

The Deception Dividend

John M. Schuessler

FDR's Undeclared War

When do leaders resort to deception to sell wars to their publics?¹ Dan Reiter and Allan Stam, drawing on the liberal tradition, have advanced a “selection effects” explanation for why democracies tend to win their wars, especially those they initiate: leaders, because they must secure public consent first, “select” into those wars they expect to win handily.² This article highlights, in contrast, those cases where the selection effect breaks down—cases where leaders, for realist reasons, are drawn toward wars where an easy victory is anything but assured. Leaders resort to deception in these cases to preempt what is sure to be a contentious debate over whether the use of force is justified by shifting blame for hostilities onto the adversary. The article assesses the plausibility of these claims by revisiting the events surrounding the United States’ entry into World War II. The case constitutes a “tough test” of the argument insofar as there is considerable disagreement among historians as to whether Franklin Roosevelt’s administration wanted war in 1941 and what lengths it was willing to go to sway public opinion. The goal is to develop a plausible case that President Roosevelt welcomed U.S. entry into the war by the fall of 1941 and attempted to manufacture events accordingly. Specifically, both the “unde-

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The author is grateful to John Mearsheimer for his guidance and support throughout the time this article was written. He wishes to thank Jonathan Caverley, Alexander Downes, Benjamin Fordham, Charles Glaser, Michael Glosny, Michael Horowitz, Nuno Monteiro, Michelle Murray, Robert Pape, Negeen Pegahi, Jeffrey Record, Sebastian Rosato, Lora Viola, and the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions. Seminar participants at Harvard University’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and at the University of Chicago also provided useful feedback. For financial and institutional support, he thanks the Smith Richardson Foundation (by way of the University of Chicago’s Program on International Security Policy), the Belfer Center’s International Security Program, and the Eisenhower Institute. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. government or the Department of Defense.

1. I define “deception” as deliberate attempts by leaders to mislead the public about the thrust of official thinking, in this case about the decision to go to war. Deception can take different forms. Lying, where a leader makes a knowingly false statement, is a particularly blatant form of deception, but for that reason is also less common than other, subtler forms such as spinning, where a leader uses exaggerated rhetoric, and concealment, where a leader withholds vital information. Deception campaigns invariably involve all three of types of deception. For more on the different kinds of deception, see John J. Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth about Lying in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

2. Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

International Security, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Spring 2010), pp. 133–165

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clared war” in the Atlantic and the oil embargo on Japan should be understood as intended, at least partly, to manufacture an “incident” that could be used to justify hostilities. An important implication of this argument is that deception may sometimes be in the national interest.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. First, I briefly summarize the long-standing debate between liberalism and realism over the difference that democracy makes for international relations, highlighting the role that deception plays in it. Second, I develop the main argument, elaborating the conditions under which the selection effect might break down and explaining why leaders would be tempted to resort to deception in these cases. Third, I conduct a plausibility probe by revisiting the events surrounding the United States’ entry into World War II. I conclude with several theoretical and policy implications that follow from the analysis.

The Debate about Democracy

The debate between liberalism and realism over the influence of democracy in international relations has been long-standing. From Immanuel Kant onward, liberals have argued that democracies are more prudent than nondemocracies in the conduct of their external relations, because leaders are accountable to publics that will endorse the use of force only when the benefits clearly outweigh the costs. The public’s sensitivity to costs is one of the factors most commonly cited to explain the democratic peace, the finding that mature democracies rarely, if ever, fight each other.³ Public opinion, from the liberal perspective, exerts a moderating influence on leaders, ensuring that they resort to war only when it is prudent to do so. Deception, in turn, has little to recommend it, insofar as it erodes the constraints that keep leaders honest.⁴ When leaders can manufacture consent, they no longer have to take public opinion into account and can pick fights as casually as their nondemocratic counterparts, increasing the risk of calamity.

Realists, for their part, argue that the central fact of international life is anarchy and the condition of insecurity that follows from it.⁵ Given that states can

3. There are two basic logics underpinning the democratic peace: a normative one and an institutional one. Public constraint is one of the causal mechanisms making up the institutional logic. See Sebastian Rosato, “The Flawed Logic of Democratic Peace Theory,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 4 (November 2003), pp. 585–602.

4. Miroslav Nincic, *Democracy and Foreign Policy: The Fallacy of Political Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), chap. 5.

5. For foundational treatments of realism, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979); and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

never be certain of each other's intentions, they have no choice but to adopt a "self-help" posture, which entails arming, alliances, and when all else fails, war. For realists, whatever peace exists among democracies has less to do with democracy per se than with the balance of power and interests among them.⁶ When realists do discuss the inner workings of democracy, it is to explain how leaders overcome "disruptions from below"—usually from a moralistic, short-sighted, and emotional public—to pursue *realpolitik*.⁷ Thomas Christensen, for example, seeks to explain the hostile relationship between the United States and China in the opening decade of the Cold War, when one might have expected them to ally against the Soviet Union. His argument is that U.S. leaders could not sell containment in balance of power terms because of various difficulties with the public, most notably limited information, short time horizons, and ideological rigidity. Thus, they resorted to anticommunist crusading, which led to conflict with China.⁸ From the realist perspective, democracy is less a moderating influence than a distorting one. Deception is thus justified in cases where public opinion deviates from what realists consider to be in the national interest. Hans Morgenthau sums up the realist position succinctly: "A tragic choice often confronts those responsible for the conduct of foreign affairs. They must either sacrifice what they consider good policy upon the altar of public opinion, or by devious means gain popular support for policies whose true nature they conceal from the public."⁹

Explaining Deception

Historically, realists have been more forgiving of deception than liberals, primarily because they have a less sanguine view of the public. Both camps, however, have left an important question unaddressed: When do leaders choose deception to convince their publics of the need for war? My main argument, which I develop below, is twofold. First, leaders are sometimes drawn toward wars where an easy victory is anything but assured—that is, the selection effect sometimes breaks down. Second, leaders resort to deception in these cases to preempt debate over whether the use of force is justified by shifting blame for hostilities onto the adversary.

6. Christopher Layne, "Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Fall 1994), pp. 5–49.

7. Nincic, *Democracy and Foreign Policy*, pp. 6–11.

8. Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

9. Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), pp. 223–224.

THE BREAKDOWN OF THE SELECTION EFFECT

The current debate between liberals and realists is over why democracies tend to win their wars, especially those they initiate. Reiter and Stam, in *Democracies at War*, examined a data set of interstate wars from 1816 to 1990 and found that democracies won 93 percent of the wars they initiated, compared with 60 percent for dictatorships and 58 percent for mixed regimes.¹⁰ Although less successful than democratic initiators, democratic targets were also more likely to win than other types of targets, prevailing 63 percent of the time compared with 34 percent for dictatorships and 40 percent for oligarchs. Reiter and Stam conducted a battery of statistical tests to control for other possible explanations of why states win wars, including military-industrial capabilities, troop quality, military strategy, terrain, distance, and alliances. Even when controlling for these factors, Reiter and Stam found that democracies were more likely to win their wars than nondemocracies, whether they were initiators or targets.¹¹

Why do democracies tend to win their wars? Reiter and Stam provide two answers. The first argument is that democracies are more selective about the wars they choose to fight than nondemocracies, initiating only those they are likely to win.¹² The logic underpinning this selection effect is twofold. First, leaders in democracies have powerful incentives not to start losing wars, because they can be deposed from office for doing so, whereas their counterparts in nondemocracies lack this electoral incentive.¹³ Second, leaders in democracies must make a public case for war if they are to secure domestic consent for it. When they do so, opposition parties, the press, and independent experts can scrutinize their claims as part of a process of collective deliberation.¹⁴ This vetting process provides democracies with the information necessary to discriminate between wars that can be won quickly and decisively and those that cannot. Nondemocracies benefit from no such marketplace of ideas, the result being that democracies produce better estimates of the probability of victory than nondemocracies do.¹⁵ Second, Reiter and Stam argue that democratic ar-

10. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 29.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 30. Alexander B. Downes points out that the statistical significance of Reiter and Stam's results depends on two choices: their decision to equate war targets and joiners and their decision to exclude draws. See Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies? Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War," *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Spring 2009), pp. 9–51.

12. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, chaps. 2, 6.

13. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Randolph M. Siverson, "War and the Survival of Political Leaders: A Comparative Study of Regime Types and Political Accountability," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (December 1995), pp. 841–885.

14. On the process of collective deliberation, see Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 362–366.

15. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 23. The marketplace of ideas argument is made most fa-

mies outperform nondemocratic armies on the battlefield because their soldiers, products of a political culture that emphasizes individualism, fight with greater initiative and exhibit better leadership than their nondemocratic counterparts do.¹⁶ Here, Reiter and Stam part ways with other proponents of the “democratic victory” thesis, such as David Lake, who argue that democracies win their wars by bringing a preponderance of power to bear against their opponents.¹⁷

The most comprehensive critique of the democratic victory thesis is Michael Desch’s *Power and Military Effectiveness*.¹⁸ In the book, Desch makes the case that regime type “hardly matters” for explaining who wins and loses wars. Desch’s critique of the selection effect, in particular, is worth elaborating. He makes three points. First, compared with other variables, such as material capabilities, democracy has a relatively small substantive effect on the probability of victory.¹⁹ Second, there are logical reasons to think that leaders are relatively unconstrained by public opinion and that caution about starting a war should not be unique to democracies, as authoritarian leaders who lose wars are frequently exiled, imprisoned, or put to death.²⁰ Finally, Desch argues that the case study method, rather than statistical modeling, is the optimal way to test for the selection effect and that there is scant evidence of it at work in six of the ten cases that should support the theory.²¹ In the lead-up to the Mexican War (1846–48), the Greco-Turkish War (1897), the Russo-Polish War (1919–20), the Sinai War (1956), the Six-Day War (1967), and the Lebanon War (1982), leaders stifled debate and initiated wars that lacked broad public support. Nor were they punished politically for doing so. Even if the democratic side won in the end, it is difficult to credit the outcome to the selection effect.

Desch, in short, dismisses the selection effect on logical and empirical grounds. One suspects, however, that Reiter and Stam, and other proponents of the democratic victory thesis, will not be entirely swayed by his critiques.

mously by Jack Snyder. See Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 31–55.

16. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, chap. 3.

17. David A. Lake, “Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (March 1992), pp. 24–37.

18. Michael C. Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness: The Fallacy of Democratic Triumphalism* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 39–43.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 43–45. On the impact of regime type on leaders’ postwar fate, see H.E. Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

21. Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness*, pp. 49–51. Desch drops six cases from consideration because the democracies in question did not actually initiate war. These include the Boxer Rebellion (1900), the Czech-Hungarian War (1919), and World War II (1941–45).

First, the fact remains that democracies win the large majority of the wars they initiate. How are scholars to account for this finding? As a reviewer has noted, one wishes that Desch were able to offer a convincing theoretical argument that explains the correlation between democracy and victory in war.²² Second, it is not particularly damning for the selection effect that democracy has a small substantive effect on the probability of victory relative to other variables such as material capabilities. The argument, after all, is not that democracy is more decisive for victory than material capabilities, but that democracies are likely to select into wars where they enjoy decisive advantages in material capabilities over their opponents.²³ Third, the notion that leaders in democracies are no more accountable for their performance in war than their counterparts in nondemocracies is belied by the fact that democracies fight so few losing wars relative to nondemocracies.²⁴ Finally, Desch leverages a considerable amount of case evidence to suggest that the selection effect cannot account for why democracies win the wars they initiate. Yet, even he finds the mechanism at work in four cases: the Spanish-American War (1898), the First Balkan War (1912–13), the Bangladesh War (1971), and the Turkey/Cyprus Invasion (1974).²⁵ The case evidence, in other words, is hardly conclusive one way or the other.

Rather than discredit the selection effect, my goal is to specify the conditions under which it breaks down. When, in other words, might leaders be drawn toward wars where an easy victory is anything but assured? Reiter and Stam address the question of when democracies start wars in chapter 6 of their book. Their basic argument is that democracies go to war when the public consents to it. This begs the question, of course, of when such consent is likely to be forthcoming. Reiter and Stam's answer is open-ended: "The central factor determining whether a public will consent to war is its definition of the national interest."²⁶ A narrow definition of the national interest implies a short list of circumstances under which the public will consent to war. An expansive

22. David M. Edelstein, "Review of *Power and Military Effectiveness: The Fallacy of Democratic Triumphalism*," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (December 2008), pp. 863–864.

23. Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, "Understanding Victory: Why Political Institutions Matter," *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003), pp. 168–179. As Michael C. Desch points out, Reiter and Stam are inconsistent on this point. In their book, they go to some effort to dispel the notion that democracies win their wars because they are richer or better able to extract resources from their economies. See Desch, "Democracy and Victory: Fair Fights or Food Fights?" *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003), pp. 185–186.

24. David Kinsella, "No Rest for the Democratic Peace," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 99, No. 3 (August 2005), p. 455; and Branislav L. Slantchev, Anna Alexandrova, and Erik Gartzke, "Probabilistic Causality, Selection Bias, and the Logic of the Democratic Peace," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 99, No. 3 (August 2005), p. 461.

25. Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness*, p. 50.

26. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 148.

definition of the national interest implies a longer list of such circumstances. The public's sense of the national interest, in turn, is a function of the state's power, the level of external threat it faces, and its past history. Reiter and Stam are reluctant to make more determinate claims, "as there is great variability among democracies in different eras as to the conditions that are sufficient to generate public consent for the use of force against some other state."²⁷

Democratic publics allow for the initiation of war to advance a variety of national interests. If the selection effect is to hold, however, these national interests cannot be so vital as to justify excessive risk taking. Generally, the public should consent to war only insofar as a quick and decisive victory is assured. In their work on casualty sensitivity, Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, and Jason Reifler find that the public is indeed "defeat phobic," that is, beliefs about a war's likely success matter most in determining the public's willingness to tolerate casualties. When the public is confident of eventual victory, casualties have little effect on popular support. But when the public comes to believe that victory is unlikely, even small numbers of casualties erode support. Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler marshal a wealth of evidence to test their claims, reanalyzing polling data from a number of conflicts dating back to the Korean War and conducting original surveys designed explicitly to tap into public attitudes on casualties.²⁸ The implication of their work is that the public is going to be reluctant to pay the human cost of war when victory is uncertain, especially when that cost promises to be high.

This reluctance will be all the more evident when threats are diffuse or indeterminate. Christensen, among others, has argued that "the public will judge the importance of international challenges by how immediately and clearly they seem to compromise national security."²⁹ By this standard, public consent for war should be most forthcoming when an adversary appears ready to launch an attack, either on the homeland or on a key ally, and least forthcoming when no such attack is on the horizon. For example, in the event that the adversary is geographically distant and does not have much in the way of an offensive capability, the public should be reluctant to pick a fight with it.³⁰ Normative considerations should reinforce this tendency, as force

27. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

28. Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009). Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler seek to qualify the less contingent claim, associated with John E. Mueller, that public support for war declines inexorably with mounting casualties. See Mueller, "Trends in Support for the Wars in Korea or Vietnam," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (June 1971), pp. 358–375.

29. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, p. 27.

30. On the sources of threat, see Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 21–26.

is generally viewed as legitimate only as a last resort and only for defensive purposes.³¹

If the public is indeed “defeat phobic,” the more so when the threat is less than imminent, then why might leaders be drawn toward wars where an easy victory is anything but assured? Realism provides the beginnings of an answer. Democratic decisions for war, from a realist perspective, are determined and constrained not only by public consent but also by the imperatives of self-help in an anarchic environment. Democracies are not always free to pick on weak and vulnerable opponents but must, from time to time, take on formidable foes because their territorial integrity or political independence would be threatened otherwise. The goal is either to amass power at a rival’s expense or to prevent that rival from doing the same. Granted, war is most likely to start when the potential attacker envisions a quick victory—either because of an imbalance in military capability, the relative ease of attack versus defense, or a disparity in skill—but the political consequences of continued peace are sometimes so unacceptable as to lead decisionmakers to assume significant risk.³²

This will be the case, for example, when a power shift is under way and the declining state faces a shrinking window of opportunity or growing window of vulnerability. Windows increase the risk of war in a number of ways, most directly by tempting the declining state to launch a preventive war.³³ As Jack Levy defines it, “The preventive motivation for war arises from the perception that one’s military power and potential are declining relative to that of a rising adversary, and from the fear of the consequences of that decline. . . . The temptation is to fight a war under relatively favorable circumstances *now* in order to block or retard the further rise of an adversary and to avoid both the worsening of the status quo over time and the risk of war under less favorable circumstances later.”³⁴ Dale Copeland, consistent with this logic, has found that major wars are typically initiated by dominant military powers that fear significant decline.³⁵ The stronger the preventive motivation, the more willing the leadership should be to gamble on a war that holds out some hope of forestalling decline. The public, however, is likely to be reluctant to absorb the costs of a major war when the threat is more potential than actual. This leads to a gulf, as Randall Schweller argues, between what realpolitik requires of the leadership

31. Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 19.

32. John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), chap. 2, especially pp. 62–63.

33. Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), chap. 4, especially pp. 76–79.

34. Jack S. Levy, “Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War,” *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (October 1987), p. 87 (emphasis in original).

35. Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000).

and what the public is willing to sanction.³⁶ Schweller's original finding, that democracies do not wage preventive wars, has since been qualified.³⁷ The logic of his argument remains compelling, however, and suggests that the leadership should have some difficulty securing public consent for war in the event that it is preventively motivated.

Another scenario where leaders may have difficulty securing public consent for war is offshore balancing, which entails intervening in a distant region to forestall the rise of a powerful adversary when local states prove unequal to the task. As John Mearsheimer argues, not only do great powers aim to dominate their own region, but they also strive to prevent rivals in other regions from gaining hegemony.³⁸ If there are two or more great powers in other regions of the world, they are likely to spend most of their time competing with each other, rather than threatening distant states. Given the "stopping power of water"—or the ways in which large bodies of water limit the power projection capabilities of land forces—what kind of threat can a regional hegemon pose to an offshore balancer?³⁹ First, it may be able to offer material support to a hostile coalition in the offshore balancer's backyard. The United States had to deal with this problem three times during the twentieth century: German involvement in Mexico during World War I, German designs on South America during World War II, and the Soviet Union's alliance with Cuba during the Cold War.⁴⁰ Alternatively, a regional hegemon could isolate the offshore balancer economically and politically, threatening it with strangulation and forcing it to adopt the trappings of a "garrison state."⁴¹ Robert Art, for example, has argued that the United States could have remained secure over the long term had it not entered World War II and had it allowed Germany and Japan to win. Its standard of living and its way of life, however, would most likely have suffered, which was the real reason to have entered the war.⁴²

36. Randall L. Schweller, "Domestic Structure and Preventive War: Are Democracies More Pacific?" *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (January 1992), p. 248.

37. Jack S. Levy and Joseph R. Gochal, "Democracy and Preventive War: Israel and the 1956 Sinai Campaign," *Security Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Winter 2001/02), pp. 1–49; Marc Trachtenberg, "Preventive War and U.S. Foreign Policy," *Security Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (January–March 2007), pp. 1–31; Scott A. Silverstone, *Preventive War and American Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2007); and Jack S. Levy, "Preventive War and Democratic Politics," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (March 2008), pp. 1–24.

38. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 140–143.

39. On the "stopping power of water," see *ibid.*, pp. 114–128.

40. Michael C. Desch, *When the Third World Matters: Latin America and United States Grand Strategy* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

41. Aaron L. Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America's Anti-Statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

42. Robert J. Art, "The United States, the Balance of Power, and World War II: Was Spykman Right?" *Security Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (July–September 2005), pp. 365–406.

When a potential hegemon emerges, the offshore balancer's first preference is to pass the buck, to stand aside and allow local states to check the threat.⁴³ If local states prove unequal to the task, however, the offshore balancer may intervene to slow the potential hegemon's momentum and, if possible, reestablish a rough balance of power in the region. The political problem confronting leaders is that, in the event war is necessary, the fighting is likely to be costly and protracted, as the offshore balancer attempts to roll back a potential hegemon at the peak of its strength. The public can thus be expected to insist on evidence of direct provocation before it consents to a fight to the finish on the adversary's turf. This is likely part of the explanation for why offshore balancers prefer to pass the buck and intervene only at the last moment, as the United States and Great Britain have done repeatedly.⁴⁴

In sum, the selection effect is most likely to break down when leaders, for realist reasons, are drawn toward wars where an easy victory is anything but assured.⁴⁵ My hypothesis is that leaders will be tempted to resort to deception in these cases to preempt what can only be a contentious debate over whether the use of force is justified.

THE RESORT TO DECEPTION

From Kant onward, liberals have argued that a crucial difference between democracies and nondemocracies is that democratic leaders must enlist broad support when going to war.⁴⁶ Reiter and Stam's central claim, consistent with this tradition, is that democratic decisions for war are determined and constrained by public consent.⁴⁷ Rather than dispute this claim, I ask how leaders might go about manufacturing consent in cases where the selection effect breaks down and there is the prospect of significant public dissent.⁴⁸ In cases where victory might come at a steep price or threats are ambiguous, an open declaration of war is likely to trigger a contentious debate between the leadership and the political opposition over whether the use of force is justified. As Kenneth Schultz argues, "The opposition generally has greater political incentives to support the threat of force the better it expects the outcome to be. On

43. On buck-passing, see Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 157–158.

44. *Ibid.*, chap. 7.

45. Downes's treatment of the Vietnam War suggests that domestic politics may also contribute to leaders' decisions to initiate war despite poor odds of victory. See Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?"

46. Michael Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (December 1986), pp. 1151–1169.

47. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 144.

48. I agree with Reiter and Stam that democratic leaders want to generate public consent before entering into war. Unlike them, however, I highlight the ways in which leaders can manufacture such consent, by way of deception.

the other hand, when the opposition expects that the threat or use of force has weak support in the electorate, it has incentives to capitalize on that fact by giving voice to those concerns.⁴⁹ The more contentious the debate at the elite level, in turn, the more polarized the public is likely to become as people respond to cues from fellow partisans.⁵⁰

Rather than press their case in the marketplace of ideas under such unfavorable conditions, leaders will be tempted to preempt debate by shifting blame for hostilities onto the adversary. The trick is to prepare domestic opinion for a possible, and even probable, war while providing firm assurances that it will come only as a last resort and only when the other side forces the issue. This entails two types of deception: (1) leaders must obscure the fact that they are open to war; and (2) they must wait for a crisis of sufficient magnitude to justify escalation.

First, if war threatens to be divisive, leaders are likely to go to some lengths to obscure the fact that they are considering it. This can entail a number of political and military distortions. For example, if alliance commitments have been made that threaten to entangle the state in a brewing conflict, leaders may downplay those commitments or deny that they are binding. Leaders can also negotiate in bad faith, professing a willingness to resolve matters peacefully while conducting talks with the adversary in such a way that they are likely to break down. In the modern context, this can involve channeling coercive diplomacy through international organizations, in the expectation that such diplomacy will ultimately fail but that the resulting war will be seen as more legitimate for having made the effort.⁵¹ To preempt charges of warmongering, leaders may even renounce the use of force altogether—for example, if election-year politics demand it. Militarily, the key is to mobilize in a way that does not betray aggressive intent. One option is to escalate incrementally, deploying forces in a piecemeal fashion so as not to arouse suspicion. In cases where larger, and more dramatic, buildups are required, justifications can be offered that the forces are necessary for defensive purposes or for coercive diplomacy, but are not evidence of a war footing. Throughout, leaders are likely to shroud their war planning in secrecy.

49. Kenneth A. Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 82–83.

50. On the “polarization effect,” see John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 100–113.

51. Alexander Thompson argues that when powerful coercers work through international organizations (IOs), they do so strategically to lower the international political costs of coercion. See Thompson, “Coercion through IO’s: The Security Council and the Logic of Information Transmission,” *International Organization*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (January 2006), p. 9. An additional benefit would be the enhanced domestic support that comes from giving diplomacy a chance, however halfheartedly.

Second, to justify escalation to war, leaders must wait for a suitable pretext, usually some hostile act on the part of the adversary that leaders can point to as evidence of aggressive intent. These “justification-of-hostility crises,” as Ned Lebow calls them, are unique in that leaders of the initiating state make a decision for war before the crisis commences: “The purpose of the crisis is not to force an accommodation but to provide a *casus belli* for war. Initiators of such crises invariably attempt to make their adversary appear responsible for the war. By doing so they attempt to mobilize support for themselves, both at home and abroad and to undercut support for their adversary.”⁵² Justification-of-hostility crises tend to follow a standard script: leaders exploit a provocation, real or imagined, to inflame public opinion; make unacceptable demands upon the adversary in response; legitimize those demands with reference to generally accepted international principles; publicly deny or understate their real objectives in the crisis; and then point to rejection of their demands as a *casus belli*.⁵³ In extreme cases, leaders may even try to provoke the adversary into striking first, although this strategy is difficult to achieve when the other side is intent on avoiding war.⁵⁴ Either way, the goal is to preempt a contentious debate over whether the use of force is justified by exploiting a crisis and the “rally-round-the-flag effect” that follows it.⁵⁵ Under emergency conditions, public consent is sure to be more forthcoming than if leaders had declared war outright. In the next section, I assess the plausibility of these claims by revisiting the events surrounding the United States’ entry into World War II.

FDR’s Undeclared War

In the realm of national mythology, Americans remember World War II as “the good war.” According to the standard narrative, the United States desired only to be left alone but was forced to fight in the face of German and Japanese aggression. When one takes a closer look at the historical record, though, it becomes clear that World War II was hardly forced on the United States. Well before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, President Roosevelt came to the conclusion that the United States would have to act as a balancer of last resort in Europe, but he understood that public support for a declaration of war was unlikely to be forthcoming in the absence of a major

52. Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 25.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 37–40.

55. John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973), pp. 208–213.

provocation. In this light, both the “undeclared war” in the Atlantic and the oil embargo on Japan should be understood as designed, at least in part, to invite an “incident” that could be used to justify hostilities. While controversial, a plausible case can be made that Roosevelt welcomed U.S. entry into the war by the fall of 1941 and manufactured events accordingly.⁵⁶

I chose the World War II case for two reasons. First, it is a potential outlier for the selection effects argument.⁵⁷ On the one hand, consistent with the argument’s logic, Roosevelt was sensitive to the domestic mood and waited until public consent was forthcoming to ask for an official declaration of war. On the other hand, there is compelling evidence that Roosevelt settled on a war policy well before Pearl Harbor and that in the interim he engaged in a significant amount of deception, maneuvering the country in the direction of open hostilities while assuring a wary public that the United States would remain at peace. Second, the case is a “tough test” of the argument insofar as there is considerable disagreement among historians as to whether the Roosevelt administration wanted war in 1941 and what lengths it was willing to go to sway public opinion.⁵⁸ Admittedly, some uncertainty about Roosevelt’s intentions is irreducible, but I attempt to build a strong circumstantial case that he misled the public about his thinking. The role of deception in the World War II case remains controversial, but it is worth exploring for exactly this reason.

I expand on the argument in the rest of the section. First, I outline the grand strategy that motivated U.S. entry into the war. I also address the debate among historians about whether Roosevelt sought full-scale intervention prior to Pearl Harbor. Second, I discuss the anti-interventionism that Roosevelt had to contend with as he expanded U.S. involvement. Third, I detail the deceptions that he used to counteract this anti-interventionism. Finally, I discuss the consequences of these deceptions.

THE OFFSHORE BALANCING STRATEGY

During World War II, the United States essentially pursued a grand strategy of offshore balancing, acting as a balancer of last resort in Europe and Asia after its allies failed to contain potential hegemonies in those regions. The primary

56. FDR’s deceptions were a prominent theme in the first wave of revisionist scholarship on U.S. entry into World War II. See, for example, Charles A. Beard, *President Roosevelt and the Coming of War, 1941: Appearances and Realities* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1948).

57. On the heuristic value of outliers, see Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), p. 75; and John Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 105–108.

58. On tough tests, see George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, pp. 120–123; and Gerring, *Case Study Research*, pp. 115–122.

challenge to U.S. interests was Nazi Germany, which threatened to overrun the European continent. The Nazis came perilously close to doing so with the fall of France and the invasion of the Soviet Union. U.S. policymakers feared that if Adolf Hitler were able to dominate Europe he would pose an intolerable military, economic, and ideological threat to the Western Hemisphere. To check the Nazis, Roosevelt extended assistance to European powers resisting Hitler, first Great Britain and then the Soviet Union, in the form of lend-lease aid and convoy protection. As the allies' situation grew more precarious over the course of 1941, however, FDR reluctantly concluded that stronger measures would be required and began to seek out opportunities to escalate U.S. involvement in the conflict. In Asia the United States faced a secondary but still serious threat from Japan, which was embroiled in a protracted war with China and menaced the Soviet Union to the north and the British supply line to the south. As Japanese forces expanded into the Southwest Pacific, U.S. policymakers moved to contain them. Official policy was to deter the Japanese while not provoking them, so as not to divert scarce resources from the primary theater in Europe.

Below I elaborate on these points. First, I discuss the Nazi threat and the offshore balancing strategy that the United States adopted in response. Second, I argue that this offshore balancing strategy implied U.S. entry into the war, while acknowledging disagreement among historians on the issue. I conclude by discussing the Japanese threat and initial U.S. attempts at containment.

THE NAZI THREAT IN EUROPE. By late 1938, in the wake of Germany's forcible annexation of the Sudetenland, Roosevelt was convinced that Hitler wanted nothing less than world domination and that after subduing the European continent he was sure to turn his sights on the United States.⁵⁹ Because of the nature of modern warfare, with aircraft capable of attacking at great speeds over long distances, FDR felt that the United States could no longer afford to retreat within its borders and rely on the oceanic barriers for safety. Instead, he envisaged the European democracies as the United States' front line. As long as France and Great Britain resisted Nazi advances, the United States was afforded a degree of protection from the Nazi threat. If France and Great Britain were to succumb to Nazi rule, though, Germany would pose an intolerable threat to the Western Hemisphere. Roosevelt's primary fear was that Hitler would exploit political unrest in Latin America to in-

59. For the impact of the Munich crisis on FDR's thinking, see Barbara Rearden Farnham, *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis: A Study of Political Decision-Making* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

stall pro-Nazi regimes, which would provide staging areas for direct attacks on the United States.⁶⁰

Roosevelt's intention to pass the buck to the European democracies suffered a major blow with the fall of France in June 1940.⁶¹ Thereafter, the survival of Great Britain became of paramount importance. As FDR warned in a fireside chat at the close of the year, "If Great Britain goes down, the Axis powers will control the continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, Australasia, and the high seas—and they will be in a position to bring enormous military and naval resources against this hemisphere. It is no exaggeration to say that all of us, in all the Americas, would be living at the point of a gun—a gun loaded with explosive bullets, economic as well as military."⁶² To avert this outcome, it was vital that the United States extend whatever assistance was necessary to sustain Great Britain in its fight against the Nazis, even if that meant courting war.

By the fall of 1940, FDR's military advisers were thinking along similar lines.⁶³ Indeed, some were willing to go further. In early November, Harold Stark, chief of naval operations, circulated one of the more explicit statements of the offshore balancing logic that was to motivate U.S. entry into the war a little more than a year later, commonly known as the Plan Dog memorandum. In it, Stark warned, "Should Britain lose the war, the military consequences to the United States would be serious." He further cautioned that Britain's mere survival would be insufficient. Rather, "To win, she must finally be able to effect the complete, or, at least, the partial collapse of the German Reich." This would require an invasion of Axis territory, with U.S. help. In Stark's estimation, "The United States, in addition to sending naval assistance, would also need to send large air and land forces to Europe or Africa, or both, and to participate strongly in this land offensive." At the same time, Stark understood that "account must be taken of the possible unwillingness of the people of the United States to support land operations of this character." Overall, Stark recommended "an eventual strong offensive in the Atlantic as an ally of the British, and a defensive in the Pacific."⁶⁴

60. On the perceived Nazi threat to the Western Hemisphere, see Desch, *When the Third World Matters*, chap. 3.

61. On the impact of the fall of France on U.S. thinking, see David Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance, 1937–41: A Study in Competitive Cooperation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), pp. 108–113.

62. Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, comp. Samuel Rosenman, Vol. 9 (for 1940) (New York: Russell and Russell, 1941), p. 635.

63. Initially, military planners recommended a posture of hemispheric defense in response to Hitler's victories in Europe, but that consensus was short lived. See Mark A. Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Grand Alliance, and U.S. Strategy in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 24–29.

64. The Plan Dog memorandum is reprinted in Steven T. Ross, ed., *American War Plans, 1919–1941*,

At the time, Roosevelt was not ready to admit that British victory would require a U.S. declaration of war and an invasion of Europe, so he avoided any direct approval of the Plan Dog memorandum.⁶⁵ He subscribed to its basic thinking, however, so military planning proceeded under the assumption that, in the event of war, the United States would pursue a Germany-first approach in conjunction with Great Britain while maintaining a defensive posture against Japan. This assumption underpinned the joint planning done by Anglo-American officers in the spring of 1941 and is reflected even more clearly in the Victory Program. The latter, prepared at Roosevelt's request in the wake of Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in late June 1941, outlined production requirements in the event of a global war. Echoing Plan Dog, it reiterated that "if our European enemies are to be defeated, it will be necessary for the United States to enter the war, and to employ a part of its armed forces offensively in the Eastern Atlantic and in Europe or Africa." Moreover, it stressed that "naval and air forces seldom, if ever, win important wars" and that "it should be recognized as an almost invariable rule that only land armies can finally win wars."⁶⁶ The logic, as Mark Stoler argues, was unassailable: "If British survival and German defeat were essential to U.S. security and if this required ground operations beyond British capabilities or competence, then Washington would have to create and deploy the enormous army needed for such operations."⁶⁷ Vitally, it would have to do so by July 1943, at which point Germany would have consolidated its gains.

U.S. ENTRY INTO THE WAR? As evidenced by Plan Dog and the Victory Program, Roosevelt's military planners were in agreement that Germany's defeat would require U.S. entry into the war, including an invasion of Europe. Historians, however, remain divided on the issue of whether the president himself sought full-scale intervention. As one review of the literature concludes, "After a half century of research, it must be noted that there is still no scholarly consensus as to whether the president sought full-scale intervention in the European war."⁶⁸ David Reynolds, for example, argues that FDR's "de-

Vol. 3: *Plans to Meet the Axis Threat, 1939–1940* (New York: Garland, 1992), pp. 225–250. Direct quotes are taken from pp. 229, 241, and 247.

65. For FDR's reaction to Plan Dog, see James R. Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy: Anglo-American Naval Collaboration, 1937–1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), pp. 202–205, 219; and Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries*, pp. 33–37.

66. Quoted in Robert E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), pp. 412, 415.

67. Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries*, p. 49. In a separate estimate, the U.S. Army concluded that Germany's defeat would require the creation of a ground force of 215 divisions and nearly 9 million men.

68. Justus D. Doenecke, "Historiography: U.S. Policy and the European War, 1939–1941," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Fall 1995), p. 696.

sire in 1941 was that America's contribution to the war would be in arms not armies—acting as the arsenal of democracy and the guardian of the oceans but not involved in another major land war in Europe.⁶⁹ Roosevelt had good reasons for avoiding formal entry into the war, according to Reynolds: public opinion would demand that rearmament take priority over lend-lease aid, with potentially disastrous consequences for the allies; and war with Germany would inevitably mean war with Japan, given the Tripartite Pact.⁷⁰ Stoler, along similar lines, argues that FDR viewed the Russian and British armies as substitutes for U.S. ground forces.⁷¹ As late as the fall of 1941, he points out, Roosevelt deferred army expansion so as to release supplies for the Allies.

Roosevelt undeniably had deep misgivings about entering the war, given its expected cost. He was known to say privately that it would be politically impossible to send another American Expeditionary Force to Europe.⁷² At the same time, the president's military advisers had made it clear to him that an invasion of Europe would be necessary to defeat Hitler. To the extent that Roosevelt was committed to that goal, it follows that he should have been at least open to full belligerency. Robert Dallek, who has written the most comprehensive account of Roosevelt's foreign policy, concludes as much, arguing that the president considered U.S. entry into the war inevitable by the summer of 1941.⁷³ By this time, as Steven Casey argues, FDR was "under pressure from both advisers and allies to plunge America directly into the war"; and if he had been free to act, he "would probably have favored a balanced response to the Nazi danger, based primarily on the use of U.S. land power."⁷⁴ Because of pressing domestic constraints, however, Roosevelt was reluctant to push for a formal declaration of war or the creation of an American Expeditionary Force. Instead, I argue, he maneuvered the country in the direction of open hostilities while assuring a wary public that the United States would remain at peace.⁷⁵

CONTAINING JAPAN. If Roosevelt intended to balance against Germany, even at the risk of war, what were the implications for U.S. policy toward Japan?

69. Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, p. 288.

70. *Ibid.*, pp. 218–219.

71. Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries*, pp. 56–57.

72. Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, p. 212.

73. Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 265, 285.

74. Steven Casey, *Cautious Crusade: Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion, and the War against Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 42.

75. Waldo Heinrichs concludes that, from the Atlantic Conference on, FDR was not seeking war but was knowingly risking it to forward supplies to the allies and contain Japan. He admits, though, that "it is hard to believe that he did not understand that sooner or later, one way or the other, this course of action would lead to war." See Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 159.

First, it meant a clear recognition that the Japanese threat was of secondary importance and that the United States should not court war in the Pacific while it deepened its involvement in the Atlantic. Roosevelt himself, as Casey points out, “strongly believed that Nazi Germany posed the most powerful threat to U.S. interests” and that “wherever possible, the conflict in Asia had to be contained and dampened so that scarce U.S. resources would not be diverted away from Europe.”⁷⁶ As I have already shown, this was a sentiment that was shared by the military. War planners agreed that in any war against the Axis the United States should pursue a Germany-first approach while maintaining a defensive posture against Japan.

At the same time, there was widespread agreement within Roosevelt’s administration that the United States should make some effort to contain Japanese expansion, which had already consumed parts of China and, by the summer of 1941, menaced both the Soviet Union and the British supply line in the Southwest Pacific. Waldo Heinrichs summarizes the administration’s thinking nicely: “Whether Japan went north or south it threatened to upset the improving balance of forces. This careening expansionism must be stopped. Japan must be boxed in, contained, immobilized.”⁷⁷ To this end, the United States reinforced the Philippines with land and air forces, expanded military aid to China, and, most important, applied increasingly stringent economic sanctions on Japan. The dilemma, as FDR understood, was how to deter Japanese aggression without provoking a war in the process.⁷⁸ One of the enduring puzzles of the period is why the United States failed in this regard and ended up at war with Japan in December 1941. This is a subject I return to later.

ANTI-INTERVENTIONISM

Even as the Axis threat intensified, Roosevelt had to contend with domestic opposition to expanded U.S. involvement in the war. Most prominently, a diverse anti-interventionist movement, with significant representation in Congress, mobilized to challenge the president’s initiatives. This movement fed off a deeply ambivalent public, which came to support aid to the Allies but was strongly opposed to a declaration of war or a commitment of ground forces. I discuss the anti-interventionist movement, Congress, and public opinion in turn.

76. Casey, *Cautious Crusade*, p. 13.

77. Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, p. 145. Heinrichs represents the dominant view among historians when he describes U.S. policy in the Pacific in containment terms.

78. Scott D. Sagan, “From Deterrence to Coercion to War: The Road to Pearl Harbor,” in Alexander L. George and William E. Simons, eds., *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994), p. 61.

“THE MANY MANSIONS OF ANTI-INTERVENTIONISM.” The anti-interventionists of 1939–41 were a highly diverse coalition, one that included communists, fascists, and pacifists. As Justus Doenecke characterizes the movement, “The house of anti-interventionism contained many mansions.”⁷⁹ At the same time, the anti-interventionists were by no means restricted to the fringes of society. Indeed, their ranks included former presidents (Herbert Hoover), influential members of Congress (Hamilton Fish and Robert Taft), powerful elements of the press (William Randolph Hearst), celebrities (Charles Lindbergh), radio personalities (Charles Coughlin), prominent business and labor leaders (Gen. Robert E. Wood and John L. Lewis), and even members of the Roosevelt administration (Joseph Kennedy and Adolf Berle). The organization that came to embody these diverse tendencies was the America First Committee (AFC), which established itself during the 1940 presidential election as the primary anti-interventionist organization in the United States. By the time it disbanded on December 11, 1941, the AFC had more than 250,000 members. Its unifying message was that the traditional philosophy of hemisphere defense was still viable.⁸⁰

With the AFC leading the way, the anti-interventionists protested any steps, such as lend-lease, that they thought would result in U.S. involvement in the war. To bolster their case, leading spokesmen hammered home a number of points in speeches and articles: that the Axis posed neither a military nor an economic threat to the United States; that the Soviet Union would emerge as the conflict’s primary beneficiary; that Great Britain was an imperial power and unfit ally; that aid to the Allies would come at the expense of national defenses; that overseas involvement would lead to domestic ruin; and that a negotiated peace could be secured.⁸¹ In the end, the anti-interventionists were defeated at every point, but in the short term, they complicated Roosevelt’s task with Congress and the public.

THE NEUTRALITY ACTS. During his time in office, Roosevelt enjoyed his share of legislative triumphs, most famously with the New Deal. Congress, however, proved less cooperative when it came to measures that might embroil the country in another European war. By the mid-1930s, as Dallek reminds us, “Americans generally believed that involvement in World War I had been a mistake, that Wilson’s freedom to take unneutral steps had pushed the country into the fighting, and that only strict limitations on presidential discre-

79. Justus D. Doenecke, *Storm on the Horizon: The Challenge to American Intervention, 1939–1941* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), p. 8.

80. David Reynolds, *From Munich to Pearl Harbor: Roosevelt’s America and the Origins of the Second World War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), p. 94.

81. Doenecke expands on all these themes in *Storm on the Horizon*.

tion could keep this from happening again.”⁸² The result was a series of Neutrality Acts. The first, passed in August 1935, imposed an embargo on the sale of arms to belligerents. The second, passed in February 1936, added a ban on loans. The final Neutrality Act, passed in May 1937, forbade travel on belligerent ships. Collectively, the Neutrality Acts were designed “to minimize the economic entanglements and naval incidents that had supposedly drawn America into the Great War.”⁸³

Initially, Roosevelt was not opposed to the idea of a neutrality act, so long as it permitted him to exercise a degree of executive discretion. The legislation that resulted strongly tied the president’s hands, however, and as the situation in Europe deteriorated in the late 1930s, he began to chafe at the constraints it imposed. Roosevelt wanted the freedom of maneuver to sell armaments to Britain and France and later to finance and transport them, but he faced an uphill battle in Congress when it came to revision of the legislation. This is not to say that he met only with failure. With the outbreak of war in Europe, Congress repealed the arms embargo and placed trade with belligerents on a “cash-and-carry” basis. Right up until Pearl Harbor, however, the president remained reluctant to ask for full repeal of the Neutrality Acts. He understood that there were limits to congressional interventionism. Indeed, in the latter half of 1941, Congress only narrowly revised the acts to allow the arming of merchant ships. Close votes such as these convinced Roosevelt that winning a declaration of war would be impossible in the absence of a substantial provocation from abroad.⁸⁴

AN AMBIVALENT PUBLIC. In its ambivalence toward the war, Congress reflected public opinion. On the one hand, overwhelming majorities detested the Nazi regime and wanted the Allies to win. As German victories piled in 1940 and 1941, more and more Americans came to favor a moderate interventionist stance that included military preparedness and aid to the Allies.⁸⁵ By May 1941, for example, almost 70 percent of the public was convinced that Hitler sought to dominate the United States; the same percentage believed it was more important to help Britain than to keep out of the war.⁸⁶ Public opinion was even more bellicose toward Japan, with persistent calls for the liberation of China well before the administration made it an issue.⁸⁷ On the other

82. Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, p. 109.

83. Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, p. 54.

84. Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, p. 292.

85. On public attitudes toward Nazi Germany and World War II, see Casey, *Cautious Crusade*, pp. 19–30.

86. Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, p. 267.

87. Paul W. Schroeder, *The Axis Alliance and Japanese-American Relations* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1958), pp. 182–199.

hand, as Casey points out, Americans “remained adamantly opposed to a direct, unlimited, and formal involvement in the conflict.”⁸⁸ No more than a third of the public ever supported a declaration of war. Roosevelt’s perpetual problem, as he put it to the British ambassador to the United States, was “to steer a course between the two factors represented by: (1) The wish of 70 percent of Americans to keep out of war” and “(2) The wish of 70 percent of Americans to do everything to break Hitler, even if it means war.”⁸⁹ It was in this context, I argue, that Roosevelt resorted to deception.

THE UNDECLARED WAR

President Roosevelt was famously sensitive to the domestic mood. He firmly believed that an effective policy abroad first required a consensus at home.⁹⁰ Given the persistence of anti-interventionism, such a consensus was bound to be elusive in the case of a declaration of war. FDR thus maneuvered the country in the direction of open hostilities while assuring a wary public that the United States would remain at peace. I now outline the deceptions that this strategy entailed. First, I discuss Roosevelt’s efforts to obscure the belligerent drift of U.S. policy. Second, I argue that by mid-1941 he was searching for pretexts in the Atlantic and Pacific that would justify open hostilities.

THE GUISE OF NONBELLIGERENCY. As predicted, Roosevelt went to some lengths to obscure the belligerent drift of U.S. policy. He did so in three ways. First, he insisted that the United States was a nonbelligerent even as he waged a proxy war on behalf of the Allies. This pattern is evident as far back as the congressional debate over revision of the Neutrality Acts in the fall of 1939. In that debate, the Roosevelt administration presented “cash-and-carry” as a peace measure even though it was primarily intended to benefit Britain and France, which had the “cash” to pay for arms and the ships to “carry” them.⁹¹ The administration, as Robert Divine argues, “carried on the elaborate pretense that the sale of arms to the Allies was but the accidental byproduct of a program designed solely to keep the United States clear of war.”⁹² The gap between rhetoric and reality only widened after the fall of France, when the administration moved to bolster the British. During that period, Roosevelt defended such unneutral acts as destroyers-for-bases, lend-lease, and interven-

88. Casey, *Cautious Crusade*, p. 30.

89. Quoted in Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, p. 289.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 39. FDR regularly consulted a variety of sources to stay abreast of popular attitudes. These included newspapers, media surveys, gossip, mail, and increasingly opinion polls. See Casey, *Cautious Crusade*, pp. 16–19.

91. Reynolds, *From Munich to Pearl Harbor*, pp. 63–68.

92. Robert A. Divine, *The Illusion of Neutrality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 297.

tion in the Battle of the Atlantic as intended to secure the Western Hemisphere. For example, he provocatively titled the lend-lease legislation "An Act to Promote the Defense of the United States." Roosevelt justified expanded naval patrolling in similar terms, as entailed by a series of "Western Hemisphere Defense Plans." Roosevelt was not being entirely disingenuous in this regard; his fears for the security of the Western Hemisphere did intensify as Britain's position worsened.⁹³ The president could have been more forthcoming, however, that a "common-law" alliance was developing with Britain, given that such a policy entailed a serious risk of war with Germany and Japan.⁹⁴

Second, and related, Roosevelt pledged to keep the country out of the fighting, even as official thinking came around to the conclusion that entry into the war might eventually be required. The most prominent examples come from the 1940 election campaign, when Roosevelt's opponent, Wendell Willkie, charged him with warmongering. To rebut these charges, the president felt compelled to predict that the country would not become involved in fighting of any kind. Most famously, he promised at a campaign stop in Boston, "I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again and again: Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars."⁹⁵ After some thought, he left out the qualifying phrase in the Democratic platform, "except in case of attack." Nor did FDR's pledges cease with the election. In a fireside chat at the end of December 1940, the president reassured the public that "the people of Europe who are defending themselves do not ask us to do their fighting" and that "our national policy is not directed toward war."⁹⁶ Roosevelt, again, may have shared some of these sentiments, but he also must have understood that such unqualified assurances of peace were at odds with the central tendency of U.S. policy.

Finally, Roosevelt was careful to shroud military planning in secrecy. He not only kept internal exercises such as Plan Dog and the Victory Program secret, but he also authorized secret talks between U.S. planners and their British counterparts, which were held from the end of January to the end of March 1941.⁹⁷ Known as the "ABC talks," the consultations revolved around contingency plans in case the United States entered the war. They culminated in agreement "that Germany was the primary threat to the security of both countries, that the defeat of Germany and Italy was the priority, that the Atlantic

93. Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, p. 82.

94. On the "common-law" alliance between the United States and Britain, see Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, pt. 3.

95. Quoted in Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, p. 250.

96. Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 9, p. 640.

97. On FDR's authorization of the talks, see Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, pp. 202–205.

lifeline between Britain and the U.S.A. must be secured and that a purely defensive, deterrent policy should be maintained against Japan.”⁹⁸ The participants even produced a war plan to that effect in case the United States entered the conflict. One informed observer has written that these staff talks “provided the highest degree of strategic preparedness that the United States or probably any another non-aggressor nation has ever had before entry into war.”⁹⁹ Such detailed planning belied FDR’s assurances that the United States would definitely remain out of the fighting, which explains why the president went to such lengths to keep the talks secret. British planners, for example, dressed in civilian clothes and were officially described as technical advisers to the British Purchasing Commission.¹⁰⁰

LOOKING FOR AN “INCIDENT” IN THE ATLANTIC. As the ABC talks were coming to a close, the Germans intensified their war on British shipping and communications. By March 1941, Britain was losing ships at the rate of more than 500,000 tons a month; and because its shipyards were under air attack, those losses were becoming increasingly difficult to replace.¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, Nazi armies were advancing through the Balkans, overrunning Yugoslavia and Greece in April. Uncertainty abounded as to where they would move next: southeast toward the Suez Canal, across the English Channel, or southwest toward Dakar, which was within aircraft range of Brazil.¹⁰² Ominously, Hitler was massing his forces for a possible invasion of the Soviet Union. With the Axis threat intensifying, Roosevelt began to conclude that the United States would ultimately have to join the fighting, but he was reluctant to ask for a declaration of war in the absence of a provocation from abroad. As Dallek summarizes the president’s thinking, “While he believed that the public would strongly line up behind intervention if a major incident demonstrated the need to fight, he did not feel that he could evoke this response simply by what he said or did.”¹⁰³ The problem was how to court such an incident when Hitler was going out of his way to avoid confrontation with the United States. With the outcome of the war in Europe still undecided, Hitler was hardly ready to invite U.S. belligerency. Roosevelt, however, saw opportunity in the “undeclared war” that was about to be waged in the Atlantic.¹⁰⁴

FDR first edged into the Battle of the Atlantic on March 15, 1941, when he

98. Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, p. 184.

99. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, p. 273.

100. Reynolds, *From Munich to Pearl Harbor*, p. 117.

101. Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, p. 30.

102. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

103. Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, p. 267.

104. William L. Langer and S. Everett Gleason, *The Undeclared War, 1940–1941* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953).

ordered the Atlantic Fleet to prepare for active duty. Roosevelt's principal concern was to ensure that lend-lease supplies arrived safely in Britain. Over the course of the summer, however, as forces became available, the president adopted an increasingly confrontational posture. In April he extended the neutrality zone to include Greenland and the Azores. This allowed the U.S. Navy to patrol the western Atlantic and broadcast the location of German ships to the British. In July he moved to occupy Iceland, which he envisioned as an eventual transshipment point for Atlantic convoys. In August he met with Churchill to discuss war aims, culminating in the Atlantic Charter. In September the navy began escorting convoys as far as Iceland, with orders to "shoot on sight" in the event that they encountered Axis warships. By this time, the United States was at war with Germany in the western Atlantic in all but name only.

In his public appearances, FDR defended U.S. intervention in the Atlantic in hemispheric security terms. For example, in a May 27 radio address, he warned listeners that "unless the advance of Hitlerism is forcibly checked now, the Western Hemisphere will be within range of the Nazi weapons of destruction." To counter this threat, the president promised to "actively resist wherever necessary, and with all our resources, every attempt by Hitler to extend his Nazi domination to the Western Hemisphere."¹⁰⁵ Roosevelt came to have a more provocative end in mind, though: to force an "incident" that would justify open hostilities. His conversations with Winston Churchill are especially revealing in this regard. At the Atlantic Conference in August 1941, he explained to the prime minister that "he was skating on pretty thin ice in his relations with Congress" and that "if he were to put the issue of peace and war to Congress, they would debate it for three months." Instead, FDR indicated that "he would wage war, but not declare it, and that he would become more and more provocative." As Churchill understood it, "Everything was to be done to force an 'incident' . . . which would justify him in opening hostilities."¹⁰⁶ This was hardly an isolated remark. FDR used similar language with his advisers throughout the summer, leading Henry Stimson, his secretary of war, to speculate, "The President shows evidence of waiting for the accidental shot of some irresponsible captain on either side to be the occasion of his going to war."¹⁰⁷

105. Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, comp. Samuel Rosenman, Vol. 10 (for 1941) (New York: Russell and Russell, 1950), pp. 181, 190.

106. Quoted in Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, pp. 214–215. Reynolds suggests that such bellicose rhetoric was meant to boost British morale and should not be taken at face value. See *ibid.*, pp. 66–67, 149.

107. Quoted in Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, p. 265. Stimson did not intend this remark as a compliment. He, along with other cabinet "hawks," grew increasingly frustrated with FDR for his indecisiveness during the spring and summer of 1941, as well as for his

In the weeks following his meeting with Churchill, FDR used just such an “incident” to announce his policy of escorting and “shoot on sight” in the Atlantic. The details are as follows: on September 4, a U.S. destroyer, the *Greer*, exchanged fire with a German submarine in the North Atlantic. The submarine fired on the *Greer* only after being pursued for several hours and evading depth charges from a British plane. As U.S. Navy officials reported to the president on September 9, “Submarine was not seen by *Greer* hence there is no positive evidence that the submarine knew nationality of ship at which it was firing.”¹⁰⁸ In a fireside chat delivered on September 11, FDR deliberately distorted the details of the incident. He claimed that the *Greer*’s identity as a U.S. ship was unmistakable and that the German submarine fired first without warning. He went on to outline a Nazi design to abolish the freedom of the seas as a prelude to domination of the United States. Reminding his audience that he had sought no shooting war with Hitler, FDR insisted nonetheless that “when you see a rattlesnake poised to strike, you do not wait until he has struck before you crush him.”¹⁰⁹ The president then announced that the U.S. Navy would protect all merchant ships engaged in commerce in the North Atlantic and that Axis ships would enter U.S. waters at their peril. The navy began escorting convoys shortly thereafter.

Although the *Greer* incident certainly facilitated U.S. intervention in the Atlantic, it was hardly the *casus belli* that FDR had promised Churchill in August. As subsequent events made clear, naval skirmishes would not suffice to generate the kind of consensus for war that the president wanted. In the latter half of October, German submarines claimed 126 American lives in attacks on the destroyers *Kearny* and *Reuben James*. Nevertheless, Congress barely passed revisions to the Neutrality Act arming U.S. merchant ships and allowing them to enter combat zones. FDR reluctantly concluded that it would take a more dramatic event than any sinking in the Atlantic to draw the United States into the war.¹¹⁰ After all, Hitler was determined to postpone hostilities with the United States until victory in Russia was assured

lack of candor with the public. Their fear, at least, was that FDR would not intervene soon enough to stave off disaster.

108. On the *Greer* incident, see *ibid.*, pp. 287–288; Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, p. 216; and Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, pp. 166–168.

109. Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 10, pp. 384, 386–387, 390.

110. Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, p. 292. Gerhard L. Weinberg has argued that the Roosevelt administration exploited intercepted German naval messages to avoid rather than provoke incidents during this period. See Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 240–241. Marc Trachtenberg rebuts these claims. See Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 84–87.

and had issued orders to his navy to that effect.¹¹¹ In the event, he declared war on the United States only after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

PEARL HARBOR: BACK DOOR TO WAR? Even today, conspiracy theories persist suggesting that Roosevelt deliberately allowed the Pearl Harbor attack to bring a unified country into the war. Among serious scholars, though, such arguments have been discredited.¹¹² David Kennedy points out that “despite decades of investigation, no credible evidence has ever been adduced to support the charge that Roosevelt deliberately exposed the fleet at Pearl Harbor to attack in order to precipitate war.”¹¹³ Rather, the scholarly consensus is that the administration did not anticipate a Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, preoccupied as it was with developments in Southeast Asia. “The evidence,” as Reynolds concludes, “points to confusion and complacency, not conspiracy, in Washington.”¹¹⁴

Although such conspiracies have been found wanting, the notion that Roosevelt allowed matters to come to a head with Japan so that the United States could have a “back door” into the European war remains defensible.¹¹⁵ The argument has recently been revived, for example, by historian Marc Trachtenberg.¹¹⁶ As he points out, official policy was to deter the Japanese while not provoking them, so as not to divert scarce resources from the primary theater in Europe. Given these limited aims, it is puzzling that the president adopted such an aggressive line in the summer and fall of 1941, imposing an oil embargo and then insisting that the Japanese withdraw from China before supplies would be resumed. When negotiations predictably unraveled and Japanese action was imminent, Roosevelt talked openly of maneuvering Japan into firing the first shot rather than working for a diplomatic compromise. In these ways, Pearl Harbor was neither a complete surprise to the president nor entirely unwelcome. I elaborate on these points in the remainder of the section.

In late June 1941, Japanese leaders debated how they could best exploit Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union. On July 2 they decided to move forward with the Southern Advance, which promised control of the resources of Southeast Asia and the encirclement of China. Japanese troops made their first

111. Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, p. 109.

112. Roberta Wohlstetter’s account remains definitive. See Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1962).

113. David M. Kennedy, *The American People in World War II: Freedom from Fear*, pt. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 90.

114. Reynolds, *From Munich to Pearl Harbor*, p. 163.

115. The “back door” argument is made most famously by Charles Callan Tansill. See Tansill, *Back Door to War: The Roosevelt Foreign Policy, 1933–1941* (Chicago: Regnery, 1952).

116. Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*, chap. 4.

moves in this direction on July 24, occupying southern Indochina. At the time, the leadership did not expect a war with the United States to result.¹¹⁷ To its surprise, the Roosevelt administration responded by imposing an oil embargo, if only a de facto one. "The United States," as Waldo Heinrichs puts it, "had imposed an embargo without saying so."¹¹⁸ As was widely recognized in Washington, this was a provocative move given that Japan was heavily dependent on oil imports to supply its war effort in China. Roosevelt himself understood that an embargo could well lead to a Japanese attack on the Dutch East Indies to secure alternative sources of supply and thus to war with Great Britain and the United States.¹¹⁹ Admittedly, his participation in the embargo was indirect: he issued an order freezing Japanese assets and then failed to intervene when funds were not released for exports. This has led some observers to conclude that midlevel officials hijacked the policy process and engineered an embargo against the president's wishes.¹²⁰ Other evidence, however, suggests that the oil embargo almost certainly met with Roosevelt's approval. At the Atlantic Conference, for example, Roosevelt assured Churchill that he would maintain economic measures against Japan in full force. It is hard to escape the conclusion, which Trachtenberg reaches, that the president "deliberately opted for a policy which he knew would in all probability lead to war with Japan."¹²¹

If that was Roosevelt's intent, the embargo had the desired effect. It accelerated preparations for a general war that Japanese leaders had hoped to avoid. Faced with looming shortages, Japanese policymakers decided that they had no choice but to secure the raw materials of Southeast Asia by force, even if that entailed war with Great Britain and the United States. The moderates among them, however, still held out hope for a diplomatic settlement that would allow oil shipments to resume. To secure an agreement, Japanese leaders were willing to forgo further expansion, to withdraw from territory Japan had occupied as part of the Southern Advance, and even to work toward an

117. Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, pp. 118–121; and Sagan, "From Deterrence to Coercion to War," pp. 66–67.

118. Heinrichs, *Threshold of War*, p. 177.

119. Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, pp. 273–274; and Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*, p. 96.

120. See, for example, Jonathan G. Utley, *Going to War with Japan, 1937–1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985).

121. Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*, p. 100. Trachtenberg rebuts Jonathan Utley's argument that Roosevelt had lost control of policy. He cites Waldo Heinrichs, who agrees that Roosevelt had some hand in the oil embargo but argues that it was intended to deter a Japanese attack on the Soviet Union (see *Threshold of War*, pp. 141–142). What is puzzling, from this perspective, is why the embargo remained in effect even after it was clear that a Japanese attack on the Soviet Union was unlikely and why the United States insisted on a Japanese withdrawal from China as a condition of its removal.

accommodation on the China issue. As Paul Schroeder argues, "From the beginning of August till late November the Japanese government bent all its efforts toward securing some kind of agreement with the United States which would relax the economic pressure now grown intolerable, without sacrificing all of Japan's gains."¹²² U.S. negotiators, however, insisted on a complete withdrawal from China, a demand that the Japanese army found hard to accept after four years of intense fighting there. Coupled with the oil embargo, U.S. demands for the liberation of China were more consistent with a policy of roll-back than containment.¹²³ They were certainly at odds with the thrust of U.S. grand strategy, which was to remain on the defensive in Asia until Nazi Germany was defeated. The president's military advisers, in particular, were opposed to this shift from deterrence to coercion. From their perspective, the president seemed to be "insanely willing" to provoke a second war in the Pacific when hostilities were escalating in the Atlantic.¹²⁴

Rather than play for time as the military was recommending, Roosevelt rebuffed Japan's final diplomatic overtures. In early October, he refused to agree to a Leaders' Conference with Prince Konoe, the Japanese premier, because a comprehensive settlement could not be reached beforehand, ostensibly the purpose of the meeting. At the end of November, he abandoned the search for a *modus vivendi*, a temporary agreement that would have postponed hostilities, in the face of Chinese and British resistance. Roosevelt may have had the solidarity of the Allied coalition in mind when he gave up on negotiations, but that coalition had become important exactly because war was near. Signal intercepts indicated that Japanese action was imminent, most likely in Southeast Asia. At this point, the discussion turned to preparations for war and how to justify war to the public. U.S. negotiators, to this end, reintroduced the issue of the Tripartite Pact into the final round of talks with the Japanese. The thinking was that it would be useful to link Japanese expansion with Hitler's program of world conquest in the minds of Americans.¹²⁵ The only remaining question, as FDR remarked to his cabinet on November 25, "was how we should maneuver them [the Japanese] into the position of firing the first shot without allowing too much danger to ourselves."¹²⁶ With Japanese forces moving into position, all the public knew was that talks were stalled but not broken.

Japanese planes attacked Pearl Harbor shortly thereafter, on December 7. Expecting an invasion of Thailand, Malaya, or the Dutch East Indies, Roosevelt

122. Schroeder, *The Axis Alliance and Japanese-American Relations*, p. 54.

123. Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*, p. 91.

124. Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries*, p. 58.

125. Schroeder, *The Axis Alliance and Japanese-American Relations*, pp. 100–101.

126. Quoted in Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, p. 307.

was taken aback that the Japanese had targeted the fleet at Hawaii. He was also relieved, however, that they had not limited their attacks to British and Dutch possessions, potentially depriving him of the popular backing needed to declare war. Harry Hopkins, a top Roosevelt adviser, says this explicitly when recounting the events of the day: "I recall talking to the President many times in the past year and it always disturbed him because he really thought that the tactics of the Japanese would be to avoid a conflict with us; that they would not attack either the Philippines or Hawaii but would move on Thailand, French Indo-China, make further inroads on China itself and possibly attack the Malay Straits. This would have left the President with the very difficult problem of protecting our interests. Hence his great relief at the method that Japan used. In spite of the disaster at Pearl Harbor and the blitz-warfare with the Japanese during the first few weeks, it completely solidified the American people and made the war upon Japan inevitable."¹²⁷ By December 1941, Roosevelt and his advisers wanted such a war because it promised entry into a European conflict that demanded U.S. intervention. Again, Hopkins makes this explicit when describing the mood at the White House following the Pearl Harbor attacks: "The conference met in not too tense an atmosphere because I think that all of us believed that in the last analysis the enemy was Hitler and that he could never be defeated without force of arms; that sooner or later we were bound to be in the war and that Japan had given us an opportunity."¹²⁸

What reason did Hopkins have to believe that Japanese military action would facilitate U.S. entry into the European war? It is important to point out in this context that it had been official policy since early 1941 that in the event of a conflict with Japan, the United States would go to war with Germany and Italy at once.¹²⁹ As it happens, FDR was not forced to declare war first, as he had intelligence in hand suggesting that Hitler would declare war on the United States in the event of a Japanese attack.¹³⁰ Even if Hitler had refused to declare war, however, Roosevelt would likely have been able to channel the popular anger surrounding the Pearl Harbor attacks into a declaration of war against Germany. The idea that the Japanese were in league with Hitler had

127. Quoted in Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, p. 428.

128. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 431. On the sense of relief surrounding Pearl Harbor, see Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, p. 311; Casey, *Cautious Crusade*, p. 47; and Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*, p. 129.

129. Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*, p. 126; and Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, pp. 225, 242.

130. Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*, p. 125. See, for example, F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations*, Vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 75.

been in place since the signing of the Tripartite Pact, and for that reason Pearl Harbor was widely blamed on the Axis as a whole.¹³¹ According to a Gallup poll taken on December 10, after Pearl Harbor but before Hitler's declaration of war, 90 percent of respondents favored an immediate declaration of war on Germany.¹³² U.S. leaders simply took it for granted, right after the Pearl Harbor attacks, that war with Germany was imminent.

In summary, a plausible reading of the evidence suggests that if there was a strategy underpinning Roosevelt's actions in the latter half of 1941, it was almost certainly that of the "back door." Since taking office, the president had been unwilling to take a hard line with Japan over its territorial ambitions in Asia, but he allowed matters to come to a head when the situation in Europe was deteriorating. He did so even though the thrust of official thinking suggested that he appease Japan and even though he was providing public assurances that war was not at hand. One of the few logical explanations is that he was taking advantage of the East Asian situation to bring the United States into the European war, a war that the public had been reluctant to embrace.

DID DECEPTION PAY?

Roosevelt understood that a declaration of war was bound to be divisive. Thus, he maneuvered the United States in the direction of open hostilities while providing misleading assurances to the contrary. In the process, he concealed the belligerent drift of U.S. policy and sought out pretexts that would justify escalation. In the wake of the Pearl Harbor attack, Roosevelt got the result he wanted, entry into the European war. Even anti-interventionists dropped their opposition to U.S. involvement, if only temporarily. That said, FDR's maneuvering and indirection were hardly without consequence. Most important, the United States had to fight an essentially unnecessary second war in the Pacific because Roosevelt could not bring himself to declare war on Germany as an act of policy.¹³³ Indeed, Pearl Harbor yielded a groundswell of support for revenge against Japan, which interfered with the administration's "Germany-first" strategy. Roosevelt worked throughout the war to counter such sentiment, downplaying Japanese intentions and capabilities. Such concerns contributed to his decision to invade North Africa in November 1942: FDR wanted to get U.S. troops into action as quickly as possible against the Nazis, so as to preempt demands for more effort in the Pacific.¹³⁴ More indirectly, FDR's arbitrary use of executive power paved the way for the imperial

131. Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*, p. 127.

132. Richard F. Hill, *Hitler Attacks Pearl Harbor: Why the United States Declared War on Germany* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2003), p. 209 n. 37.

133. Trachtenberg, "Preventive War and U.S. Foreign Policy," p. 28.

134. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, p. 251; and Casey, *Cautious Crusade*, chap. 3.

presidency of the Vietnam era, enabling Lyndon Johnson to wage a massive, undeclared war in Southeast Asia. Like Roosevelt, Johnson concealed his intentions and exploited pretexts such as the Gulf of Tonkin “incident,” all in the service of a cause that has come to be considered more dubious than the fight against the Nazis.¹³⁵ What this particular legacy suggests is that deception always comes with a cost, even when otherwise most justified.

Conclusion

Leaders resort to deception to sell wars to their publics for two reasons. First, leaders are sometimes drawn toward wars where an easy victory is anything but assured—that is, the selection effect can break down. Second, leaders resort to deception in these cases to preempt debate over whether the use of force is justified by shifting blame for hostilities onto the adversary. Empirically, one can make a compelling case that this is exactly what the Roosevelt administration did in the lead-up to World War II, bringing the country into the war by way of the “back door.”

One must be careful, of course, about deriving implications from a single case, especially one as controversial as World War II. That said, three are worth developing, although they must remain speculative at this point. First, the selection effect may break down when systemic pressures are severe. Contrary to the argument put forth by Reiter and Stam, democracies are not always free to pick on weak and vulnerable opponents but must, from time to time, take on formidable foes because their territorial integrity or political independence would be threatened otherwise. Roosevelt, for example, recognized that public consent was not forthcoming for a protracted war against Germany, but he felt that the United States had no choice but to intervene as a balancer of last resort to forestall the Nazi threat to the Western Hemisphere. He was willing, therefore, to court “incidents” in the Atlantic and Pacific that could be used as pretexts to justify hostilities. Democracies are obviously reluctant to fight open-ended wars and hence prone to pass the buck.¹³⁶ When systemic pressures are severe, however, their leaders are likely to do what is necessary to balance against external threats, including resorting to deception. This provides some vindication for realism.

Second, in cases where the selection effect does break down, alternative ex-

135. Senator J. William Fulbright famously asserted in 1971, “FDR’s deviousness in a good cause made it easier for LBJ to practice the same kind of deviousness in a bad cause.” Quoted in Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, p. 289.

136. Randall L. Schweller argues that democracies will be particularly slow to balance against threats. See Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 48.

planations for why the democratic side ultimately prevailed are required. In an influential study of the outcome of World War II, Richard Overy finds that the Allied victory resulted from more than an overwhelming advantage in manpower and resources. Other elements—technological quality, combat prowess, organization and leadership, and fighting a moral war—were also important.¹³⁷ Overy's findings are consistent with trends in the scholarly literature on the sources of military effectiveness. The point of departure for that literature is that the creation of military power is only partially dependent on states' basic material and human assets. Cultural and societal factors, political institutions, and pressure from the international arena all affect how states organize and prepare for war, and ultimately influence their effectiveness in battle.¹³⁸ It remains to be seen how important regime type is as a source of military power relative to these other factors.

Finally, and perhaps most important, deception cannot be ruled out a priori as contrary to the national interest. If he had not resorted to deception, Roosevelt may not have been able to generate public consent for entry into World War II; and if the United States had not entered the war, then Hitler may have come to dominate Europe and to threaten the Western Hemisphere.¹³⁹ More generally, in the event that the leadership and the public disagree over the necessity of using force, deception may be justified when the leadership's assessment of the threat environment is sounder than the public's. This is not to deny that deception is costly. It is simply to say that deceiving may sometimes be less costly than not deceiving.

Allow me to conclude with a few words about the Iraq War. There is now relative consensus that the George W. Bush administration engaged in threat inflation to secure domestic support for deposing Saddam Hussein, and the focus of the academic debate has been on explaining why the marketplace of ideas failed to expose its distortions.¹⁴⁰ Less remarked upon, and in stark contrast to the World War II case, is that leading officials were able to be forthcoming about their belligerent intentions in the lead-up to the invasion. Indeed, if the Bush administration had wanted to be coy about its thinking on Iraq, it probably would not have elevated preventive war to the level of doctrine.¹⁴¹

137. Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).

138. Risa A. Brooks and Elizabeth A. Stanley, eds., *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007).

139. For some skepticism on this point, see Bruce M. Russett, *No Clear and Present Danger: A Skeptical View of the U.S. Entry into World War II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

140. On threat inflation in the context of the Iraq case, see A. Trevor Thrall and Jane K. Cramer, eds., *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear: Threat Inflation since 9/11* (London: Routledge, 2009).

141. George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: White House, September 2002).

Ironically, the selection effects argument provides a straightforward explanation for why the Bush administration was able to be so transparent: the public is likely to support the use of force when an easy victory is seemingly assured. Debate will then be truncated, because the political opposition has little incentive to present an alternative to a policy that is popular or widely regarded as successful. Under these conditions, leaders can be more forthcoming about their belligerent intentions. They may still engage in threat inflation, to convince the public that there is some danger that warrants the use of force, but whatever deceptions are entailed are unlikely to come under serious scrutiny in the marketplace of ideas. An initial reading of the evidence suggests that this is what happened in the Iraq case.¹⁴² No firm conclusions can be drawn, however, until the documentary record is more complete.

142. John M. Schuessler, "Deception and the Iraq War," Air War College, 2009.