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Abstract. Despite the conceptual importance of probability assessment in war, national security officials often approach this challenge in uninformative ways. Previous scholarship on this issue has focused on underprecision, as phrases such as “fair chance” or “serious possibility” have unclear meanings. This paper explains how two additional problems – relative probability and thresholds of necessity – pose even greater obstacles to sound strategic decision making. A case study of U.S. strategic assessment in Vietnam from 1961-65 shows that even though the “Whiz Kids” were unusually inclined towards rigorous analysis, they almost exclusively debated their strategic prospects in terms of what policies offered the “best chance” of success or what measures appeared necessary for victory, without addressing the probability that these strategies would ultimately succeed. Such behavior does not support rigorous decision making and it is inconsistent with common theoretical assumptions about how national security officials closely evaluate their chances of success in war.

Introduction

Clausewitz described war by writing that “no other human activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance.”¹ The way that national security decision makers grapple with uncertainty is one of the central themes in scholarship on intelligence analysis, national security decision making, and coercive bargaining. Today, international relations scholars widely believe that one of the primary purposes of warfighting is to provide information allowing combatants to update their perceived probabilities of military victory in a manner that facilitates negotiated settlements.

Yet despite the conceptual importance of probability assessment in war, national security officials often address this issue in strikingly uninformative ways. For example, before President John F. Kennedy authorized the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, the Joint Chiefs of Staff reported that “This plan has a fair chance of success.” The report’s author, Brigadier General David Gray, claims that while President Kennedy took this to be an optimistic assessment, “We thought other people would think that ‘a fair chance’ would mean ‘not too good.’” Gray thus argued in

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hindsight that the Joint Chiefs’ vague language enabled an otherwise avoidable strategic blunder.²

This example is not idiosyncratic. National security analysts generally avoid making explicit probabilistic judgments.³ Sherman Kent’s description of this problem in a 1964 essay is one of the seminal works in intelligence studies.⁴ A survey of declassified National Intelligence Estimates from 1964-94 found that only four percent of key judgments expressed probability unambiguously.⁵ Despite substantial attention devoted to this issue over the last decade, many intelligence officials and military analysts are currently instructed to make their probability assessments intentionally imprecise, a practice garnering widespread criticism.⁶

Yet this paper explains that underprecision is only one obstacle to assessing uncertainty in national security decision making. Section 1 describes two other forms of vagueness that pose even greater problems for evaluating risky actions. The first of these problems is the use of relative probability, explaining what policies offer the “best chance” of success or whether those chances are moving up or down without saying what those chances actually are. The second problem is describing thresholds of necessity, identifying measures that are required for success without assessing the chances that those measures will also be sufficient to achieve intended goals. Though arguments invoking relative probability or thresholds of necessity are often used to justify decisions under uncertainty, they do not describe that uncertainty in a manner that supports rigorous analysis.

To evaluate the extent of these problems, Section 2 describes how U.S. officials assessed their chances of success in Vietnam from 1961 to 1965. If any group of national security officials should have been willing to analyze their strategic prospects directly, they would be the “Whiz Kids” who managed the Vietnam War. Yet an overview of key documents, combined with a database spanning 1,831 probabilistic statements drawn from primary sources, shows that when these officials considered escalating U.S. involvement in Vietnam, they almost exclusively described their chances of success using relative probability or thresholds of necessity. These patterns confirm that vague probability assessments surround critical national security decisions, but they also demonstrate that the existing literature on underprecision captures a limited extent of this problem. As Section 2 shows, statements such as a “fair chance of success” would actually have been more informative than the manner in which U.S. officials generally assessed their strategic prospects as they debated escalation in Vietnam.

The primary theoretical contribution of this paper is to unpack the concept of vagueness in probability assessment into three distinct problems that impede national security decision making. The primary empirical goal is to show how widely these problems recur in a case with special analytic and historical value. But these patterns also demand explanation, and Section 3 thus asks why U.S. officials were so uninformative when assessing uncertainty in Vietnam. The empirical record is inconsistent with ideas that these officials were averse to assessing subjective probabilities or that they were reluctant to address uncertainty based on political, bureaucratic, or psychological factors. The Vietnam War managers were consistently willing to make clear probability assessments of many complex, controversial, and falsifiable aspects of their strategy. Their use of relative probability and thresholds of necessity was almost entirely confined to a single aspect of decision making, namely the odds that the United States would ultimately obtain its strategic objectives.

These patterns suggest that the practice of strategic assessment is less consistent with the kind of careful cost-benefit analysis so prominent in international relations theory than with the more limited concept of constrained optimization: identifying the most effective means of combining available resources to pursue desired ends. This idea is widespread in strategic studies, and it does not actually require directly analyzing the likelihood that risky actions will succeed. Identifying the best viable strategy is sufficient for these purposes. Regardless of the normative flaws inherent to this approach, it accurately characterizes the way U.S. officials generally analyzed their options in Vietnam from 1961-65. Section 4 concludes by discussing practical, historical, and theoretical implications of this behavior.

Section 1. Variants of Vagueness in Probability Assessment

Assessing uncertainty in national security decision making is one of the central subjects of international relations scholarship. Contemporary theories of coercion generally argue that one of the primary purposes of warfighting is to provide information allowing combatants to update their perceived probabilities of military victory in a manner that facilitates negotiated settlements. Building on the insight of scholars such as Thomas Schelling, Geoffrey Blainey, Robert Pape, and James Fearon, recent works seek to understand how rational combatants should form and revise their estimated chances of success in armed conflict. The resulting framework,

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7 For example, see Brian C. Rathbun, “Uncertain about Uncertainty: Understanding the Multiple Meanings of a Crucial Concept in International Relations Theory,” International Studies Quarterly, Vol. 51, No. 3 (September 2007), pp. 533-557. The way national security officials assess uncertainty is also a central theme in the political psychology of international relations: for a recent review, see Jack S. Levy, “Psychology and Foreign Policy Decision-Making” in Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy, eds., The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

known as the “bargaining model of war,” is one of the most successful and widely-taught research programs in contemporary political science.9

The role of uncertainty in war is central to professional military discourse as well, where it is almost universally accepted that armed conflict is an “integratively complex,” “nonlinear” process whose outcomes are impossible to predict with certainty.10 The U.S. Marine Corps’ capstone doctrine captures this insight on its opening pages, stating that “War is intrinsically unpredictable. At best, we can hope to determine possibilities and probabilities.”11 Moreover, the notion that coercion operates by influencing opponents’ probability assessments is widely shared in the policy world. For example, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara once explained U.S. strategy in Vietnam by arguing that “our objective is to create conditions for a favorable settlement by demonstrating [to the Communists] that the odds are against their winning.”12

Yet it is one thing to acknowledge the importance of uncertainty in war and another matter to address that uncertainty directly. In this respect, the Bay of Pigs example in this paper’s introduction connects to a broad literature on how national security analysts often address critical uncertainties in an excessively vague fashion. In a famous 1964 essay, for instance, Sherman Kent described his experience leading the production of a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) which identified “a serious possibility” that the Soviet Union would invade Yugoslavia in 1951. After submitting this estimate, Kent asked the NIE’s authors to quantify their own interpretations of the phrase “a serious possibility.” Responses ranged from 20 percent to 80 percent. Surely intelligence estimates clarified little, Kent argued, if their own authors disagreed so strongly as to what they meant.13

When scholars critique assessments such as a “fair chance of success” at the Bay of Pigs or a “serious possibility” of Soviet invasion, the issue at stake is underprecision, or excessive variance in how decision makers interpret probabilistic statements. Though reasonable people can disagree on what constitutes “excessive” variance in different contexts, this variance can be measured empirically. Following Kent’s lead, several scholars have thus explored the extent to which national security officials disagree in their interpretations of different probability phrases.14 Other empirical studies examine the degree to which foreign policy analysts can


11 Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, Warfighting, p. 7.


13 Kent, “Words of Estimative Probability.”

14 Kent, “Words of Estimative Probability;” David L. Wark, “The Definition of Some Estimative Expressions,” Studies in Intelligence, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Fall 1964); Edgar M. Johnson, Numerical Encoding of Qualitative
effectively parse probabilities and the extent to which the choice of qualitative versus quantitative expression influences how national security decision makers respond to probabilistic information.\(^\text{15}\)

Over the last decade, underprecision in national security analysis has become especially controversial. A central critique of the Intelligence Community’s flawed reporting on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction programs was that analysts insufficiently specified the uncertainty surrounding key judgments. The Silberman-Robb Commission thus concluded that analysts must find better ways “to explain to policymakers degrees of certainty in their work,” while the 2004 Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act attempted to mandate such reform by requiring analysts to “properly caveat and express uncertainties or confidence in analytic judgments.”\(^\text{16}\) In response to this pressure, the U.S. Intelligence Community developed a series of guidelines defining probabilistic terms ranging from “remote” to “almost certain.”\(^\text{17}\) The most recent version of these guidelines, released by the Director of National Intelligence in 2015, contains seven probabilistic terms defined in relation to numeric percentages.\(^\text{18}\) (U.S. Army doctrine currently recommends assessing probabilities using a range of five terms whose meanings are undefined.\(^\text{19}\))

Thus in the half-century since Sherman Kent wrote his seminal article on underprecision in probability assessment, this issue has received considerable attention from scholars and policymakers. Yet underprecision is only one aspect of vagueness in how national security officials evaluate probability. As the remainder of this section explains, two other problems – relative probability and thresholds of necessity – pose even deeper challenges for understanding the uncertainty surrounding crucial national security decisions.

**Relative probability**


When General Stanley McChrystal wrote to President Barack Obama in 2009 to recommend surging 40,000 additional forces to Afghanistan, he wrote that these measures “will improve effectiveness” and that the new strategy presented “the best prospect for success.” Yet McChrystal’s report did not indicate how much improvement this entailed or what the new strategy’s chances of succeeding might be. Logically speaking, the key question was whether this improvement was large enough to justify the additional costs. Ultimately, McChrystal’s assessment left this comparison undefined.

This is an example of relative probability, defined here as probability assessments made in relation to an unspecified baseline. To say that some outcome is the “most likely” possibility or that some policy is “more likely” to work than others invokes probabilistic judgment but provides no clear sense of where the relevant probabilities fall along the number line. This practice does not support sound decision making, and a substantial volume of research indicates that communicating “relative risk” can bias assessments of expected value. For example, pharmaceutical companies routinely mislead customers into purchasing treatments that promise to reduce risks, even if those risks are already vanishingly small. Even if national security officials do not seek to fool their colleagues in this manner, it is reasonable to expect a similar result: that decision makers would find it easier to accept a strategy billed as the “best chance of success,” or one which offers “improved effectiveness,” over a strategy whose odds of succeeding are “roughly one in five,” even if those strategies are the same.

Yet relative probability appears regularly in national security analysis. One of the most widely-taught structured analytic techniques for intelligence analysis, called “Analysis of Competing Hypotheses,” provides a method for “select[ing] the hypothesis that best fits the evidence.” This method suggests which hypothesis is most likely to be correct, without indicating what that likelihood is. Similarly, U.S. Army planning doctrine states that when decision makers evaluate potential courses of action (COAs), they should define the problem, gather information, develop possible solutions, and “select the best solution.” To do this, the staff compares feasible COAs to identify the one with the highest probability of success….

The selected COA should also pose the minimum risk to the force and mission accomplishment; place the force in the best posture for future operations; provide maximum latitude for initiative by subordinates; provide the most flexibility to meet unexpected threats and opportunities; provide the most secure and stable environment for civilians in the AO; [and] best facilitate initial information themes and messages.

Such guidelines encourage national security officials to orient their attention towards relational judgments, identifying the course of action that offers the best chances of success.

24 FM 5-0, paragraph B-173. Emphasis added.
without assessing what those chances actually are. These practices are surprisingly uncontroversial. Though General McChrystal’s report on the Afghan Surge was widely opposed, for instance, I am aware of no instance where critics – either within or outside the administration – seized on the fact that General McChrystal declined to assess the extent to which adding forty thousand additional troops to the war effort might raise the chances of success in Afghanistan.25

Thresholds of necessity

One piece of information that General McChrystal used to justify the Afghan Surge – and which national security analysts had used three years earlier to justify sending additional forces to Iraq – was the official doctrine on force sizing for counterinsurgency (COIN) found in U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24. The relevant paragraph of this doctrine reads:

“During previous conflicts, planners assumed that combatants required a 10 to 15 to 1 advantage over insurgents to win. However, no predetermined, fixed ratio of friendly troops to combatants ensures success in COIN. The conditions of the operational environment and the approaches insurgents use vary too widely. A better force requirement gauge is troop density, the ratio of security forces (including the host nation’s military and police forces as well as foreign counterinsurgents) to inhabitants. Most density recommendations fall within a range of 20 to 25 counterinsurgents for every 1000 residents in an AO [area of operations]. Twenty counterinsurgents per 1000 residents is often considered the minimum troop density required for effective COIN operations; however as with any fixed ratio, such calculations remain very dependent upon the situation.”26

At a glance, this doctrine appears to offer a clear basis for planning: if commanders wish to wage effective counterinsurgency, they should deploy at least twenty troops per thousand residents in an area of operations. But even if it were true that twenty troops per thousand inhabitants is necessary for success,27 this says nothing about the probability that such resources will also be sufficient to enforce security. Taken literally, Field Manual 3-24 only argues that if counterinsurgents surpass a particular troop density threshold, then their probability of success should be greater than zero.28

As with the use of relative probability, such thresholds of necessity – defined here as statements about measures required for policies to achieve their intended goals – run serious risks of biasing decision makers. Warning decision makers that they will fail without implementing a policy surely provides more encouragement for taking action than stating that the policy has a small chance of success, even though both statements can simultaneously be

28 The doctrine may not even imply this much, given its caveat that the proper troop density threshold may vary by conflict.
true. But again, such assessments appear to be largely uncontroversial in national security decision making. Though Field Manual 3-24 had many critics, and though its force sizing guidance was used to support contested troop surges in Iraq and Afghanistan, I am aware of no instance where critics highlighted the fact that this guidance provides no logical support for expecting that properly-sized counterinsurgencies will succeed.\textsuperscript{29}

**Summary**

This section has explained how many scholars have previously explored the subject of vague probability assessments in national security. Yet these analyses have generally focused on underprecision, which is only one kind of vagueness that impedes rigorous decision making. The use of relative probability and thresholds of necessity may be even more problematic because they lend rhetorical weight to arguments supporting risky actions while providing no logical reason to believe that those actions are worthwhile. Having introduced these problems, the next section demonstrates how they recurred throughout U.S. decision making in Vietnam.

**Section 2. The Probability of Success in Vietnam**

The remainder of this paper revolves around an empirical analysis of how U.S. officials assessed their chances of success in Vietnam between 1961 and 1965. There are four main reasons why this case offers unusual insight for examining probability assessment in national security decision making.

First, debates about escalating the Vietnam War are exactly the kind of context where decision makers should parse probability assessments as carefully as possible. U.S. officials had genuine agency over their involvement in Vietnam before 1965. Not yet locked into any course of action, they compared fundamentally different options, they knew that all of these options presented serious risks, and they had clear interests in understanding whether these risks were worth accepting.\textsuperscript{30}

Second, the officials who participated in this debate are exactly the sort of individuals whom one would expect to assess their chances of success explicitly. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy and the “Whiz Kids” at the Pentagon are often maligned for excessive zeal in analytic methodology.\textsuperscript{31} If even they neglected to assess their chances of success directly, committed to rigorous decision analysis as they were, this lends credibility to the claim that this is a consistent problem in U.S. strategic decision making.

Third, the documentary record of Vietnam War decision making is unusually thorough. Collections such as the *Foreign Relations of the United States*, the *Pentagon Papers*, and the

\textsuperscript{29} For a discussion of the development of Field Manual 3-24’s force sizing doctrine, including a candid discussion of how the guidelines were written with the goal of supporting advocates of the Iraq Surge, see Peter Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking the Iraq War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 39.


\textsuperscript{31} For example, David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Penguin, 1983).
National Intelligence Council’s *Estimative Products on Vietnam* allow scholars to examine a broad base of well-known, widely-available primary sources. Thus the manner in which U.S. officials debated escalating the Vietnam War presents a case where assessing the chances of success is especially important, where decision makers should be especially willing to discuss this issue directly, and where these discussions should be especially accessible to scholars.

Last, the Vietnam War casts a long shadow over scholarship on national security decision making and military coercion. During this time, IR scholars developed the view that the purpose of coercion is to influence the way opponents perceive their odds of victory. As Secretary McNamara’s statement in the previous section showed, this idea lay at the foundations of U.S. strategy.\(^32\) If any experience should match theoretical conceptions about the use of probability in strategic assessment, it should be Vietnam. Yet we will also see that while U.S. officials designed their strategy to influence how the communists estimated their chances of winning the war, these officials rarely evaluated their own probability of success when making key decisions.

I analyze this experience using qualitative and quantitative evidence. I first describe key documents surrounding John F. Kennedy’s decision to escalate the U.S. advisory role in Vietnam and Lyndon Johnson’s decisions to expand the air campaign and to deploy U.S. combat forces. I then analyze a database spanning 1,831 probabilistic statements drawn from primary sources. This combination of methods allows me to demonstrate how different pathologies of probability assessment appear at key junctures while confirming that these examples represent broader patterns in how U.S. officials assessed uncertainty across a 54-month period.

**Assessing the chances of success in Vietnam, 1961**

In November 1961, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara wrote to President Kennedy recommending a new counterinsurgency strategy in South Vietnam. McNamara argued that “The chances are against, probably sharply against, preventing [the fall of South Vietnam] by any measures short of the introduction of U.S. forces on a substantial scale.” He rejected proposals for limited escalation, saying that if the United States introduced eight to ten thousand additional forces to South Vietnam, Hanoi “would probably outrun” their efforts, and the United States would be “almost certain to get increasingly mired down in an inconclusive struggle.” McNamara thus recommended sending up to 220,000 troops to Vietnam. But he never assessed the chances that the United States would succeed in this effort: he only wrote that large-scale commitments were necessary to keep Saigon from falling to the communists.\(^33\)

Kennedy also solicited a report at this time from his personal military advisor, General Maxwell Taylor, and Deputy National Security Adviser Walt Rostow. Taylor and Rostow seconded McNamara’s view that the present strategy was failing: “It is evident that morale in Viet-Nam will rapidly crumble,” they wrote, unless the United States provided “a hard U.S. commitment to the ground.” But when Taylor and Rostow recommended that the U.S. commit

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combat forces, they too indicated only that this would be more likely to succeed than the alternatives, writing that “intervention under SEATO or U.S. plans is the best means of saving SVN [South Vietnam] and indeed, all of Southeast Asia.” By the same token, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) repeatedly argued throughout this debate that defeating the Viet Cong (VC) insurgency required expanding U.S. involvement and that “the over-all objective could best be served” by attacking North Vietnam directly. Yet none of these officials assessed the likelihood that the United States would succeed on that path.

Critics of escalation in 1961 used probability in similar ways. In several letters to President Kennedy, for instance, John Kenneth Galbraith denounced escalation for its “high risk and limited promise” given the leadership in Saigon. Galbraith argued that “there is scarcely the slightest practical chance” that South Vietnam’s President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Nhu, would implement needed reforms; that restructuring the U.S. military command in Vietnam would “set back whatever slight chance there is for military reform and counterinsurgency action.” There was “no chance of success,” he wrote, with Diem in charge. Galbraith thus recommended that the United States back other leaders and avoid committing additional forces. But beyond saying that this course was “not hopeless,” Galbraith did not indicate its chances of success – he simply said this was “the only solution” worth considering. (In rebuttal, JCS Chairman Lyman Lemnitzer stated the opposite view but used the same style of argumentation, stating that “the President’s policy of supporting the Diem regime... appears to be the only practicable alternative at this time,” without explaining how practicable the policy actually was.)

These documents share several similarities. Each contains direct warnings about the current likelihood of failure. None shies away from expressing doubts, from making controversial statements, or from expressing subjective judgments. But all these documents say in support of proposed strategies was that they were the best available choice or that they were necessary for success. Reflecting on this debate 35 years later, McNamara acknowledged that he and his colleagues failed to address the basic question of whether the war was actually winnable when debating escalation in 1961.

Assessing strategic prospects in 1964-65

President Kennedy expanded the U.S. advisory commitment to South Vietnam, but he did not send combat forces or approve sustained strategic bombing. Those decisions developed under

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34 *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Vol. I, Doc 210 (3 November 1961) and *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. V.B.4, p. 331-342. Taylor and Rostow called for 6,000-8,000 combat troops to be sent to Vietnam, while acknowledging that there was “no limit to our possible commitment” once U.S. forces were committed in this way.


36 See Logevall, *Choosing War*, on how opponents of Americanization were consistently vague in articulating alternative proposals.


Lyndon Johnson in 1964-65. Throughout this period, U.S. officials once again consistently backing their recommendations in terms of relative probability or thresholds of necessity.

National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy led the push for sustained air strikes against Hanoi. “The situation in Vietnam is deteriorating,” he wrote, “and without new U.S. action defeat appears inevitable.” Bundy then identified sustained strategic bombing as “the most promising course available... the best available way of increasing our chance of success in Vietnam.” But Bundy also wrote that “we cannot estimate the odds of success with any accuracy.”

Maxwell Taylor, now ambassador to Saigon, concurred that an escalated bombing program “offers the best available means of exerting increasing pressure on the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] leaders to induce them to cease their intervention in SVN,” without indicating how that policy was likely to fare.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) played an ambivalent role in this debate. They agreed that the United States could not succeed in Vietnam without committing extra forces. In an October 1964 memorandum, for instance, JCS Chairman Earle Wheeler stated that “Unless we move now to alter the present evolution of events, there is great likelihood of VC victory.” However, the Chiefs believed civilian officials underestimated how much punishment the Viet Cong could sustain, and underappreciated the need to attack Hanoi directly. Wheeler explained that “The military course of action which would contribute most to defeating insurgencies in Southeast Asia remains the destruction of the DRV will and capabilities as necessary to compel the DRV to cease providing support to those insurgencies.” Wheeler repeatedly backed his recommendations with relational judgments, arguing in one memorandum that bombing North Vietnam offered “the best probability of success,” the “greatest assurance of success,” and the “best probability of achieving our objectives.”

But despite directly warning of the high likelihood that existing U.S. policy would fail, Wheeler and the Chiefs gave no similarly direct assessment of the chances that their preferred strategy might succeed.

As in 1961, opponents of escalating the war also presented recommendations without assessing their chances of success. Undersecretary of State George Ball was the most prominent internal critic of escalation. Ball wrote that there was “a reasonable chance of success through political action – at least as good as the chance of success through military action alone,” but he

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40 In January 1961 there were fewer than 700 U.S. soldiers in Vietnam; by Kennedy’s death that figure was 16,000. Johnson ordered 175,000 U.S. combat troops to Vietnam in July 1965, but Logevall argues in Choosing War that the decision was largely locked in place by February of that year. Thus I mainly focus on documents relevant to that period.

41 McG. Bundy to Johnson, FRUS 1964-1968, Vol. II, Doc 84 (7 February 1965). In an earlier memorandum, Bundy had indicated that he and McNamara were both “pretty well convinced that our current policy can lead only to disastrous defeat... There is no real hope of success in this area unless and until our policies change.” Ibid, Doc 42 (27 January 1965). These are hardly the views of advisers who are psychologically or politically averse to acknowledging doubt.


43 On JCS views during this period, see Herbert R. McMaster, Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

44 Wheeler to McNamara, FRUS 1964-68, Vol. I, Doc 388 (27 October 1964). The JCS also wrote to McNamara that “if present trends are not reversed, the counterinsurgency campaign in South Vietnam will be lost” and stating that US combat troops are required “to turn the tide of the war.” FRUS 1964-68, Vol. II, Doc 208 (18 March 1965).

never directly assessed the probability that this alternative would succeed. Beyond this, Ball’s arguments largely revolved around identifying the risks and logical flaws in arguments for escalation rather than making a positive case for how negotiations would achieve U.S. objectives.

**Evaluating progress without assessing the probability of success**

The way that top U.S. officials indirectly addressed their strategic prospects in high-level debates was reinforced by the way they deployed analytic resources to support their decisions. From 1961-65, the U.S. Defense Department build an unprecedentedly elaborate system for evaluating military, political, and economic progress in Vietnam. These measurements were so detailed that Army reporting requirements alone generated up to 14,000 pounds of paper per day. Yet as Gelb and Betts note, the Pentagon undertook just one formal study of “whether the United States actually had the capacity to ultimately achieve [its] central objectives” in the war. Even that report ducked the issue by debating whether the United States could win the war rather than assessing the chances that this might happen, concluding that “there appears to be no reason we cannot win if such is our will,” while explicitly avoiding any “assessment of the assurance the U.S. can have of winning.”

U.S. decision makers often discussed the likelihood of achieving progress, as if progress itself were their strategic goal. For example, a Defense Department memorandum of discussion from Fall 1964 stated that the “guiding principle” for bombing Hanoi was that “The situation in Southeast Asia can be improved over what it would otherwise be if pressure is brought to bear on North Vietnam.” The memorandum then discusses which measures had the potential to accomplish this objective of making improvements – a “guiding principle” that was much more limited than the objective of winning the war. A subsequent Executive Committee meeting reached consensus that escalating U.S. commitment “would improve GVN [Government of Vietnam] performance and make possible an overall improvement in the situation.” In an August 1964 memorandum to President Johnson advocating that he consider sending combat forces to Vietnam, McGeorge Bundy wrote that “the larger question is whether there is any course of action that can improve the chances in this weakening situation.”


47 Again, see Logevall, *Choosing War* on the limited value of arguments against escalation during this period.


54 Ibid, Doc 335 (31 August 1964).
Estimating the chances of making progress is an inherently confusing way to evaluate policy. For example, when Brigadier General Edward Lansdale reported to President Kennedy in January 1961, in a document some historians use to mark the start of debate about escalating U.S. commitment, he concluded that while the Viet Cong were making headway, “We still have a chance of beating them if we can give the people some fighting chance of gaining security and some political basis of action.” Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy used similarly convoluted language that Fall in writing that “An early and hard-hitting operation has a good chance (70% would be my guess) of arresting things and giving Diem a chance to do better and clean up.”

In other words, Bundy argued that escalating U.S. commitment had a chance of giving Diem a chance to do something that would, in turn, improve the chances of success in Vietnam. These contortions are especially pronounced given Bundy’s effort to specify part of his reasoning numerically. Yet Bundy’s statement exemplifies a broader pattern. While U.S. decision makers often assessed the chances of improving the situation in Vietnam, they rarely addressed the chances that the measures they proposed would ultimately succeed.

This is not to say that these officials totally ignored the probability of success when making key decisions. U.S. officials generally realized that the odds were against them in Vietnam. Yet to say that these officials shared a sense of pessimism about their prospects does not mean that further analysis was unwarranted. There are situations where decision makers might accept a thirty percent chance of success but not a three percent chance of success (and certainly not a zero percent chance of success), even though all of these assessments could be described as “pessimistic.” When decision makers are pessimistic about their prospects, this is in fact exactly where it becomes most important to parse probabilistic beliefs carefully, because it is plausible to think that a strategy’s chances of success may be too low to justify.

Quantitative patterns in probability assessment

Describing individual documents demonstrates that top U.S. decision makers used relative probability and thresholds of necessity to justify their recommendations in important instances. But how consistently did they do this? How many exceptions are there to this pattern?

To address these questions, I constructed a database of all statements from documents in the Foreign Relations of the United States’ Vietnam volumes containing any of 21 probabilistic terms or their common variants. Statements containing these search terms do not always reflect

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56 W. Bundy to Rusk, ibid, p. 312 (10 October 1961).
58 These terms were: “almost certain,” “cannot rule out,” “chance,” “conceivable,” “doubt,” “doubtful,” “fifty-fifty,” “improbable,” “inconceivable,” “liable,” “likelihood,” “likely,” “odds,” “percent,” “probability,” “probable,” “probably,” “prospect,” “remote,” “risk,” and “unlikely.” I chose these search terms because they appear in other scholars’ empirical studies of “verbal uncertainty expressions,” specifically Kent, “Words of Estimative Probability,” Beth-Merom, “How Probable is Probable?”, and Mosteller and Youtz, “Quantifying Probabilistic Expressions.” I draw these statements from text searches of Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-63, vols. I-
probability assessments (for example, a “remote area of Vietnam” versus the “remote possibility” of an event), and so I removed statements that did not address uncertainty. I applied three additional criteria for inclusion. First, statements must express beliefs of the document’s author or be recorded in a memorandum of discussion. Second, statements must reflect the beliefs of acting members of the U.S. administration. Third, those statements must be intended for an internal audience. Public speeches or letters to President Diem, for example, are not reliable statements of officials’ beliefs. A total of 1,831 statements fit these criteria, spanning 601 individual documents.

Of these statements, 106 involved U.S. officials proposing or defending specific strategies for prosecuting the Vietnam War. I divided these statements into four categories: relative probability statements, arguing only that some strategy was more likely to succeed than another; thresholds of necessity, indicating that some measure was required for success without also stating the chances that the United States would succeed as a result; underprecise statements which provide no structured information about where a probability assessment falls along the number line; and coherent statements, which provide at least some structured information about the probability of success in Vietnam. Since the definition of underprecision is inherently subjective, I coded “coherent” statements as expansively as possible. All statements coded as either “coherent” or “underprecise” can be found in this paper’s appendix (which makes clear that identifying a probability assessment as “coherent” does not imply that it was also informative).

These data strongly reinforce the qualitative evidence presented in this section. Of the statements in the database pertaining to the chances that proposed strategies would succeed in Vietnam, only 7 percent addressed the probability of victory in a manner that could be mapped even roughly to the number line. By contrast, 50 percent of assessments defending U.S. strategy invoked thresholds of necessity, 40 percent of those assessments invoked relative probability, and 4 percent were conveyed no meaningful information.

These findings confirm the argument, made by many scholars since Sherman Kent, that national security officials often assess probability in un informatively vague ways. Yet these findings also demonstrate that the existing literature’s emphasis on underprecision represents only part – and here, a very small part – of the obstacles to effective probability assessment in national security decision making. Through qualitative analysis of key documents and quantitative analysis of Foreign Relations records, we see that commonly-maligned phrases such as “a fair chance” or “a serious possibility” would have in fact been some of the most informative assessments that U.S. officials made about their strategic prospects in Vietnam. By contrast, when these officials defended their preferred strategies, they described their prospects almost exclusively in terms of what measures offered the best chances of success or what efforts were necessary to avoid strategic failure.


59 I exclude hearsay on the grounds that officials may naturally express other people’s beliefs more vaguely than their own, and this should not be allowed to bias the analysis.

60 Though independent scholars or members of the press sometimes appear in records of discussion about the Vietnam War, it is unlikely that their views carried as much weight as acting U.S. officials.

61 Full text of all statements and codings in the database will be made available at the author’s website.
Section 3. Sources of Probability Neglect in Strategic Assessment

The way that U.S. officials debated their chances of success in Vietnam is inconsistent with how international relations scholars typically approach the subject of strategic assessment in war. Contemporary theories of coercive bargaining rely on the assumption that national security officials pay close attention to their probability of military victory. These theories are not intended to be descriptive in the narrow sense that international relations scholars actually expect national security officials to model their strategic prospects mathematically. Nor would most scholars claim that military decision making is fully rational: in practice, strategic assessment can be skewed by psychological and organizational factors, and many decision makers have incentives to continue fighting even if this is inconsistent with national interests.  

Underlying all of these theories, however, is an assumption that the practice of strategic assessment resembles cost-benefit analysis, and that national security officials pay close attention to their probability of military victory. This is ultimately an empirical claim. Perhaps because this claim seems intuitively obvious, it is rarely justified explicitly. Yet the documentary record of Vietnam War decision making demonstrates that this empirical claim is problematic. Statements about relative probability or thresholds of necessity are not just noisy signals for grounding cost-benefit analysis: logically speaking, they do not provide information that supports cost-benefit analysis at all.

These patterns demand explanation, and the remainder of this section thus considers three broad arguments for why the Vietnam War managers assessed their strategic prospects in such uninformative ways. First, I explain why it is hard to sustain the view that U.S. officials avoided assessing their chances of success in Vietnam due to political, bureaucratic, or psychological constraints. Second, I explain why it is implausible to believe that U.S. officials could not have assessed an issue as subjective and complex as the probability of success in war. Instead, I argue that U.S. officials’ use of relative probability and thresholds of necessity reflects an approach to strategic assessment based on constrained optimization instead of cost-benefit analysis. The notion that the goal of strategy is to identify the best viable means for achieving desired ends is common throughout the strategic studies literature, and it does not logically require national security officials to evaluate their chances of success directly. Though approaching strategic

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63 Gartner’s Strategic Assessment in War is the primary exception. Gartner argues that organizations perform strategic assessment by tracking rates of change in “dominant indicators,” which can vary across organizations. Gartner’s focus on how organizations track progress differs from this paper’s focus on how national security decision makers evaluate their overall chances of success, but the findings are complementary. Here, I argue that the Vietnam War managers paid excessive attention to relative probability and marginal changes in their probability of success, to the neglect of analyzing the chances that their strategy would actually succeed. Gartner’s volume explains how even those assessments of progress were noisier than what scholars would otherwise believe without acknowledging organizational constraints.
assessment as an exercise in constrained optimization is normatively problematic, it provides a descriptively accurate picture of how U.S. officials debated escalation in Vietnam.

**Political, bureaucratic, and psychological aversion to probability assessment**

In almost any field, decision makers struggle to address doubts about crucial decisions. This problem is especially stark in national security. The national security profession cultivates confident decision makers, national leaders often base their decisions on salient personal experiences as opposed to rigorous analysis, and most individuals have a tendency to focus cognitive resources on near-term tactical issues at the expense of long-term strategic planning. Accepting doubts about major policies can threaten organizations’ abilities to accumulate scarce resources, while admitting a probability of failure could potentially undermine valuable organizational morale. Moreover, admitting doubts about military strategy could have serious political repercussions if such statements became public. For all of these reasons, one might expect that national security officials would naturally avoid candidly assessing their chances of success in war.

No analysis of Vietnam War decision making can neglect these issues. It is especially difficult to see why President Kennedy and President Johnson would not have pressed their advisers to specify their assessments in greater detail without accounting for some degree of overconfidence, defensive avoidance, or other aversion to controversy. But there are two reasons why these factors cannot account for the overwhelmingly vague manner in which U.S. officials assessed their chances of success in Vietnam.

First, many officials within the Kennedy and Johnson administrations opposed escalating the Vietnam War. If these officials had found their opponents’ probability assessments disingenuous, then they also had many opportunities to flag the problem, pressing colleagues to specify whether “necessary” measures were also sufficient to achieve U.S. objectives, or whether “the best chance of success” was also a large enough chance to be worth pursuing. If proponents of a strategy proved unable or unwilling to estimate its odds of success in a meaningful way, it would then be easy to question how they could justify pursuing that course of action at all. In other words, even if some officials had an incentive to conceal their beliefs, other officials had incentives to prevent logically-flawed judgments from passing unquestioned. Yet I am aware of

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67 For example, see Johnson, *Overconfidence in War* and Rapport, *Waging War, Planning Peace* for arguments about how psychological constraints impacted U.S. decision making in Vietnam.
no instance where critics of escalation in Vietnam pushed their colleagues to provide more informative assessments of strategic prospects.

Second, the documentary record of Vietnam War decision making reveals that top officials did not shy away from discussing the difficulties of stabilizing South Vietnam. For example, recall how Defense Secretary McNamara argued in 1961 that “The chances are against, probably sharply against, preventing [the fall of South Vietnam] by any measures short of the introduction of U.S. forces on a substantial scale,” while General Taylor and Deputy National Security Adviser Rostow supported that judgment by saying that “It is evident that morale in Viet-Nam will rapidly crumble” without “a hard U.S. commitment to the ground.”

These statements acknowledge profound doubts about U.S. policy in Vietnam, and they are inconsistent with the idea that U.S. officials guarded their opinions to avoid controversy. Since President Kennedy did not commit several hundred thousand troops to Vietnam in 1961 as McNamara, Taylor, Rostow, and the Joint Chiefs had recommended, these officials spent the next four years executing a policy that they had explicitly argued would not succeed. It is hard to sustain the argument that these officials were too savvy to assess their policy proposals clearly while at the same time making other assessments that would eventually place their decisions in such an unfavorable light. When the Pentagon Papers were published in 1971, it became clear that U.S. officials had been misleading the public for the very reason that they had been so candid when discussing politically controversial views in private.

Studying the database of probabilistic statements recorded for this paper reveals that U.S. officials were consistently willing to make pessimistic, controversial, falsifiable statements about the war effort. These statements are especially common with respect to analyzing the prospects of coups against U.S.-backed governments in Saigon. For example, note how this 1963 National Intelligence Estimate assesses the political situation in Saigon and the prospects for an impending coup:

“[G]eneral discontent with the Diem regime... is likely to persist. Further, if – as is probable – the regime is dilatory, inept, and insincere in handling Buddhist matters, there will probably be renewed demonstrations, and South Vietnam will probably remain in a state of domestic political tension. Under these circumstances, the chances of a non-Communist assassination or coup attempt against Diem will be better than even.”

Similarly, Secretary of State Dean Rusk cabled to Ambassador William Nolting in July 1963 that “we judge odds favor [an] attempted coup within [the] next few months if not weeks” and that “odds also seem to favor [the] success of such [a] coup.” State Department intelligence reports from 1961 and 1962 consistently discussed the possibility of a coup in Saigon.

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68 This is a central theme in works such as Gelb and Betts, Irony of Vietnam; Logevall, Choosing War; Daddis, No Sure Victory, and Caverley, “Myth of Military Myopia.”
69 SNIE 53-2-63, “The Situation in South Vietnam,” Estimative Products on Vietnam (10 July 1963). See also this 1961 State Department intelligence report: “Any coup attempt during the next year or so is likely to be non-Communist in leadership.... The participating elements probably would be broader than those involved in the 1960 attempt.... Moreover, a major split within the military leadership does not appear likely; most of the generals probably would elect to remain uncommitted at the outset.... Under these circumstances, a military coup attempt would have a better than even chance to succeed.” Pentagon Papers, Vol. V.B.4, p. 260 (29 September 1961).
director Roger Hilsman wrote a month later that “we estimate the chances of an attempted coup in the next few months at 50-50,” while “the odds of success of such a coup are much more difficult to estimate but may also be about 50-50.” In total, the database I collected contains 212 probabilistic statements describing the prospects for coups and their potential aftermath; just 12 percent of those statements employed either relative probability or thresholds of necessity, even though these analyses generally conveyed grave doubts about the United States’ strategic partners in Saigon.

One might argue that analyzing coup prospects is simply easier than drawing strategic-level conclusions about the chances that Vietnam would fall to communist insurgency. Yet U.S. officials regularly discussed the chances that other countries would fall to communist insurgencies. This issue was indeed crucial to Vietnam War decision making, because the prospect of neighboring countries falling to communism was the core of the “domino theory,” which was one of the main justifications for escalating U.S. involvement.

In an April National Security Council 1964 meeting, for instance, CIA Director of Intelligence Ray Cline estimated that the Pathet Lao had “a 50-50 chance of overrunning all other non-Communist forces in Laos.” Secretary McNamara later argued to President Johnson that “unless we achieve [our] objective in South Vietnam, almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance.” Director of Central Intelligence John McCone argued that if Vietnam went Communist, then Laos would “probably fall quickly” while Burma and Cambodia would “almost certainly move closer to Peiping” and the loss of Thailand “might be inevitable.” In total, 30 statements in the database involve national security officials describing the odds of other countries turning communist. Though many of those statements could have been more precise, ninety percent of them contained coherent probability assessments.

Some of these assessments might be dismissed as mere rhetoric to build support for escalation in Vietnam. But this argument is harder to sustain in the case of formal intelligence assessments, and especially for a well-known 1964 report prepared by the CIA’s Board of National Estimates (BNE). The BNE argued that “With the possible exception of Cambodia, it is likely that no nation in the area would quickly succumb to communism as a result of the fall of Laos and South Vietnam.” This estimate is remarkable not only because it provided a coherent probability assessment of the chances of communist insurgencies taking power – essentially the same analytic challenge as addressing U.S. prospects in Vietnam – but because the Board thus went on the record challenging one of the central justifications for the war itself.

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73 McNamara to Johnson, ibid, Doc 84 (16 March 1964).
Table 1. Use of relative probability across issue areas in *Foreign Relations* documents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Probabilistic statements regarding:</th>
<th>Number of statements</th>
<th>Statements using relative probability or thresholds of necessity</th>
<th>p-value†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All statements</td>
<td>1,831</td>
<td>255 (14 percent)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposed strategies succeeding</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>95 (90 percent)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coups/GVN succession</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>37 (17 percent)</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other states turning Communist</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3 (10 percent)</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GVN domestic policies</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>26 (6 percent)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GVN economic/fiscal policies</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2 (5 percent)</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist strategy/perceptions</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>55 (12 percent)</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign policies of noncombatants</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>5 (5 percent)</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chances that specific policies will succeed</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>9 (7 percent)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†Two-way paired sample t-test of the hypothesis that the frequency of relative probability in each category is statistically indistinct from the overall base rate.

Table 1 further substantiates the claim that the way U.S. officials used relative probability and thresholds of necessity to assess their strategic prospects does not match the manner in which they confronted other forms of uncertainty. I divided the probabilistic statements I gathered from *Foreign Relations* documents into seven additional categories (which are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive), indicating whether or not those statements pertained to: (i) predictions about coups or GVN leadership succession; (ii) assessments of the chances that other states would turn or lean Communist; (iii) assessments of GVN domestic policies; (iv) assessments of GVN economic or fiscal policies; (v) assessments of Communist combatants’ strategies or intentions; (vi) assessments of noncombatant countries’ foreign policies or intentions; and (vii) the chances that specific policies would succeed in meeting tactical objectives.

For each of these categories, Table 1 reports the percentage of statements employing relative probability or thresholds of necessity. Across 1,831 statements in the database, the base rate for these problematic assessments of uncertainty is just 14 percent. Across all the categories in Table 1, the only area where U.S. officials show a statistically significant tendency to use relative probability or thresholds of necessity more often than this base rate is when evaluating the chances that strategies they favored would succeed. These patterns are inconsistent with any notion that U.S. officials faced general political, psychological, or bureaucratic constraints when assessing uncertainty in Vietnam.

*Aversion to subjective judgment*
Another explanation to consider for U.S. officials’ uninformative assessments of strategic prospects in Vietnam is that these officials may have believed that estimating their chances of military victory would simply be too hard or too subjective to be useful. As mentioned in Section 1, contemporary military discourse contains widespread skepticism of attempts to predict strategic outcomes in war. Yet this cannot account for vague strategic assessments throughout the Vietnam War documents either, because even if U.S. officials rarely discussed their chances of success directly, they often specified subjective judgments that depended on making assumptions about the probability of winning the war.

Following Kennedy’s decision to escalate U.S. commitment in 1961, for instance, officials planned to begin withdrawing forces by the end of 1963 and to complete the process in 1965. In order to set a valid timeline for withdrawing troops, one would first need to assess the chances that these troops could complete their mission. But U.S. officials self-consciously omitted these assumptions from their analysis. For example, when Ambassador Nolting described the Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam (CPSVN) in Spring 1963, he explained how the “Basic assumptions to this exercise were that [the] VC insurgency would be under control by [the] end of a three-year period and that extensive U.S. support would be required during [that] period to do this.” But later in the same memorandum, he acknowledged that it was “impossible to guarantee that CPSVN will bring [the] U.S. out of the woods by [the] end [of this] three-year period, or that its major assumption that [the] VC will be brought under control by then will be borne out.”

Similarly, consider a June 1965 memorandum from General William Westmoreland, the top U.S. commander in Vietnam, discussing how many troops the United States should send during its major ground force increase. Westmoreland stated that the proposed 34 battalions “will not provide reasonable assurance” of success. Instead, he recommended a 44-battalion package, which Johnson ultimately approved, “as the proper and necessary scope of deployment authority at this time.” Though Westmoreland did not assess the “assurance of success” corresponding to his recommended force package, his analysis implied comparative probability assessments: that while 34 battalions would provide some assurance of success, 44 battalions would offer enough additional assurance to constitute “reasonable” or “proper” risk. Westmoreland’s recommendations for force sizing could not have been more valid than the assumptions backing his conclusion. Thus if one believes that it was appropriate for Westmoreland and other officials to make specific recommendations for force sizing or other inputs to their proposed military strategies, then it cannot also have been inappropriate for these officials to have discussed the chances of strategic success in a similarly explicit fashion.

Strategic assessment as constrained optimization

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76 See the sources cited in note 10 above.
79 The statement also implied that while a greater number of troops (say, 54 battalions) would have raised the probability of success even higher, the difference would not be large enough to make further expansion worthwhile.
These documents raise tensions between the normative foundations of strategic assessment – what this process logically requires to support sound decision making – and descriptive questions about what factors national security officials actually prioritize when making military strategy. In order to go to war, national security officials must estimate the amount of manpower, money, and time that their efforts will take. These estimates are all subjective, controversial, and falsifiable. Yet military decision makers cannot do their jobs without estimating these requirements explicitly. They cannot send a “fair number” of troops overseas, deploy forces for a “reasonable” amount of time, or request “more” money to support them. At some point, officials need to specify these factors into orders and legislation.

By contrast, national security officials do not literally need to specify the probability of strategic success in order to form and implement military strategy. Estimating the probability of success may be logically crucial to policy evaluation in principle, but this does not mean that such analysis actually plays a major role in the way that national security officials form and evaluate strategy.

For all the normative sense that cost-benefit analysis makes in theorizing strategic assessment, much of the classical strategic studies literature supports a different perspective on assessing uncertainty in war, and one which is more consistent with the empirical patterns shown in this paper. In this view, the purpose of strategy is to identify the most effective means of combining available resources to achieve desired objectives. Clausewitz thus defined strategy as “the use of engagements for the object of the war;” Liddell Hart described strategy as “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy.” While contemporary theories of coercive bargaining generally assume a free-flowing analysis of how objectives and strategies can be manipulated to maximize expected value, classical definitions of strategy often assume that political goals are exogenously-defined. As Betts thus writes, “If the problem is that the ends are wrong, we are in the realm of policy and values, not strategy.” In this view, the analysis of means-ends tradeoffs lies beyond the responsibilities of most national security officials. In the United States, at least, defining political objectives in war is the sole prerogative of the president.

In analytic terms, the classical approach to strategy could thus be characterized as constrained optimization rather than cost-benefit analysis. Of these two tasks, constrained optimization is far less demanding. As long as national security officials believe that their strategy has some chance of success, and so long as they agree on what measures offer the best chance of success, then these determinations fulfill classical requirements of forming strategy even if they do not provide the information necessary to determine whether a strategy is worth pursuing, all things considered.

As a normative statement about how strategic assessment should be performed, approaching strategic assessment though the lens of constrained optimization is clearly problematic. But as a descriptive model for how U.S. officials actually performed strategic assessment in Vietnam, this argument accounts for all of the key empirical patterns in this paper. While U.S. officials were consistently willing to acknowledge doubts about key aspects of the conflict (including stating explicitly when they believed that existing strategies were bound to fail), they defended their

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proposals almost exclusively by stating that they were necessary for success or that they offered the maximized the chances of keeping a non-Communist regime in Saigon. Critics did not seize on these logical problems as they, too, focused their analysis on identifying the best viable strategy for protecting South Vietnam. Officials made explicit, controversial, falsifiable assessments of timetables and force sizes because those judgments were necessary to run the war. Though they left assumptions about strategic prospects which lay beneath those conclusions implicit, those assumptions were not directly relevant for determining the most effective means of combining available resources to pursue U.S. objectives.

Section 4. Discussion

Though existing literature on probability assessment in national security has focused mainly on underprecision, two additional problems – the use of relative probability and thresholds of necessity – pose even deeper challenges for rigorous decision making. Throughout a case study of U.S. military decision making in Vietnam from 1961-65, the way top officials assessed uncertainty generally revolved around identifying the best viable course of action rather than addressing whether that strategy’s probability of success was also high enough to be worth pursuing.

There is a simple way to address this problem in practice: when national security officials propose military strategies (or any costly policy for that matter), they should provide at least some rough sense of how likely they believe that strategy will be to succeed. Forming such estimates is obviously difficult. But if national security officials do not feel that they can develop sound views about a strategy’s chances of success, then they also lack grounds for recommending that strategy’s adoption. Multiple advocacy can play an important part in ensuring that decision makers devote rigorous attention to the probability assessments underlying their available choices. Any time a policy is presented as being “required” for success or the “best” available option, it is worth pointing out that these arguments are insufficient to conclude that a risky action is worthwhile.

The empirical findings in this paper contribute to two scholarly literatures. With respect to research on Vietnam War decision making specifically, this analysis complements existing criticisms of the system that the Defense Department established to track progress in the war. Common critiques emphasize how this system was far less rigorous than it seemed: that despite the Whiz Kids’ attempts to assess the war precisely, their estimates were still subjective and their data were riddled with errors.\(^\text{82}\)

Progress is obviously key to winning any war, but a quote from Major General Frederick Weyand (commander of the III Corps Tactical Zone surrounding Saigon) emphasizes the gaps this leaves in strategic assessment. “Before I came out here a year ago,” Weyand said, “I thought we were at zero. I was wrong. We were at minus fifty. Now

\(^{82}\) See the sources cited in note 50.

\(^{83}\) Progress is obviously key to winning any war, but a quote from Major General Frederick Weyand (commander of the III Corps Tactical Zone surrounding Saigon) emphasizes the gaps this leaves in strategic assessment. “Before I came out here a year ago,” Weyand said, “I thought we were at zero. I was wrong. We were at minus fifty. Now
can be made more broadly with respect to contemporary debates about metrics for measuring progress in counterinsurgency. 84 These debates are important, but measuring progress is not the same thing as assessing a strategy’s chances of success, and the latter is what matters most for making sound decisions.

The broadest scholarly literature to which this paper’s findings contribute comprises theoretical frameworks for coercive bargaining. Since Thomas Schelling’s work in the 1960s, IR scholars have generally assumed that the purpose of coercion is to change national security officials’ perceptions about the probability of military victory. This perspective is most explicit in the “bargaining model” of war, in which the probability of success is always represented as a number, and when that number gets low enough, decision makers should stop fighting.

As a normative claim about how national security officials should assess their strategic prospects, this approach is unassailable. But applying these theoretical frameworks entails making empirical assumptions about how national security officials actually evaluate their probability of military victory. This paper suggests that those assumptions are problematic. The evidence presented here indicates that the practice of strategic assessment can depart substantially from the tenets of cost-benefit analysis. By evaluating strategies in terms of relative probability or thresholds of necessity, national security officials do not assess their chances of success in the manner that many international relations scholars assume.

This is not a purely academic issue, as theories of coercion drive pragmatic conceptions of military effectiveness. There is no better example of this connection than the Vietnam War. Throughout this conflict, U.S. decision makers openly stated that they viewed military operations as a way to communicate with their opponents about the chances of military victory. As mentioned earlier in this paper, Secretary McNamara argued that “our objective is to create conditions for a favorable settlement by demonstrating [to the Communists] that the odds are against their winning.” 85 Scholars of the Vietnam War often argue that McNamara and his colleagues “mirror-imaged” their own conceptions of rationality onto their opponents. But here we see the opposite: U.S. officials assumed that rational actors would pay close attention to their probability of success, while they largely avoided analyzing that subject themselves.

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84 See Connable, *Embracing the Fog of War*, for a recent review.
Appendix

Annotated list of “coherent” and “underprecise” statements in the database of probability assessments regarding U.S. strategy in Vietnam.

1. Memorandum from Deputy National Security Advisor Rostow to President Kennedy (November 11, 1961), FRUS 1961–63, Vol. I: doc 233. “If we move without ambiguity – without the sickly pallor of our positions on Cuba and Laos – I believe we can unite the country and the Free World; and there is a better than even chance that the Communists will back down and bide their time. This we should cheerfully accept; because the underlying forces in Asia are with us, if we do not surrender and vigorously exploit them.” Note: Rostow is not evaluating a specific policy here, and it is difficult to know exactly what it means to “move without ambiguity,” but this is a clear statement of optimism about U.S. strategic prospects in Vietnam. Thus this statement is coded as coherent.

2. Draft Memorandum of the Conversation of the Second Meeting of the Presidential Task Force on Vietnam (May 4, 1961), FRUS 1961–63, Vol. I: doc 43. “General Bonesteel… expressed the view that if we wanted to put down the insurgency effort in VietNam, if we had a reasonably workable settlement in Laos, bolstered by the barrier between Laos and Viet-Nam and along the 17th parallel, we could probably succeed.” Note: This assessment contains two large contingencies in the form of (a) achieving a settlement in Laos, and (b) subsequently protecting the border. General Bonesteel does not assess the chances of these contingencies materializing. Thus this statement is coded as underprecise.

3. Telegram from Ambassador Nolting to Department of State (October 6, 1961), FRUS 1961–62, Vol. I: doc 147. “I think we have better than 50-50 chance of winning on this policy line provided the border with Laos is reasonably well protected.” Note: It is unclear what protecting the border with Laos entails here or what the chances are that it can be protected sufficiently. In context, however, this document appears to be a clear statement of optimism about U.S. strategic prospects in Vietnam. Thus this statement is coded as coherent.

4. Letter from General Taylor to President Kennedy (November 3, 1961), FRUS 1961–63, Vol. I: doc 210. “We have many assets in this part of the world which, if properly combined and appropriately supported, offer high odds for ultimate success.” Note: Though Taylor is not assessing a specific policy, this document appears to be a clear statement of optimism about U.S. strategic prospects in Vietnam. Thus this statement is coded as coherent.

5. Report by an Investigative Team Headed by the Chief of Staff, U.S. Army (Wheeler), to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (January 1963), FRUS 1961–63, Vol. III: doc 26. “The situation in South Vietnam has been reoriented, in the space of a year and a half, from a circumstance of near desperation to a condition where victory is now a hopeful prospect.” Note: Since a “hopeful prospect” could mean almost anything, this statement is coded as underprecise.

6. Telegram from CIA Station in Saigon to Agency (August 28, 1963), FRUS 1961–63, Vol. III: doc 307. “If this attempt by the generals does not take place or if it fails, we believe it no exaggeration to say that VN runs serious risk of being lost over the course of time.” Note: Since a “serious risk” could entail almost anything, this statement is coded as underprecise.

7. Letter from DCI McCone to President Johnson (December 23, 1963), FRUS 1961–63, Vol. IV: doc 375. “Nevertheless, as I state in my conclusion, there are more reasons to be pessimistic than to be optimistic about the prospects of our success in South Vietnam.” Note: As noted earlier in the paper, most U.S. officials were pessimistic about the prospects of escalating the war, and this statement does little to clarify this general mood. However, given that this statement corresponds to a region of the number line, it is coded as coherent.
8. Ibid. “The military government may be an improvement over the Diem-Nhu regime, but this is not as yet established and the future of the war remains in doubt.” Note: Since saying that the war’s outcome was “in doubt” provides no indication of how strong those doubts should be, this statement is coded as underprecise.

9. Ibid. “Overcoming the VC movement by the GVN is formidable and difficult, but not impossible. The problems can be intensified by continuing increased support from NVN and political failures by the MRC. Hence, in my judgment, there are more reasons to doubt the future of the effort under present programs and moderate extensions to existing programs (i.e., harassing sabotage against NVN, border crossings, etc.) than there are reasons to be optimistic about the future of our cause in South Vietnam.” Note: This statement reprises views described in item #7, and is thus coded as coherent.

10. Paper prepared by National Security Council Working Group (November 21, 1964), FRUS 1964-68, Vol. I: doc 418. “For a period of time, perhaps some months, this Option [essentially, current policy] might keep the GVN afloat and even get it moving slowly toward effectiveness. Most of us doubt that it can do more than that.” Note: This statement does not directly assess the chances of success, as it leaves open the (undefined) possibility that current policy could promote a stable outcome in Saigon. Nevertheless, in context, this statement implies that the odds of this outcome occurring are tenuous, and perhaps unsupportably so. Thus this statement is coded as coherent.

11. CIA Memorandum (June 10, 1965), FRUS 1964-68, Vol. II: doc 344. “In our view, this [essentially, current policy] will probably not permit us to impose our will on the enemy.” Note: As with item #7 on this list, this statement is not especially informative, but it is coded as coherent.