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Learning from Experience in U.S. and Soviet Foreign Policy

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Did Soviet and American political leaders learn from experience, and did the lessons they learned help to shape their foreign policies during the Cold War? Is historical learning likely to influence Russian and American foreign policies in the post-Cold War era? These questions arose repeatedly at the 1990 Moscow conference from which this volume originated. The discussions made it clear that learning is a potentially powerful explanatory variable but one which raises an extraordinarily difficult set of conceptual and methodological problems.

The aim of this paper is twofold. I will apply a simple learning model to a number of key developments in U.S. and Soviet foreign policy in the Cold War era in order to illustrate the potential explanatory power of the learning concept. In the process I will identify some of the analytical problems which must be overcome before the concept of learning can be meaningfully employed to explain past events or to predict future behavior.

The question of whether political leaders learn from historical experience has attracted considerable attention in the literature on international relations and foreign policy, particularly in the last half decade or so. May (1973) initiated these investigations with his pathbreaking study of the use and misuse of history by U.S. foreign policy leaders in a number of cases since World War II. Jervis (1976) followed with a seminal theoretical analysis of how decision makers learn from history, what events they are most likely to learn from, and what kinds of lessons they frequently learn. A decade later Etheridge (1985) explored the impact of historical learning on the American response to revolutions in Central America, and Neustadt and May (1986) examined how American political leaders have used his-

tory in the formation of U.S. foreign and domestic policy and suggested how decision makers might make better use of history.

Important new theoretical developments have generated additional interest in learning. Axelrod's (1984) formal and experimental research on iterated prisoners' dilemma games focused attention on the question of how self-interested actors can learn to cooperate in an anarchic system without a higher authority, and learning has been incorporated into recent theories of international cooperation (Grieco, 1990; Milner, 1992).¹ This has been expanded by work in regime theory on the question of how international regimes contribute to learning by reinforcing bilateral norms, providing new information, altering belief systems of individuals and affecting institutional memories, and generally changing each actor's expectations regarding the behavior of others (Nye, 1987; Keohane and Nye, 1987).

There has also been work on the extent to which policy is influenced by autonomous ideas (Odell, 1982; Goldstein, 1988; Mueller, 1992) and, more recently, by technical experts sharing similar intellectual paradigms in epistemic communities (E. Haas, 1990, 1991; P. Haas, 1990, 1992; Adler, 1992; Mendelson, 1993). At the individual decision-making level, research in social psychology on the use of heuristics and analogical reasoning in judgment and decision making (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky, 1982; Vertzberger, 1990; Hybel, 1991; Khong, 1992) provided an explanation of the learning process and set forth specific hypotheses which could be applied to foreign policy behavior.

Some of these theoretical developments have combined with important substantive concerns to generate a dramatic surge of interest in the role of learning in U.S. and Soviet/Russian foreign policy in the last few years. Early work in this area focused on nuclear learning—about the destructive power of nuclear weapons, its political implications, the problems of control and proliferation, and the optimum conditions for arms race and crisis stability (Nye, 1987; Zubok, this book). The moderation in the intensity of the Cold War led scholars to explore how Soviet and American decision makers have learned *de facto* rules of prudence and norms of cooperative behavior, and to determine how these rules and norms have helped moderate the U.S.-Soviet relationship (George, 1983; George, Farley, and Dallin, 1988; Kremenjuk, this book).²

In addition, several observers have noted regular and frequent cycles in Soviet foreign policy in general and in Soviet Third World policy in particular, with periods of expanding commitments and influence followed by periods of retrenchment (Huntington, 1987; Fukuyama, 1987; Breslauer, 1987). The emergence of the "new thinking" under Gorbachev and the profound changes in Soviet foreign policy which were associated with it was a particularly interesting and historically important phase of this cycle, and this provided further impetus to the application of learning models. The very concept of the new thinking and the fact that it appears to have occurred prior to fundamental changes in Soviet foreign policy suggest the potential importance of learning and belief change as an important source of policy change. A number of scholars have begun to explore the impact of learning on cycles of Soviet foreign policy in general and on the Gorbachev era in particular, and to test learning models of foreign policy change against alternative realist, bureaucratic politics, and domestic politics models (Breslauer,

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1987, 1992; Bennett, 1990, 1992; Evangelista, 1991; Wallander, 1992; Larson, 1992; Moltz, 1993; Mendelson, 1993; Stein, 1993).

In this paper I am concerned both with the substantive question of the role of experiential learning in U.S. and Soviet/Russian foreign policy and with the conceptual question of the theoretical utility of learning models. I will begin with an examination of the role of learning in U.S. decision making in the wars in Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf and in the period of detente with the Soviet Union.³ I will then look at the role of learning in Soviet strategic doctrine and in cycles of extension and retrenchment in Soviet global commitments, including the new thinking of the Gorbachev regime. I will use these historical analyses to identify some of the conceptual problems that arise in the application of the learning model and to explore some of the alternative explanations with which the learning model must contend if it is to provide a convincing explanation of foreign policy change.⁴ I will not attempt to evaluate whether the learning model provides a better model of foreign policy change than do alternative models, for that is an empirical question which requires a carefully constructed research design and extensive historical analysis.⁵

For the purposes of this study I define learning as a change of beliefs or the degree of confidence in one's beliefs based on the observation and interpretation of experience.⁶ Learning is not equivalent to behavioral change but refers instead to changes in an individuals' beliefs about the world, so that learning is one of several possible sources of behavioral change. The experiential learning model posits a two-stage process in which (1) individuals interpret historical events and (2) these inferences from experience in turn influence future policy preferences, definitions of the situation, and behavior.⁷

LEARNING IN AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY: FROM THE 1930S TO THE PERSIAN GULF WAR

Scholars commonly argue that the experiences of the 1930s in general and Munich in particular generated lessons that influenced American decision making in the Korean crisis, that the lessons of Korea as well as Munich influenced decision making in the Vietnam conflict, and that the lessons of Vietnam influenced American policy in the 1990 Persian Gulf crisis.⁸ Let us consider each of these in turn and then briefly examine how learning from experience influenced the Nixon administration's policy of detente with the Soviet Union.

The Munich Analogy and U.S. Decision Making in the Korean War

One explanation for the American decision to intervene in the Korean War emphasizes the impact of lessons which President Truman drew from past historical events. Historical analogies from the 1930s were particularly salient for Truman and many of his advisors, who remembered the aggressions of Japan, Italy, and

Germany and the failure of the Western powers to respond until it was nearly too late. The lessons they drew from the 1930s are summarized by the "Munich analogy"—the belief that it is dangerous to appease an aggressor and that unchecked aggression will only enhance the aggressor's appetite for further gains, erode the defender's credibility and others' will to resist, and lead to further aggression and ultimately to a more costly war in the future.⁹ The implication is that firm and timely resistance in the early stages of aggression is both necessary and sufficient to prevent a chain of events which will lead to further losses and a more costly war.¹⁰

That the Munich analogy was foremost in Truman's mind after the North Korean invasion of the South is suggested by Truman's later recollections (as he described them in his memoirs) of his thoughts as he returned to Washington the day after hearing of the North Korean invasion:

In my generation, this was not the first occasion when the strong had attacked the weak. I recalled some earlier instances: Manchuria, Ethiopia, Austria. I remembered how each time that the democracies failed to act it had encouraged the aggressors to keep going ahead. Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen, and twenty years earlier. I felt certain that if South Korea was allowed to fall Communist leaders would be emboldened to override nations closer to our own shores. If the Communists were permitted to force their way into the Republic of Korea without opposition from the free world, no small nation would have the courage to resist threats and aggression by stronger Communist neighbors. If this was allowed to go unchallenged it would mean a third world war, just as similar incidents had brought on the second world war. (1956:378-379)

As an individual, Truman may have been particularly prone to rely on historical analogies as guides to decision making. He stated in his memoirs, "I had trained myself to look back in history for precedents. . . . Most of the problems a President has to face have their roots in the past" (1956:13). In an interview he said that he was convinced that the "lessons of history" offered clear guides to "right principles" of action and that he "weighed the North Korean invasion in the balance of past experience" (Paige, 1968:114).¹¹ Truman was hardly alone in his references to Hitler and other aggressors of the 1930s. Several of his advisors and numerous congressmen also used analogies from this period. As May (1973:49-50) noted, Acheson's biographer wrote that the "image of Hitler seared itself on the eyes of all who fought him."¹²

The attractiveness of the Munich analogy as a guide to subsequent analysis and decision making was particularly great because the 1930s were a critical period in the intellectual and political development of Truman, Acheson, Rusk, and others; because the events associated with it were so dramatic (in part because they represented the last major war); because the lessons of the 1930s' European experience were driven home for Americans by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor;¹³ and because there were some apparent similarities between the totalitarian dictatorships of the 1930s and the communist regimes of the late 1940s and also between Hitler and Stalin themselves (May, 1973:81-85; Jervis, 1976:239-270).

Admittedly, inferences regarding the causal importance of the Munich analogy later in the Cold War period may be more difficult to establish; by this time the concept had acquired the status of ritual discourse and served as a common

and useful rationalization for a variety of hard-line policies. But that was not yet the case in 1950, and the novelty of explicit references to Munich in June, 1950, arguably makes the learning hypothesis all the more plausible (Neustadt and May, 1986:36). Thus May (1973:83) concludes that the Korean decision provides a "particularly vivid illustration of the potency of beliefs about history," and Jervis (1976:218–220) and many others agree that perceived historical lessons had an independent causal impact on the American decision to intervene in the Korean War.¹⁴

The Lessons of Korea and U.S. Decision Making in the Vietnam War

The Munich analogy and other perceived lessons of the 1930s continued to be used by American decision makers,¹⁵ although by the mid-1960s the Korean analogy was the "lesson of the past" most frequently invoked by American political leaders.¹⁶ The idea that the Korean analogy was particularly important for U.S. decision making in the Vietnam period has been advanced most persuasively by Khong (1992), who concludes from a thorough empirical investigation that the Korean analogy not only played a major role in the U.S. decision to intervene in Vietnam but also helped determine why certain strategic options (gradual escalation) were pursued while others (withdrawal or massive strategic bombing) were not.

This explanation for U.S. policy in Vietnam finds support in the views of several American decision makers of the time. George Ball, who had emphasized the differences between Korea and Vietnam as undersecretary of state during the Vietnam period, argues that "if we had not gone into Korea, I think it would have been very unlikely that we would have gotten into Vietnam." When he was later asked who in the administration believed that Vietnam was another Korea, Ball responded, "Practically everybody" (Khong, 1992:110).

Everybody included Secretary of State Rusk, who, according to Ball, "was enormously impressed by the analogy of Korea because he had been deeply engaged himself in the Korean War" (Khong, 1992:111–112). The group included also Lyndon Johnson, who suggested in his memoirs (1971:151)—in a way quite reminiscent of Truman—that "when a President faces a decision involving war or peace, he draws back and thinks of the past and of the future in the widest possible terms." Though Johnson drew on a wide range of historical cases, he was influenced most by the experiences of Munich and Korea (Khong, 1992:177).

William Bundy, assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs, was another who was influenced by the lessons he drew from the past. He stated in 1965 that U.S. policy toward South Vietnam was "the fruit of history and experience" and that it derived from "(1) the fact of the Communist nations of Asia and their policies; (2) the lessons of the thirties and of Korea; (3) the logical extension of that fact and these lessons to what has happened in Southeast Asia." Bundy remarked, "We had relearned the lessons of the 1930s—Manchuria, Ethiopia, the Rhineland, Czechoslovakia" (Department of State *Bulletin*, February 8, 1965,

pp. 171, 168, cited in Khong, 1992:99–100), suggesting that the lessons of Korea reinforced those of Munich.

These were not the only lessons of the Korean War, however. Memories of the Chinese intervention and the Sino-American war, the protracted nature of the conflict, high American casualties, and political divisions among the American people about the wisdom of the war suggested additional lessons which were at odds with those from Korea and Munich: (1) the United States should never fight a land war in Asia, and (2) the American people would not tolerate a prolonged limited war (May, 1973:95–96). These lessons were reinforced by the example of the French defeat in Indochina in 1954,¹⁷ and they were frequently invoked by opponents of U.S. intervention in Vietnam.

These "negative" lessons of Korea were given less attention by members of the Kennedy administration, particularly the president and others who had a keen interest in counterinsurgency and who focused instead on the lessons of the Philippines, Malaya, and Greece (Khong, 1992:87–88, 177). Those cases seemed to suggest that guerrilla movements could be defeated with modest efforts (May, 1973:96–98; Shafer, 1988). The cautionary lessons of Korea had greater impact on members of the Johnson administration, but by then the issue was not whether to intervene with military force but instead how to conduct the war in a way that minimized both the likelihood of Chinese intervention and the domestic political costs of the war. Johnson's images of domestic dissent during the prolonged war in Korea and of China crossing the Yalu influenced his decisions to seek congressional support for the war effort (in the form of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution) and to avoid the options of massive strategic bombing or of calling up reserves and declaring a state of emergency.

Although the China dimension of the Korean experience was important, it was not confined to the image of China crossing the Yalu. Both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations were also influenced by another dimension of the China lesson: the victory of the communists in China and its domestic political fallout in the United States. Republican charges that the Democrats had "lost" China had a significant impact on American partisan politics in the 1950s, and those domestic political lessons had an impact on Kennedy and his advisors, who attempted in the 1960 campaign to blame the Republicans for "losing" Cuba. Later, in his public defense of efforts to strengthen the South Vietnamese government in 1963, Kennedy remarked, "Strongly in our mind is what happened in the case of China at the end of World War II, where China was lost. . . . We don't want that" (May, 1973:99). Similarly, Vice President Lyndon Johnson later remarked to a confidante that

I knew that Harry Truman and Dean Acheson had lost their effectiveness from the day that the Communists took over China. I believed that the loss of China had played a large role in the rise of Joe McCarthy. And I knew that all these problems, taken together, were chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam. (Neustadt and May, 1986:87)

The loss of China had such an impact on American political leaders, some argue, that their fear of the domestic political consequences of the fall of South Vietnam

was the primary reason for their reluctance to disengage from the war (Ellsberg, 1972; Thomson, 1973).

Thus, while the lessons of Korea may have been read differently by different observers, the key members of the Kennedy administration generally agreed on a common set of lessons. Taken together, these perceived lessons of Korea served a number of cognitive functions for U.S. decision makers. As Khong (1992:chap. 5) argues, these lessons helped shape their perceptions of several issues:

1. The definition of the situation in Vietnam (as external aggression from the North)
2. The political stakes of the conflict (nonaction would lead to further aggression and the need for a future response at higher costs)
3. Normative implications (the United States had an obligation to South Vietnam and intervention was morally right)
4. Predictions about the likelihood of success of military intervention (high, and without excessive costs)
5. A warning about the risks inherent in certain options (inaction would only lead to further aggression which would have to be resisted under more difficult circumstances, whereas excessive American military action might lead to an undesirable escalation of the war and the risk of Soviet or Chinese intervention)

Although those in charge of American Vietnam policy shared a common set of lessons from the past, a minority of dissenters inside the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and many others on the outside—including many in the American antiwar movement—drew a different and conflicting set of lessons from Korea and other cases (Vasquez, 1976). This leads to the obvious question: Given the highly ambiguous and conflicting lessons of Korea and the only slightly less conflicting lessons of other cases, why did some individuals appear to draw one set of lessons while other individuals drew another set of lessons? Why was the “never again” lesson not more influential in America’s decision making on Vietnam? Unless the learning model can come to terms with the problem of selective learning and explain what types of people draw which types of lessons and under what conditions, the explanatory power of the model is severely restricted.

One plausible explanation for variations in learning is that individuals do not learn from history so much as they use history to reinforce and advance their pre-existing beliefs and policy preferences. This political or rhetorical use of history may be driven by a deliberate strategic calculation to use history as a weapon to gain leverage in domestic or bureaucratic political debates, whether for the purpose of advancing one’s own view of the national interest or perhaps even one’s bureaucratic or domestic political interests (Snyder, 1991a). It may also be driven by a psychological process which functions to maintain cognitive consistency or to rationalize behavior adopted for other reasons which may not be fully understood (Larson, 1985:42–50).¹⁸ The instrumental use of history may involve the search for particular historical cases which support one’s position, the deliberate distortion of the lessons of individual cases in order to advance one’s interests, or (most likely) a combination of both.

Because of the plausibility of the idea that decision makers do not learn from history so much as use it to advance their preexisting beliefs and policy preferences, it is important that any empirical study of learning through analogies come to terms with this alternative hypothesis. That is, tests of the learning model must demonstrate that the causal arrow between interpretations of the past and current policy preferences and interests points from the past to the present rather than from the present to the past. Jervis (1976:chap. 3) acknowledges that the latter pattern sometimes occurs but argues that genuine learning is the more common pattern and suggests some criteria to differentiate between these two empirical patterns. More specifically, it is likely that current preferences influence interpretations of the past when shifts in interests or preferences are followed by shifts in interpretations of past events or when interpretations of the past are “strikingly incorrect” (Jervis, 1976:225–226).

In addition, Jervis (1976:239–271) specifies the theoretical conditions under which genuine learning is most likely to occur and in so doing provides a set of criteria which help to identify genuine learning. Jervis hypothesizes that genuine learning from past historical events is most likely to occur when an individual experiences an event firsthand; when the event occurs early in his or her adult life or professional career; when the event had important consequences for the individual or the nation (a revolution or the last major war, for example); and when a weak knowledge of history leaves the individual with few alternative analogies and little understanding of the context in which they occur, and thus increases the impact of a particularly salient event.

Khong (1992) is quite sensitive to the possibility that decision makers may be self-serving in their use of history and constructs his research design in order to deal with that alternative causal model. Khong suggests, first of all, that if American decision makers were engaging in political rhetoric rather than expressing their true beliefs regarding the Vietnam issue, there would be a discrepancy between their public and private statements. He compares the public and private documentary record and finds that individuals referred to the same analogies in private as they did in their public statements.

Khong also argues (following Jervis) that the specific analogies used by particular individuals correspond to their own personally salient experiences, whereas the political rhetoric hypothesis would imply that an individual would select the most effective analogy and that analogies would not correlate with personal experiences. The dissenter Ball had worked more closely with the French than had Johnson or Rusk and thus felt more strongly the impact of the French defeat, for example, whereas Rusk had been deeply involved with Korea. Khong’s research design gains added power by his use of multiple historical analogies (primarily Munich, Korea, and Dien Bien Phu) and his analysis of why different individuals use different analogies. These considerations lead Khong to conclude that the public uses of historical analogies by U.S. decision makers in the 1965 Vietnam decisions reflected their true beliefs.

Khong is methodologically self-conscious in his approach and makes a very plausible argument in support of his hypothesis. One limitation of his study, however, is that it is restricted to a relatively small number of official U.S. decision

makers at basically one point in time (although Khong does look at Eisenhower's decision not to intervene in Vietnam in 1954 and Kennedy's decisions in both Laos and Vietnam in 1961). An even more powerful research design would include a broader range of individuals with different formative experiences, different political roles, and different interests—including individuals outside the administration or perhaps political leaders in other countries—in order to examine the impact of more varied experiences, interests, and motivated biases on the selection and use of historical analogies.

An expanded research design might also include longitudinal studies of certain key individuals in order to determine whether the relationship between their policy preferences and use of historical analogies changed over time, particularly during periods in which their interests shifted. As key political leaders turned against the Vietnam War in the late 1960s, did they turn to a different set of historical analogies? Is there evidence that certain leaders shifted their positions on the war (when their interests were unchanged) because they were persuaded by the historical analogies advanced by others? Did individuals use the Korean or Munich analogies in the Cuban missile crisis?

Some of these additional considerations can be found in Snyder's (1991a) study of the origins of the strategic beliefs of foreign policy leaders in Germany, Japan, the Soviet Union, Britain, and the United States over the last century and a half. Snyder's research design includes comparisons across states, across individuals within a given state at a given time, and across different time periods for certain individuals.¹⁹ Snyder concludes that historical analogies, and strategic concepts in general, are not derived from a dispassionate reading of history but instead are constructed or manufactured in order to reinforce preexisting policy preferences. These preferences, however, reflect the domestic interests of political elites (more specifically, their need to form a stable ruling coalition) rather than their interpretations of the national interest. Snyder probably underestimates the role of genuine learning relative to the political use of historical analogies. This derives in part from the fact that Snyder (like Khong) makes a strict differentiation between a learning model and a political model of foreign policy behavior, which is a point to which I will return later in this essay.

It would be misleading, of course, to think that the causal relationship between historical learning and current policy preferences runs in either one direction or the other. The relationship is often a reciprocal one which reinforces itself over time. The process may begin with independently drawn lessons of the past shaping current preferences, but once created these preferences often generate incentives for the individual to reinforce those historical lessons and to reinterpret other historical experiences in a way that conforms to his or her existing views.

Alternatively, the process may begin with current interests leading actors to select and interpret historical analogies instrumentally in a way that maximizes their leverage in internal debates. But the process may not end there. Once those lessons or myths are constructed, individuals may come to internalize them, become intellectually entrapped by them, and then rely on those lessons to influence their future preferences and choices.²⁰ Moreover, the political successors of these "lesson makers" may be more likely to ignore or forget the instrumental and

rhetorical origins of those lessons and then rely on them to shape their own policy preferences and actions, even in a strategic environment that has changed and in which the original lessons are not entirely applicable. Truman's use of the rhetoric of global anticommunism to sell the Greek-Turkish aid program in 1947, for example, acquired a momentum of its own and had an important impact on the subsequent generation of American political leaders.

Still another possibility is that the relationship between historical lessons and current policy preferences is spurious: deeply held world views or operational codes might work independently to shape both one's interpretation of past events and one's current policy preferences. The lessons Americans drew from the Vietnam experience were probably highly correlated with their policy preferences in the Persian Gulf crisis, but it is not clear whether genuine learning took place or whether individual world views existing prior to the Vietnam period go far in explaining both of these variables. My suspicion is that if we were to control for individual world views or operational codes in 1961, the relationship between the lessons of Vietnam and policy preferences in the Gulf War might be significantly reduced.²¹ Thus, variations in individual world views (or operational codes or cognitive maps) help explain variations in the lessons different individuals draw from the same historical event.²²

The "Lessons" of Vietnam and the Persian Gulf War

Just as the lessons of the 1930s appear to have influenced American decision making in the Korean crisis, and just as the lessons drawn (or constructed) from Munich and Korea (and perhaps Greece, the Philippines, and Malaya) may have influenced American decision making in the Vietnam War, a strong case can be made that the lessons drawn from Vietnam influenced American foreign policy in the subsequent years. Even more than in the case of Korea, there was a major debate about the lessons of the Vietnam War for the United States (Summers, 1982; Luttwak, 1984; Krepinevich, 1986; Ravenal, 1978). Issues relating to Angola, Central America, and the Middle East were perceived (by official decision makers as well as by the public) through the prism of the Vietnam War, but different individuals used different prisms. As Holsti and Rosenau suggest,

the Vietnam War remains for many a rich lode from which to extract nuggets of wisdom to guide contemporary American foreign policy. But those engaged in the enterprise seem unable to agree on which nuggets are real gold, and which are merely fool's gold. (1984:15)

Some interpreted the lessons of Vietnam broadly to mean that American intervention was inappropriate under nearly any circumstances, which reinforced the "never again" lesson of Korea. Others argued that the American withdrawal from Vietnam would have costly domino effects and that this made it all the more imperative to stand firm against future aggression and draw the line in Angola or elsewhere. Still others drew a more restricted lesson: Do not intervene in a strategically unimportant area, on the side of a regime that lacks an indigenous political base, and without the support of the American people (Ball, 1973).

Regardless of the debate about the specific lessons of Vietnam, the Vietnam experience undoubtedly contributed to a "war-weariness" in American society,²³ and it reduced the propensity of American political leaders to intervene with military force in Third World conflicts, particularly in the 1970s following the American political defeat in Vietnam (Holsti and Rosenau, 1984).²⁴ But did this constitute learning? Did decision makers really change their ideas about the utility of military intervention in response to the Vietnam experience? Or did a new administration bring to power individuals (like Jimmy Carter), who had always preferred anti-interventionist policies?²⁵ Alternatively, rather than changing their beliefs, did American leaders instead feel constrained by public opinion from pursuing interventionist policies they might otherwise have preferred? Or did they still believe in intervention under certain conditions but choose not to intervene because the proper conditions never arose? Or, finally, did they broaden their conception of the utility of force from a narrowly military perspective to a broader military-political one, giving equal importance to creating and maintaining a domestic political coalition that supports the goals of intervention and the means necessary to achieve those goals?²⁶

In addition to generating conflicting lessons about the proper conditions, if any, for U.S. intervention in Third World conflicts, the Vietnam experience led some observers to draw certain lessons about *how* military force should be used when such intervention is deemed appropriate. Many retrospective analyses reached the conclusion that the U.S. failure in Vietnam derived from the inability to recognize that "there is no substitute for victory" in war,²⁷ from the policy of gradual escalation,²⁸ and from the excessive "micromanagement" of the war by the White House (including presidential involvement in the selection of specific military targets). Former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger stated in 1975 that the lesson of Vietnam was that "rather than simply counter[ing] your opponent's thrusts, it is necessary to go for the heart of the opponent's power; destroy his military forces rather than simply being involved endlessly in ancillary military operations" (in Holsti and Rosenau, 1984:11).

These ideas—that appeasement is counterproductive, that aggression must be met with timely and potent military force, that a policy of gradual escalation is not effective, that when military force is used it must be used rapidly and with overwhelming strength, and that domestic support is a prerequisite for any substantial use of military force—became the conventional wisdom among top defense policy officials within the Reagan and Bush administrations.²⁹ Bush and his key advisors repeatedly resorted to these arguments in the lengthy debate over the proper response to the Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait in the fall of 1990 and in doing so explicitly identified them as the lessons of Vietnam and of Munich.³⁰ In a White House speech on August 8, 1990, for example, President Bush stated that

if history teaches us anything, it is that we must resist aggression or it will destroy our freedoms. Appeasement does not work. As was the case in the 1930s, we see in Saddam Hussein an aggressive dictator threatening his neighbors.

These lessons were invoked not only in an attempt to gain public and congressional support for the administration's policies, but also to help guide policy and

military strategy against Iraq.³¹ These lessons created a perceived need to secure diplomatic and domestic political support before initiating military action; to apply massive force early in the war effort; to leave the conduct of the war—including the selection of strategy, tactics, and targets—to military professionals;³² and, more generally, to do everything possible to avoid a protracted war.

Nixon, Kissinger, and the Lessons of Detente

One can find other examples of learning from experience in U.S. foreign policy. The evolution of the Nixon-Kissinger policy of detente with the Soviet Union provides an interesting example of learning from short-term feedback regarding the impact of one's strategy on the adversary. Nixon and Kissinger initially conceived of linkage as consistent behavior across issue areas, so that U.S. cooperation in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) negotiations or trade issues was contingent upon conciliatory Soviet behavior on Vietnam and in the Middle East. But the attempt to link SALT to Soviet "good behavior" produced Soviet resentment and domestic opposition to linkage in the United States rather than Soviet compliance. This led the Nixon administration to change their approach. They decoupled SALT from Soviet-American competition in the Third World, accepted nuclear parity with the Soviets, and generally disaggregated issues in the hope that (in Kissinger's words) "in moving forward across a wide spectrum of negotiations, progress in one area adds momentum to progress in other areas" (in Larson, 1991a:388).

This example raises two questions: What type of learning took place, and how important was learning relative to other factors in inducing a change in American policy toward the Soviet Union? Larson (1991a) argues convincingly that Nixon and Kissinger did not change their fundamental beliefs about the Soviet Union or about the optimum world order and how best to achieve it, but only their tactics. Moreover, these tactical changes may have been a response more to internal political pressures than to any genuine learning from the international environment or from Soviet actions. Larson (1991a:390) argues that Nixon decoupled SALT from negotiations on Vietnam and the Middle East primarily because Congress would not finance nuclear weapons programs prior to serious efforts at arms control negotiations, and concludes that "Nixon was more responsive to the domestic context of learning than the international one."

We have seen that the learning hypothesis provides a plausible interpretation of several important episodes in American foreign policy. But as we have also seen, different people draw different lessons from the same historical experience or rely on different historical analogies; political leaders use historical analogies to advance their policy preferences or domestic political interests as well as to understand the world better; people's underlying belief systems may account for both their interpretation of historical experience and their use of those lessons of history to guide policy at a latter point in time; and changing beliefs at the governmental level may be the consequence of political succession as well as the result of individual learning. Many of these same patterns arise in Soviet foreign policy, to which we now turn.

LEARNING IN SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY

Soviet Military Doctrine and the Inevitability of War

Scholars have applied the learning hypothesis to a number of important developments in Soviet foreign policy, including changes in Soviet military doctrine in the 1950s regarding the inevitability of war. In a dramatic break with Leninist doctrine, Premier Khrushchev declared at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 that war between capitalism and socialism was no longer "fatalistically inevitable" (Holloway, 1984:32). Although this reflected a certain degree of learning by Khrushchev (Zimmerman, 1969), it is not clear whether this represented "fundamental learning" involving a change in goals and a more differentiated world view (Evangalista, 1991:289) or more restricted tactical learning that did not involve any significant revision of the conception of the global struggle with imperialism (Breslauer, 1987:434; Weber, 1991:792; Zubok, this book).

This "nuclear learning" was not sufficient for a change in Soviet nuclear policy, for not all Soviet leaders accepted the doctrinal change. Although some Soviet political leaders had probably begun to reassess the "inevitability of war" doctrine prior to Stalin's death (Holloway, 1984:31), it was not politically possible for them to move away from "Stalinist military science" until well after Stalin's death in 1953. Recall that Malenkov's 1954 statement that war in the nuclear age would result in the "destruction of world civilization" not only was rejected but actually contributed to his political downfall. Only with a changing coalition of domestic political forces was Khrushchev able to reverse his own position on this issue (Snyder, 1991a:chap. 6).³³ Thus, individual learning, even by top political authorities, is not a sufficient condition for governmental learning and policy change. The institutionalization of individual learning at the governmental level requires a certain constellation of domestic political forces.³⁴

Learning and Cycles in Soviet Expansionism

A number of scholars have observed a cyclical pattern of expansion and retrenchment of global commitments in Soviet foreign policy since at least the mid-1930s (Fukuyama, 1987).³⁵ The general argument is as follows. Stalin's policy of "socialism in one country" eschewed global competition with "imperialist" states prior to World War II, though by the late 1940s his foreign policy had become much more belligerent. Soviet foreign policy was somewhat cautious in the early 1950s but became more expansionist in the late 1950s and early 1960s under Khrushchev, who was more willing to support nationalist regimes and national liberation movements in the Third World. After some retrenchment in the late Khrushchev and early Brezhnev periods,³⁶ the 1970s were characterized by a greater willingness to support radical regimes and movements in the Third World (in sub-Saharan Africa, for example) and by the invasion of Afghanistan, which was the first large-scale use of Soviet ground forces in a Third World conflict. This extension of global commitments was followed by a significant retrenchment under Gorbachev, as manifested by a withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, of Cuban forces from Angola (with Soviet encouragement, and matched by a South African pullback as well), and of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia.³⁷

American Sovietologists have suggested a number of hypotheses in an attempt to explain these cycles in Soviet foreign policy. One is the learning hypothesis, which asserts that Soviet leaders learn from the success or failure of their own policies and from American policies in the previous cycle, and that the lessons drawn influence subsequent Soviet behavior. For the Cold War period, the learning hypothesis might suggest the following line of argument. Soviet leaders learned from the Truman Doctrine that there was little hope for cooperation with the United States and that the United States had adopted an aggressive posture of continuous pressure on the Soviet Union (Kremenjuk, this book). These lessons were confirmed in Soviet eyes by the formation of the NATO alliance and a separate West German state and by American intervention in the Korean War.

A decade later, however, Soviet leaders drew a different set of lessons from the Cuban missile/Caribbean crisis: the determination of the United States to resist any sudden change in the status quo that might significantly affect the correlation of forces, the dangers of an inadvertent war with the United States, the limits of the norms of the emerging U.S.-Soviet security regime, and the necessity for greater prudence in Soviet behavior (Breslauer, 1987:434-435; Kremenjuk, this book).

Soviet leaders drew a different set of lessons in the mid-1970s, as a result of the American withdrawal from the Vietnam War and the gains from Soviet interventions in the Third World. The correlation of forces was shifting in favor of socialism, modest Soviet support for radical forces in the Third World could bring significant gains, and these gains would contribute to falling dominoes and encourage additional countries to join the socialist camp. In addition, regional conflicts had been decoupled from the U.S.-Soviet strategic relationship, so that the USSR could make gains in the Third World without risks of a confrontation with the United States (risks which would be further diminished by the deterrent effects of enhanced Soviet military power) and without sacrificing the advantages of detente (Zimmerman and Axelrod, 1981; Breslauer, 1987; Bennett, 1992).³⁸

The new mood of Soviet optimism in foreign policy was reversed, however, after the unexpectedly strong American response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and after increasing problems with Soviet-backed socialist regimes in the Third World. The new lessons were that Soviet intervention could generate balancing rather than bandwagoning behavior and that it could disrupt detente; that the inevitability of the victory of socialist forces in low-intensity wars could no longer be taken for granted; that the military activities of Soviet client states generated substantial economic costs; and that the long-term viability of progressive military regimes was open to question (Breslauer, 1987; Bennett, 1992).

Gorbachev's "new thinking" not only subsumed these tactical and strategic lessons but also involved a reconceptualization of the nature of the international system and the role of the Soviet Union in it.³⁹ The new thinking recognizes that nuclear war would be suicidal, that the prevention of war should be the primary goal of Soviet military doctrine and foreign policy,⁴⁰ and that nuclear war is most likely to occur through inadvertence or accident rather than by deliberate design. Security is mutual, national security requires international security, the fate of socialism and capitalism is inextricably linked, and the quest for unilateral gains is counterproductive. Moreover, political means of enhancing security are more

effective than military-technical means, superiority is no longer a viable strategic conception, "reasonable sufficiency" and "defensive" (nonprovocative) defense constitute a more solid basis of security and military policy, and the negotiation of deep reductions in strategic nuclear forces with the United States will enhance Soviet security (Snyder, 1987/88; Meyer, 1988; Holloway, 1989; Legvold, 1989, 1991; Stein, 1993). More generally, as George (1991:478) argues, Gorbachev and his supporters hoped that it might be possible to " 'deideologize' international relations, to 'demilitarize' the foundations of security, and to 'degeopoliticize' competition with the United States for influence in the Third World."⁴¹

Although this line of argument is a plausible one, there are a number of alternative explanations for the observed patterns in Soviet foreign policy. Structural models might explain the cyclical extension and retrenchment of Soviet global commitments in terms of changes in the dyadic balance of U.S.-Soviet military power at either the conventional or nuclear levels, changes in U.S. foreign policy or the overall state of U.S.-Soviet relations, or changes in the opportunities for exploitation created by political instabilities in Third World countries. Institutional models would emphasize the impact of changing norms or the emergence of a "security regime" in the U.S.-Soviet strategic relationship. Domestic and bureaucratic political models would explain the observed cyclical patterns in Soviet foreign policy in terms of internal economic developments, generational change and political succession, and bureaucratic or coalitional politics.

One of the strengths of some very recent studies of Soviet foreign policy is their attempt to test several of these alternative explanations for changing patterns of Soviet foreign policy over all or part of the Cold War period (Bennett, 1990, 1992; Evangelista, 1991; Wallander, 1992; Snyder, 1991a; Deudney and Ikenberry, 1991/92; Stein, 1993; Moltz, 1993; Mendelson, 1993). Although these and other studies are not in full agreement about the relative importance of the various causal factors represented in the alternative models, there is some convergence around a few general themes.

One theme, which is supported by nearly all of these studies, is that realist models based on the dyadic balance of military power and other constraints and opportunities in the international system cannot adequately explain variations in Soviet foreign policy (Breslauer, 1987; Bennett, 1990; Wallander, 1992; Evangelista, 1991; Snyder, 1991a; Stein, 1993). Snyder (1991a:229) argues, "Realism provides a good explanation for Stalin's buck-passing diplomacy of the 1930s and a fairly plausible explanation for his aggressive policies in Europe in the late 1940s. It explains less well Khrushchev's diplomatic overassertiveness and Brezhnev's imperial overextension."⁴²

It should also be noted that Gorbachev's immediate predecessors Andropov and Chernenko faced basically the same external circumstances and internal economic constraints that Gorbachev did, but they responded much differently. In addition, most of the key components of Gorbachev's new thinking were challenged by other top Soviet leaders. Military leaders, including Minister of Defense Yazov, criticized the emphasis on political solutions to security problems, and Ligachev continued to emphasize the importance of the international class struggle (Meyer, 1988; Stein, 1993). Thus there was considerable variation in per-

predictions that significant changes in the international system lead directly to policy change through structural adjustment by political leaders who have uniform perceptions of the changing environment.

The fact that there was some variation in the world views of Soviet elites, that this variation existed even among those in Gorbachev's age cohort, and that individuals with shared information still drew different lessons (Moltz, 1993), suggests also some limitations of a purely generational model of Soviet foreign policy change under Gorbachev, which has been advanced by a number of analysts.⁴³ These scholars emphasize the importance of the fact that the learning associated with the new thinking under Gorbachev coincided with generational changes in Soviet political and military elites and with a major political succession in the party leadership (Bialer, 1980; Breslauer, 1987; Hough, 1988; Cohen and Vanden Heuvel, 1989).

The generation gap between the elites associated with the Brezhnev and Gorbachev regimes is particularly striking. Most members of the Brezhnev Politburo were born around 1910, and their formative political experiences were shaped by Stalin's forced collectivization, the Great Terror, and the Great Patriotic War (i.e., World War II). Gorbachev and most of his cohort, on the other hand, were born around 1930. Their formative political experiences were largely shaped by Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, his subsequent policy of de-Stalinization and partial opening of the Soviet system, and the Cuban missile crisis. There were also potentially important differences in the educational backgrounds of the two generations of Soviet elites. Most of the elite associated with Brezhnev had more technical training in engineering or agriculture, while Gorbachev was the first Soviet leader since Lenin to get a law degree (Hough, 1988:chap. 1).

Thus, the "children of 1956" (Cohen and Vanden Heuvel, 1989) as a group differed from the previous generation in terms of both their critical formative experiences and their professional training. Their different backgrounds contributed to different world views, and these in turn left them predisposed to interpret the events of the 1980s in a different way than did the previous generation. Yet significant differences remained within this new generation of Soviet leaders (Meyer, 1988; Stein, 1993), and this suggests that generational learning alone is not an adequate explanation of significant Soviet foreign policy change under Gorbachev.

This leads us to another general theme, which is accepted by most analysts in spite of their disagreements about the precise mechanisms by which experiential learning affects Soviet foreign policy: Learning is not a sufficient condition for change, and the primary impact of learning comes through its interaction effects with other variables. The role of domestic political variables is particularly important because the transmission of learning from the individual to the governmental level is impeded or facilitated by bureaucratic and domestic political conditions and processes (Snyder, 1991a: chap. 6; Wallander, 1992; Moltz, 1993; Mendelson, 1993).⁴⁴

More specifically, individual learning by top decision makers has little impact unless those who learn are in a position to implement their preferred policies or to

is "not whether Soviet leaders have the intellectual wherewithal to learn about the realities of international politics, but whether those who learn such lessons can survive in Soviet domestic politics." Similarly, Wallander (1992) argues that the political success of those who have learned is a necessary condition for Soviet learning at the governmental level.

Wallander (1992) acknowledges that individual political leaders learn lessons from the successes or failures in their foreign policies.⁴⁵ She argues, however, that such learning is rarely a sufficient condition for policy change. Instead, internal economic crises and the failure of existing policies to resolve them play a critical role by forcing the elite in power to change policies at both the domestic and international levels in order to maintain its position of power. In the absence of such crises, she argues, there are few incentives for change (see also Bennett, 1990; Moltz, 1993).⁴⁶

The domestic factors that determine whether individual learning by top political leaders gets transmitted to the governmental level are also affected by the same international factors which affect individual learning. Successful external interventions play a key role in legitimizing the political authority and influence of pro-interventionists within the Soviet leadership, and this reinforces international activist policies. Unsuccessful foreign policies, on the other hand, discredit the existing leadership and facilitate domestic changes that bring a new elite with different strategic conceptions to power, and this in turn leads to policy change (Wallander, 1992).⁴⁷

More generally, Snyder (1991a:253) argues that "international conditions helped make or break strategic ideologies" by affecting the plausibility of the arguments advanced by various Soviet factions.⁴⁸ These considerations lead Cohen (1985:157) to conclude that "cold-war relations abet conservative and even neo-Stalinist forces in Soviet officialdom and that Soviet reformers stand a chance only in conditions of East-West detente." The impact of Western actions on Soviet domestic politics and consequently on the viability of Soviet strategic learning is not always the same, however, but may depend upon who is in power in Moscow.⁴⁹ Snyder (1991a:253-254) hypothesizes that hard-line American policies help Soviet soft-liners when—but only when—Soviet hard-liners are in power (for example, after the Korean attack and the Cuban missile crisis) but discredit Soviet doves when the doves are already in power.⁵⁰

The previous discussion deals with the impact of political change on opportunities for foreign policy learning.⁵¹ But the relationship between personnel changes and learning is often a reciprocal one. As Breslauer (1987:443) argues, "these political changes facilitate regime learning by providing the impetus, political incentive, and political opportunity for a significant reevaluation of assumptions." Bennett (1990, 1992) develops this argument further and argues that learning can contribute to personnel changes and therefore to a shift in the domestic balance of forces. Lessons from the early 1980s regarding the long-term costs of Soviet military interventions not only had an independent impact on Gorbachev's new thinking but led Gorbachev to replace Gromyko with Shevardnadze as foreign minister and Ponomarev with Dobrynin as head of the Central Committee's International Department. These new heads subsequently used

their influence to restructure their departments in a way that facilitated the new thinking (Bennett, 1992).

There are also other paths through which learning might affect domestic politics. The growth of multiple schools of thought within the network of Soviet institutes (such as the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Moscow) and the expanded role of academic specialists—many of whom had contacts with Western intellectuals through international meetings and exchanges (Mandelbaum, 1988; Checkel, 1993)—created a broad-based consensus among many policy intellectuals in favor of change. This provided a steady flow of ideas which influenced those Soviet leaders open to new ideas, and which the leaders could use to legitimize fundamental reevaluations of policy (Breslauer, 1987:444; Stein, 1993).⁵² These policy scientists had long been critical of traditional strategic concepts and of the failure of Soviet doctrine and policy to advance Soviet goals, the case of Afghanistan being particularly salient in this regard.

This raises the question of whether the top leadership adopts ideas which are generated by midlevel officials or academics (and which may have already been "tested" domestically) or whether the top leadership takes the initiative in formulating and spreading new ideas. Bennett (1992) calls the first "bottom-up" learning and the second "top-down" learning. He argues that bottom-up learning was more common in the Brezhnev period, whereas top-down learning was somewhat more common under Andropov and was the dominant pattern under Gorbachev.⁵³

This dichotomy is somewhat misleading, however, for in reality both types of learning were involved, and in fact the process was a reciprocal and mutually reinforcing one. Gorbachev learned from policy intellectuals, who had come to the new thinking about Soviet security and international politics before Gorbachev did. As Gorbachev began to learn and as his political power increased, he went to great lengths to sell these new ideas to influential Soviet elites.⁵⁴ He also initiated a substantial restaffing of the foreign and defense policy establishment (excluding the Soviet General Staff) in an attempt to institutionalize the new thinking. Although Gorbachev was only partially successful in this goal, in that substantial dissent remained, he did expand somewhat the political base in favor of foreign policy change.

The previous arguments suggest that genuine learning occurs but that it influences policy only under certain types of domestic conditions. Other theorists, however, are more skeptical about the existence and causal influence of genuine intellectual learning. They emphasize instead the role that domestic political interests and processes play in shaping the interpretation or construction of "lessons" from recent or past historical experience. Evangelista (1991:328) summarizes the basic argument when he suggests that "learning metaphors obscure what is fundamentally a political process of change toward moderation [under Gorbachev]." Similarly, Lynch (1989:3) argues that the new thinking "is first of all a political rather than an intellectual or conceptual act," and Meyer (1988:129) suggests that "Gorbachev's agitation for new political thinking on security is more a product of instrumental necessity than of military-strategic enlightenment."

Snyder (1991a) subsumes this argument under his more general model of coalitional politics and strategic mythmaking. Although Snyder (1987/88, 1991: chap. 6) acknowledges the existence of genuine learning which is then blocked from affecting policy by domestic conditions, his main emphasis is on the process by which Soviet elites construct lessons from the past in order to rationalize, protect, and advance their domestic political interests.⁵⁵ Evangelista (1991:328) concurs, and argues that “‘lessons’ of the Brezhnev era have become instruments of Gorbachev’s coalition building strategy.” He suggests that “Gorbachev has latched onto these ideas, which are probably compatible with his own instincts in any case, in order to redistribute the relative power of the institutions involved in formulating and carrying out Soviet security policy.”

To suggest that the new thinking about Soviet security is primarily the product of domestic necessity and thus epiphenomenal is a considerable exaggeration, however, and draws too stark a contrast between a learning model and a domestic political model. It may be true that Gorbachev’s primary concern as general secretary was to rebuild the economic and industrial base of the Soviet Union; he soon came to recognize that traditional conceptions of Soviet interests in foreign and defense policy would seriously constrain this internal economic restructuring. Gorbachev needed to gain control of the defense agenda, and consequently his new thinking about security issues may initially have been motivated by this commitment to *perestroika* (Meyer, 1988; Stein, 1993).

This argument, however, is not inconsistent with the idea of learning. Gorbachev, did, after all, develop new ideas about Soviet security and international politics, and he integrated those ideas into a changing and increasingly complex and differentiated world view. Learning as cognitive change is analytically distinct from the source of learning, and the fact that Gorbachev had incentives to rethink existing strategic concepts helps to explain the learning process rather than to undercut its existence entirely. What Stein (1993) calls “motivated learning” is still learning, and it can serve as an important intervening variable in the processes leading to policy change.

Moreover, it is not at all clear that other general secretaries would have responded the same as Gorbachev in the same situation. Andropov and Chernenko faced similar problems but behaved differently. Stein (1993) builds on the literature in social psychology to argue that Gorbachev was particularly open to change because he had spent most of his career on economic rather than security issues and therefore came to the position of general secretary with less deeply entrenched beliefs about security issues than did Andropov or others. As an “uncommitted thinker” in foreign and defense policy, Gorbachev was psychologically less committed to traditional security concepts, and he was more open to the recognition of important value trade-offs between existing security policy and the domestic economic changes necessary to ensure both domestic welfare and long-term security. Thus, he was more flexible to respond to the economic crisis at home with creative initiatives in foreign policy. This cognitive analysis of the conditions conducive to learning helps to refine the interactive relationship between learning and political change and provides a richer model of Soviet foreign policy change under Gorbachev.

CONCLUSIONS

This study suggests that although learning from experience is a potentially powerful explanatory concept in both U.S. and Soviet foreign policy, we have to be cautious in applying the learning concept empirically because it is often confounded with other explanatory variables and because its impact on policy generally comes through its interaction effects with other variables rather than directly. Although much more empirical research is required before we can determine the relative importance of learning and understand more fully how learning combines with other variables to affect foreign policy outcomes, it is clear that substantial conceptual clarification and model specification is necessary before empirical research can meaningfully proceed. Here I summarize some of the main analytical points which have emerged in the course of this study and which I have developed more fully elsewhere (Levy, 1994).

It is necessary, first of all, to recognize that learning is not definitionally equivalent to foreign policy change. States change their foreign policies for a variety of reasons (Hermann, 1990). Changes in the international or dyadic distribution of power, diplomatic alignments, patterns of trade and finance, international norms, or other structural features of the international system may create incentives for policy change. Domestic shifts in power at the bureaucratic or societal levels may bring a new elite to power which has a different conception of the national interest or the means to achieve it, a different domestic agenda, or different self-serving political or personal interests, any of which might create incentives for foreign policy change. Finally, changes in the belief systems of individual leaders at the cognitive level may lead to a new world view and a reassessment of foreign policy goals and the strategies or tactics most likely to achieve those goals.⁵⁶

Only the last of these processes constitutes learning. Because there are various paths to foreign policy change, any empirical study of foreign policy learning must either explicitly test the relative explanatory power of learning against alternative explanatory models, or integrate learning into more general models of foreign policy change and identify the specific causal linkages between learning and other key causal variables. The existence of interaction effects between learning and domestic and institutional variables leads to the conceptualization of learning at the organizational, societal, and governmental as well as individual levels, which raises troublesome analytical issues relating to collective learning and the levels-of-analysis problem. Individual learning is a necessary but not sufficient condition for organizational learning or governmental learning.⁵⁷

The task of testing alternative models of foreign policy change is also complicated by the possibility that what appears to be learning from historical experience may actually be the deliberate use of historical analogies by political leaders to bolster their preexisting policy preferences or to rationalize bureaucratic or domestic political interests. Perhaps even more likely and more troubling for the analyst is the possibility that the relationship between historical lessons and current policy preferences is a reciprocal one which unfolds dynamically over time. Or the relationship may be spurious, with underlying belief systems inde-

pendently shaping both the interpretation of historical experience and current policy preferences.

Thus it is clear that our understanding of the impact of learning on foreign policy change is as much a theoretical problem as an empirical one. Before the learning hypothesis can be tested against the empirical evidence or against alternative explanations of foreign policy change, we must define precisely what we mean by learning, how learning interacts with other variables in the causal paths leading to foreign policy change, and where in the causal chain this learning occurs. We must then test the learning model against a range of empirical evidence. On the basis of this preliminary investigation, I expect we will find that cognitive learning models by themselves have limited explanatory power with to state behavior, but that learning may play an essential role in combination with other variables in a number of important causal paths leading to foreign policy change.

NOTES

1. Prior to this relatively little attention was devoted to the importance of learning in the literature on international conflict and the causes of war (Levy, 1989).
2. Not all learning is in the direction of greater cooperation. Leng (1983) shows that states that engage in repeated crises often learn, however mistakenly, that the key to success is to engage in more competitive behavior.
3. Although I restrict myself here to security-related issues, it would also be useful to explore learning in issues relating to foreign economic policy. It is commonly argued, for example, that the development of the Bretton Woods regime for the international political economy was influenced by the lessons political leaders drew from the experiences of the Great Depression of the interwar years (Kindleberger, 1973).
4. I deal with these conceptual and methodological problems more thoroughly in Levy (1994).
5. I will not be concerned here with theories of learning in the literature on social psychology or organizational behavior, where they have been explored at length (Bandura, 1977; Lott and Lott, 1985; Argyris and Schon, 1978; March and Olsen, 1979; Sagan, 1992).
6. This definition includes the acquisition of new beliefs. It does not require that learning involve an improved understanding of the world or an increasingly complex cognitive structure. (On the latter see Tetlock, 1991.) Learning may involve the construction of "lessons of history," but not all inferences from experience involve lessons. I discuss these definitional and related conceptual issues further in Levy (1994).
7. See Jervis (1976:chap. 3), Bennett (1990), Tetlock (1991), Haas (1990, 1991), Breslauer (1991), Evangelista (1991), and Stein (1993). For summaries of theories of attitude or belief change, see McGuire (1985) and Larson (1985:chap. 1), and for potential errors and biases in the use of historical analogies, see Jervis (1976) and Vertzberger (1990).
8. It is possible to extend this analysis to the periods before World War II and after the Persian Gulf War. One can plausibly argue, for example, that for many Americans the "lesson" of World War I was that the munitions makers led the United States into the

war and that this lesson contributed to the isolationist sentiment in the 1930s (Cole, 1962). One might also argue that the overwhelming U.S. military success in the Persian Gulf War has created certain lessons which might influence U.S. policy in subsequent crises. Some will undoubtedly "learn" from the Gulf War that military force in general and high-tech military weapons in particular can be used effectively and with minimal costs and risks to deal with a wide range of international problems facing the United States. It is not clear, however, that the Persian Gulf War and the particular political and diplomatic conditions under which it arose are likely to be duplicated in the future. Hackworth (1991) puts it more colorfully: "Desert Storm was the mother of all military anomalies."

9. Although this is the most common interpretation of the lessons of Munich—at least among American academics and policymakers and perhaps others as well (see note 12)—it is not the only possible "construction" of Munich. Others may have drawn a somewhat different set of lessons. For some Soviet leaders—who had attempted to work with Britain and France to contain the Nazi threat—the lesson of Munich was that cooperation with the West was a futile exercise. Others may have inferred from Munich that the aim of the West was to create the conditions for a Nazi-Soviet war (Fleming, 1961:79–83). Although it does not appear that these other constructions of Munich have acquired the status of a well-defined and frequently utilized historical "script" upon which political leaders rely to guide their policies or perhaps help rationalize them, this would be an interesting research question to pursue and to examine empirically.
10. Note that the Munich analogy is related to the metaphor of falling dominoes and the assumption that states tend to bandwagon with a threatening state rather than balance against it (Jervis and Snyder, 1991). The hypothesis that a firm and timely response to aggression will work successfully may be true under some conditions but not under others (Jervis, 1976:chap. 3; Glaser, 1992). Ironically, it is probably incorrect for the case of Hitler at Munich; it is unlikely that compellent or deterrent threats would have worked against Hitler (Glad and Taber, 1990:67–69).
11. Truman's actual knowledge of history, which some historians describe as rather "sketchy" (Vertzberger, 1990:328), is less important here than Truman's own degree of confidence in his understanding of history and hence his willingness to rely on that knowledge as a guide to judgment and decision in foreign policy.
12. Americans were not the only ones to use the Munich analogy, and perhaps not the first. In a 1947 speech, Andrey Zhdanov warned, "Just as in the past the Munich policy untied the hands of the Nazi aggressors, so today concessions to the . . . United States and the imperialist camp may encourage its inspirers to be even more insolent and aggressive" (Carlyle, 1952:137). After the North Korean invasion but before the American intervention, a number of Europeans noted parallels with the 1930s (Larson, 1991b:97). A few years later, during the Suez crisis, British Prime Minister Eden asserted, "It is important to reduce the stature of the megalomaniacal dictator at an early stage. . . . Some say that Nasser is no Hitler or Mussolini. I am not so sure" (in Holsti and Rosenau, 1984:5).
13. In the 1930s Truman had accepted the view that it was the bankers and munitions makers who had maneuvered the United States into intervention against its best interests in World War I; as a senator he had voted in favor of some isolationist policies; Pearl Harbor marked a major conversion for him; and he felt shame and guilt for his earlier views—these facts only intensified the strength of the Munich analogy for Truman (May, 1973:81).

14. For an interesting critique of the hypothesis that the Munich analogy had a causal impact on American decision making in the Korean War, and an argument that political leaders used the Munich analogy to help justify a policy they preferred for other (domestic) reasons, see Snyder (1991a:277-278).
15. In 1965, for example, Lyndon Johnson stated, "We learned from Hitler at Munich that success only feeds the appetite of aggression" (cited in Ravenal, 1978:34).
16. This is demonstrated by Khong (1992:97-98) in his content analysis of the U.S. Department of State *Bulletin*. U.S. decision makers also referred to the experiences of Greece, Malaya, Berlin, the Philippines, Cuba, and Turkey, among others.
17. In fact, the "never again" lesson was influential in Eisenhower's decision not to commit U.S. military forces to Indochina in support of the French in 1954. But others drew different lessons from the French war in Indochina. General Maxwell Taylor told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1966 that France had lost the war not in Vietnam but in Paris (Brodie, 1973:5), which parallels a lesson some have drawn from the American defeat in Vietnam two decades later.
18. In contrast with the deliberate strategic use of historical analogies to serve current interests, interpretations of the past which are governed by subconscious psychological processes to maintain cognitive consistency are difficult to distinguish analytically from genuine learning.
19. Although in this sense Snyder's research design is more powerful than Khong's, Snyder's learning model is not as fully developed as Khong's, and Snyder's need to cover multiple cases understandably limits to some extent the thoroughness of the research on each individual case.
20. Leaders may also become *politically* entrapped by their analogies and be unable to abandon them without undermining their domestic political positions (Thomson, 1973; Snyder, 1991a:42).
21. Of course, not all Americans had well-defined world views prior to the Vietnam War, and it is reasonable to hypothesize that the more amorphous one's views, the greater the "learning" from the Vietnam War. For many in the baby boom generation, the Vietnam War was a formative political experience which independently generated important historical lessons.
22. See Jervis (1976:chap. 3) for an excellent discussion of the dangers of spurious inferences regarding the relationship between interpretations of the past and current preferences.
23. For a review of the literature on war-weariness (and war contagion more generally), see Levy and Morgan (1986).
24. The effect persists, as evidenced by debates about the wisdom of American intervention for humanitarian purposes in the Bosnian crisis that began in 1992.
25. If a new administration comes to power *because* it offers an alternative conception of foreign policy, then we can say that the process involves social learning by the public, who elect their leaders. But if the new administration comes to power primarily because of domestic issues, which is the more common pattern in the United States (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik, 1976), then learning is not really involved. On the distinction between political succession and learning, see Evangelista (1991) and Levy (1994).
26. I thank George Breslauer for bringing this point to my attention. This broadening of the concept of the requisites of an interventionist policy still involves a change in beliefs regarding the optimal conditions for achieving one's interests, which fits into my definition of learning.
27. This goes back to MacArthur's famous dictum and his argument that "once war is forced upon us, there is no other alternative than to apply every available means to bring it to a swift end" (Brodie, 1973:4).

28. Critics argue that the policy of escalation, in conjunction with numerous pauses in the bombing campaign, gave the adversary breathing space and let it fight a protracted war on its own terms and with continual resupply from the outside. They argue also that the policy of graduated escalation also contributed to the erosion of the American public's support for the war (Summers, 1982).
29. Of course, both presidents had staffed key foreign and defense policy positions with individuals who shared their own beliefs on these issues.
30. At the same time, opponents of American military intervention in Kuwait repeatedly invoked the opposite side of the Vietnam analogy to highlight the potential costs and risks of an interventionist policy.
31. It is also plausible that the "lessons" Saddam Hussein drew from the American experience in Vietnam contributed to the origins and escalation of the Persian Gulf War—by increasing his confidence both that the United States would not intervene with military force and that if the United States did intervene the high casualties (which Saddam expected) from the war would create American public pressure for a negotiated settlement on terms favorable to Saddam. These misperceptions reduced the perceived risks of the invasion of Kuwait for Saddam and reduced his incentives to agree to a negotiated withdrawal from Kuwait in response to American and UN pressures. The lessons which Saddam drew from the Iran-Iraq War were also important (Freedman and Karsh, 1993).
32. President Bush did impose some general guidelines on strategy (minimize American casualties) and on the selection of targets (Woodward, 1991), and once the objective of expelling Iraq from Kuwait was achieved he decided to terminate the military effort over the objections of many military and some civilian leaders. But the level of presidential involvement was clearly less than in the Vietnam War.
33. In addition, Khrushchev's overall political agenda required some relaxation of tensions with the West, and the shift in Soviet military doctrine was helpful and perhaps even necessary for that purpose.
34. For subsequent changes in views on the usability of nuclear weapons, see Nye (1987). Nye cautions, however, about possible discrepancies between declaratory policy and operational doctrine.
35. This pattern correlates with the alternating pattern of "left-wing" and "right-wing" strategies in Soviet policy, as defined primarily by the Soviets' willingness to encourage local Communist parties to ally with sympathetic but noncommunist groups (bourgeois nationalists, socialists, national liberation movements, and other "anti-imperialist" groups) as a means to the ultimate goals of communist power or Soviet influence (Fukuyama, 1987:2-4).
36. For an interpretation of the U.S.-Soviet Partial Test Ban Treaty of 1963 in terms of mutual iterated learning by Kennedy and Khrushchev, see Larson (1992).
37. There is substantial but not perfect agreement among scholars regarding the timing of these phases of extension and retraction of Soviet global commitments (Fukuyama, 1987; Huntington, 1987; Breslauer, 1987; Snyder, 1991a:Chap. 6; Bennett, 1992; Crumm and Rosenau, this book).
38. Although this is a common interpretation of the views of Soviet leaders in the mid-to-late 1970s, it is also possible to argue that interventionist behavior actually reduced Soviet power because expanding commitments imposed a serious drain on scarce economic resources without significantly adding to Soviet influence in politically important areas.
39. Legvold (1991:708) characterizes the new thinking as a case of "schemata under siege." These changes in beliefs involved an increasingly differentiated and nuanced conception of international politics. The new thinking did not develop autonomously, how-

ever, but instead evolved in conjunction with generational change, political succession, and political maneuvering by the new leadership to promote their ideas (Mendelson, 1993; Stein, 1993).

40. Although political leaders had long recognized this, Soviet military doctrine had previously emphasized the utility of a strategy of preparing to fight and win a nuclear war if that became necessary.
41. Although these beliefs were shared by many of Gorbachev's key advisors, they were challenged by other Soviet political and military elites (Meyer, 1988; Stein, 1993).
42. Snyder may be too generous to realist theory in his interpretation of Soviet foreign policy under Stalin. Stalin's caution in the 1930s might be better explained by an interpretation which emphasizes Stalin's domestic goals and the policies to achieve them, including forced collectivization, industrialization, and the Great Terror. Moreover, Stalin's aggressive stance in the late 1940s probably went beyond what realist theory might predict, given American atomic superiority and Soviet backwardness. The more general problem, of course, is that realist theory is not very precise in its prediction of foreign policy outcomes.
43. Meyer (1988), Stein (1993), and Moltz (1993), among others, emphasize variations in the beliefs of many in Gorbachev's cohort and differences in the extent to which those beliefs changed in the 1980s.
44. This raises the larger question of whether the concept of learning can be meaningfully applied to organizations, governments, and other collective decision-making bodies. I deal with this issue and related levels-of-analysis problems associated with the concept of organizational or governmental learning in Levy (1994). See also Argyris and Schon (1978) and March and Olsen (1979).
45. Wallander (1992) suggests, for example, that the change in Khrushchev's world view was a necessary condition for Soviet activism from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s.
46. As I emphasize later, internal economic crises can force not only a change in foreign and defense policy but also a change in strategic concepts and world views.
47. Similarly, Vasquez (1987) emphasizes how the outcome of the last war changed the internal balance of power between hard-liners and accommodationists and hence the receptivity of the political leadership to certain kinds of lessons.
48. Snyder (1991a:233) argues, for example, that Malenkov's 1954 argument regarding the disastrous consequences of nuclear war was undercut by Dulles's "massive retaliation" speech.
49. Not all policies and international outcomes generate unambiguous external feedback, so some lessons are more open to domestic debate than others. This may vary by issue area as well as by specific policy. Weber (1991) argues that in issues like arms control, in which there is little feedback from the environment regarding the success of a particular policy, the competition between strategic models becomes primarily a political process.
50. Constraints and opportunities for learning may also vary by issue area. Breslauer (1987:445) suggests that because the Third World was always less politically important than issues tied directly to relationships with the United States, Europe, or China, the political costs incurred in a fundamental reevaluation of assumptions underlying Soviet Third World policy would be less than in other areas.
51. Anderson (1991) advances a psychological model to argue that political competition impedes learning in foreign policy by focusing the attention of decision makers on internal rather than external developments. Any such effect should be much smaller, however, than the positive feedback between domestic change and enhanced learning.

53. Learning may also vary across organizations. Wallander (1989:33) argues that "the Soviet military does not 'learn'; rather, it 'accommodates' itself to successful changes in the leaders' policy."
54. For good discussions of the role of policy entrepreneurs in promoting new ideas in order to build political coalitions around them, see Evangelista (1991:275-279) and Checkel (1993).
55. This hypothesis is supported by Wallander's (1992) argument that the predominance of interventionist ideas usually follows rather than precedes actual interventions.
56. A change in the conception of specific foreign policy goals in order to promote higher-order national values (sovereign independence, individual freedom, etc.) is clearly a case of learning. Whether a change in fundamental national values itself (or an individual religious conversion, for example) should be treated as learning is more problematic (Levy, 1994).
57. A secondary theme of this chapter is that learning can take place at several different cognitive levels, ranging from tactics to instrumental goals to more fundamental interests. The most plausible hypothesis is that fundamental learning occurs only after changes in tactics and instrumental goals prove to be ineffective. Another theme, which I have only hinted at here, is that learning is an analytically and normatively loaded concept. There is a tendency to define cognitive or behavioral change as learning only when it involves learning empirically correct or normatively acceptable lessons, as defined by the analyst's own theoretical and normative biases. For further discussion of these and other issues, see Tetlock (1991) and Levy (1994). On the concepts of organizational and governmental learning, see Argyris and Schon (1978), March and Olsen (1979), Etheridge (1981, 1985), Lovell (1984), Bennett (1990), and Haas (1991).

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