A Methodology for the Study of Historical Counterfactuals

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Counterfactual reasoning is a component in much historical and political research. A proposal for exploring counterfactuals is elaborated, based on philosophical work on modal logic and possible worlds semantics. It is proposed that phenomena have essences which are unchanging in all possible worlds and that counterfactual analysis consists of making inferences about the contingent properties of these phenomena. Essential properties can be expressed as contingent relations bound, in different counterfactual situations, to different contingent properties. This methodology is applied to counterfactual explorations of a particular phenomenon: the “winnability” of high-level United States foreign policy recommendations. In two cases, the question is asked of whether “harder line” U.S. policies regarding Vietnam would have been adopted. Using the methodology elaborated in the first half of the article, it is found that as early as 1961, recommendations for the overt use of U.S. ground combat troops could have been accepted.
been different, the crisis would still have been resolved as it was (Thorson and Sylvan, 1982). More recently, the Gulf War has been the focus of counterfactual reasoning to claim that “the invasion of Kuwait was probably ‘unstoppable’... and was irreversible, short of the use of force to compel Iraq’s withdrawal” (Stein, 1992:179). This interest in counterfactuals is mirrored in an even more recent statement by the editors of an anthology on “counterfactual thought experiments in world politics” that “counterfactual reasoning is a prerequisite for any form of learning from history” (Tetlock and Belkin, 1996a:4).

Counterfactual reasoning thus seems unavoidable if one wants to study the past. However, to recognize the importance of such reasoning tells us nothing about how to carry it out. Should one, for example, construct a simulation model? Should one look for documentary “smoking guns”? Should one engage in a kind of role-playing, putting oneself in the shoes of historical actors?

Our aim in this paper is to suggest a specific methodology for carrying out counterfactual analysis. We will begin with a general discussion of counterfactuals and of alternate possibilities, arguing, on the basis of philosophical work on modal logic and possible worlds semantics, that counterfactual analysis explores contingent properties of phenomena in different worlds. For a given phenomenon to exist across worlds, it has an essence; the latter can be captured by a set of constitutive relations, something akin to a recipe for how the phenomenon can be put together. Constitutive relations, in turn, can be expressed as a set of functions which, when calculated for the possible world values of particular arguments, generate the contingent properties of the phenomena in those worlds.

Following this first, abstract, discussion, we will turn in the second section to two examples which illustrate how our suggested methodology works in practice. Both examples are drawn from research of ours concerned with United States policy making during the Vietnam War. The historical question we are interested in is when the U.S. commitment to a noncommunist South Vietnam became strong enough for American ground combat forces to have been sent to that country (as they were in July 1965). To answer this question, we focus on a specific phenomenon: namely, whether certain foreign policy recommendations can win out over others and thus become the new foreign policy. This phenomenon, which we call the “winnability” of recommendations, has an essence which can be modeled by particular constitutive relations. We then apply these relations to the contingencies of two counterfactual situations: one involving a recommendation for sending significant numbers of U.S. ground combat forces to South Vietnam in March 1965; and the other for sending such forces there in November 1961. What our analysis shows is that in the former case the recommendation would not have been winnable but that in the latter case it would have been. We then conclude the article with a brief discussion about the implications of these two “what-ifs,” particularly as regarding the more general question of whether, and if so when, the war could have been avoided.

**Methodology**

Ever since Plato, the notion of counterfactuals has given rise to intense philosophical debate. All agree that it has something to do with possibilities that, in some sense or other, are not actual; but just what this notion of possibility means has been strongly disputed. Indeed, many prominent thinkers have denied that possibilities are anything other than a particular obfuscatory way of speaking.¹ Space constraints

¹ See Rescher, 1973:180–1, for a good summary of the various positions philosophers have taken on counterfactuals. Among the best-known critiques of strong possibilist positions are those of Frege (1892), Russell (1905), and, most importantly, Quine (1948, 1951, 1952, 1960).
Counterfactuals and Possible Worlds

Although much of Kripke's work is formal, it is possible to summarize it in a nontechnical fashion.3 (The summary does—unavoidably—use Kripke's notation; but, we promise, requires no knowledge of symbolic logic.) Kripke began by defining a model structure as an ordered triple \((G, K, R)\), where \(K\) is a set, \(R\) a relation on \(K\), and \(G\) an element of \(K\). The notation for this last point is \(G \in K\). Intuitively, we can think of \(K\) as the set of all possible worlds; this set includes the actual world \(G\). If \(H_1\) and \(H_2\) are two worlds, \(H_1 R H_2\) means that \(H_2\) is possible relative to \(H_1\), i.e., that every proposition true in \(H_2\) is possible in \(H_1\).4 For this model structure, a model assigns to each propositional variable \(P\) (i.e., a claim about some feature of the world) a truth value \(T\) or \(F\) (i.e., true or false) in each world \(H \in K\). Note that a model, in Kripke’s formulation, gives us a semantics, i.e., it permits us to denote possibilities and distinguish them from each other. Notationally, we will say that a model \(\phi\) on a model structure is a binary function \(\phi(P, H)\) whose range (the different values that the function can have as “output”) is the set \(\{T, F\}\), where \(P\) varies over propositional variables and \(H\) varies over elements of \(K\) (i.e., particular worlds).

Finally, we will say that the proposition \(P\) is necessarily true in world \(H\) notionally, \(\phi(P, H)\) — if and only if \(P\) is true in all worlds \(H\) possible relative to \(H\). The idea here is that both true and necessarily true propositions are world-specific, with the latter being applicable not to all worlds but to all worlds possible relative to a given one.5

Kripke then introduced quantifiers by associating with each world a domain of individuals, namely, the individuals who exist in that world.6 Notationally, a quantificational model structure is a model structure \((G, K, R)\) together with a function \(\Psi\) which assigns to each \(H \in K\) a set \(\Psi(H)\) called the domain (the different values that can serve as the function’s “input”) of \(H\). We can interpret \(\Psi(H)\) as the set of all individuals existing in world \(H\). Clearly, \(\Psi(H)\) does not need to be the same for different \(H\), just as in worlds other than the actual one, some currently existing individuals may be absent and others, not currently existing, be present. What we would now like is a means of making truth claims about certain individuals in various \(\Psi(H)\), that is, about certain individuals in various possible worlds. Such truth claims will concern predicates, that is, characteristics of individuals. Monadic predicates pertain to individuals considered in isolation (e.g., the characteristic of being

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3 See Bradley and Swartz, 1979: ch. 1, for a good discussion of modality. For a nontechnical overview of semantics for various modal systems see Hintikka, 1963. Note that the semantics in these systems depends on a Tarskian notion of truth.

4 A technical note: \(R\) is actually a reflexive relation, since, per the argument about \(H_1\) and \(H_2\), every world \(H\) is possible relative to itself (given that every proposition true in \(H\) is possible in \(H\)). We will discuss below the question of how to interpret the relation \(R\).

5 In philosophical terms, this notion of necessity is a metaphysical one, not a logical one. Notice that the interpretation of possibilities as possible worlds is an old one, going back to Leibniz.

6 Actually, the term “individual” is a convenience: we need not restrict ourselves to human beings. As we will discuss below, possible worlds can be populated by animals, vegetables, minerals—and even other entities, such as nation-states.
red-haired, of being a democracy, etc.); dyadic predicates pertain to pairs of individuals (e.g., being in love, being at war, etc.), and so forth. We then can say that in each world a given n-adic (monadic, dyadic, triadic, etc.) predicate letter determines both a particular set of ordered n-tuples\(^7\) (individuals, pairs, triads, etc.) of which it can be said that the predicate is true as well as another particular set of ordered n-tuples of which it can be said that the predicate is false; each such set in the first (true) case is the extension (to borrow an old philosophical term) of the given predicate in that world. Again, we can see how Kripke’s semantics enable us to ask questions about the truth values of certain characteristics of individuals (phenomena) present in certain possible worlds, but not in the actual one. Notationally, we will say that a quantificational model \(\phi\) on a quantificational model structure is a binary function \(\phi(P^n, H)\), where the first variable ranges over n-adic predicate letters and \(H\) ranges over \(K\).\(^8\) If \(n = 0\), then the predicate letter is a proposition and, as per the above discussion, the range of \(\phi(P^n, H)\) is the set \(\{T, F\}\). If \(n \geq 1\), then the predicate letter is a predicate (a monadic predicate if \(n = 1\), a dyadic predicate if \(n = 2\), etc.) and the range of \(\phi(P^n, H)\) is the extension of that predicate in \(H\), that is, the set of objects for which the predicate is true. Thus, on Kripke’s semantics, counterfactual analysis consists of determining the extension (or lack thereof) of various predicates in a possible world.

To see the implications of this approach, consider now the model structure \((G, K, R)\), where \(K\) consists of only two nonidentical worlds, \(G\) and \(H\), and \(R\) is such that both \(G\) and \(H\) are possible relative to each other.\(^9\) We define \(\Psi(G) = \{a\}\) and \(\Psi(H) = \{a, b\}\), where \(a\) and \(b\) are distinct (this means that \(G\) is inhabited by a single individual \(a\) and \(H\) by only two individuals, \(a\) and \(b\)); we further define, for a monadic predicate letter \(P\), a model \(\phi\) in which \(\phi(P, G) = \{a\}\) and \(\phi(P, H) = \{a\}\). Then, for some individual \(x\), we can deduce that \(P\) is necessarily true—notationally, \(\exists!P(x)\) in world \(G\) when \(x\) is assigned the identity of individual \(a\); this is so (given the definition of necessity, above) because \(P(x)\) is true in both \(G\) and \(H\) under this assignment. This latter statement, however, is tantamount to saying that \(a\) falls under the extension of \(P\) in \(H\) and in \(G\), that is, in all possible worlds of the two-world set \(K\). Thus, the intuitive interpretation of Kripke’s semantics assumes that a given individual can exist in different possible worlds. This in turn means, via the implications of using quantified modal logic, that individuals or other phenomena have both necessary qualities, existing across all possible worlds, and contingent qualities, existing in only some possible worlds (Linsky, 1969:98). In effect, a commitment to quantified modality implies some type of essentialism (Quine, 1952:149). We will return to this issue in a moment; before doing so, several implications of Kripke’s semantics should be noted.

As we have seen, the general idea is that one begins by specifying a set of individuals or other phenomena defined essentially, each element of this set also associated in a particular world with certain contingent properties. If one then stipulates a different set of contingent properties for those individuals or phenomena than is (or was) actually the case, one has specified a possible, but non-actual,
Consider now the implications of this approach. First, the actual world is not synonymous with the totality of all entities that currently exist; rather, one should speak of the actual world as the actual state of affairs of certain entities. For example, in the actual world of international relations, only certain physical entities (e.g., rivers, tanks) are part of its domain of individuals. It follows, second, that actual worlds are stipulated: usually verbally, but perhaps also, as Dr. Johnson did in his rejoinder to Bishop Berkeley, by kicking or other means of focusing attention on particular entities. Third, possible worlds also pertain to the particular set of individuals and phenomena under examination: “[W]e cannot describe a complete counterfactual course of events and have no need to do so” (Kripke, 1972:18). It then follows, fourth, that possible worlds are stipulated, not discovered or (as the counterpart theory we discuss below has it) created every time we do something and hence fail to do something else. As Kripke put it:

A possible world isn’t a distant country that we are coming across, or viewing through a telescope. Generally speaking, another possible world is too far away. Even if we travel faster than light, we won’t get to it. A possible world is given by the descriptive conditions we associate with it. What do we mean when we say “In some other possible world I would not have given this lecture today?” We just imagine the situation where I didn’t decide to give this lecture or decided to give it on some other day. (Kripke, 1972:44; emphasis in original)

Fifth, notice that the means of stipulating possible worlds can vary considerably. One might do so by stipulating only a single contingent property, for a single entity, different from the case in the actual world (cf. Loux, 1979b; Lycan, 1971; Plantinga, 1973, 1976). Alternately, one might do so by recombining contingent properties (cf. Armstrong, 1989; Cresswell, 1972) assumed to be distributed in a certain fashion at present.

Essences and the Exploration of Possibilities

As we have seen, Kripke’s approach to counterfactuals requires us to come up with a satisfactory notion of essences, such that individuals and phenomena can be the

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10 Note that as long as there is at least one entity in common in two worlds, the worlds are possible relative to each other. This notion of relative possibility should not be confused with the closeness or similarity of worlds to each other; it should also not be thought of as the probability that a given world could become another world. We will return to these issues below; but it is vital to keep in mind that for Kripke, the relation of worlds to each other is a matter of stipulation.

11 If, for example, we wish to study particle physics or international relations, the actual world we stipulate is unlikely to contain tigers. Were someone to complain, after reading a paper on quarks or economic sanctions, that the authors had ignored tigers, the correct response would be, not simply that the authors were not interested in studying tigers, but that tigers were irrelevant to the worlds of particle physics and international relations. For a more radical discussion of this point see Jubien, 1993.

12 It follows, then, that even as regards natural kinds such as rocks or trees, the contents of actual worlds are socially and discursively constructed, if only because one uses natural language or other socially defined means to stipulate them. Conversely, note that as regards social phenomena (e.g., wars, governments), our approach treats them essentially, an approach at odds with the typical understanding of social constructivism. We will discuss this question below: to anticipate slightly, our argument is that there is nothing preventing socially and discursively constructed phenomena from having the same essence across a set of worlds; and hence that it is perfectly reasonable to be both an essentialist and a social constructivist.

13 This may involve stipulating individuals as holding different beliefs; cf. Kripke, 1979; Stalnaker, 1976. Note that the overlap of possible worlds with each other, and with the actual world, is determined by criteria pertaining to characteristics of the entities shared by the worlds (cf. Stalnaker, 1968, 1984; Goodman, 1985:pt. 3). As we will discuss below, if one ignores causal relations between entities, one can say only that worlds are or are not comparable.
same across all the possible worlds one is considering. We here focus on two such propositions. The first revolves around notions of clusters and counterparts; the second, which we think preferable, is connected with the notion of rigid designation.

Counterpart theory is closely associated with work done by Lewis (1968, 1970, 1971, 1976, 1978). He argued that individuals and phenomena have counterparts in different worlds, only one of which is actual. An individual’s essence is thus world-specific, consisting of a cluster of phenomena; if one modifies that cluster (even if the modification is minor), one has then specified a counterpart of the individual:

Your counterparts resemble you closely in content and context in important respects. They resemble you more closely than do the other things in their worlds. But they are not really you. For each of them is in his own world, and only you are here in the actual world. Indeed we might say, speaking casually, that your counterparts are you in other worlds, that they and you are the same; but this sameness is no more a literal identity than the sameness between you today and you tomorrow. It would be better to say that your counterparts are men you would have been, had the world been otherwise. (Lewis, 1968:28; emphasis in original)

As this passage makes clear, Lewis would say that other worlds parallel the actual one more closely or less closely, depending on how much one’s counterparts resemble one. That is, there is an actual world in which someone puts on a brown sweater, a non-actual world in which she puts on a blue sweater, another non-actual one in which she puts on a thick jacket, another in which she decides to stay in bed, and so forth. Worlds never “touch” or “branch” off from one another; instead, they are located at a variable distance from the actual one (Lewis, 1979, 1986b, 1986c). One can then specify relevant criteria (e.g., colors, if one is comparing possible paintings) and use them as weights to compute a similarity “distance” indicating just how far worlds are from each other (Lewis, 1973:50–2).

Lewis’s arguments may seem bizarre, but in fact, they are quite practical. The problem with Lewis’s position is not its apparent disregard of Occam’s Razor but its overly cautious view of identity. As Kripke (1971, 1972) has argued, Lewis’s conception of identity is that of a cluster of qualities: a person has a certain appearance, certain thoughts, desires, and so forth. On a strict reading of Lewis, if every action one engages in leads to the creation of parallel worlds in which one’s counterpart took alternative actions, then one’s identity is a hodgepodge of an enormous number of factors, including the fact of having put on, say, a brown sweater rather than a blue one.

Even on a looser reading of the cluster theory of identity in which no one quality is necessary (e.g., Searle, 1958), problems arise. Consider, for example, the cluster of qualities that would define Richard Nixon: 5 o’clock shadow, Checkers, China, and so forth. Kripke pointed out (1972:40–9) that we can certainly imagine Nixon having done things other than what he did (e.g., not going to China) or having had other experiences (e.g., losing the 1968 election), or even having died several decades earlier than was actually the case. It seems as if Lewis would have to say that the individual we are imagining in these cases is not Nixon, but a counterpart of
Nixon; but then, if Nixon prior to certain of his life experiences was the same Nixon as after those experiences, one begins flirting with notions of determinism and predestination. By the same token, if Nixon is defined as a particular cluster of qualities, then someone else who happened to have the same qualities would in fact be Nixon. Indeed, if we posit a world in which Nixon did not exist (or, in Lewis's terms, we say that Nixon had no counterpart), then no one else who had the same cluster of qualities could have lived in that world.

It is to avoid these problems that Kripke proposed his rigid designator argument. It hinges on a distinction between fixing a reference and giving a synonym. Naming, Kripke argued, involves the former activity, not (except in minor instances) the latter. Names refer to persons regardless of their qualities; this is what permits us to ask what-if questions about those persons. It follows, then, that names rigidly designate the same person across all possible worlds. This implies, in turn, that persons thus designated have an essence which is physiological, not social: it comes from their genetic identity, not what happened to them or what they thought, or with whom they interacted. Such a notion of essence is clearly minimal and Kripke would not say that it coincides with someone’s psychological or social identity. However, for all the minimalism of the physiological view, it has the considerable advantage over the counterpart and cluster approaches of permitting us to ask about major alternate possibilities: what if Nixon had died at an early age (we posed this above), or never gone into politics, or become a Democrat?

Kripke did not claim that only human beings have essences. He argued (1972:112–42) that natural kinds also have essences: in the case of gold, its atomic number; in the case of tigers, their species identification. Putnam (1962, 1970, 1973a, 1973b, 1975b) has made similar arguments: a tiger, for example, is not a cluster of qualities (feline, striped, and so forth) but a member of a species; more controversially, a pencil is not alive (even if there were animals who looked and wrote like pencils). Putnam accordingly argued (1975b:247–52) for the importance of stereotypes: not as clusters of qualities but as ostensive means of fixing a reference and/or communicating that reference to others (this is related to Kripke’s argument about names of persons or natural kinds referring through an initial “baptism” and then being communicated to others in a shorthand fashion; cf. Evans, 1973, for refinements).

Thus, at least for persons and natural kinds, the rigid designator approach permits us to distinguish essential properties (e.g., genetic endowment; atomic number) of these sorts of entities from contingent properties (e.g., being a Republican; having the color yellow), thereby permitting us to identify such entities across various possible worlds. As per the preceding discussion, counterfactual analysis would thus involve making truth claims about the contingent properties of such

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17 The alternative would be for Lewis to pick out certain elements in the cluster as the really essential ones in defining Nixon. However, Lewis provides no hint of an argument along those lines, and such a position is at odds with his counterpart argument. Moreover, as the rather pointed phrase “really essential” at the beginning of this note indicates, such an alternative would be tantamount to specifying essences within essences, which simply pushes the problem to another level.

18 A final, minor objection: if Nixon had a whole series of counterparts, why would he have had any emotions at all about their actions? After he was impeached, ought he to have envied the counterpart who burned the tapes and stayed in office? Or ought he to have mourned for the counterpart who died of phlebitis? How could Lewis even begin to specify which qualities are most important for Nixon’s emotions?

19 See Kripke, 1977:9–12, for a discussion of possible exceptions; see also Donnellan, 1979, Schiffer, 1979, and Brody, 1979, for commentaries on Kripke’s position. More generally, see Dummett, 1973, for a critique of Kripke and an attempted salvaging of Frege’s position on naming.

20 An interesting corollary of his argument is that, since essences such as atomic number and species identification are discovered scientifically, necessary truths can thus be determined a posteriori.
entities (whose essences remain constant) in particular possible worlds. We will address below the question of how truth claims of this sort can be made; first, though, we need to address a series of issues dealing with social phenomena.

The distinctive feature of the rigid designator approach is that essences are not a commonly occurring cluster of surface features but a particular arrangement of components by dint of which given phenomena are those phenomena and not others. For instance, it is because a substance is made up of atoms each of which has 79 electrons orbiting 79 protons that the substance is gold; by the same token, it is because an individual had a particular arrangement of genetic material that the person was Nixon and not someone else. In effect, to use a not quite accurate temporal metaphor, we can think of essences as giving a recipe by which certain phenomena are constituted. This reasoning can be extended to social phenomena. Consider, for example, the phenomenon of a "client state" in international relations. One might discover that a client state is made up of several components: (1) a regime whose (2) performance is overseen by (3) a foreign policy bureaucracy of another state. The overseeing relation might turn out to be expressed by a dichotomous if-then relation, such that if the regime was succeeding in a given task, it would be allowed to continue; but if the regime was assessed as failing in a given task, then the bureaucracy would begin to worry about taking over the task from the regime. To give a second example of social phenomena, our research indicates that in high-level U.S. foreign policy making, policy recommendations have a particular essence. They are made up of a series of statements, including: (1) that a situation is characterized by one or more problems; (2) that policy henceforth should be characterized by the pursuit of a new proximate goal which (3) will aim at solving the problems; and that that goal should be pursued by means of (4) particular day-to-day missions (e.g., bombing; putting forward a new negotiating position) which in turn should be executed by particular "tools" (e.g., the Air Force; Canadian diplomats). We have found that relation (3) has a particular linguistic form: the goal in (2) is the negation of the problem in (1). Hence, the Kripke and Putnam approach seems applicable to social phenomena as well as biological individuals and natural kinds. Whatever the phenomenon, it has an essence which is a particular arrangement of certain components. Because such arrangements are relations (between components) which constitute phenomena as such (e.g., as gold rather than lead; as Nixon rather than Humphrey; as a client state rather than a great power; as a recommendation rather than a decision), we call these "constitutive relations." Viewed in this way, essences become something quite concrete, rather than remaining as an abstract philosophical term. Our next task will then be how to specify contingent properties of phenomena so that we will be able to make truth claims about them.

Before proceeding to this task, though, several implications of the above argument should be brought out. First, it must be kept in mind that claims about constitutive relations are both empirical and theoretical in nature. They are empiri-
cal because they pertain to objects which exist in the actual world and which may exist in possible worlds; they are theoretical because they explain how particular components are connected to each other. For example, by identifying the essence of gold with its atomic number, we are making the empirical claim that every sample of gold we may choose to analyze will have the same atomic number. We are also claiming that in the case of gold (and, of course, of all other elements), electrons orbit protons. Note that the essence of gold was a discovery, based on research and requiring the construction and validation of a sophisticated theory. Similarly, the above claim about recommendations is both an empirical finding, based on extensive research, and a theoretical statement that describes how particular components are related to each other. Simply to sit in an armchair and posit a phenomenon as having an essence does not mean that the claim is correct, as witness the furious social science debates over particular armchair definitions. It may well be the case that phenomena originally clumped together as all being of the same sort will be revealed, after empirical work, to be several quite different phenomena, each with its own essence and sharing only contingent properties. This is another way of saying that claims about essences can turn out to be incorrect.

Second, note that although biological individuals and natural kinds differ from social phenomena, both types of entities can be said to have essences which take the form of constitutive relations. Of course the essences of social phenomena are due to human actions, which is not the case with the essences of rocks or trees, for example; but this should not be taken as indicating a contradiction between essentialism and what is often called social or discursive constructivism. We claim, for example, that U.S. foreign policy recommendations are constructed by means of words. Now, there certainly is no immanent necessity for only certain verbal components (goals, missions, etc.) to have been connected in a particular way such that the entire group of words is labeled a recommendation: we can imagine that in U.S. foreign policy making, recommendations should also include estimates of efficiency or scenarios covering likely reactions by adversaries. However, this is not what we find. In all instances of U.S. foreign policy making which we have studied, phenomena understood by policy makers as recommendations are characterized only by the constitutive relations we have discussed above; whenever groups of statements fail to include all of the components ordered in the way we have specified, the statements are not grasped by policy makers as recommendations. Hence, phenomena can be constructed socially and still be recognized as having essences across various worlds. If, for example, we think that phenomena such as a greeting or a civil war are socially constructed (and we do), we can still claim that in all worlds

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26 For example, Singer and Small (1972:381) have defined interstate war as ”involving at least one member of [the] interstate system on each side of the war, resulting in a total of 1,000 or more battle deaths.” As Duvall (1976:78–9) has pointed out, this definition is ”hazardous” since phenomena that are reasonably thought of as wars would change status from non-war to war the moment the 1,000th person is killed. A better definition of war would start from an examination of a series of phenomena commonly considered wars to see what (if anything) they, or a subset of them, have in common. It may be that this will lead to a claim that guerrilla wars, say, are essentially characterized by certain motivations, certain forms of activity, and so forth.

27 Thus, certain recommendations include cost-benefit analyses, or estimates of adversarial reactions, or positive analogies to the course of action being advocated. None of these characteristics, however, are true of more than a fraction of the recommendations we have studied, whereas the components we have identified as essential are present in every case. We freely admit that the empirical analysis we engaged in cast doubt both on our own prior common sense about policy making and on various theoretical claims in the foreign policy literature that had earlier seemed reasonable to us.

28 Typical signs that a set of statements is understood as a recommendation include its being criticized by other policy makers, the fact that it is either accepted (thereby becoming the new policy) or rejected at some point, and, more often than not, that it is labeled with the word ”recommendation.”
where they exist—that is, all worlds in which people greet each other or wage civil wars—they have the same essence.29

Thus far, we have been talking about essences. These, however, are only a means to an end in counterfactual analysis, the point being to make truth claims about contingent properties of phenomena in different possible worlds. It would clearly be helpful if contingent properties were linked in some way to essential ones, so that we could use the latter to tell us something about the former. Such is in fact the case. Consider the case of gold. Its essence (in pure form) consists in a particular connective relationship between its 79 protons and its 79 electrons: as the gold atoms have weakly bound outermost electrons, the metal has a certain characteristic conductivity, luster, and ductility so that gold normally appears as yellow, shiny, and so forth. These latter properties are precisely the contingent ones in which we are now interested: they will be manifested under certain circumstances (read: certain possible worlds) but not others. If, for instance, we stipulate that the temperature in a given possible world is under 1000° Celsius, then gold will have the contingent property of being solid. Similarly, we can say that the essence of tigers as animals with a particular sequence of DNA implies that tigers need oxygen to live and that they lack the physiological equipment (teeth, enzymes) for digesting plants. If the environment of a given tiger is then stipulated to be composed only of plants, or to dwindle in oxygen over time, the tiger in question will not survive.

We can apply this same reasoning to social phenomena. If, as per our earlier suggestion, we discover that client states have as their essence an overseeing relation under which indigenous regimes will be permitted to continue only if they succeed in certain tasks, one could then generate contingent properties of the client state by stipulating the success or failure of the regime. For example, by stipulating failures of various sorts, one might deduce that the client state would experience a military intervention by the overseer, or perhaps a coup d’état to replace the regime with another one. By the same token, the constitutive relations comprising the essence of U.S. foreign policy recommendations can be used to generate contingent properties of such recommendations. For example, if a particular recommendation contains as one of its components the contingent statement that current policy toward an adversary is failing because the adversary does not consider U.S. threats credible, then we can deduce that the recommendation will contain as another of its components the contingent statement that the new proximate goal of policy toward the adversary should be to make U.S. threats credible.

This relationship between essential properties and contingent properties can be expressed in a simple form, using a branch of mathematics known as the lambda calculus.30 We can say that constitutive relations can be represented as functions which relate certain variables to other variables. The variables are, in effect, the components of the phenomenon in question and the function is the way in which they are ordered. One can say that contingent properties of a phenomenon can be represented as values of the variables; by “binding” the function’s arguments (loosely, the right-hand side of the function) to certain values and calculating the resulting value of the function (loosely, the left-hand side of the function), one can

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29 There is, of course, no reason why the constitutive relations that characterize U.S. foreign policy recommendations should also be applicable for other kinds of policy making: say, U.S. domestic policy making, or French foreign policy making. The question is an empirical one and, without having studied these other kinds of policy making, we can only speculate on what the answer would be. It may also turn out to be the case that we are mistaken and that someone presents additional instances of phenomena recognized as U.S. foreign policy making, which suggests we need to revise our hypothesis about the essence of those phenomena. For a recent example of how, using a “grounded theory” methodology, we have been able to abduce essences of U.S. foreign policy making phenomena see Majeski and Sylven, 1990; a more general discussion of this methodology is in Sylvan, Majeski, and Miliken, 1991.

30 For a detailed discussion of the lambda calculus and the way it can be linked to constitutive relations, both generally and in political science, see Majeski and Sylven, 1995.
thus deduce that certain contingent properties of a phenomenon (i.e., particular values of the function) will be present when other contingent properties (i.e., particular values of the function’s arguments) are present. Hence, if one stipulates certain contingent properties of a phenomenon, one can, using the constitutive relations that express the phenomenon’s essence, generate other contingent properties of the phenomenon. But since, as we saw above, possible worlds are constructed by stipulating particular instances—i.e., certain contingent properties—of various phenomena, the calculation of the value of the constitutive relations expressing the essence of those phenomena is precisely the means of generating counterfactual truth claims about those worlds.

Thus, to summarize, our proposal is that counterfactual possibilities be explored by a multi-step procedure. First, one isolates a given phenomenon or set of phenomena. Second, one discovers, via research on the actual world, the constitutive relations which express the essence of the phenomena. Third, one constructs one or more possible worlds by stipulating one or more sets of contingent properties for the phenomena. Fourth, one binds the arguments of the constitutive relations of the phenomena to the values stipulated in step three. Fifth, one calculates the functions for the particular bindings in step four, thereby generating other contingent properties for the phenomena under investigation.

Notice that our proposal for comparing possible worlds differs considerably from the proposals one often finds in political science (e.g., Barry, 1980; Cederman, 1996; Elster, 1978, 1980; Fearon, 1991, 1996; Tetlock and Belkin, 1996a; Woodruff and Skyrms, 1994). In our view, the latter face certain practical difficulties which, it appears, our approach is able to avoid. First and most importantly, the above proposals usually call for making truth claims about causal relations, albeit with a rather loose notion of causality.31 The problem, as almost every scholar is aware, is that simple causal relations among political phenomena are scarce; but to bring in all the relevant causal relations implies the specification of a large and complex system which, probabilistically, is characteristic only of the actual world and not of any possible worlds. Strictly speaking, if one really believes that political science research revolves only around the exploration of highly complex causal systems, then one cannot advocate the undertaking of even limited counterfactual analysis. By contrast, our proposal is to explore constitutive relations—i.e., how phenomena are composed as such—bracketing the causes and consequences of the phenomena we analyze.32 As the example in the next section shows, this bracketing does not mean that we cannot explore historical counterfactuals.

Second, and in line with their focus on causality, most political science proposals for counterfactual research have been greatly concerned with the likelihood of certain possibility-creating conditions.33 The standard statement of this comes from Elster who, discussing the counterfactual of a non-railroad economy in nineteenth-century America, writes that “we can hardly ask whether the internal combustion engine would have been invented before it actually was, for this would require a

31 By von Wright’s (1971, 1974) standards, almost none of the asserted causal claims in political science is genuinely causal. See Sylvan and Majeski, 1985, for a discussion. Of course, whether social interactions ought best to be understood by means of causal notions is another problem.

32 It is important not to conflate our focus on constitutive relations with the particular phenomena we are studying. For example, we pointed out above that recommendations contain as one of their essential components a statement about the hoped-for consequences of pursuing a new proximate goal (i.e., the solving of a current problem). Such statements are loosely causal. Our interest in these sorts of statements, though, has nothing whatever to do with the validity of their causal assertions (we would argue, in fact, that the vast majority of these assertions about Vietnam, communism, and the like were demonstrably false), but rather, qua recommendations, with how those statements are linked to other statements (about missions, current problems, and so forth).

33 Certain authors (e.g., Cederman, 1996; Fearon, 1991) treat this problem as stemming from Goodman’s (1947:15–6) criterion of “cotenability” for antecedent conditions.
theory of technical change that might prevent the non-railroad assumption itself from being meaningful” (1978:185). Note that this concern assumes we can know in advance sufficiently well what various causal pathways look like that we can rule out certain antecedents as being of vanishingly low probability (e.g., as Hawthorn, 1991:158, does). The problem is that even if we had this knowledge, it would not help us in establishing a criterion by which certain antecedents can be ruled out as too unlikely to be explored. Given that many historical events are singular, i.e., having occurred only once, one can only assess some of them as more likely than others if one attaches a lengthy and fairly stringent set of conditions to them (cf. Gould, 1989:ch. 5). But why attach certain conditions and not others? None of the various suggestions put forward by Tetlock and Belkin (1996a), for instance, permits this question to be answered.34

By contrast, our proposal for exploring counterfactuals sidesteps this entire problem via its focus on essential and contingent properties. Our concern is not with causal relations, by dint of which one could assess certain sequences as likely or unlikely, but with constitutive relations, by dint of which one can assess whether certain contingent properties of a given phenomenon can co-occur. Indeed, the question of whether certain antecedent conditions are causally likely has no bearing on the knowledge claims one can make about whether certain contingent properties of a phenomenon will be present in the possible world constructed by stipulating other contingent properties (i.e., antecedent conditions) of that same phenomenon. For example, in the next section, we will discuss the constitutive relations which express the essence of “winnable” foreign policy recommendations. We then construct a possible world by stipulating the replacement of an actual recommendation by a non-actual one; we do this by stipulating a particular content—i.e., a particular set of contingent properties—for the latter. At that point, we can calculate the function which expresses the constitutive relations of winnability, thereby enabling us to determine an additional contingent property—the value of that function (in this case, “yes” or “no”)—for the non-actual recommendation. In this way, we can figure out, for a counterfactual recommendation, whether or not it would have been winnable.

Now, one could of course object that certain of our stipulated recommendations were unlikely to have been put forward. By the same token, one could claim that if a certain recommendation had been put forward, other, competing, recommendations would in turn have been advanced. Such arguments may well be true (provided, as we discussed above, that one can come up with a justification for attaching certain likelihood-determining conditions and not others), but they have no bearing on whether our analysis is right or wrong. They pertain not to the truth claims we make about the counterfactual recommendations but are about whether we should have considered those counterfactuals rather than others. And, in this regard, since we are not asking likelihood-related questions within our analysis of counterfactual, or for that matter, actual, situations, there is no more reason to privilege likelihood as

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34 For example, appealing to a “minimal-rewrite rule,” as Tetlock and Belkin do (1996a:23–5), tells us nothing about what counterfactual antecedents do and do not constitute “rewrites.” Why, for example, do Lebow and Stein (1996) characterize a spring 1962 warning by Kennedy to Khrushchev about missiles in Cuba as less likely than a public announcement by Khrushchev that he was going to deploy missiles? In the former case, they adduce Kennedy’s knowledge and political incentives to dismiss a spring warning as unlikely; but in the latter case, they fail to adduce the various reasons (mentioned on p. 135) why Khrushchev was strongly disposed toward secret deployment. More generally, we would observe that Lebow and Stein’s insistence on likelihood vitiates their analysis by leading them to ignore counterfactuals that shed light on why the crisis was even a crisis (e.g., what if Kennedy had qualified the missiles as defensive and therefore as not a threat?) in the first place (cf. Thorson and Sylvan, 1982; Sylvan and Thorson, 1992).
a criterion of choice in stipulating counterfactuals than policy relevance, theoretical elegance, or other criteria commonly advanced in the social sciences.35

A corollary of the above argument should be noted. Typically, political science proposals for counterfactual research are concerned with making sure that counterfactual worlds are not too distant from the actual world. The argument that antecedent conditions should be likely relative to the actual world is one expression of this concern; another is the argument that antecedents must be linked to consequents via connections that are consistent with theoretical or statistical generalizations about the actual world (Tetlock and Belkin, 1996a:18).36 As with the likelihood point above, this concern immediately runs up against the problem of how to determine the relevant theoretical or statistical generalizations.

Our proposal, however, permits us to avoid this problem. Recall that we stipulate both actual and possible worlds by dint of specifying the objects they contain and certain of the contingent properties of those objects. Recall further that objects can only exist across different worlds because they have an essence which is the same for all possible worlds. Hence, every time that worlds share one or more objects, they share phenomena (i.e., those objects) whose constitutive relations are identical. Since our proposal is to use those constitutive relations to generate particular contingent properties for various phenomena (given that we have stipulated other contingent properties) and not to worry about causal or other relations between phenomena, the question of whether the worlds are close enough to each other is obviated. In our approach, worlds are neither close to each other nor far apart; instead, they are either comparable for given phenomena (that is, if the phenomena are stipulated to be present in each of the worlds one wishes to explore) or not comparable (that is, if the phenomena are not stipulated to be present in each of those different worlds). Since we presume that no one cares about stipulating counterfactual worlds which share no objects with the actual world, any counterfactual world analyzed by our approach will of necessity be comparable with the actual one.

**Military Intervention Under Counterfactual Situations**

In this section, we illustrate how our suggested methodology works by means of studying two counterfactual situations. Both of these stem from research we have done on United States foreign policy making with respect to Vietnam from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s.37 The general historical questions we are interested in have to do with why the U.S. went to war in Vietnam and when and how that war could have been avoided. In this article, we focus on the particular issue of the point at which the U.S. commitment to a noncommunist South Vietnam became strong enough for American ground combat forces to have been sent to that country. In this regard, it will be recalled that the U.S. decision to intervene in this fashion was made in July 1965; prior to that, recommendations to commit modest numbers of

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35 Barry (1980) seems to see this point, but fails to take it as far as he should. The issue is not whether we can stipulate unlikely possible worlds, but why there should be a criterion of likelihood at all. (Keep in mind the difference between unlikely and impossible.)

36 In a variant of this position, Fearon (1996:66) argues for “a proximity criterion” by which one should consider “only thought experiments in which the hypothetical antecedent and consequent are close together in time and are separated by a small number of causal steps.” Note, incidentally, that this leads Fearon to advise eschewing the analysis of what he calls “counterfactuals that are, unfortunately, of great interest” (p. 66) for which the proximity criterion is violated.

37 We recently have extended our analysis of U.S. foreign policy making to cover a long series of overt and covert interventions, ranging from the late 1940s to the middle 1990s and covering countries around the world (Majeski and Sylvan, 1996). In general, we find that the claims we have developed about the essence of U.S. foreign policy making as regards Vietnam are applicable to the other intervention cases for this period of almost fifty years.
U.S. combat forces to Vietnam were considered but rejected on several occasions. Our counterfactual analysis deals with two of those occasions, March 1965 and November 1961, and explores whether recommendations to commit larger numbers of ground combat forces would have been accepted.\textsuperscript{38} To carry out this analysis, as discussed above, we will work with the constitutive relations that express the essence of a particular policy-making phenomenon: the “winnability” of recommendations. We will discuss this phenomenon below; first, though, a brief historical review is in order.

In the early fall of 1961, the Kennedy administration was faced with a situation whereby a string of policies implemented during the course of the year had failed to arrest a deteriorating situation in South Vietnam. President Kennedy sent one of his top advisers, General Maxwell Taylor, along with the NSC deputy adviser Walt Rostow, to visit South Vietnam to consider the feasibility of various forms of U.S. military intervention and alternatives to it that would help achieve U.S. goals. Taylor found that the Saigon regime and its army (ARVN) were incapable of taking the war to the enemy and that there was a massive morale problem. He proposed a two part program: that 8–10,000 U.S. combat troops be sent to restore confidence; and that the government and the military there be encadred by American advisers to make them more effective.

High-level foreign policy makers in Washington reacted to Taylor’s recommendations in two ways. One group (Secretary of Defense McNamara, Secretary of State Rusk, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Lemnitzer) approved of the encadrement plan but argued strongly that “major units of U.S. forces” should not be introduced into South Vietnam unless U.S. officials were willing to “commit the U.S. to the clear objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam to Communism and [to] support this commitment by the necessary military actions.”\textsuperscript{39} The group was also opposed to sending combat troops to the Mekong Delta for flood relief (as Taylor had recommended) but advocated placing U.S. forces not far to the south of the 17th parallel so that South Vietnamese forces could be relieved and an overt invasion countered.\textsuperscript{40} A second group composed of country specialists, military men, and dovish political appointees believed that sending troops was dangerous. They recommended making a commitment to prevent the fall of South Vietnam to communism but not sending combat troops. The group accepted that the introduction of combat troops might be required later and recommended that plans be developed for their possible introduction; they also supported Taylor’s encadrement recommendation. This group, which came to include Kennedy, Rusk, and McNamara, won this round of policy making. A recommendation to use a higher level of military force, 8–10,000 combat troops to the delta, was rejected. However, by implementing encadrement, the United States became committed to a massive military assistance program (by 1963, nearly 20,000 military advisers).

\textsuperscript{38} For more detailed discussion of these two occasions, see Sylvan and Majeski, 1993, 1994. See also Sylvan and Majeski, 1996a, for a discussion and counterfactual analysis of another such occasion, that of spring and summer 1954, when the siege of Dien Bien Phu led U.S. policy makers to consider intervening. We deal with the related question of whether anti-intervention and de-escalatory recommendations could have been accepted on and after July 1965 in a chapter of a forthcoming monograph.

\textsuperscript{39} McNamara to Kennedy, 8 November 1961, FRUS:561. McNamara would make the same argument in 1965 regarding U.S. combat troop deployment. The McNamara to Kennedy memo and all other documentary references in this paper were, along with many other archival materials, used as the basis for elaborating our theory of the constitutive relations that comprise the essence of various phenomena connected with U.S. foreign policy making. See Sylvan, Majeski, and Milliken, 1991, for a discussion of this collection.

\textsuperscript{40} Rusk draft to Kennedy, 7 November 1961, FRUS:550-2; Rusk, McNamara, and Lemnitzer draft to Kennedy, 8 November 1961, ibid.:561-6. Neither memorandum was formally submitted to Kennedy, although he likely was informed of both.
Several years later, after months of intensive policy making, the Johnson administration finally implemented the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign on March 2, 1965. This plan of overt, sustained, and graduated bombing of North Vietnam represented a significant U.S. escalation in Vietnam for it both deepened U.S. involvement and formally internationalized the war. But, even though Rolling Thunder had only been in operation for a week, President Johnson concluded that it had not accomplished anything. Other advisers came to similar conclusions. General Harold Johnson, the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, who was ordered to Vietnam the same day as the first Rolling Thunder raid to formulate recommendations to improve the ground war there, returned in mid-March and recommended that U.S. combat forces be sent to the central highlands of South Vietnam, with an additional four-division ground force being deployed across the northern part of South Vietnam and the Laos panhandle.41

General Johnson’s predictable but nonetheless dramatic recommendation to use even higher (by U.S. standards) levels of military force drew opposition from other advisers. Some of the principal supporters of the just-implemented bombing policy, in particular Maxwell Taylor (by then Ambassador to South Vietnam) and John McNaughton, a high Pentagon official, argued against the troop deployment and in favor of additional bombing. However, faced with a persuasive argument made by others that more bombing of North Vietnam would do little to solve the problem of a deteriorating ground combat situation in South Vietnam, a new policy line, whose advocates included some of the bombing supporters, emerged. In addition to continuing the slowly ascending air attacks on North Vietnam, this group advocated a minimalist troop policy: experimenting with U.S. forces in “enclaves.”42

This bombing plus minimal troops line was successful and President Johnson approved the recommendation on April 1, 1965. As in the prior case, a recommendation to use a higher level of military force—here, sending troops to the highlands—was rejected in favor of the less escalatory enclaves strategy.

To account for why the two recommendations advocating higher levels of military force lost, we will apply a model of a theory of a particular phenomenon of U.S. foreign policy making, specifically, a model of the constitutive relations that express the essence of “winnable” recommendations. We will also use this model to address the counterfactual question of whether a recommendation calling for higher levels of military force could have won out and been implemented in these two cases. Before we can address these questions, however, we need to provide a relatively short summary of our theories of U.S. foreign policy making.

Theorizing About U.S. Foreign Policy Making

We argue that high-level U.S. foreign policy making regarding security in the post–World War II era is the province of a small, largely autonomous, normatively cohesive, and secretive group of persons. Given these characteristics, we conceive of this group as sharing a particular culture, namely, the culture of high-level policy making about security. This culture is constituted and recognized as such—and distinguished from other cultures—by dint of relations among certain distinctive features. First, it is a problem-solving culture that revolves around dealing with new and recurring problems. Policy is made about what are considered to be problems; policy making revolves around discussions about the specific nature of certain problems and how problems might plausibly be resolved. Second, it is a culture

42 Taylor to State 3120, 27 March 1965, State/P, McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, 31 March 1965, LBJ/NSF/M.
characterized by argumentation. Members of the culture are skilled at and spend a great deal of time putting together arguments in both oral and written form. In particular, high-level policy making involves a rhetoric of problem solving built up from situation descriptions. As we will discuss below, however, the “rules” of argumentation in the culture are not always those one finds in standard works on argumentation theory. A third and final characteristic of this culture is its imperial quality. Members of the culture are accustomed to running an empire, which means that the usual problems the culture must solve are those which its client states are unable to solve.

We see this problem-solving culture as engaged in three central activities: constructing recommendations, choosing among recommendations, and reopening debate. These three activities define, in effect, the way this culture operates. We have developed theories to represent the constitutive relations which express the essence of these three activities of this problem-solving culture; we have also developed formal models (using the lambda calculus) of these theories. We have discussed the theories and our modeling of them in great detail elsewhere, and our aim here is simply to provide a brief summary of them.43

First, however, a few additional aspects of our approach should be noted. We have divided bureaucratic time into policy-making phases, which can last anywhere from a few hours to several months. Recommendations are put forward as policy lines. Policy lines do not necessarily pertain to a particular bureaucratic institution or to an individual; usually, several members of the high-level foreign-policy-making culture contribute to or help construct a given line’s recommendations.44 (Indeed, we frequently see individuals changing their affiliation from one policy line to another within the span of a particular policy phase.) A phase opens when debate on a given question is reopened by a recommendation being put forward; such a recommendation evaluates current policy as having either succeeded or failed (if only partially). That reopening recommendation we call the main line; in addition, we have found that two subsidiary (competing) lines must also be put forward.45 The phase ends when one of the recommendations wins out over its competitors and is adopted, thus becoming current policy. We have also argued that at any phase in bureaucratic time, a number of policies are possible. The actual policy is thus only one among a number of possible policies. We denote the set of possible policies as the policy space. A policy space is bounded: at any given moment, there are numerous possible policies as well as numerous impossible policies. Thus, when a policy wins out and is adopted, that policy is one of a set of possible policies; in effect, the policy is one of those possibilities, actualized.

Our first theory is concerned with what constitutes a foreign policy recommendation. Such recommendations must enumerate relevant problems and provide

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43 See Majeski and Sylvan, 1990, 1992; Sylvan and Majeski, 1990. These papers also contain brief descriptions of the formal models, which are discussed in much greater detail in a forthcoming monograph.

44 Note that our portrayal of policy lines does not mention bureaucratic, careerist, or organizational interests. Quite apart from the fact that it is often difficult to specify even after the fact just which interests would be advanced or impeded by the adoption of a particular policy line, we frequently find persons advocating policies that arguably go contrary to their interests. We can make this point even stronger: it is not uncommon to find individuals highly skilled at bureaucratic politics putting forward, often with great passion, arguments which they are quite sure will lose out. (This partly explains why certain winnable arguments are not made.) In our experience, high-level policy makers are true believers with respect to policy issues, however cynical they may be about the policy process.

45 The fact that there are always three policy lines put forward in a given phase (though not all at once), namely, the main line and two subsidiary lines, may seem like sheer numerology. But there are a variety of practical (by the culture’s own rationale) reasons for it, principally the fact that the culture is argumentative (thus, a main line provokes responses), that arguments are resolved by means of agreements among members (see our discussion of winnability; this means that two lines are not enough for the phase to end), and that arguments are assessed relative to each other rather than absolutely (thus, a fourth or fifth recommendation will be assimilated to one of the three others). For a discussion of these points see Sylvan and Majeski, 1990.
solutions for those problems. In effect, there are two sorts of problems a recommendation must address: those connected with the current policy, and those that are claimed as likely to result from the adoption of some other recommendation. As we have discussed above, a recommendation must provide a policy solution packaged in terms of goal(s), tool(s), and mission(s) which directly address relevant problems.

A second theory, that about the constitutive relations that define reopening debate, is based on the premise that a decision (i.e., a policy being accepted and implemented) at the end of one recommendation phase has consequences for the kinds of policies that can be put on the table next time around. In particular, winning recommendations, with their attendant goals, tools, and missions, become current policy. The current policy also comes with a set of what we can call adequacy conditions regarding the current and desired state of affairs. To reopen debate, a main line must successfully “challenge” one or more of these conditions. When at least one of the adequacy conditions of current policy is demonstrated to be satisfied no longer, then debate is reopened. When that occurs, the current policy space collapses, since in this problem-solving culture, the task of challenging current policy and successfully reopening debate requires establishing problems that necessitate solutions and connecting these problems both to existing problems and to the claimed failure of the policy designed to solve those problems.

A third theory, bearing directly on the counterfactual issues we examine below, is concerned with the essence of winnable recommendations. During a policy-making phase, certain recommendations can win out over others. This subset of recommendations defines what, for purposes of concision, we call a region of winnability. The specific recommendation whose adoption closes a policy-making phase is one—the actual—element of the winnable subset. What is necessary for there to be a region of winnability? At a minimum, there must be agreement among the members of the culture that a particular class of policies is unacceptable at that time. Agreement on this issue is tantamount to delimiting what we can call the boundaries of the region of winnability.

In principle, there are two sorts of boundaries that can be established. Current policy can (1) be viewed as unacceptable and (various) proposed policies can (2) be viewed as unacceptable. (For euphonic reasons, we will substitute the word “fail” for “unacceptable.”) Recommendations not only must delineate a solution (i.e., a policy) to a problem but must also elaborate why other proposed policies (and usually the current one as well) are failing or would fail. This latter task is accomplished by arguing that the goals of current policy are inconsistent with the current situation and that a proposed policy will fail by referring to an analogical case where a similar policy failed. Agreement on these arguments is obtained if two or more recommendations accord on the reasons that some other policy (current or proposed) is failing, would fail, or would otherwise be unacceptable. In effect, argumentation in this

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46 It will be noted that this aspect of policy making follows standard Toulmin criteria for validity; see Toulmin, 1958, and, for a formalization, Rescher, 1977.

47 It is conceivable that current policy can be assessed as having succeeded; in this case, its continuance is argued against by a claim that the time has come to take on the next problem; to continue with the current policy would thus start to create problems. It is also conceivable that current policy can be assessed as having not yet succeeded; in this case, its continuance is argued for by reiterating (perhaps with minor modifications) the current goal as the new goal.

In both these cases, though, other proposed policies are argued against.

48 It is possible, for example, for all three recommendations to criticize the current policy, even though no two of them agree as to why the third recommendation would fail if implemented as policy. Note that while the two-line agreement criterion is a kind of majority-rule principle, it has to do with arguments, not groups or individuals. The unit of analysis here is the policy line, particularly certain of the arguments contained in that line, rather than some kind of “player” (except in an extremely loose sense of the latter). In this regard, our theory of policy making has nothing to do with notions of bureaucratic power or the aggregation of bureaucratic capabilities, since it is not uncommon to find a significant majority of the most powerful individuals or bureaucracies lined up on the losing side of an argument.

We refer here to our observation above on true believers.
culture must be nasty. Recommendations do not win out because they are cheaper, or more logical, or even closer at hand than others. Rather, success comes from knocking down other proposed policies in language shared by at least one other policy line. Hence, recommendations are winnable by dint of obtaining agreement from other recommendations as to why current and/or other proposed policies will fail. It is these agreed-upon reasons for the failure of current policy and agreed-upon reasons for the failure of proposed policies that form the boundaries of winnable recommendations. Policy lines enumerate a central or core reason why current and other proposed policies will fail; they may also list one or more non-core reasons why current and other proposed policies will fail. The boundaries of winnability are thus made up of the agreed-upon core and non-core reasons: any policy that could win must not be criticized as likely to fail for any of these reasons.

The constitutive relations that express the essence of winnable recommendations establish a set of conditions for non-winning policies. We know that the winning policy is in the region of winnability and that other actual and conceivable policies may be in that region as well. We also know that losing policies are defined as such by the agreed-upon reasons for their failure. Thus, our theory of the essence of winnable recommendations permits us to state aspects a winning policy must not contain, but not aspects it must contain. Therefore, when we address counterfactual recommendations, some can be demonstrated to be not winnable since they violate the boundary conditions. Those that do not are winnable. Whether a particular policy recommendation is or is not winnable can be determined by modeling the constitutive relations of winnability as a series of matching rules that sort through the various agreements and non-agreements among the competing policy lines on the core reasons why current policies will fail and proposed policies would fail. (Note, as per our earlier discussion of causality, that our concern here is with whether certain policy recommendations would have been winnable and not with the policy consequences stemming from one of those recommendations having won out. These latter, of course, are of great importance, but they presume a completely different methodology than that which we have elaborated in this article.)

With this brief summary, we now return to the two cases we introduced and use the model of the constitutive relations which express the essence of winnable

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49 As per our earlier argument (in the first section) about the components of recommendations, we can, of course, well imagine that arguments against other recommendations could have included claims along these lines, for example, that an alternative policy line should be rejected because it is too costly or is illogical. This, however, is simply not the case for most of the policy lines we have studied. There are many ways of criticizing another position and no one such way is true of every policy line, or even of a majority of those lines. Thus, although our prior common sense, or our prior theoretical knowledge, may lead us to assume that winnability involves positive arguments, or efficiency arguments, or other such components, the evidence fails to support such suppositions. After the fact, the criteria we have enumerated may come to seem like common sense, but that says more about our ethnographic abilities than about policy making.

50 For readers familiar with standard logics of argumentation (e.g., Toulmin, 1958; Rescher, 1977), this criterion may be disconcerting. All we can say is that the culture has its own rules of argumentation, no matter how much these may differ from “proper” rules. For example, recommendations can win out even though their advocates admit many of their opponents’ criticisms and fail to put forward any rejoinders to those criticisms. Recall that in March 1965, President Johnson and various of his advisers concluded that the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign had failed even though it had been carried out for only a week. Although, as we will discuss below, defenders of Rolling Thunder did object that it was too early to say that the policy had failed, their argument, reasonable by standard rules of disputation, was not accepted.

51 This is a conceptually straightforward process, but an algorithmically lengthy and cumbersome one which we will not go into here. A full discussion is provided in Sylvan and Majeski, 1990. Several aspects of the model presented in that discussion have subsequently undergone revision. We note here that for phases characterized by three policy lines, our model usually yields two winnable lines (or the discovery that two or more of the lines were argumentatively identical and thus that the phase cannot yet end), while also specifying which of the two is the winner in the absence of a “knock-out” condition.
recommendations to account for the outcomes described earlier.\textsuperscript{52} We then will introduce counterfactual situations by stipulating recommendations that were not in fact made, using the model to determine the winnability of these latter.\textsuperscript{53} We will begin with the case closest to the July 1965 ground troop decision and then move backward in time, looking for the earliest moment at which a recommendation along the same lines would have been winnable.

\textbf{Counterfactual History 1: Vietnam, March 1965}

General Johnson, when he recommended sending combat troops to the highlands in early March of 1965, called into question the adequacy of the current policy (overt, sustained bombing of North Vietnam) and thus reopened debate. Advocates of this main line noted that Viet Cong units in the south were larger, stronger, and in control of more of the population in the South than they had been earlier. Also, the South Vietnamese government was said to be stretched to the limit of its capabilities and thus unable to deal with the Viet Cong. The current bombing policy was described as failing already and likely to fail in the future because the bombing was not hurting North Vietnam enough yet to force them to cease support for the Viet Cong. Also, proponents of this line argued that the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) could lose to the Viet Cong before bombing could have an effect, and that the ARVN could not be built up fast enough to counter this possibility.\textsuperscript{54}

Not surprisingly, those who advocated the line of increased bombing and no troops had a different assessment of current policy. Proponents of this policy line argued that the air strikes had lifted morale, generated some stability in South Vietnam, and had begun to persuade Hanoi to leave its neighbors alone.\textsuperscript{55} In effect, current policy was just beginning to work and doing considerably more bombing would lead to success. However, proponents of the third policy line, that advocating enclaves, raised the same problem about South Vietnam as the highlands line: the Viet Cong were gaining more control of the countryside and the South Vietnamese government (GVN) could not keep pace with the Viet Cong troop buildup. Proponents of the main line (highlands) and the enclave line both agreed that the air war had not and would not adequately deal with the troop strength problem in South Vietnam and that it had not had any effect and would not have any effect for two to three months on the war in South Vietnam. These agreed-upon reasons for the failure of current policy provided two of the boundary conditions for the region of winnability. Policies that did not address troop strength weaknesses in South Vietnam were not winnable, nor were policies that relied on waiting for bombing to take effect. In this context, we argue that the core agreed-upon reason for failure of current policy concerned the inability of current policy to deal with the troop strength problems in South Vietnam.

\textsuperscript{52} Our discussion is a nontechnical walk-through of several of the model’s “runs.” As the model is written in a computer language and operates on data structures coded in a multi-layer quasi-syntax, we will not bother with technical aspects of the model here.

\textsuperscript{53} It is useful here to reiterate a point we made in the methodological section of this article. We have no way of knowing whether the counterfactuals we stipulate would have spurred other policy makers to have put forward alternative recommendations. This uncertainty, however, has no bearing whatever on the accuracy of our calculations of the winnability (yes/no) of the counterfactual recommendations we stipulate. One may, if one wishes, think of our analysis in ceteris paribus terms, but that somewhat misses the point. The “spurring” argument is tantamount to stipulating a different counterfactual situation and claiming that it is causally likely given the first counterfactual. Hence, the “spurring” argument presumes that causal criteria should be used to stipulate counterfactuals. But since our approach to counterfactuals has nothing to do with causality, there is no more reason to privilege that criterion in coming up with counterfactuals than other criteria such as policy relevance or theoretical elegance.

\textsuperscript{54} Harold Johnson to JCS and McNamara, 14 March 1965.

\textsuperscript{55} McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, 6 March 1965, LBJ/ NSF/M; Taylor to State 2941, 12 March 1965, State/P.
Advocates of the first subsidiary line (the more-bombing line) argued that increased bombing would raise morale in South Vietnam and convince Hanoi that the price it had to pay to continue supporting the Viet Cong was too high. However, proponents of the other two policy lines agreed that more bombing would not help the growing inadequacies of the South Vietnamese combat forces. They also agreed that if bombing were to have an effect on the will of North Vietnam, it would have to include bombing near areas that could bring in Chinese Communist intervention. The more-bombing line failed to help with the troop situation in the South and if pursued enough to where it might have a positive effect could lead to a wider war reminiscent of the Korean conflict. These agreed-upon reasons for the failure of the proposed more-bombing line established additional boundary conditions for the region of winnability. Policies advocating more bombing were not winnable because they failed to solve the troop problem in South Vietnam, were too escalatory, and would widen the war. We argue that among these reasons, the last was the core.

The policy line of more bombing had a number of core and non-core reasons why both the highlands’ and enclaves’ proposed policies would fail. The following reasons were attributed to both proposed policies: they would increase U.S. involvement, expose a greater number of U.S. forces, invite greater U.S. losses, and raise sensitive command questions with the GVN. Advocates of this line suggested that the highlands line would not work because of the limited absorptive capacity of the ARVN; they also argued that the enclave policy would fail because it amounted to an “inglorious static defensive” posture.56 However, advocates of the more-bombing line argued that the core reasons that both the enclave and the highlands policies would fail were because they would encourage the ARVN to slack off, thus hurting rather than helping its poor military performance and making the U.S. appear as a colonizer.

Advocates of the highlands policy line argued that the enclave-proposed policy would be less effective or perhaps fail to solve the troop strength problem in South Vietnam because far fewer ARVN troops would be relieved by sending U.S. forces to enclaves than to the highlands. Hence, there was not agreement between the highlands and the more-bombing policy lines about the reasons for failure of the enclave policy line. Note that the highlands line failed to win in part because its proponents were unable to go after the enclave line effectively. While they certainly could have argued more forcefully that the enclave policy would not succeed because it did not adequately address the ARVN troop strength problem, they did not agree with the bombing line’s other reasons since almost all those applied to their own policy recommendations as well. The lone reason for failure raised by advocates of the more-bombing line that advocates of the highlands line could have agreed with as a means of attacking the enclave line was the claim about inglorious static defense. Indeed, after its implementation, the enclave policy was called into question in part for this reason. However, this reason posed by advocates of the more-bombing line was certainly a non-core reason and perhaps of least importance to that line.

Proponents of the enclave policy line, while agreeing with advocates of the highlands line that improving the performance of the ARVN was necessary to combat the Viet Cong, argued that the situation was not deteriorating so drastically as to warrant the troops proposal. More importantly, advocates of this line were more concerned with the South Vietnamese reaction to the introduction of U.S. troops. Such a large infusion of American troops could adversely affect the situation by reducing the pressure on the GVN and ARVN to perform and also, by making the U.S. appear as a colonizer, create more political problems for the GVN. The enclave troop proposal, being smaller and more narrowly scoped in its mission and

56 Taylor to State 3003, 18 March 1965, ibid.
locational, could act as a test of “the political and psychological effect of U.S. combat participation.”
Advocates of the enclave and the more-bombing policy lines agreed that the highlands line would fail because it would make the U.S. appear as a colonizer and because it would undermine and hurt rather than help the military performance of the South Vietnamese. (Here we would argue that the core reason was the claim about damage to the military performance of the South Vietnamese.) These agreed-upon core and non-core reasons for the failure of the highlands line established additional boundary conditions on the region of winnability.

Advocates of the enclave policy line won this recommendation phase because they agreed with the advocates of the highlands policy line about why current policy would fail and why the proposed more-bombing line would fail. This agreement effectively knocked the more-bombing line out of the region of winnability. In turn, the highlands line was ruled out of the region of winnability because advocates of the enclave line and of the more-bombing line agreed about why the highlands line would fail.

From the set of core and non-core agreed-upon reasons for the failure of current and proposed policies, the following boundary conditions on the region of winnable policies emerge.

Core reasons (boundaries)

1. Undermine and hurt rather than help the military performance of the South Vietnamese
2. Could lead to a wider war reminiscent of the Korean conflict
3. Would not adequately deal with the troop strength problem in the South

Non-core reasons (boundaries)

1. Make the U.S. appear as a colonizer
2. Would not have any effect for two to three months on the war in the South

Thus, the higher level of military force advocated by proponents of the highlands policy line in March 1965 failed to win the policy debate and was not implemented because it was characterized as likely to hurt rather than to help the military effectiveness of the U.S. client state, South Vietnam. This characterization meant that the highlands line failed to meet one of the boundary conditions for winnable policies.

Could a policy line advocating high levels of military force have been winnable? To address this counterfactual possibility, we will stipulate replacing the highlands line first by a tougher, then by a softer, combat troops recommendation. We further stipulate that the current policy and the other two lines (enclaves and more bombing) would have stayed the same, with their advocates’ goals and basic concerns (e.g., the military effectiveness of the ARVN) thus remaining unchanged. A tougher line, one whose advocates recommended more combat troops, or a broader military mission, or deployment to a larger physical area than the actual highlands policy line, would not have fared well. Given their goals, advocates of the enclave and more-bombing policy lines would have agreed that such a policy (actually a whole range of possible policies) would fail for the same reason as would the actual highlands line: such policies would undermine and hurt the military performance of the South Vietnamese. By taking on too many military tasks or taking over too much responsibility to solve the client state’s military problems, thereby absolving the client state of its own responsibilities and duties, a recommendation proposing higher levels of military force than the actual highlands line would appear to have had no chance of being winnable, much less actually winning out and being implemented.
A softer policy line than the actual highlands line, one whose advocates recom-
mended fewer combat troops and/or locating them in a smaller area with a less
dangerous military mission, would also have had a difficult time winning, given the
goals of the more-bombing and enclave lines. As long as the proposed policy would
be seen as more costly, riskier, and larger (in troop size and/or mission) than the
enclave line, it would still have been characterized by the enclave line as likely to
fail because it would undermine and hurt the military performance of the client
state. Because advocates of the more-bombing line were opposed to sending any
combat troops, they would characterize any policy line advocating such action,
including of course the enclave line, as undermining and hurting rather than
helping the military performance of the South Vietnamese. Nor could a softer line
have become winnable by its proponents trying to obtain agreement with advocates
of the more-bombing line that the enclave line would not be sufficient to deal
adequately with the troop strength problem in South Vietnam. After all, advocates
of both the highlands and enclave lines had attacked the bombing line precisely on
the troop strength problem, making it unlikely that advocates of the more-bombing
line would agree with proponents of an altered highlands line about the likely failure
of the enclave line to deal with the troop strength problem. By this logic, in March
1965, any possible policy line with a recommendation for higher levels of military force than
those of the enclave line would have been unwinnable.

Counterfactual History 2: Vietnam, November 1961

When Maxwell Taylor recommended combat troops and encadrement of the
government and military of South Vietnam with Americans in early November 1961,
he called into question what was then current U.S. policy: to reassure and support
South Vietnam by providing economic and military aid to increase South Vietnam-
ese combat troop strength; also to send both an unconventional Air Force squadron,
the “Jungle Jim” team, and Special Forces units to train and accompany South
Vietnamese on bombing missions in South Vietnam and cross-border operations
into Laos. These various actions were designed to boost the morale of the govern-
ment and people of South Vietnam and to allow them more effectively to take the
war to the Viet Cong.

During his mission to South Vietnam in October of 1961, Taylor noted that there
had been a string of Viet Cong victories, increased Viet Cong strength, the percep-
tion in South Vietnam that the ongoing negotiations in Geneva regarding Laos
would soon produce a communist-dominated government in that country, a disas-
trous flood ravaging the Mekong Delta, and an atmosphere “bordering on panic”
in Saigon. Based upon this situation, Taylor argued that national morale was near
collapse. There was a double crisis of confidence: in whether the U.S. was deter-
mined to save Vietnam and Southeast Asia, and in South Vietnam President Diem’s
ability to stop the communists. In addition, the government appeared to be
incompetent to conduct the war, with its armed forces apparently incapable of taking
the war to the enemy due to bad tactics and administrative arrangements. The
core reason current policy was failing was because morale and confidence in the
U.S. among the people and government of South Vietnam was terribly low, adding
to the inability of the GVN to govern and carry out the war effectively. The non-core
reason current policy was failing was because the Saigon regime lacked the ability
and experience to govern effectively and use its military capabilities effectively

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Kennedy, BAGU 0005, 1 November 1961, US-VN:331–6; Taylor to Kennedy, BAGU 0006, 1 November 1961,
against an ever-increasing enemy. By effectively challenging current policy, Taylor and others advocating this policy line reopened debate and thus established their position as the main line.

The first subsidiary policy line, the Rusk-McNamara line advocating encadrement and commitment of U.S. combat troops to just south of the 17th parallel, came to similar conclusions about the situation in South Vietnam and the failure of current policy. The situation in Vietnam was deemed a disaster, prompting advocates of this line to argue that “chances are against, probably sharply against, preventing the fall of South Viet-Nam by any measures short of the introduction of U.S. forces on a substantial scale.” This group argued that current policy was failing because of GVN incompetence and ineffectiveness, increased infiltration and the inability of ARVN to slow it down, and a lack of a clear decision by the United States to prevent the fall of South Vietnam to communism. The core reason among these was the lack of a U.S. commitment, which made current U.S. policy (providing military and economic aid, along with plans to revamp both the GVN administration and military command strategy) ineffectual. GVN incompetence and ineffectiveness and increased infiltration were non-core reasons for the failure of current policy.

Advocates of the second subsidiary policy line, a collection of country specialists, military men, dovish political appointees, and, in the end, Kennedy, Rusk, and McNamara, also agreed that current policy was failing. The core reason they advanced for its failure was low morale and confidence in the GVN. Arguments about the GVN’s ineptness and its failure to implement measures of current policy were non-core reasons for the failure of current policy.

There was agreement between advocates of the combat troops main line and of the second subsidiary policy line on the core reason for the failure of current policy: low morale and a lack of confidence in the GVN. Also, one non-core agreement for the failure of current policy emerges: GVN administrative inability to govern effectively and to use its military capabilities effectively against an ever-increasing enemy. These agreed-upon core and non-core reasons provided boundary conditions for the region of winnability. Policies that did not address GVN political and military ineffectiveness were not winnable. Note that winnable policy lines must all have addressed this problem, but, since it was a non-core argument, it was not a condition for determining the winning line. Winning policies thus had to address the low morale and confidence problem. All three competing policy lines contained recommendations proposing encadrement (with thousands of military advisers, helicopters, etc.) as a solution to the GVN and ARVN incompetence and ineffectiveness problem. Thus, none of the three lines could easily have been taxed with ignoring the problem of GVN incompetence; all three therefore met the winnability criterion just established.

Since proponents of none of the policy lines argued that the other proposed policies would fail because encadrement would not solve or alleviate GVN and ARVN incompetence and ineffectiveness, advocates of the three proposed policies criticized the proposals on different grounds. Thus, the Taylor combat troops line was attacked by the encadrement but no combat troops line for various reasons. It was claimed that the policy would fail because the small detachment of troops would be shot at and harassed. Deployment of these troops would lead to calls for further

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59 Rusk, McNamara, and Lemnitzer draft to Kennedy:561.
60 Advocates of this policy line put forward different reasons for the confidence and morale problem, which they depicted as due instead to South Vietnamese politics, the absence of a strong noncommunist political coalition, and public apathy.
62 There seems to be a minimal recognition of consistency at work, in which policy makers who highlight a problem cannot be claimed by others to have ignored that problem.
larger-scale, long-term intervention, leading some to recall the U.S. experience in Korea and the French disaster in Vietnam, and to raise the likelihood of Chinese intervention.\textsuperscript{63} Employing interesting and classic reasoning, advocates of this policy line also argued that “the employment of United States combat forces . . . involves a certain dilemma; if there is a strong South Viet-Namese effort, they may not be needed; if there is not such an effort, United States forces could not accomplish their mission in the midst of an apathetic or hostile population.”\textsuperscript{64} Advocates of this line of reasoning suggested that it was best for South Vietnam to help itself and that U.S. combat troops might not be necessary if encadrement worked. If it failed and there was not the required effort from South Vietnam, the deployed U.S. combat troops would fail in their mission. Thus, not surprisingly, proponents of this policy line argued for encadrement and for waiting on possible combat troop deployments. In addition, proponents of the line also argued that, while the U.S. should be prepared to send combat troops, such troops were not needed to show U.S. determination, nor to boost South Vietnamese morale, nor to assist in suppressing the Viet Cong insurgents. Rather, advocates of this line argued that measures ought first to be taken (encadrement in particular) to put the GVN in a position to win their own war against the guerrillas and to take actions they had to take themselves.\textsuperscript{65} Lastly, the proposal to send combat troops to the delta would fail because doing so would not address the infiltration problem. Advocates of the encadrement but no combat troops line argued that to stabilize the situation in South Vietnam without a major commitment of combat forces required a “sharp diminution in communist support to the Viet Cong.”\textsuperscript{66} A major commitment would be undesirable, and the small combat troops to the delta proposal failed to accomplish this.

Similarly, advocates of the first subsidiary line, the encadrement and troops to the border line, argued that the Taylor combat troops to the delta plan would fail because it would not relieve ARVN forces which could then be deployed elsewhere, because it would fail to reduce infiltration, and because it failed to provide a means to counter a possible invasion by North Vietnam and Communist China.\textsuperscript{67}

Proponents of the two subsidiary policy lines thus agreed that the troops to the delta policy would not solve the infiltration problem and that such a policy would make the possibility of an invasion by North Vietnam, and perhaps Communist China, greater. These two problems, they agreed, would stretch SVN forces even more, thus undercutting their effectiveness. However, the core reason the Taylor plan was agreed as likely to fail was because the combat troops would not relieve and help ARVN but rather take responsibilities over from ARVN that it should have been carrying out itself; this would undermine rather than enhance ARVN’s ability to do its job. Not surprisingly, an advocate of one line argued that levels and missions of U.S. combat troops be restricted to that which “leaves the burden primarily on the Vietnamese.”\textsuperscript{68}

The encadrement and no troops now policy line won the November 1961 phase of policy making because its proponents agreed with those of the main line...
(encadrement plus combat troops to the delta) about why current policy would fail, and because they agreed with proponents of the other subsidiary line (encadrement plus combat troops to the border) about why the main line would fail. By our model’s rules for determining winners, this was sufficient for the encadrement but no troops now line to be the winner.

From the set of core and non-core agreed-upon reasons for failure of current and proposed policies, the following boundary conditions on the region of winnability emerge.

Core agreed-upon reasons (boundaries)

1. Would not relieve and thus help ARVN but rather take over responsibilities that ARVN should carry out thus undermining rather than enhancing the ability of ARVN to do its job
2. Not help low morale and confidence in the GVN

Non-core agreed-upon reasons (boundaries)

1. Not help GVN administrative inability to govern effectively and to use its military capabilities effectively against an ever-increasing enemy

Maxwell Taylor’s recommendation to send combat troops to Vietnam in November 1961 failed and was not implemented because it was cast as undermining rather than enhancing the ability of the client state (South Vietnam) to do its job and defeat the enemy, the Viet Cong. How might stipulating the replacement of the Taylor line by a tougher combat troops recommendation have fared against the encadrement and troops to the border, and encadrement and no troops now policy lines? Here, unlike the March 1965 case, it appears that some alternative recommendations might have been winnable. A policy line that combined encadrement with a somewhat greater level of combat troops than advocated by Taylor would, provided those troops were given a mission distinct from that of the ARVN, have been immune to the criticism that it would hinder rather than help the client state’s own military efforts. Indeed, advocates of the troops to the border line satisfied this criterion by claiming to help solve some of the client state’s problems (infiltration and potential invasion) without inhibiting or undercutting the primary duties and responsibilities of the client state, that is, carrying out counterinsurgency operations; it thus would not (and, in actuality, was not) criticized for hindering the ARVN’s own efforts. There are several missions, particularly those connected with countering infiltration and the possibility of an invasion, that could have been assigned to a larger number of combat troops and that would have escaped this criticism. For example, if the combat troops to the delta line had had an altered mission of focusing, say, on stopping infiltration from Cambodia, such a line could not have been attacked by the troops to the border line as not relieving ARVN and undermining rather than enhancing ARVN’s abilities. This lack of criticism would have collapsed the agreement between the troops to the border and no troops lines on why the actual Taylor line would fail, making this counterfactual, altered Taylor line, policy winnable. Given the rules for winning, an altered main line would then have won if its advocates could have obtained agreement with proponents of the troops to the border line about why the no troops line would fail. There would have been many opportunities for agreement here, since advocates of both the combat troops to the border

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69 On our analysis, the even harder line troops to the border recommendation could also have been winnable since our counterfactual stipulation of an alternative Taylor line does not add any new arguments against why other lines would fail or otherwise be unacceptable. However, by the rules of our model, the alternative Taylor line, as the main line, would still have been the winner. (Recall also that if the phase had had only two lines, e.g., the troops to the border line and the dovish line, neither could have won.)
line and the actual Taylor line consistently argued that the situation in South Vietnam could not be stabilized without the commitment of U.S. combat forces. In short, unlike the March 1965 counterfactuals, a harder-line policy could have been a winning one in November 1961. If we thus can agree with the view (Newman, 1992: parts 1–2) that Kennedy displayed a strong predilection toward dovish policies, we can also infer that, under certain circumstances, he would have opted for quite hard-line policies (though still rejecting the intermediate proposals).

### Conclusion

The two actual policies advocating higher levels of military force we have just examined were rejected because they failed to satisfy an essential feature of winnable recommendations, namely, agreed-upon reasons for current and/or proposed policy failure. Our simple counterfactual analysis based upon these boundary conditions of winnability suggests that in March 1965, no other possible policy advocating higher levels of force could have been winnable, whereas three and a half years earlier, various possible recommendations advocating high levels of military force could have been winnable (indeed, winning) lines. We have carried out this analysis by positing a difference in only one policy line, stipulating that the other two lines were unchanged. Yet even in this limited set of possible worlds, certain interesting patterns emerge, giving us some leverage to speculate beyond these cases about restrictions on other possible recommendations for military intervention.

Of course, we chose the two cases above in part because we wanted to begin our analysis by examining why actual recommendations to use higher levels of force were rejected in a security situation about which we have considerable information and which we have studied in great detail. Although the boundary conditions we derived for winnable and nonwinnable policies had, as we would expect, a number of Vietnam-specific details, a more general contingent property was evident in both cases. In both November 1961 and March 1965, recommendations to use higher levels of military force were not and would not have been winnable because they were or would have been cast as undermining or eroding the ability of the client state to do its own job and solve its own problems. Even in the counterfactual November 1961 case, only certain types of troop commitment (e.g., not those that involved counterinsurgency operations) would have escaped this reproach. This sheds light on client states more generally and suggests certain similarities between the Cold War and post–Cold War eras (Majeski and Sylvan, 1996).

Additionally, the Vietnam examples imply two directions for future research. In a substantive sense, they suggest that, at least by the end of 1961, it would have been difficult for Kennedy to have avoided troop commitments under certain circumstances. This raises questions not only about whether Kennedy would have withdrawn U.S. advisers in 1964 or 1965 had he not been assassinated in 1963 (an issue which was rekindled with the release of the film *JFK*), but whether, by 1961, the war was indeed avoidable. Elsewhere (Sylvan and Majeski, 1996a, 1996b), we have argued informally that South Vietnam was constructed between 1954 and 1961 as a country to which a U.S. commitment was possible via large-scale, ground troop intervention. The more formal analysis presented in this article lends support to that informal claim. Future research might extend this analysis by studying the converse question: when was the first time (say, after 1961) it became possible for U.S. policy makers to consider seriously a policy that would have been tantamount to “losing”?

The second contribution of this article is methodological. We have put forward a specific proposal for how to do counterfactual research on historical and political
subjects. If this proposal is accepted, it implies that an important element in research on these subjects should be the discovery of constitutive relations that define the essence of various phenomena. Theorizing about counterfactual possibilities requires detailed research into the actual world.

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