on providing public goods like effective national security. If, however, democratic leaders regularly provide private rewards to elites, their incentive to provide public goods may be reduced.

The first step is defining who I mean by "elites." I argue that in any democracy facing a decision about the use of force, three groups of elites are most likely to have systematic influence: legislators, military leaders, and high-ranking cabinet and administration officials. To keep the analysis tractable, I limit the theoretical scope to these three groups, acknowledging the importance of others, such as media elites, along the way. Even unelected elites who make decisions about war and peace are political actors, and our theories must treat them as such.

Although many elites represent or serve the public, they also have different preferences, incentives, and sources and means of power that make them capable of action independent of the voters. Elites themselves vary in how they view the costs and benefits of war, and elites are not uniformly more accepting of military conflict. But elite preferences are more specific and more informed by policy, political, or career concerns than those of the public. Elites also have policy preferences on other foreign and domestic policy issues that open up space for bargaining.

Elites can impose costs and constraints on leaders that differ from those available to the mass public. Elite-imposed costs generally take two forms. First, elites can impose resource costs, forcing a leader to expend precious time or political capital to secure elite support for preferred policies, or to abandon those policies altogether. Elites can take away or block something the leader wants (for example, legislation, policies, or personnel appointments), extract concessions that lead to policy spillover on other issues, or sabotage policies as they are implemented. Democratic elites can thus punish leaders directly. It is crucial to note that these mechanisms exist independent of public opinion, because voters do not have these tools available to them. Furthermore, elites have concentrated power that gives them outsized influence: for example, a well-placed handful of hawks can exert more leverage than legions of dovish voters.

Second, elites can impose informational costs by sharing information with other elite audience members, through either private or public communications. Sustained elite disagreement can act as a “fire alarm” that tells voters it is time to pay attention to a potential or ongoing military conflict.[42] Conversely, elite support can reassure voters that their leader’s decision is sound. While public-driven models assume elites will pull the fire alarm in the service of the voters’ interests, I argue that elite bargaining in the insiders’ game may alter when elites pull the fire alarm, sometimes earlier than necessary, or more likely, delaying elite dissent and thus masking problems that voters might want to know about. These information costs can stay within elite circles, for example when elites cue each other and trigger some of the elite resource costs, without going public.

Thus I argue that the presence or absence of an elite consensus about the use of force is itself a political process. And as in any political process, leaders are not passive observers. Leaders have tools to shape how elites judge and what elites say about their decisions to use military force that are unavailable when dealing with voters. There are two primary mechanisms through which leaders manage elites. First, democratic leaders can use side payments to bargain with particular elites. This argument challenges the view, made prominent in selectorate theory, that democratic leaders, who face a large public audience, must provide public goods that all voters can share—like victory—to keep their audience happy, whereas leaders of authoritarian regimes can dole out private goods to a small number of supporters.[43] Second, leaders can manage information, keeping certain elites informed, choosing emissaries carefully, and cutting others out of the loop. Such information management can alter perceptions of the probability of success in war, and thus whether elites will support it. The book is thus not simply about elite leadership of mass opinion—it is also about elite leadership of elite opinion, which can be as much a part of a leader's messaging strategy as "going public."[44]

It remains possible that elites will come to a consensus in the public interest, or their sincere best estimate about what would be in the public interest. But the insiders' game can introduce democratic distortions in decisions about the use of force because leaders compromise with crucial elites and alter information flow inside elite circles. In the case studies (chapters 4–7), I look for evidence that democratic leaders are mindful of potential elite costs and that they respond by managing information and offering side payments.

Curses and Misadventures

But does this all add up to more war, less war, or different wars? I argue that what I call the "insiders' game" introduces a systematic set of distortions that lead to wars we would not expect under a public-driven model, as well as decisions about strategy and war fighting that are not part of most public-driven models at all.[45] In settings like that of the United States, these democratic distortions induce a hawkish bias in decisions related to war—even in the presence of powerful doves. One note on terminology: throughout this book I use "war" and "peace" as shorthands, but "war" can include escalation or other hawkish policies after war begins, while "peace" can mean dovish or deescalatory policies, including simply staying out of a conflict rather than making an affirmative peace overture.

To see the source of hawkish bias, we can start with a classic argument about hawks and doves. For better or for worse, hawks are more trusted on national security issues than doves, who face a larger credibility deficit when they make decisions about war and peace.[46] A dove who chooses a dovish policy has a hard time convincing a domestic audience that the policy is in the national interest, and not simply a blind commitment to dovish views. Research on this topic suggests leaders want to signal that they are moderate, giving hawkish leaders who want to avoid the "warmonger" label an advantage in peace initiatives.[47] Thus leaders can gain political benefits from acting "against type," as in the famous idea that only a hawk like Nixon could go to China.[48] Most theory, however, has been about the politics of making peace, rather than the full set of trade-offs between peace and war, for both hawks and doves. One can infer that the public-driven version of this argument is symmetric: if hawks have an advantage in making peace, doves have an advantage in making war, pulling policy toward the middle. In the public-driven model, then, the constraints on leaders are therefore symmetric if leaders want to act on their true views.[49]

Shifting to an elite view of politics alters this symmetric picture. I argue that in the insiders' game, the doves' credibility deficit generates asymmetric constraints between hawkish and dovish leaders when they want to act true to type, that is, to follow their hawkish or dovish preferences. Put simply, it is easier for hawks than for doves to be themselves.

Three mechanisms generate these asymmetric constraints in the insiders' game. First, dovish leaders face *selection pressures* that give power to elites with more intense, specific, and sometimes hawkish preferences. These pressures put at least some hawks inside dovish leaders' own governments, and these hawks can monitor decision making up close and extract a price for their support. Hawkish leaders do not face selection pressures to the same degree.

Second, doves face larger *agenda costs* if they choose or seek hawkish buy-in for a dovish policy—making the trade-off for doves between fighting and staying out of conflicts politically starker than for hawks. For doves, initiating, continuing, or escalating a war may not be their preferred policy, but choosing to fight can conserve political resources for the issues doves often prioritize, such as domestic policy. Doves therefore have incentives to make concessions on war- or security-related policies—which hawks care about intensely—to save the political capital they would have to use to get hawks to support a dovish policy (or, if they cannot or do not want to seek hawkish support, to avoid a politicized fight over whether their dovish policy is weak or harmful to national security). In contrast, hawks are more trusted and focused on national security to begin with—leaving aside whether they deserve such deference—and have lower political opportunity costs for other policy aims. Hawks can therefore obtain dovish support for military action at a lower "price," such as procedural concessions.

Third, *the costs of obtaining countertype elite support* are greater for dovish than for hawkish leaders, in part because the private benefits—including career, political, or policy benefits—to elites are greater for dovish elites who support war than for hawkish elites who support peace. Even if they are truly dovish, elites may find that supporting war or at least refraining from criticism can be better for their career or policy aims, making supporting war more attractive to doves. For a hawkish leader who wants to fight, these incentives further lower the "price" to obtain dovish elites' support for war, even if these doves are in the opposition party. Hawkish elites outside the leader's inner circle, who are more likely to gain career or policy benefits from war, do not realize the same degree of private benefits from going against type and supporting peace. To be sure, hawkish copartisans of a hawkish leader who chooses peace are unlikely to deny their own leader a Nixon-to-China moment, but the political benefits of such peace initiatives accrue mainly to the individual leader, leaving hawkish advisers or copartisans unsatisfied. Hawkish elites have much lower incentives to support dovish policies under a dovish leader—especially a dovish leader who does not share their party—and thus will provide such support only at a steep price. If dovish leaders want to get hawkish elites on board for dovish policies, therefore, they must pay those costs out of their own stock of scarce political capital.

These mechanisms lead to two ideal-typical distortions that emerge from the theory and are not expected by public-driven arguments. The first is a *dove's curse*, in which a dovish leader becomes trapped in an inconclusive military conflict. The second is the *hawk's misadventure*, in which hawks, who enjoy deference on national security and whose security priorities lower their political opportunity costs for fighting, face fewer *ex ante* constraints on initiating war. They may undertake inadvisable military ventures whose likelihood of success they have incentives to exaggerate through information management.

This hawkish bias does not inevitably lead to war. Indeed, it is theoretically possible that elite constraint can raise or lower the probability of war. Jon Western highlights an example from the George H. W. Bush administration, when the military and others in the administration framed Bosnia as the more challenging conflict and Somalia the more feasible operation, and George H. W. Bush, supported by General Colin Powell, chose to intervene in Somalia but not in Bosnia. Yet Western also notes that the military had for months insisted that Somalia would be a major challenge and shifted its stance only when it became clear that the recently elected Bill Clinton would probably try to intervene in Bosnia.[50] Elites are more likely to prevent democratic leaders from initiating conflict when the leader is already leaning against war or when the probability of success is widely perceived to be low or highly uncertain. For example, in August 2013, the British Parliament voted down Prime Minister David Cameron's proposed operation against Syria after its chemical weapons use. The unexpected outcome, widely seen as a humiliation for Cameron, influenced Barack Obama, who was already highly ambivalent about using force. Obama threw the issue to Congress to force legislators to go on the record, something most members were unwilling to risk given the very uncertain likelihood of success—thus providing Obama cover for staying out.[51]

The theory suggests that the asymmetries of elite politics make it more likely that reluctant elites will support or passively tolerate war after gaining policy concessions or after receiving an inflated estimate of the probability of success, increasing the likelihood of war initiation. It is easier for hawks to convince doves to support war than for doves to obtain hawkish buy-in for staying out. Considered in light of the bargaining model of war, elites who see benefits from fighting or who can be persuaded through side payments or information to support war can narrow the bargaining range for finding a peaceful solution with an adversary.[52] Leaders' efforts to influence perceptions of the probability of success also undermine democracies' ability to select into wars they expect to win, or to signal their intentions credibly. Thus elites need not uniformly favor war to increase the odds of conflict. In general, the lower the cost to democratic leaders to secure elite support, the greater the likelihood of initiating a war that a leader would not choose if the cost of evading constraint were higher. The ability to use relatively "cheap" side payments undermines democratic selectivity mechanisms and makes it easier for elites to slip the constraints that come with public scrutiny.[53]

But once wars begin, elite politics also contain the seeds of accountability, especially for hawks. Elites may sometimes smooth the path to war, but democratic leaders must face these elites early and often. Dovish leaders, who are subject to hawkish elite pressure, can become trapped into fighting with just enough effort not to lose in order to keep elite consensus intact—prolonging wars until the elite consensus finally reaches its limits. Hawkish leaders exhibit wider variance. They may be selective, as in the examples of Dwight Eisenhower and George H. W. Bush, who chose carefully when to fight and placed strict limits on their war aims when they did so. But hawks' lower *ex ante* constraints can allow them to pursue misadventures. What hawks seek, however, are definitive outcomes. Though they risk being seen as overly bellicose, hawks start with the benefit of the doubt on matters of war and peace, and hawkish elites want to protect their credibility on these issues. Hawkish leaders thus feel the heat from other hawkish elites if military operations go poorly. These pressures can lead hawks to pursue an outcome they can call a victory, including some form of withdrawal.

Thus the insiders' game can lead to democratic distortions in decisions about the use of military force, departing from what a fully informed and attentive public would choose. Elite politics can affect the substance of policy even if the public is not clamoring for a policy shift in the same direction or if the details remain largely out of public view, because leaders face constraints from elites that differ in their content, timing, and frequency. Elites may effectively "collude" with leaders to start a war with dim prospects. Elites can allow an unpopular war to continue, as doves seek to keep it on the back burner without losing, or as hawks gamble for a resolution. Elite politics can affect the information available to decision makers, including those in the opposition who must decide whether to lend public support to a conflict.[54] But these same elite politics can also force leaders to revisit decisions and even end wars.

It is important to stress that the insiders' game is a feature of democratic politics, not a perversion of it. I refer to outcomes like the dove's curse and hawk's misadventure as "democratic distortions" because while they are different from what we would expect from a public-driven model where voters can get the information they need to hold leaders accountable, the distortion stems from democratic politics. It is normal for elite politics in democracies to shape not only the substance of policy but also what elites say about the use of force, and thus the information available to the public. Often, these elite politics play out without entering the public arena or land there with little fanfare, precisely because leaders work strategically to keep the politics of war out of the spotlight. Leaders need not necessarily hide foreign policy or military operations from public audiences, however.[55] For example, in a military operation, leaders might make concessions on strategy to satisfy military or bureaucratic officials—a critical decision but one that the public might not know much about. Leaders can also make concessions on other foreign policy or national security issues unrelated to the conflict, leading to spillover effects the public does not necessarily view as linked to war. Insider politics also mean that elites are on the front lines of democratic accountability. The insiders' game is often the only game in town.

Why the United States? Defining the Scope of the Insiders' Game

There is a tension in studying democracies and war: do we study democracies as a group, or examine the politics of particular democracies such as those most capable of using force? Elite politics, which include the strategic behavior of leaders, are difficult to trace across institutions and national contexts, much less across changes over time like partisan polarization or shifts in the technology of war. Narrowing the focus to one country can mitigate these problems and hold many factors constant. Yet the trade-off is the risk that the findings will not generalize to the broader set of democracies.

This book examines presidential decisions about the use of force in the United States, a choice that offers many theoretical and empirical advantages, but also entails some costs given that one of the book's main motivations is to illuminate how elite politics shapes choices about war in democracies. On the plus side, studying a single country allows me to hold domestic institutions and national political characteristics constant in order to focus on the strategic behavior of leaders and elites. This strategy illuminates variation in elite constraint within one country over time to show how democratic leaders manage constraint. The long sweep of the case selection—from the dawn of the Cold War through the post-9/11 "forever wars"—tests the theory in different international environments, technological eras, and political contexts. It also holds constant factors that may be unique to a country's geopolitical or historical position. For example, in postwar Germany and Japan, antimilitarism is embedded in political culture, arguably giving doves an advantage politically.[56] In the wake of China's rise and North Korea's nuclear threats, as well as the war in Ukraine, both Germany and Japan have recently shifted away from this cautious approach. But historical factors can influence party brands and leaders' credibility on national security issues for decades at a time.

It is also the case that historically, dovish parties have been associated with the Left. Leftist parties have, of course, conducted brutal wars. But in modern democratic countries with significant military power, doves often make their home on the left. This association does not mean that all doves are left-leaning politicians, or vice versa. Indeed, as Schultz notes, the imperfect alignment of preferences and party leads to uncertainty about whether dovish parties will always oppose force, and this uncertainty allows party members to send informative signals, particularly when they support war.[57] As I discuss in chapter 4, dovish (or isolationist) elites had a strong presence in the Republican Party until the Korean War helped sort the parties more clearly. But the association between the conservative Republican Party as more hawkish and tougher on national security and the more liberal Democratic Party as more dovish and weaker predates the Korean War. This association helps make the United States a useful case through which to study the politics of hawkish and dovish elites in other settings, because parties on the left typically have more ambitious domestic programs, increasing their agenda costs when considering whether to use military force. Scholars of American politics have shown that the Democratic Party has historically had a larger domestic legislative agenda, centered on ambitious social programs, than the Republican Party, which has often pursued domestic policies, like tax cuts, that require less complex legislation.[58]

Studying the United States also has some specific advantages. First, very few democracies get to make these decisions about the use of force, and there is also much value in studying decisions about war in the most militarily powerful democracy. The United States is the democracy whose decisions about the use of force are the most potentially consequential for elites and citizens across the globe.

Second, separation of powers in the United States means that there are clearer distinctions between insider and elected elites. The presidential system allows voters to express their views directly in elections for the chief executive and legislators, with cabinet officials and other advisers appointed rather than elected.[59] Other institutional configurations muddy the waters between elected and unelected elites. For example, in a parliamentary democracy like the United Kingdom, many powerful governmental officials are also elected legislators (though civil servants and other advisers can be very powerful and can also serve as cue givers). In a proportional representation system with coalition government, defense and foreign policy portfolios may be given to other parties, imbuing disagreement between ministers with much more obvious political motives. For example, following the 2021 federal elections in Germany, the new coalition of center-left parties, led by Social Democrat (SPD) Olaf Scholz, faced the threat from Russia's military buildup on Ukraine's border. The Green Party's candidate for chancellor, Annalena Baerbock, got the foreign ministry appointment, giving the Greens considerable leverage over foreign policy. Defying her party's traditional pacifist roots, Baerbock put pressure on Scholz to shake off his dovish instincts.[60] Her position within a coalition government, however, may dilute the pressure her policy arguments put on the chancellor, because her policies can be seen as linked to her own future political ambitions and her party's electoral fortunes more directly than if she served in a US presidential administration. One could certainly account for these different institutional structures theoretically, but for theory building it is simpler to begin with a cleaner separation between the executive and legislative branches.

Even with a narrower focus on the United States, however, many aspects of the insiders' game are common across democracies. Democratic leaders in different institutional settings face many similar challenges. Democratic leaders of all stripes must manage fractious wings of their party, work with unelected policy advisers and bureaucrats, and interact with the military. Thus while extending the argument to other democratic settings is beyond the scope of the book, along the way I highlight the theory's significant implications for the broader study of democracies at war.

Implications for Theories of Democracy and War

This book challenges the voter-driven view of democracies in the international arena that has dominated international relations theory for several decades. In making this challenge, my argument is not that the public is irrelevant—especially since elites derive some of their leverage from their ability to cue the public. In recent years, many scholars have questioned the predicted effects of public accountability, such as whether democracies make more credible threats or whether democratic leaders are more likely to be punished for battlefield failures.[61] Others have examined the microfoundations of public attitudes to show how public opinion is not uniform in its response to democratic leaders' threats or conduct of foreign policy more generally.[62] But the democratic picture remains focused on leaders and voters.

The theory I develop is a more direct challenge to the nature of democratic decision making. It does not merely add an intervening variable to public opinion models. I argue that leaders must also play to an elite audience, leading to democratic distortions in decisions about war and peace. But though these distortions depart from the outcomes predicted by public-driven theories, they are nonetheless the product of democratic politics. The public remains an important, latent voice in the background, but the scope of policy that can be debated and pursued without public scrutiny is vast, and the effort required to rouse the public is large. Democratic leaders know this and try to control the composition and size of their domestic audience—a regular, normal part of politics.

This perspective echoes E. E. Schattschneider's argument that "the most important strategy of politics is concerned with the scope of conflict,"[63] where conflict here means political conflict. Schattschneider asserts that "at the nub of politics, are, first, the way in which the public participates in the spread of the conflict and, second, the processes by which the unstable relation of the public to the conflict is controlled." As he concludes, "conflicts are frequently won or lost by the success that the contestants have in getting the audience involved in the fight or in excluding it, as the case may be."[64] Thus "a tremendous amount of conflict is controlled by keeping it so private that it is almost completely invisible."[65]

Although they are part of normal democratic politics, leaders' regular use of the two main tools of the insiders' game—side payments and managing information—undermines two mechanisms that underpin several arguments that democracies are better at selecting and fighting wars: that the difficulty of buying off domestic audience members with the spoils of war causes democratic leaders to fight better and more effectively to deliver victory to voters; and that the open flow of information leads democracies to make better decisions about when and how to fight.[66] If instead the audience for many decisions about the use of force is smaller than theories of democracies and war typically assume, then an elite-driven theory of democracies and war raises the possibility of side payments and bargaining that are precluded in accounts such as selectorate theory.[67] Furthermore, elite politics may distort information flow within elite circles, and thus the efficiency of elite cues as an information shortcut for voters. Voters may still get cues, but elite politics introduces distortions in what they hear. In the insiders' game, we should expect more choices and outcomes that depart from the predictions of a public-driven model—more wars that the public appears to oppose, or more decisions not to use force when the public is permissive—as well as a wider range of outcomes, including defeats and stalemates.

Treating war as an insiders' game in democracies provides an explanation from the democratic side for findings that democracies and some autocracies exhibit similar conflict behavior, initiating and winning wars at similar rates. After decades of treating autocracies as a residual category of countries that were not democratic, scholars of autocracies and conflict have explored variation in the institutional and structural features of autocracies, from personalist dictatorships, on one extreme, to relatively "constrained" autocracies where elites can hold dictators accountable, on the other.[68] This wave of research has shown that some autocracies can generate enough constraint to signal credibility in crises, and that these autocracies initiate conflicts and win them at rates similar to those of democracies.[69] Studies of autocracies and conflict highlight mechanisms of accountability, arguing that the size of the politically relevant domestic audience in some "constrained" autocratic regimes is larger than previously assumed, ranging from elites who can oust the leader to protesters strategically sanctioned by the state.[70] Focusing on autocratic elites, Weeks hints at an explanation that accounts for the similar conflict initiation rate between constrained autocracies and democracies, positing that "leaders of machines may find it much more difficult to massage domestic opinion when the audience consists of high-level officials—themselves often active in foreign policy and with no special appetite for force—than a 'rationally ignorant' mass public."[71]

To be sure, autocratic politics introduces its own set of elite-driven distortions in decision making. Mechanisms like coup proofing, exclusionary policies toward ethnic groups, and information control undermine dictators' ability to make good decisions and to field militaries that are effective on the battlefield.[72] Dictatorships, particularly personalist dictatorships, cannot afford to keep competent, well-informed militaries with divided loyalties close at hand. Scholars rightly see these autocratic distortions as part of autocratic politics, as autocrats balance their own survival against the interests of the state and its people when selecting and fighting wars. There are no easy solutions for dictators, only trade-offs.

Similarly, scholarship on the domestic politics of war has come to see democratic leaders' political interests and incentives as rational, political drivers of crisis and conflict decisions. Some of these theories introduce distortions, in the sense of departures from what the public would prefer if it were fully informed and could choose policy, but the mechanisms are usually driven by public opinion and voting.[73] Others argue that political competition and partisan incentives need not distort democratic decision making and can even enhance it, if the opposition's incentives to challenge the government help uncover information that would aid public accountability and make signals more credible to adversaries.[74]

I argue that elite politics produces its own set of democratic distortions that are likewise an inescapable part of democratic politics. Democratic leaders may not take the kinds of steps to guard against violent overthrow that autocrats do, but they take plenty of political actions that can distort the choice to enter wars and how to fight them. These actions also reflect trade-offs for democratic leaders and their elite audiences—for those who want to get other things done, for those who seek to stay in or one day gain office, and for those who work to protect national security. Understanding the insiders' game allows us to see that the differences between democracies and autocracies are more subtle than existing theories suggest.

Implications for the United States

For the United States—the country with by far the most capabilities and opportunities to make decisions about the use of force—recognizing that war is an insiders' game is crucial to understanding why presidents so often seem to make self-defeating choices. There have been many attempts to explain what can seem like baffling presidential decisions in the post–World War II record of American national security decisions. Many theories explain these outcomes with a variable that hardly varies, however, including a shared ideology of hawkishness, an ideology of "limited liability" liberalism that seeks to promote values while limiting costs, or casualty sensitivity or aversion that can lead to distortions in force structure or strategy.[75] Other approaches account for variation but treat distortions as the product of psychological biases or errors that alter decision making, such as misperception and overconfidence.[76] These are distortions, to be sure, but they arise from individuals' predispositions or institutions' selection of elites with those predispositions. Yet as Gelb and Betts eloquently argue in the context of the Vietnam War, US presidents—and many other elites—often knew exactly what they were doing and that it was unlikely to succeed.[77]

In my argument, elite political incentives drive variation in when and especially how presidents decide to use military force. Outcomes like the dove's curse and the hawk's misadventure are the product of regular democratic politics, rather than mistakes or biases. The diagnosis matters for those seeking treatment. Gelb and Betts's argument that the "system worked" in the Vietnam War—that is, that the government machinery did what it was programmed to do—showed how to think about poor war outcomes as clear-eyed products of presidential decisions.[78] Such a diagnosis means that no amount of tinkering with the bureaucracy or better information from the field would have altered the outcome. Similarly, if elite politics drives the distortions I identify in this book—effects like policy sabotage, policy spillover, or asymmetric incentives to act against type—then then there are no easy fixes, only different trade-offs.

Another implication is that to understand these trade-offs, we cannot treat the major political parties symmetrically. The literature on partisanship and war in the United States treats the parties essentially the same and focuses on whether they are in or out of power. As Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins argue, even scholarship on American politics more generally has treated the parties symmetrically. Yet as they demonstrate, the two major parties have significant differences in structure, policy preferences, and ideology. Grossmann and Hopkins argue that the parties are "asymmetric," with Republicans focused on the ideology of small government, and Democrats managing a coalition while trying to pass major domestic legislation.[79] Detecting asymmetries in the observed record can be challenging, however, because of selection effects, including incentives to act against type. We know that the parties have very different priorities, generating party brands around issues that a particular party "owns."[80] These brands, in turn, generate incentives for presidents to act against type but, as Patrick Egan argues, also lead to pressure to shore up the brand for the party that owns that issue—sometimes leading to more extreme policies from the issue-owning party.[81] As I argue in chapter 2, these incentives are not symmetrical for the two parties, leading to what we can think of as an "oversupply" of war under Democratic presidents, and fewer constraints on Republican presidents' misadventures.

The parties also differ in the opportunity costs of their decisions about the use of force. For Democratic elites, who typically want to focus on domestic policy and social programs enacted through legislation, military policy is usually a lower priority, but failing to address real or perceived threats can leave them open to charges of weakness. This fear can make the short-term, private benefits of supporting war more attractive for individual elites, especially those with future career or political aspirations, lowering the cost of obtaining their support for war. For Republicans, national security is often the main event. The theory does not rely on party ideology, however—rather, it is important that elites vary in their views within parties, because this heterogeneity generates the uncertainty that underpins against-type logic, and tars all but the most extreme members of a party with the party reputation, whether they deserve it or not.[82] The theory shows that elite incentives generate asymmetries in elite selection and in the price and currency presidents must pay to secure the support of elites for their preferred policies—a process that, in turn, generates hawkish bias in US national security policy.

Both of these implications—the fundamentally political nature of democratic distortions, and the asymmetry in the parties' cost to be themselves—may seem dispiriting. Can the Democratic Party do anything to escape the dove's curse, for example, or are Democrats doomed to be prisoners of the party's reputation for weakness on national security? I return to this question in the conclusion, but it is important to note that if the elite politics diagnosis is correct, many commonly prescribed solutions will not be effective. For example, calls for more voices of "restraint" that would widen the debate are unlikely to break the dove's curse if the political incentives for elites with dovish views remain unchanged—and as the cases illustrate, there are often many doves or voices of restraint in decision-making circles already.

The effects of partisan polarization offer interesting implications for mitigating, if not necessarily escaping, the dove's curse, however. On the one hand, polarization is dangerous for US foreign policy since, as Kenneth Schultz, Rachel Myrick, and others point out, it can inhibit unity in addressing threats or prevent presidents from getting political cover for risky moves that might be necessary.[83] On the other hand, by removing some of the political upside to acting against type—because the opposition is committed to opposing the president no matter what—polarization may give dovish leaders and dovish elites more room to be their dovish selves. That President Biden could choose to exit Afghanistan, absorb significant elite and public disapproval for his handling of the withdrawal, and still go on to a string of domestic legislative successes—including the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 and significant action on the Democratic priority of addressing climate change—illustrates the point. If Senate vote counts are rigidly partisan, Democratic presidents may perceive lower agenda costs to pursuing a more dovish course in foreign policy. Similarly, if elected Democrats are less inclined to give support up front to Republican presidents' decisions to use force, potential hawkish misadventures may face more scrutiny.

For studies of American foreign policy—and scholarship on the domestic politics of war more generally—the larger implication of the book is that we must take another step beyond the leaders-want-to-stay-in-office assumption.[84] That assumption generated important advances in the study of domestic politics and war, by treating leaders' political survival as a component of a rational leader's calculations in crises and conflict. But leaders are not the only ones with political incentives, nor are elected elites. Elite politics can have profound effects on not only when but how democracies use force.

Existing Arguments: The Missing Politics of Elites

This book is not the first to argue that the public is inattentive to the details of foreign policy or that elites shape decisions about war and peace in the United States. Its major contribution is to develop and test a theory of democratic elite politics and war. The theory bridges several literatures in international relations and American politics by focusing on features missing from each: political interactions among elites, and the political agency of leaders.

One of the book's contributions is to advance the study of elite politics in international relations. Two well-developed areas of research on elite political interactions are executive-legislative relations, which focuses on whether Congress can constrain the president in war;[85] and civil-military relations, which addresses the relationship between civilian leaders and the armed services.[86] But this work focuses on certain types of elite interactions rather than a general theory of elite politics. The bureaucratic politics perspective explicitly addresses elite bargaining, arguing that "individuals share power" and that "government decisions and actions result from a political process."[87] This emphasis on shared authority among elites echoes Richard Neustadt's arguments about presidential power as the "power to persuade" other actors to support the president's policies.[88] The bureaucratic politics approach, however, can be overly complex and strangely lacking in politics.[89] More recently, Helen Milner and Dustin Tingley explore bureaucratic politics and presidential leeway across foreign policy issues. They predict the militarization of policy because the president has a freer hand in the military arena, but given the cross-issue scope of their study, they do not explore the politics of war itself.[90] This book puts the bureaucratic politics of war on firmer footing by addressing elite politics more generally.

Some existing accounts of domestic politics and war—in both international relations and American politics scholarship—recognize the role of elite consensus or dissent but do not assess the politics that influence whether these elites decide to support war or what might sway them if they are on the fence. For example, many studies recognize the strategic behavior of opposition parties when they decide whether to publicly support the government's use of force or publicly oppose it and make a military venture politically more perilous for leaders.[91] The electoral effects of war outcomes depend critically on opposition behavior: if the opposition supported a successful war, the leader gets little political benefit, but winning a war the opposition opposed is politically exploitable.[92] Rally effects in presidential approval also depend on the presence of opposition support or criticism, an argument that accounts for Kennedy's approval bump after the Bay of Pigs, when Republicans held their fire.[93] But how does the opposition get information and decide whether supporting the government's position is wise, both for national security and for the opposition's political goals? Moreover, these accounts tend to be silent on what leaders can do to shape opposition elites' decisions.

Relatedly, in American politics research on elite leadership of mass opinion, the nature and volume of elite cues, and the presence or absence of elite consensus, are usually taken as given. The book thus contributes to the study of American political behavior by exploring the political origins of elite cues. Leaders' strategic management of elites yields variation in elite consensus and discord over time. This book joins several other recent efforts to bridge scholarship on international relations and American politics.[94]

The theory shows how leaders can intervene to shape constraints on their ability to pursue their preferred policy. Just as scholars recognize that leaders strategically engage with the public, or choose to conduct foreign policy secretly or even deceptively, I argue that leaders can intervene in the elite politics of war.[95] For example, the opposition party, whose behavior may turn on its estimate of the likelihood of victory, needs information to form that estimate—giving democratic leaders a point of leverage. It is not merely that leaders anticipate public reaction and choose messages or messengers, or even tailor policy, accordingly. Leaders also have incentives to manage the information elites receive about the war's wisdom and progress. Elites, of course, are themselves strategic. Some elites can impose greater costs than others, and the leader can offer some elites certain types of side payments, like career or prestige boosts, while others require concessions on war policy or other national security concerns. The theory developed in chapter 2 outlines when we should expect to see different forms of side payments and how that affects decisions about the use of force.

Testing the Theory: Looking for Elite Politics

Where should we look within the United States for evidence of the insiders' game? As Schattschneider observed, "in view of the highly strategic character of politics we ought not to be surprised that the instruments of strategy are likely to be important in inverse proportion to the amount of public attention given to them."[96] Elite bargaining over the use of force can look distasteful, so there may be few traces in the public record. Thus "men of affairs do in fact make an effort to control the scope of conflict though they usually explain what they do on some other grounds. The way the question is handled suggests that the real issue may be too hot to handle otherwise."[97] Furthermore, if leaders try to avoid paying the costs elites can impose on them, then there may be few instances in which we can see leaders paying these costs. As Schultz observes, it can be quite difficult to see the imprint of domestic political constraints, because "to the extent that leaders value holding office, they are unlikely to make choices that lead to outcomes with high domestic political costs. If we can observe only the domestic costs that leaders choose to pay, then we will generally miss the cases in which these costs are large."[98] This selection argument applies to many of the domestic political costs that arise in the insiders' game. For example, it is rare for advisers to resign in protest, but we cannot conclude that leaders and advisers did not struggle mightily over policy behind the scenes to avoid such a dramatic departure.

There are also challenges that arise from testing the insiders' game model against a baseline model of public constraints—what I call the "faithful intermediaries" model, developed in chapter 2. If elites lead public opinion, we would expect observed public opinion to track closely with elite opinion, and thus it will be difficult to separate them—so looking at contemporaneous polling or even polling on anticipated future policies will not be sufficient. The argument requires an empirical strategy that can combine strategic behavior at the elite level with the anticipated effects of elite cues on not only the public but also elites who are less well informed, such as legislators who are not foreign policy experts.

I therefore use a two-pronged empirical approach. I combine survey experiments, designed to show which elite cues would affect public attitudes and thus should most concern presidents if they reached the public, with case studies designed to illustrate that in the real world, presidents spend their bargaining energy—and political capital—on managing those elites whose cues would have the strongest effects on public and secondary elite opinion, as well as avoiding the political costs that elites can impose directly. Using hypotheses developed in chapter 2, the experiments focus particular attention on cues from presidential advisers in the context of group decision making and bureaucratic politics, an important topic that has long been plagued with methodological problems.

The elite-centric arguments of this book put the focus squarely on leaders and their strategic interaction with elites. Given the rarity of decisions, it is difficult to conduct a large-N test that can account for the nuances of party and insider composition within a single country. Testing the theory requires historical accounts and primary documents that can illuminate the often-hidden mechanisms of the insiders' game. This evidence can help trace strategic behavior and assess whether politicians believe that theoretically predicted domestic costs exist. Additionally, case studies allow me to expand the range of outcomes usually considered in studies of domestic politics and war: not just initiation, escalation, termination, and war outcome, but also strategy, timing, and scope—elements of war that are of intense interest to scholars and policy makers, and may have important effects on a war's progress, duration, and outcome.

As I discuss in chapter 2, both survey experiments and case studies have strengths and weaknesses. It is the combination of the experiment and the cases that makes the research design more powerful. Survey experiments can identify the costs and benefits of particular elites' support or opposition to a policy—including the costs we are unlikely to observe in the real world—and help disentangle some of the partisan and ideological effects that are often difficult to tease out in case studies. The cases, which utilize historical and archival evidence from both presidential and adviser document collections, allow me to trace the mechanisms identified in the theory.

The two-pronged empirical approach in this book also makes an important methodological point about survey experiments.[99] The real-world effects of public opinion experiments sometimes manifest not in changes in public attitudes or even in elite anticipation of such a change, but rather in elite bargaining and strategic behavior. This bargaining often occurs behind the scenes, however, so that the effects turned up by the experiment manifest not in public but rather inside the proverbial Situation Room. The theory takes a significant step beyond the implications of many survey experiments, namely, that leaders anticipate which cues will most effectively move public opinion, and then choose policies, recruit messengers, and tailor messages accordingly. Rather, the insiders' game serves as a separate interaction, distinct from leaders' interactions with foreign states and with the public.

Plan of the Book

Chapter 2 develops the "insiders' game" model and compares this elite-driven theory to a public-driven approach, or what I call the "faithful intermediaries" model. Chapter 3 tests public opinion–related hypotheses using several large-scale survey experiments. Chapters 4 through 7 examine cases of US presidential decisions to use military force across the two parties. One aim of the case selection strategy is to span multiple eras. Some arguments suggest that democratic elites have been able to escape domestic constraints more easily in more recent decades, because of technological or material developments that help insulate leaders from public scrutiny. These developments include the end of the draft, the emergence of drone warfare, advances in military medicine that reduce the number of casualties, and changes in how democracies like the United States finance their wars.[100] Some of these developments started before the fall of the Berlin Wall, but many arrived or accelerated after the end of the Cold War, decreasing accountability as the public and even members of Congress became less engaged in oversight.[101] In the post–Cold War and especially the post-9/11 era, increased presidential power relative to other elites would make it somewhat surprising to see presidents bargaining. I therefore choose several cases from the Cold War, to show that war was an insiders' game even in an era with the draft and without many of these developments.

In chapters 4 and 5, I examine two cases—Korea and Vietnam—showing that elites dominated decisions to use and escalate force in major conflicts initiated by Democratic presidents during the Cold War. These cases hold constant the Cold War context, the initiating president's political party, and the party of the president who took over at a later stage. Scholars have seen the elections of 1952 and 1968 as outliers in terms of foreign policy's influence, with rising public dissatisfaction amid mounting casualties contributing to defeat for the incumbent president's party.[102] These cases also are also central to studies that emphasize the importance of elite consensus or dissent.[103] I take these arguments a step further, showing that elite consensus was no accident but rather the product of presidential efforts to keep elites on board, thus highlighting the strategic origins of the elite consensus so central to behavioral accounts.

The Korean War mapped out the political and international hazards of limited war in the post–World War II era. Harry S. Truman was concerned about the domestic political ramifications in Congress of failing to defend Korea, as well as Taiwan, from which he had sought to disengage prior to the outbreak of war in June 1950. As the conflict unfolded, he found himself beholden to those who advocated aid to Taiwan, and to the more hawkish preferences of his well-known military commander Douglas MacArthur. Truman's attempts to contain dissent led to a "dove's curse" and culminated in his removal of MacArthur, politicizing the debate openly.[104] I briefly discuss Dwight D. Eisenhower and the armistice, noting the surprising pressure he felt from his own party.

In the Vietnam case, Lyndon B. Johnson was able to manage elites remarkably well until the early part of 1968, enabling the United States to escalate to high levels with relatively high public support. He too continually placated his hawkish advisers, in part to conserve political capital for his cherished Great Society legislation. When Nixon won the election in 1968, the public had turned against the war, but Nixon escalated significantly even as he drew down US troop levels, in search of an outcome that he plausibly could paint as honorable for the United States.

In chapters 6 and 7, I turn to Republican presidents and several very different examples of hawks' misadventures. In chapter 6, I examine another case from the Cold War: Ronald Reagan's intervention in Lebanon. For Reagan, initiating intervention was easy, but rising congressional opposition and internal administration resistance to a more aggressive strategy pushed the president to withdraw even as public opinion remained steady, in a comparatively small intervention. In chapter 7, I turn to the so-called forever wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, focusing on George W. Bush's decisions in the 2003 Iraq War, as well as the "surge" debate and decision in 2006–7. Both Reagan's decision to withdraw a small force from Lebanon under relatively permissive public opinion conditions and Bush's decision to escalate in Iraq despite the rebuke of the

2006 midterm elections illustrate the power of elite politics and the pressure they exert on Republican presidents to seek a decisive outcome. I also briefly examine successive presidents' approaches to the war in Afghanistan.

Taken together, these cases show that presidents bargain with an elite audience in ways that may force them to pay significant political costs or make policy concessions to elites, but not necessarily in a direction the public prefers. They demonstrate, across presidencies of different parties and in different time periods, both the direct effect of elite preferences and the potential costs elites can impose, as well as the effect of elite cues on public debate.

In chapter 8, I conclude the book by raising a normative question: is an elite-dominated foreign policy democratic? Answering that question requires addressing an even more basic issue: in the highly polarized, post-2016 era, is elite leadership of mass opinion—and even foreign policy—still possible? As historian Beverly Gage has noted, the word *elite* itself "has become one of the nastiest epithets in American politics."[105] Even before the 2016 election, claims that elites no longer hold sway or have lost their legitimacy abounded, particularly in the wake of the 2003 Iraq War and the 2008 financial crisis.[106] The 2016 presidential election, as well as the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, raised fundamental questions about expertise and the limits of elite leadership.

But it is premature to conclude that elite leadership's time has passed. As Gage notes, antipathy toward elites is hardly new. Additionally, we must still reckon with the reality that the public pays little attention to day-to-day foreign policy, which is a feature to be incorporated into models of politics rather than a problem to be assumed away or fixed. Furthermore, elite cues are still remarkably potent. One powerful example is the evolution of US public attitudes toward Russia during the 2016 election campaign, when Donald Trump's comments about and alleged connections to Russia garnered widespread news coverage. Republicans' views of both Vladimir Putin and Russia shifted markedly in a more favorable direction, despite the long history of GOP hawkishness on Russia.[107] Such shifts are a dramatic illustration of the power of a single leader to shape mass opinion.[108]

The rapid polarization of public opinion on Russia in 2016 suggests a further concern: perhaps partisan polarization has become so dominant that elite bargaining of the type described in this book is no longer possible. Although politics have always permeated foreign policy—going back to the Founding era, when bitter partisanship surrounded fundamental foreign policy choices such as whether the United States should align with France or Britain—polarization in the foreign policy arena has increased.[109] Even if bargaining is more difficult in a polarized era, however, we must understand these processes if we ever hope to repair them. Given that the public is not likely to become better informed on foreign policy—nor, rationally, should it—understanding elite bargaining as a source of accountability is important even if it is eroding.

Normatively, it is somewhat unpalatable to argue that an insiders' game is consistent with popular or even some scholarly ideals of democracy. Just as Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels call for a more realistic understanding of democracy in the context of American politics, we need theories that deal with the reality of how voters delegate.[110] Robert Michels's famous "iron law of oligarchy" recognized the inevitability of elite control, which he argued was ultimately corrupting.[111] The arguments in this book are more hopeful about elite accountability but recognize that it is often a slow, flawed process.

Finally, the insiders' game also sheds light on democratic distinctiveness in international relations. Alexis de Tocqueville famously argued that aristocracies were better at foreign policy because they were stable and insulated, in contrast to the mass public, which could be "seduced by its ignorance or its passions," or a monarch, who "may be taken off his guard and induced to vacillate in his plans." Thus "foreign policy does not require the use of any of the good qualities peculiar to democracy but does demand the cultivation of almost all those which it lacks."[112]

In the last few decades, the study of war has implicitly refuted Tocqueville by putting voters front and center. I argue that Tocqueville was wrong about democracy and foreign policy, but not because the public is fickle. If democratic leaders face an elite audience, then foreign policy is an insiders' game in *both* democracies and autocracies. To be sure, the elite politics of war in democracies and in autocracies are very different. A wave of literature on comparative authoritarianism has shed light on the many ways that authoritarian regimes can mimic democracies—and yet it still concludes that the democratic regimes are fundamentally different because disputes are settled without violence.[113] In the insiders' game, however, the effects of democracy manifest primarily in the corridors of power, rather than in the voting booth.

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