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Narrative and the Making of US National Security

Ronald R. Krebs

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5 *The narrative politics of the battlefield*

The Terror narrative served as the organizing axis of US debate on national security for a decade. One might have expected it to have met its end in the sands of Iraq. The Bush administration had sold the Iraq War by binding it tightly into the War on Terror, and setbacks in Iraq might have reflected poorly on, and perhaps even delegitimized, the Terror narrative. This outcome would have been consistent with the theoretical conventional wisdom. Because inertia is a powerful force in policy and in the institutions, discourses, and ideas that underlie it, we tend to think that only large-scale shocks produce change. Significant unexpected failures, as in Iraq, unsettle settled minds and discredit dominant ideas. In their absence, and certainly in the wake of success, change in policy, let alone in more foundational ideas and narratives, is highly unlikely.¹

The conventional wisdom is intuitive, and it would seem to be backed by the historical record. Notably, it appears to fit the Cold War consensus. Broad agreement on ideology and policy supposedly so took hold in the United States by late 1947 or 1948 that alternatives to militarized global containment could not get a hearing. Pre-eminent for two decades, the consensus was blamed for numerous errors and tragedies of US policy – from military brinkmanship to imprudent intervention, most notably in Vietnam, to alliance with rapacious autocrats and brutal rebels to an inflated defense budget. According to the standard history, it finally unraveled only amidst the trauma of the Vietnam War: Americans lost faith in the Cold War as its military floundered in the jungles of Southeast Asia.²

¹ This logic informs accounts in many policy domains, as I discuss further below. For general discussions, see Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Pierson 2004.

² This presentation of the standard view of the Cold War consensus draws on, among others, Allison 1970–1971; Gelb and Betts 1979, ch. 6; Halperin *et al.* 1974, 11–12; Hoffmann 1978, ch. 1; Hogan 1998, 10–17.

The Terror narrative took a seemingly different course: it survived public frustration with the failures of Iraq.³ The usual theory supplies an explanation: those failures were not clear or great enough to shake the war's narrative foundation. However, this explanation does not specify *a priori* how substantial failure must be to drive change. Equally important, it presumes that events speak for themselves, that the fact, magnitude, and sources of failure are clear to all. Part II builds on Part I's account of the rise of dominant narratives of national security to advance a provocative theory of when they endure and when they fall. That theory starts from two premises: that events' purported lessons are the product of interpretation by political actors; and that the critical junctures in which narratives are reconfigured are not productively theorized as responses to exogenous shock.⁴ From that more deeply political foundation, I argue that failure and success have effects quite the opposite from the expectations of existing theory. Rather than propelling change in the dominant narrative, the politics of protracted military failure impede it. Rather than necessarily reinforcing that narrative, victory on the battlefield and in high-stakes coercive diplomacy creates an opportunity for departure from it and for the erosion of its dominance. This theory suggests that the Terror narrative persisted not despite the US military's setbacks in Iraq, but because of them – or rather because of the politics surrounding them.

Dominant narratives of national security endure as long as leading political and cultural elites continue to reproduce them, and their dominance breaks down when elites publicly challenge key tenets. Presidents, we saw in Part I, have marked advantages as storytellers-in-chief in times of narrative disorder and crisis. Chapter 2 suggested

³ Perceptions of the Iraq War have fluctuated over time, mediated by party identity. However, there is no question that the United States experienced unexpected battlefield setbacks after March 2003 and that the entrenched insurgency and civil war soured many Americans on the war. By early 2005, Americans were about evenly divided as to whether the decision to use force in Iraq had been right, and by mid 2006, a majority thought it had been a mistake. That remained the majority's judgment for five years, until mid 2011. See "More Now See Failure than Success in Iraq, Afghanistan," Pew Research Center for People and the Press, 30 January 2014, available at www.people-press.org/2014/01/30/more-now-see-failure-than-success-in-iraq-afghanistan/.

⁴ See, similarly, Bially Mattern 2005, 56–60; Legro 2005, 28–35; Widmaier *et al.* 2007.

that two factors could detract from their capacity to fix the narrative foundation: first, diplomatic and military triumph, which would ease public demand for narrative order, and, second, the erosion of their credibility, due either to missteps or deception. The first suggests that there is an irony to victory: it can open new narrative possibilities, yet also impede new narratives from achieving dominance. The second draws attention to the choices of the political opposition: when do its members seize the opportunity to undermine the dominant narrative and broaden the contours of debate, and when do they criticize policy while remaining faithful to, and reproducing, that narrative?

Part II builds on these caveats to answer that question. The prevailing view – that substantial military failure serves as the impetus to fundamental change in the narrative in whose terms officials had legitimated the mission – makes sense when failure is extreme or sudden, when wars are short and defeat overwhelming. But the collective perception of military failure normally coalesces only after a series of battlefield setbacks. Early in an uncertain and protracted campaign, these setbacks give both doves (war opponents) and hawks (war supporters) in the political opposition incentives to criticize the war's conduct while reaffirming the underlying narrative. Opposition doves pull their rhetorical punches to avoid bearing the political costs of deep wartime criticism, while opposition hawks are moved by the prospect of gain, but the effect is the same. In contrast, success creates an opening for its "owners" to advance an alternative: riding a political high, they can argue that, as a result of their wise policies, the world has changed, that a different narrative is now more apposite. In short, when it comes to public narratives of national security, the conventional wisdom has it backwards.

To assess this argument's plausibility, Part II reconsiders the Cold War consensus. Although the consensus is a mainstay of Cold War history, scholars have not studied it rigorously. I do so by conceptualizing the Cold War consensus as a dominant public narrative of national security and by tracking that narrative via a content analysis of foreign affairs editorials, whose methods and findings are discussed in detail in Chapter 6. Conventional theory accords with the usual view that the consensus persisted until the Vietnam War and then collapsed amidst that harrowing conflict. It fits less comfortably, however, with the content analysis' findings, which show that the zone of narrative agreement was at first narrow; that this narrow Cold War narrative did not

achieve dominance – that is, the consensus did not coalesce – until well into the 1950s, amidst the bloody Korean stalemate; that it fell from its dominant perch even before the Americanization of the Vietnam War in 1965; that no new consensus regarding the leading actors, their purposes, and the nature of their relationship in the global drama took its place in the 1960s; and that, when a new consensus emerged in the early 1970s, it revolved initially around the American self, not the Communist other. The Cold War narrative's rise to dominance and its subsequent fall were not tightly tied to unexpected shocks. Nor can the changing realities of global politics explain the pattern: the narrative was most dominant precisely when the Communist bloc was becoming more diverse, and a new dominant narrative did not swiftly succeed the old one.

This theory's expectations and mechanisms – rooted in the conjuncture of the dynamics of public narrative and the domestic politics of the battlefield – make better sense of both the quantitative content analysis in Chapter 6 and the qualitative evidence presented in Chapter 7. I show in the latter chapter that the disheartening Korean War facilitated the Cold War narrative's rise to dominance, that the triumph of the Cuban Missile Crisis made possible that narrative's breakdown before the upheaval of Vietnam, that the US military's difficulties in Vietnam limited how far the responsible opposition would dissent from Cold War tenets, and, finally, that the domestic upheaval of Vietnam laid the foundation for a new zone of consensus.

First, the high costs of the Korean War might have undermined the Cold War globalism in whose name the United States had gone to war. But leading Republicans, who had resisted the axiom that the world was so tightly interconnected that global security was indivisible, now insisted that the war had resulted from the fact that the Truman administration's battle against Communism had not been global *enough*. They thus helped shunt aside the nationalist alternative they held dear and consolidate the global Cold War that they had long feared would yield an imperial presidency and an imposing national-security state.

Second, the Cuban Missile Crisis, seen at the time as a one-sided triumph for President John F. Kennedy, should have bolstered the dominant Cold War narrative, according to conventional theory. Indeed, Republican hawks took the crisis and its resolution as proof of that narrative's core propositions. Yet, the missile crisis surprisingly

led to greater pluralism in US national security debate. Kennedy had long privately articulated a sophisticated view of Soviet ambitions, Communist diversity, and the superpowers' shared interests, but had hewed in public to the Cold War narrative. Victory in the missile crisis allowed him, and fellow liberal internationalists, to deviate publicly from that narrative and to lay the foundation for *détente*.

Finally, rather than explode the dominant Cold War narrative, US setbacks in Vietnam had the opposite effect. On the one hand, battlefield disappointments in that protracted war curbed the depth of the liberals' challenge: respectable doves normally criticized the war in Southeast Asia while reaffirming the basic logic of the Cold War. On the other hand, and even more surprising, the war helped to promote a new consensus around America's role in the world – that is, a new dominant narrative of national security. In the wake of Vietnam, elites across the spectrum joined in defense of American exceptionalism and internationalism. The transformation was most striking on the right: radical challenges kindled the fire of a renewed nationalism that seized the Republican Party and sustained the rise of Ronald Reagan.

The rest of Part II proceeds as follows. This introductory chapter continues with a critical overview of the theoretical conventional wisdom on change in dominant ideas and discourses. It then advances an alternative theory of military conflict and the dynamics of narrative. Chapter 6 reconceptualizes the Cold War consensus as a public narrative and proposes a method for measuring its ebbs and flows. The chapter then presents the content analysis findings, explains why they are so puzzling, and shows how they fit better with my theoretical framework. Chapter 7 shows how this theory accounts for the emergence, erosion, and re-emergence of a dominant narrative of national security in the United States in the three decades following the Second World War. Concluding Part II, Chapter 8 explores the theory's generalizability and its implications for key questions of the Cold War. The chapter then returns to the politics of the War on Terror to show that, well beyond the end of the Cold War, even substantial military failures have not prompted a narrative revolution in national security affairs.

National security narratives and theories of change

Fundamental change in national security policy – in its goals and basic orientation, as opposed to the effort expended or the means

employed⁵ – hinges on change in narrative. Existing literature and folk wisdom rightly suggest that even authoritative speakers' capacity to remake public common sense is limited. A well-known claim, associated with historical institutionalism, attributes change to large-scale policy failure. By this account, powerful psychological, institutional, and social mechanisms mutually reinforce stasis with regard to national security and other policy domains. Only during "critical junctures" can agents make meaningful choices that set a new course.⁶ As William Sewell puts it, "lumpiness . . . is the normal texture of historical temporality."⁷ To explain how such critical junctures, as moments of structural slack, arise, scholars commonly invoke exogenous shocks that puncture stable equilibria.⁸ Thus, David Welch argues that major foreign policy change is undertaken only as a last resort – when the status quo has become too painful and when policy has failed repeatedly or catastrophically.⁹ In the national security arena, this normally takes the form of substantial battlefield defeat. Since the latter half of the nineteenth century, when wars became "total" contests between polities, war has been seen as a crucible of the national mettle, in which national identity and the narratives that constitute it are put to the test and are discarded if found wanting.¹⁰

Scholarship on the life-course of dominant policy ideas and discourses, in national security and other arenas, follows in this vein. A large literature emphasizes the role of the Great Depression in promoting the turn to Keynesianism: a stark failure, the Depression demonstrated that modern national economies were not self-regulating.¹¹ In Ian Lustick's Gramscian account of imperial collapse, "organic crises" provide the crucial impetus for the collapse of hegemonic conceptions of the nation's boundaries; these crises in turn are the product of policy failures, such as defeat in war, that highlight

⁵ These distinctions come from Hermann 1990.

⁶ Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Pierson 2004. For an alternative view, see especially Mahoney and Thelen 2010.

⁷ Sewell Jr. 1996, 843 and *passim*.

⁸ Regarding economic paradigms, see Hall 1993; industrial policy, Dobbin 1994; postwar associational life, Skocpol *et al.* 2002; organizational practice, Perrow 1984; foreign policy operational code, George 1969; alliance choice, Reiter 1996; and military innovation, Rosen 1991, 8–9.

⁹ Welch 2005, esp. 31–51. See also Homolar 2011.

¹⁰ On the nature of "total war," see Imlay 2007.

¹¹ The classic work is Hall 1989.

“incurable contradictions” between the prevailing discourse and “stubborn realities.”¹² In explicating postwar Germany and Japan’s “aversion to power politics,” Thomas Berger points to the magnitude of the nations’ defeats in the Second World War to explain why “new political-military cultures [emerged] that were as profoundly antimilitaristic as the old ones had been militaristic.”¹³ An especially sophisticated version of this argument is that of Jeffrey Legro: he argues that a necessary condition for the breakdown of dominant conceptions of how states should relate to international society is an unexpected large-scale failure that invalidates old ideas and renders audiences receptive to viable alternatives; success, even when unanticipated, yields no impetus for change.¹⁴

The conventional wisdom is intuitive. We all know that nothing fails like success and that failure is the lifeblood of change. It stands to reason that defeat in major war should be a shock to settled institutions and ideas. But this historical institutionalist account is insufficiently sensitive to politics. Because institutionalists believe all institutions and discourses are sticky, they differ with realists, who implicitly adopt rationalist models of belief updating, over how much discrepant evidence is required before learning occurs. But both typically treat events, notably military defeat and triumph, as exogenous and as proving policies and ideas right or wrong. While events – from natural disaster to economic recession to war – are unquestionably real, their social import is not determined by their objective features. Whether an event is seen as a shocking crisis or a manageable problem is endogenous to political contestation. As Colin Hay notes, “crises are constituted in and through narrative.”¹⁵

If dominant narratives coalesced and collapsed in response to objective shocks, it would make sense to conceptualize collective learning as an epiphany – per the institutionalist literature. The prevailing image of substantial failure, including battlefield defeat, as a moment of intellectual awakening is apt when defeat is overwhelming and when wars are so short that there is little time for intrawar interpretation. But the collective perception of even major defeats normally comes together only at the end of a protracted process in which actors seek to

¹² Lustick 1993, 122–124. ¹³ Berger 1998, 22.

¹⁴ Legro 2005, esp. 29–35. See relatedly Samuels 2007, ch. 2.

¹⁵ Hay 1996, 254.

make sense of accumulating setbacks. Few military contests have ended as decisively as the Second World War did for Germany and Japan, and even substantial defeats have permitted interpretations, such as the “stab in the back,” which legitimate rather than reject the past. While it is true that short wars are common,¹⁶ most wars have provided ample opportunity while combat is raging for debate over their lessons. Very few are as short as Gulf War I, whose ground war went on for just 100 hours, or even the Six Day War of 1967; very few are so fast-paced that the combatants can hardly begin to make sense of events before they end.¹⁷ The average interstate war in the twentieth century lasted nearly one-and-a-half years,¹⁸ and counterinsurgencies, which many forecast as the future of warfare, are especially protracted.¹⁹

Even when victory and defeat are clear,²⁰ accounting for these outcomes and assessing their implications are normally a matter of intense public debate – not just in retrospect, but in the moment. Diverse approaches figure crises as times of national unity beyond politics,²¹ but protracted conflicts are in fact rife with disputes over the military’s stumbles. As battlefield travails come to light, domestic political contestation centers on how these are to be explained. Is the army being outgunned or outsmarted? Does it lack fighting spirit, or did the nation’s leaders dispatch it to an unwinnable war? Does the problem lie with tactics or strategy, or with the war’s fundamental rationale and thus with its legitimating narrative? An adequate theory must account for this competition over meaning, because, per the logic of path dependence, it conditions the scope and direction of subsequent change. But these public interpretive contests are not a matter of apolitical puzzling. The contestants, stylized here as doves and hawks, as opponents and supporters of military action and hard-line policies, aim to further their political fortunes and strategic agendas, and their public accounts of the conflict should be understood

¹⁶ Weisiger 2013, 2. ¹⁷ See Appendix A of Bennett and Stam III 1996.

¹⁸ Levy 1983, 123–124, 133–134, 139, 141.

¹⁹ And they have been getting longer: counterinsurgencies fought between 1800 and 1945 went on for 5.2 years, but post-1945 campaigns have lasted 11.4 years on average. See Johnston and Urlacher 2012.

²⁰ Though there is evidence that they often lie in the eye of the beholder. See Johnson and Tierney 2006.

²¹ Albeit for different reasons – for realists because the stakes are so high, and for securitization theorists because of the discursive power of crisis.

in that light. Both the emergence and breakdown of dominant narratives are deeply political processes.

Battlefield performance and the narrative politics of national security

Political elites are not equally empowered in public contests over the meaning of warfare. Public debates rarely take place on level playing fields, but this is especially true in the national security domain – in which publics are most likely to look to official sources, and especially the executive branch, for the production of meaning.²² Government spokespeople thus enjoy substantial starting advantages in the exercise of “interpretive leadership.”²³ As they are the owners of the military campaign, victory redounds to their benefit. Setbacks, however, erode public trust, diffuse authority, and empower the opposition. Opposition elites’ rhetorical choices then have profound narrative implications. Because dominant narratives require continual reproduction, and because they always contain contradictory strands that make possible the remaking of common sense, these elites can, broadly speaking, explain the nation’s battlefield travails either by reproducing the security narrative in whose terms the campaign had been legitimated or by charting a new narrative path. Both permit criticism of government policy, but when opposition elites opt for the former, they reinforce the dominant narrative, and when they opt for the latter, they help to undermine it.

All elites operate within a common social environment with shared cultural toolkits, whose contents they draw upon to make public sense of events. But they are also strategic actors seeking to further their political futures via their accounts of the conflict’s course.²⁴ To put strategizing political elites at the center of these dynamics is not to reduce dominant narratives to elite strategizing alone. Whether they can advance specific security narratives depends on more enduring structures of national identity discourse, in which those narratives

²² For related arguments and evidence from rhetoric and communication, see Condit 1985; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969 [1958], 53. From psychology, see Kruglanski 2004, 112–113, 124–126. This is related also to the “two presidencies” thesis: see Canes-Wrone *et al.* 2008; Wildavsky 1966.

²³ Widmaier 2007.

²⁴ This melding of strategic and cultural action draws on Swidler 1986.

must be grounded. At any given nodal point, the range of legitimate rhetorical moves is limited.²⁵ While national identity discourse, rhetorical consistency, or strategic incentives do not render political action entirely foreseeable, this theoretical account rests on the wager that, in the context of a failing military venture, both those pressures and the dangers of bucking them are fairly clear and intense. Opposition elites' rhetorical choices are thus irreducibly contingent, but they are also partly the product of a predictable political environment.

Whether opposition elites publicly give voice to other narratives depends in part on whether the alternatives are compatible with their established political identity and in part on whether they see it as politically profitable. I argue that, early in a faltering war whose ultimate outcome is uncertain, all contestants, doves and hawks alike, have incentives to ground their criticisms in the legitimating national security narrative and thereby to preserve or consolidate its dominance. The politics of poor battlefield performance inhibit the opposition from jumping through a more ambitious rhetorical window and pursuing change in the narrative in whose terms the military operation had been publicly justified.

Wartime contestation is complicated by the fact that war's course is fundamentally unpredictable.²⁶ War is enveloped in fog, as Clausewitz famously put it – not only at the operational level, but when it comes to war's outcome. Great victories are not apparent early on, nor are unsalvageable disasters. Allied missteps on the Pacific front in 1942 so worried Americans that they elected Republicans in droves that fall, and even former non-interventionists escaped punishment for their pre-Pearl Harbor outspoken opposition to war. Initial stumbles, as in Korea, may be followed by breathtaking reversals of fortune (Inchon landing) only to give way to setbacks once more (the Chinese crossing of the Yalu). In retrospect, people commonly identify turning points when an uncertain war became a lost cause, such as the 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam.²⁷ But mass support normally erodes more gradually, as the bloom wears off the rally rose and as battlefield

²⁵ Contrast this to a more purely rationalist account of public rhetoric in Riker 1986, 1996.

²⁶ Beyerchen 1992.

²⁷ Although it is now clear that the Tet Offensive was an enormous military setback for North Vietnam.

difficulties mount.²⁸ And whether an event constitutes a turning point is informed by one's assessment of the war as a whole. Opponents of the Iraq War identified the 2006 bombing of the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra as the moment when the peace was finally lost, when the futility of the war became clear; supporters have argued that the 2007 "surge" of US forces into Iraq subsequently snatched victory from the jaws of defeat.

Consider first political opponents who oppose the war. Doves face a difficult choice: they can seize the opportunity that military struggles provide to assail the underlying narrative, or they can offer a more modest attack on the war that reaffirms that narrative. For instance, the surprising persistence and effectiveness of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq created an opening for Democratic doves to take on the Bush administration after 2003. They could have exploited US struggles in Iraq to confront the Terror narrative, into which administration officials had bound the Iraq invasion. But they also could have criticized the Iraq War from safe narrative terrain – as a distraction from the "real" War on Terror, against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. When leading Democrats opted for the second course, repudiating the Iraq War by reproducing the Terror narrative, they disappointed many supporters, but their choice was not surprising in light of the fog of war and the politics of military performance.

When evidence of military difficulties has begun to accumulate, but before the perception of irrevocable failure has crystallized, doves are reluctant to launch a thoroughgoing critique that takes on the war's underlying narrative. Criticism in wartime is always dangerous, but the deeper it strikes, the more vulnerable critics are to charges that they are emboldening the enemy, demoralizing the troops, and prolonging the fight. This is especially true early in a war, when its outcome is still seen as uncertain and thus when vocal criticism arguably can affect whether the war ends in victory or defeat, not just the terms and costs of the inevitable conclusion. Should the war's course reverse, critics' judgment will be severely questioned, and should the nation's forces continue to flounder, critics may be held responsible, not lauded for their prescience. Given the stakes, caution reigns, the pressure to conform to the legitimating narrative is intense, and foundational critique is rarely heard. It is safer for doves to criticize the war's

²⁸ For data from the Vietnam War, for instance, see Mueller 1973.

conduct, insist that the strategy's application alone is flawed, or propose withdrawal on grounds of excessive cost or insufficient likelihood of victory. As a result, even as the war's costs mount, doves typically express themselves *within* the terms of the dominant narrative. Politics does not stop at war's edge, at least not for long, but wartime politics is normally waged within narrative bounds.

These political dynamics, narrowing the scope of criticism in a campaign's early stages, have long-term consequences. Once there is widespread agreement of defeat or failure, doves might find it appealing in principle to try to recast the narrative basis of national security, but that option is no longer available. Their past utterances, which reproduced and reinforced the dominant narrative, have established the conventions to which the public expects members of the "responsible opposition" – in both government and civil society – to adhere. Those who move beyond those boundaries of legitimate critique, to embrace an alternative narrative of national security, are predictably assailed as reckless radicals. Had doves known in prospect what they know in retrospect, they might have coupled their wartime criticism to a revision of the nation's security narrative. But the politics of an uncertain and failing war cast narrative alternatives to the margins in war's early stages – and there they remain. This mechanism of lock-in is at work not only when the political opposition's leadership is stable, but even when war shakes up the established order and brings new personalities into politics who are not personally shackled by a wartime rhetorical past. All who wish to avoid the radical label, politicians and pundits alike, are confined to the dominant narrative. Even Barack Obama, who more than any other top Democrat made opposition to the Iraq War the centerpiece of his political persona, remained in thrall to the Terror narrative as a senator and presidential candidate. He joined other leading Democrats in criticizing the Iraq War as having obstructed the War on Terror properly conceived.²⁹

Consider now political opponents who support the war. Hawks face a seeming dilemma. On the one hand, they do not wish to undermine public support for the war, which may already be flagging: were they to challenge the war's legitimating logic, the public might lose faith entirely. On the other hand, they wish to exploit battlefield setbacks

²⁹ For details, see Krebs 2013.

for political gain: supporting the policies and echoing the arguments of the wartime leadership will not position them as a credible political alternative. There is at least one way they can sidestep the dilemma: by accusing the government of not having been sufficiently faithful to its own articulated world-view and by suggesting that greater fidelity would have led to better battlefield outcomes, or even have made the war and its attendant sacrifices unnecessary. Criticizing the war's conduct and presenting themselves as the true believers, hawks seek to renew the public's commitment, redouble the military's efforts, and offer the public a distinctive political stance. Opposition hawks thus make political headway, albeit at the cost of principle if their hawkish preferences are rooted in a different narrative of national security from that of the wartime government. In contrast to opposition doves, who seek to evade the perils of criticism, hawks are lured by the prospect of gain. But the effect is the same: to shore up the underlying narrative of national security and stifle change. The politics of military performance can even work to consolidate narrative dominance, when hawks sign on to a narrative they had previously refused to endorse.

In contrast, *success* on the battlefield and in significant episodes of coercive diplomacy opens space for departures from the dominant narrative. This is counterintuitive from the perspective of actors' motives: as Legro argues, when policy produces desirable returns, "societal actors would find little reason to reassess the prevailing orthodoxy."³⁰ But motive is only half the story, and success alters the opportunity structure facing its owners, in both government and civil society, who wish to narrate the world differently but had previously felt constrained. Success boosts their interpretive authority and thereby loosens those constraints. It creates an opening for them to argue that the rules of the global game have changed *because* the policy they had advocated or implemented was so successful. Diplomatic and military success does not translate smoothly into enduring political power, as leaders from Georges Clemenceau to Winston Churchill to George H. W. Bush have painfully learned.³¹ Nor does it, in and of itself, end narrative dominance. But policy success makes the breakdown of narrative dominance possible, depending on whether doves or hawks

³⁰ Legro 2005, 33.

³¹ Thanks to Marc Trachtenberg for reminding me of this.

occupy positions of authority and are success' owners: doves can reveal their true colors, while hawks can continue toeing the narrative line.

Success is not, however, conducive to the consolidation of a new dominant narrative, for two reasons. First, success creates space for alternative futures without delegitimizing the past. It has not only many fathers, but many lessons: it can also be interpreted as proving the wisdom of the status quo from which deviation is dangerous. The erstwhile dominant narrative retains its legitimacy. Even when some seize the opportunity that success provides to advance an alternative narrative, others may remain loyal to what previously had seemed like common sense. The result is at most the erosion of narrative dominance. Second, as suggested in Chapter 2, publics are more tolerant of ontological insecurity and narrative disorder in the wake of victory. Individual human beings, psychologists have learned, are likely to insist on closure as signs mount that deep uncertainty will prove costly.³² That condition is least likely to hold after victory, when confidence is high. As a result, public demand to return to an ordered state, to restabilize the national narrative, is more muted.

But are not successes like streetcars, to paraphrase McGeorge Bundy's comment on the 1965 attack on the US military base near Pleiku? Cannot adroit leaders always find events they can portray as successes and on which they can hang their claims of a world made new by their skill and determination? Are they not rhetorical alchemists who, with their silvery tongues, transform dross into gold? Success after all is also a narrative, which raises the disturbing possibility that nimble leaders face no real narrative constraints. There are three reasons to be skeptical that such manipulation is widespread. First, were rhetorical alchemy so easy, we would find few leaders tarred with defeat and far more swathed in glory. We would observe leaders regularly declaring victory and withdrawing forces, rather than prolonging wars in the hope of departing under more rosy circumstances. Yet, prolonged exits and charges of failure are common.³³ Second, there is often little dispute about whether a given episode constitutes success or failure, even in its immediate aftermath and even among opponents not inclined to grant credit or among supporters not inclined to blame. This is not because these are objective assessments, nor because of post-facto rhetorical magic, but rather

³² Kruglanski 2004, 7–13. ³³ Edelstein 2012.

because dominant narratives establish collective benchmarks by which events are judged. Third, if the “fact” of success were the product of rhetorical magic, we would expect the sorcerer’s power to extend to the reasons for success as well. But, while there is often much agreement on whether a given war or coercive diplomatic episode went badly, there is often much disagreement on why it went badly and thus on whether it can be salvaged. For instance, no American in the late 1970s looked back on the Vietnam War as a victory, but they embraced divergent interpretations of why the intervention had ended so tragically and whether the war had ever been winnable, and thus whether the United States should have sent forces there in the first place or should even have withdrawn.

Why the Cold War consensus?

The next two chapters assess this theoretical account in light of the experience of the Cold War consensus. Documenting and explaining the rise and fall of the Cold War narrative’s dominance is intrinsically important. It speaks to enduring puzzles of the Cold War – from the origins of the US national-security state to the conditions of possibility for détente to the drivers of the intervention in Vietnam. Critics attributed numerous costly, sometimes even disastrous, policies to its stranglehold. The case’s prominence also gives it a practical advantage, in that it has been the subject of extensive secondary literature. But, perhaps most importantly, it should be an easy case for two common theories. First, that dominant narratives reflect global realities. Given the high stakes of superpower competition, the high costs of misunderstanding global events, and the nation’s intense focus on foreign affairs, one would expect to see an unusually close correspondence between the Cold War narrative and the world it professed to depict, and to observe little dissent among informed observers of the global scene. Second, that stability is undone only by exogenous shocks. Given the long-standing scholarly and popular conventional wisdom that gives the Vietnam War credit (or blame) for the consensus’ demise, we would expect the narrative’s dynamics to fit the standard theory.

Perhaps, however, there was something distinctive about the Cold War, with its bipolar structure, or about the United States, located far from the bloody battlefield, that altered the political dynamics. Although there is nothing in Part II’s theoretical framework that

depends on peculiarly American political institutions or culture, it is true that, unlike other nations, the United States, by virtue of its geographical position and the absence of peer competitors in its hemisphere, has normally been located far from the battlefield and somewhat shielded from the costs of war. This might have tempered the intensity with which military failure was felt and its accompanying politics. But the United States has not looked upon its distant wars with equanimity, and its wartime experiences have resonated powerfully in the nation's politics.³⁴ Since before the Second World War, Michael Sherry famously argues, the United States has lived under, and been deeply shaped by, "the shadow of war."³⁵ Moreover, when the battle rages nearby, wars can still be protracted, end indecisively, and be subject to multiple interpretations. Even a cursory reading of the history of European politics cannot support the conclusion that war there has been too immediate, too near, and too serious a business for anyone to "play politics" with it. American politicians have not enjoyed a luxury that others have not. Despite America's unusual geopolitical position, there is then little reason to think that its experiences with regard to national security narrative have been unusual.

There was, of course, something distinctive about the Cold War superpower rivalry, conducted under conditions of bipolarity and in the shadow of nuclear Armageddon. But those factors should, if anything, have rendered national security narrative more responsive to presumptive global realities and less subject to the narrative politics of the battlefield. The ways in which the Cold War was an outlier make it an especially hard case, which should give greater credence to the theoretical claims. If conventional theories do not account well for the rise and fall of the Cold War consensus, we need to rethink them. And whatever accounts for its ups and downs deserves consideration as a candidate theory with broader applicability – beyond the United States and beyond the security domain.

³⁴ See, among others, Higgs 1987; Katznelson and Shefter 2002; Mayhew 2005; Saldin 2010; Zelizer 2010.

³⁵ Sherry 1997.