CHAPTER ONE

Analyzing Presidential Decision Making

In 1954 and again in 1965, American presidents with strikingly different leadership styles and advisory teams faced the same challenge: American-backed forces in Vietnam were in imminent peril of being defeated by Communist forces. In each year, the president and his associates engaged in intense deliberations about what to do. Within each administration some voices were raised in favor of committing American military forces to Southeast Asia and some were opposed.

In 1954, the Eisenhower administration did not intervene —Vietnam was partitioned, half coming under Communist rule and half under non-Communist rule. In 1965, the Johnson administration did intervene. It moved incrementally from 23,000 American advisory personnel in Vietnam in January to an open-ended commitment of American fighting forces on July 28— a commitment that in three years was to reach a half million troops, profoundly divide the American nation and undermine the president's capacity to lead.

The chapters that follow contain a selective reconstruction, analysis and comparison of how the two administrations decided on their policies toward Vietnam and the rest of Indochina.[1] The

[1]The Indochinese peninsula consists of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. In both crises the main concern of the American decision makers was with events in Vietnam. We refer interchangeably to Indochina and Vietnam in referring to the 1954 events, except when it is necessary to make a specific distinction. By 1965 the term Indochina was no longer in wide use.

reconstruction is based on the extraordinarily rich primary sources now available in archival repositories, including some that were not available to or not discussed by previous analysts of the American involvement in Vietnam. It also draws on interviews with participants in the two episodes. The novelty of our report derives not from its sources, however, but from how it uses them.

We canvassed the thousands of pages of evidence of how the two presidents and their advisers deliberated and acted in the two crises out of an interest in the quality of presidential reality testing. We refer to reality testing not in any technical psychological sense, but rather as a catch-all term to characterize the way presidents and other actors assess their environment. How do they gather and process information? How do they identify and explore possible courses of action? What is the impact of presidential advisory arrangements on presidential use of advice and information? What is the impact of the president's personal makeup and leadership style?

Our concern, it should be stressed, is instrumental. It is with the quality of decision *making* in the senses just indicated. It is *not* with the intrinsic quality of the decisions themselves. Thus in examining the actions of the two presidential decision-making groups, we do not ask such questions as: Did they make good policy? What, if any, policy would have been better? Our comparative advantage as students of decision making is not in judging what policies were warranted. It is in establishing whether policy alternatives were systematically and rigorously addressed.

It may seem that we are ignoring *the* most interesting feature of our cases by taking no position on the merits of the decisions made in the two years. Some will view the significance of the two episodes to be that in 1954 Eisenhower and his advisers wisely decided not to intervene, and that in 1965 the Johnson administration unwisely intervened. There are two reasons why this is not the premise of our study. First, if we stipulated that there was a "right" course of action in each of the years, we would be unable to assess the adequacy with which the full range of options was addressed. We would fail to study the adequacy of Eisenhower's attention to the interventionist position in 1954 and Johnson's attention to those of his advisers who favored such hawkish

policies as bombing Hanoi and Haiphong in 1965. Secondly and more fundamentally, we would have to add to an already complex and extensive study of decision making a completely new set of considerations that bear not on our cases but rather on the nature and criteria of policy evaluation and on our own political convictions.

Before laying out our analytic approach in further detail, we consider three general questions that frame this inquiry: Why study presidential decision making? Why study Eisenhower and Johnson decision making? Why study the 1954 and 1965 Vietnam crises?

WHY STUDY PRESIDENTIAL DECISION MAKING?

Presidential decision making needs examination because it can be of profound consequence, for better or worse. President Kennedy estimated in the Cuban Missile Crisis that the chances of outbreak of a full-scale war with the Soviet Union had been "somewhere between one out of three and even." After the fact, Kennedy and his associates reckoned the outcome of the missile crisis to be one of their greatest successes. In contrast, the Bay of Pigs fiasco left Kennedy "aghast at his own stupidity" and "angry at having been so badly advised."[2]

Kennedy's successes and failures were distinctive only in their magnitude. In the exponentially expanded modern presidency that emerged in Franklin D. Roosevelt's time, chief executives are held up to exceptional standards, but denied guaranteed means of fulfilling them. Compared with their predecessors, modern presidents have far greater power to take initiatives, but the continuing pluralism of American politics and society creates the danger that reactions to the new powers will undermine presidential leadership. Presidents have come to be chief agenda-setters in federal policy making, but the existence of a presidential program can lead the president to raise hopes only to dash them. The president has come to be the most visible actor in American politics, but his

[2]Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 295 and 705.

visibility can make him the scapegoat for national woes. Presidents have been provided with a major staff and advisory capacity, but aides can be an impediment as well as an asset in policy making.

Because the balance between successful and unsuccessful presidential decision making is precarious, there have been repeated attempts to identify the factors that are likely to tip the balance one way or another. The proposed answers have been predictably diverse, but they fall readily into three categories: explanations bearing on properties of the president's advisory system, on personal properties of the president and on properties of the political environment of the president and his advisers.[3]

The President's Advisory System

The presidency is a complex institution in which the properties of the president's principal associates can be as significant as his own strengths and weaknesses. A president's advisory system may include members of the institutional bureaucracy of the presidency and whatever other advisers and confidants he chooses to consult in and out of government.[4]

The study of the nature and consequences of White House advising came to a head in the 1970s with Stanford Business School Professor Richard Tanner Johnson's influential classification of White House organization. Surveying the presidents from FDR to Nixon and their advisory arrangements, Johnson concluded that he had identified three general patterns of White House organization, each with distinctive strengths and weaknesses.

Roosevelt, Johnson asserts, had a *competitive* advisory system, one in which advisers' responsibilities overlapped and the president fostered rivalries among them. Such an arrangement encourages creativity and puts the president in the center of the flow of information, Johnson holds, but places great demands on the president's time and may expose him to partial or biased

[3]For a fuller discussion of problems of presidential leadership, see Fred I. Greenstein, ed., *Leadership in the Modern Presidency*, especially the introduction and chap. 10.

[4]For a further discussion, see John P. Burke, "The Institutional Presidency."

information. The Eisenhower and Nixon White Houses, in Johnson's view, exemplified *formalistic* systems, in which advice and information were collected by an official staff and funneled up to the president. This approach conserves the president's time and encourages analysis, but in screening the advice and information that goes to the president may distort it. Johnson finds a happy median in the Kennedy pattern of *collegial* advising, in which "the managerial thrust is toward building a team of colleagues who work together to staff out problems and generate solutions, which, ideally, fuse the strongest elements of divergent points of view." A collegial advisory system, Johnson concludes, enhances the president's information, but puts great demands on his time and "requires unusual interpersonal skills in dealing with subordinates."[5]

Professor Johnson's observations about types of advisory systems complement those of such students of presidential advising as Irving Janis and Alexander George. Janis was intrigued by the anomaly that in a number of cases where important policy decisions were made by small, congenial decision-making groups, the participants were highly intelligent, experienced and politically sophisticated, yet they took actions that they should have known would be self-defeating. Janis attributes this failure to a process he calls "groupthink," a tendency on the part of members of cohesive groups to engage in uncritical thinking, thus reaching premature and overly optimistic closure on policies.[6]

George subsumes groupthink in a more extensive account of the variety of causes of advisory group failure. He proposes what he calls "multiple advocacy" as a remedy—an advisory arrangement designed to ensure that many viewpoints and options are enunciated on policies. Acknowledging that time and political constraints are obstacles to making effective use of advice and information,

[5]Richard Tanner Johnson, *Managing the White House: An Intimate Study of the Presidency*. Quotations at 7 and 238. Professor Johnson is unable to fit LBJ into his categories, suggesting that LBJ preferred formal arrangements but that his personality tended to undermine them.

[6]Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. For a useful explication of Janis' conceptualization of groupthink, see Jeanne Longley and Dean Pruitt, "Groupthink: A Critique of Janis's Theory."

George grants that good advisory processes do not guarantee desirable policy outcomes, but stresses that good processes reduce the likelihood of out-and-out decision-making fiascos and increase the chance that policies will be well-thought-out and carefully grounded.[7]

The Personal Properties of the President

For nonacademic observers, it is self-evident that such personal characteristics of the president as his personality, belief system and leadership style matter. Scholars, however, often are uneasy about analyzing the president's personal properties, largely because of their skepticism about much of the writing on personality and politics. They note that many psychobiographies serve more as clinical case histories than as assessments of how the president responded to the demands of the presidency and what his impact was upon policy.

The flaws of the political psychology literature do not eliminate the need to examine presidents' individual characteristics in accounting for their performance. The president's responsibilities are only loosely defined by the Constitution, statutes and tradition. Incumbents therefore vary in their response to comparable events, and their responses can have significant impact on national and international events.[8]

One concern of students of individual political psychology has been with the impact of character structure on political behavior. The early work of Harold D. Lasswell identified a type of political actor whose private emotional disturbances spill over into the political arena. Smith, Bruner and White amplified on Lasswell's work, pointing to types of individuals for whom politics serves primarily cognitive needs or the need to be linked positively or

[7]Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice*, especially chaps. 1 and 11. For a valuable expansion and further specification of the multiple advocacy proposal, see David Kent Hall, "Implementing Multiple Advocacy in the National Security Council, 1947-1980."

[8]Fred I. Greenstein, *Personality and Politics: Problems of Evidence, Inference and Conceptualization*, especially chaps. 2 and 3.

negatively to significant others. Barber, who seeks to assess the psychological character of American presidents, concludes that some chief executives were principally motivated by emotional needs, some by cognition, some by social needs and still others by a sense of duty.[9]

A number of the most productive analyses of the properties of presidents do not seek to plumb the depths of character, but instead adumbrate the outwardly observable regularities in presidential style. The most important such analysis is Richard Neustadt's 1960 study, *Presidential Power*, which sets forth an influential account of what was known at the time about how the first three modern presidents (FDR, Truman and Eisenhower) elicited advice and information.

Neustadt argues that Roosevelt's competitive approach provided him with richer and more varied political intelligence than the other two presidents were able to garner, enabling him to expand his political options and helping him to avoid launching abortive initiatives. Truman, Neustadt concludes, was not as well informed as FDR, because he spurned the Rooseveltian practice of making advisers vie for his ear. Truman's informal openness to his advisers and his personal management of the White House, Neustadt suggests, did help him to approximate Roosevelt's rich fare of information and advice. Eisenhower, Neustadt argues, had a leadership style which was particularly ill-suited to well-informed and advised presidential leadership. Echoing a common 1950s view of Eisenhower as a figurehead president, Neustadt presents an account of a leadership style that, by relying extensively on delegation, renders the president ill equipped to advance his policies.[10]

[9]Harold D. Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics*; M. Brewster Smith, Jerome Bruner and Ralph K. White, *Opinions and Personality*; and James D. Barber, *The Presidential Character*.

[10]Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership*, especially chap. 7. For an alternative account of one of the cases on which Neustadt illustrated his analysis (Eisenhower and the budget), based on sources that later became available, see John P. Burke, "Political Context and Presidential Influence: A Case Study."

The President's Environment

Finally, efforts to shape public policy are fostered or inhibited not only by the president's personal strengths and weaknesses and those of his advisory group but also by forces external to the presidency. One president will take office with substantial support on Capitol Hill. (Franklin Roosevelt in 1933 and Lyndon Johnson in 1965 were accompanied into office with such massive like-minded legislative majorities that their programs were virtually rubber-stamped). Another president will encounter a closely divided Congress (as did John F. Kennedy, much of whose program was stalled), or a legislature controlled by the other party (as in the case of Richard Nixon, who frequently clashed with Congress).

Further environmental forces that inhibit or enhance the influence of presidents and their associates are interest groups, public opinion and the leaders and other significant actors in allied, neutral and enemy nations. Sometimes such influences are direct, but sometimes the impact of environment derives from expectations. For example, it was long assumed that anti-Communist interest groups, Nationalist China and the public presented insuperable barriers to rapprochement with the People's Republic of China (PRC). By 1972, however, President Nixon correctly perceived that the obstacles to an opening to China were gone.

Environmental assumptions underlie many cyclical theories of politics. For example, Arthur Schlesinger and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., posit that there are times when the political system spurs presidential action and times when it bars action or confines the president to the role of consolidator.[11] Theorists of political leadership, on the other hand, seek to identify the

[11]Arthur Schlesinger (Sr.), *Paths to the Present*; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History*. On the problem of presidential leadership and political cycles, also see Erwin C. Hargrove and Michael Nelson, *Presidents, Politics and Policy*; Bert Rockman, *The Leadership Question: The Presidency and the American System*; and Stephen Skowronek, "Presidential Leadership in Political Time."

conditions under which political actors succeed in transcending external limitations and reshaping the environment in ways conducive to the policies they seek to advance.[12]

WHY STUDY EISENHOWER AND JOHNSON DECISION MAKING?

Because Eisenhower and Johnson differ as greatly in ways of interest to the student of decision making as any two presidents and presidencies in the modern era, their leadership styles and their advisory arrangements invite comparison.

Consider first the men. They differed in style and experience in respects that one would expect to have been relevant to their use of advice and information in making decisions. An obvious difference is in their prepresidential background. Eisenhower brought to his decision making the experience of a career military professional; Johnson that of a career legislator. From this it might seem to follow that simply because of his military background Eisenhower was able to weigh the costs of intervention and reject them. In fact, in 1954 the principal advocate of military intervention was the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS).

Eisenhower is interesting to the analyst of decision making in many ways, not least for being markedly different from the image he conveyed in the 1950s to the public and to observers of Washington politics who were not closely associated with him. The public saw him portrayed in the media in ceremonial activities and in his recreations of golf and fishing, beaming his contagious grin, uttering homely reassurances. They liked Ike for what he appeared to be: a simple, uncomplicated middle-American. The bulk of politicians and Washington correspondents had a similar but less flattering view of Eisenhower. To most Washington insiders, Neustadt included, Eisenhower seemed to be a political innocent, who viewed his role as chief executive as a duty and

[12]James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership*; Robert C. Tucker, *Politics as Leadership*.

honor, but not as a mandate to immerse himself closely, vigorously and directly in the process of governing.

In the years since Eisenhower left office, a mountainous record of the once-confidential documents generated by his presidency has become available. It reveals a president who, far from being a figurehead, was the engine of his presidency. Rather than being detached from issues, he was deeply preoccupied with them. He thought hard and seriously about his administration's policies, their rationale and feasibility.

The impression of a passive president stemmed in part from Eisenhower's approach to reconciling the inconsistent expectations that American presidents be reassuring, uncontroversial heads of state while at the same time engaging in the intrinsically divisive tasks of political leadership. He publicized the uncontroversial chief-of-state side of his responsibilities and concealed the machinations and other controversial actions that can lead the president to be thought of as merely another politician, working through intermediaries and avoiding public criticism of other public figures.

Eisenhower's public and private discourse differed strikingly. His remarks in press conferences were colloquial and folksy. His speech rhetoric was dignified, but simple and direct enough "to sound good to the fellow digging the ditch in Kansas."[13] In private, particularly when he conveyed his thoughts to his aides on paper, his prose was crisp and detached, revealing a cognitive style in which deductive clarity played a central part.

Johnson is interesting not simply because he was a legislator but because he was a particular kind of legislator. His reputation is well established as the ultimate political broker. As Ralph Huitt put it, "He learned early and never forgot the basic skill of the politician, the ability to divide any number by two and add one." As a legislative pragmatist, whose trademark was the ability to blend political oil and water, Johnson's long practice was to trade off the substantive and ideological clarity of legislation in order to

[13]Quotation from preinaugural meeting of Eisenhower and his advisers at the Hotel Commodore, New York City, January 12-13, 1953, Eisenhower Library; quoted in Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency*, 109.

find common ground among proponents of seemingly discrepant viewpoints. His refrain typically was: "What do you want, houses [or farm legislation, etc.] or a housing issue?"[14]

Johnson's intellect and memory were, by all accounts, formidable, but specialized. He had the capacity to master the most arcane provisions of policies, but little intrinsic interest in doing so. His central concern was with employing that knowledge and his huge reservoir of information about the political interests of each Senate member in order to ensure the framing of proposals capable of winning approval. Once the shape of a workable compromise could be seen, but rarely before, Johnson announced his own position. Thus he was regularly on the winning side, but by virtue of first establishing what the winning side would be.

In contrast to his preoccupation with the feasibility of policies, Johnson was so indifferent to their detailed specifics that he mastered the trick of committing policy specifics almost photographically to his short-term memory, but then forgetting them. An old Johnson friend reported: "He told me once that when he had to know the contents of a bill or a report, he could scan it and fix it in his mind so well that if you gave him a sentence from it, he could paraphrase the whole page and everything that followed. But once they'd finish the piece of work, even if it was only a week later, he wouldn't remember the contents or even the name of the report."[15]

Johnson did hold broad policy convictions, in spite of his lack of interest in the particulars of policy. As a young man he had been a New Dealer. In his early Senate years, he defended conservative economic interests and resisted civil rights legislation, but he reverted to a populist liberalism and began to support civil rights in the 1950s, when he acquired presidential aspirations, and cast himself as a pro-civil rights, pro-welfare-state liberal immediately after assuming the presidency. His views about international affairs, although not well articulated, were intensely nationalist and firmly linked to Cold War internationalism. In spite of his

[14]Ralph K. Huitt, "Democratic Party Leadership in the Senate," 337.

[15]The report was to journalist Alfred Steinberg. See Steinberg's *Sam Johnson's Boy: A Close-up of the President from Texas*, 500.

great tactical flexibility, once Johnson had invested his ego in a policy, he could hold to it tenaciously. His convictions that he should not lose Vietnam and that he should leave as his historical legacy a massively expanded domestic welfare program are central to the politics of 1965.

The contrast between the two presidents' preoccupations—Eisenhower with analyzing policy and Johnson with the politics of making it—is well documented in the recollections of their Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) chairmen. Eisenhower's first chairman, Arthur Burns, devoted his initial meeting with the president to an account of "the history of business cycles . . . the growth of government in terms of employment, expenditures and revenue [and] . . . the structure of our tax system." Eisenhower was "deeply interested," instructing his appointments secretary to put Burns down for a weekly one-hour appointment, "never to fail." CEA Chairman Gardner Ackley observed that Johnson was interested in his advisers' conclusions and in what alternative views existed of what the conclusions should be, but "it didn't interest him to be able to reproduce the argument." After he established confidence in the council, when it informed him of what it thought should be done, "the question was no longer 'What would be the best thing to do?' but 'Is that feasible?' " "You could almost hear him begin to ask . . . 'What are the precise political maneuvers that would make this feasible?' "[16]

If the political styles of Eisenhower and Johnson differed in ways that make their presidencies fertile for comparison, so also did their advising systems. Eisenhower introduced a variety of staff entities and roles that hitherto had been absent from the presidency, among them a White House chief of staff, Cabinet and National Security Council (NSC) staffs and a special assistant for national security affairs (a position later commonly called the "NSC adviser" and filled by such individuals as McGeorge Bundy, Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski). Regular meetings of

[16]Erwin C. Hargrove and Samuel A. Morley, eds., *The President and the Council of Economic Advisers*, 98, 223-24. Similar remarks were made by the two presidents' other CEA chiefs.

the Cabinet and NSC were a central element in Eisenhower's White House operations.

Eisenhower and his aides took particular pride in the NSC staff system they devised. Managed by the special assistant for national security affairs, the system was designed to sharpen NSC discussion and make it more effective. The units set up to accomplish that end were the Planning Board, a committee of second-level officials in the foreign affairs departments who crafted papers for NSC discussion, and the Operations Coordinating Board (OCB), an implementation planning body. The process, described by Eisenhower's national security assistant Robert Cutler as the "policy hill," was intended to identify policy disagreements so they could be resolved at high levels, but contemporary critics of the Eisenhower administration suspected that Eisenhower's NSC system was a paradigmatic bureaucracy in the pejorative sense of the term, muting debate and delaying policy decisions. In the final years of the Eisenhower presidency, the claims of the critics and defenders were aired in hearings conducted by Senator Henry Jackson (D., Wash.), but the debate was inconclusive because evidence of how the Eisenhower NSC process actually worked was classified and remained so until the 1980s.[17]

Copious records are now available of not only Eisenhower's NSC process, but also its complement—his informal national security policy-making operations, which revolved around such fluid procedures as daily consultations between Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, informal meetings in the Oval Office between Eisenhower and core aides and one-to-one meetings of the president and an extensive network of public and private advisers.[18]

[17]On Eisenhower's NSC arrangements, see Anna Kasten Nelson, "On Top of Policy Hill: President Eisenhower and the National Security Council." See also Senate Subcommittee on National Policy Machinery, Committee on Government Operations, *Organizing for National Security*, popularly called the Jackson Committee Hearings, and Henry Jackson, "Organizing for Survival." For a representative contemporary critique, see Hans J. Morgenthau, "Can We Entrust National Defense to a Committee?" For a general discussion of foreign affairs staffing and advising, see I. M. Destler, *Presidents, Bureaucrats, and Foreign Policy: The Politics of Organizational Reform.*

[18]For a further discussion of Eisenhower's staff and advisory arrangements, see Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader*, chap. 4.

Lyndon Johnson's national security policy-making procedures and his White House organization in general could not have been accused of being formalistic, especially in the period in which his administration became committed to fight in Vietnam. The NSC committee structure instituted in the 1950s was abolished by Johnson's predecessor, in the wake of the debate over whether the NSC was excessively bureaucratized. Johnson did not restore what Kennedy had removed. Moreover, Johnson convened the NSC infrequently, using it mainly for briefings. Instead he made ad hoc use of various consulting arrangements. In 1965, the chief informal forums for Johnson's deliberations on Vietnam were his Tuesday lunches with a handful of his principal advisers—most consistently, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy.[19]

In summary, the differences between Eisenhower's and Johnson's political styles permit comparison between a president who is preoccupied with policy content and one whose concern is with policy enactment. The difference between the two presidents' advisory arrangements permit comparison between a process that has a major formal component and one in which formal routines play a minor role.

WHY STUDY THE 1954 AND 1965 VIETNAM CRISES?

Much as plagues and famines are a boon for the advancement of certain kinds of medical specialties, the unhappy course of United States relations with Vietnam provides an intellectual bonanza for the study of the preconditions of satisfactory use of advice and information in presidential decision making. With varying degrees of priority, Vietnam was on the agenda of American presidents

[19]David C. Humphrey, "Tuesday Lunches at the Johnson White House: A Preliminary Assessment"; Henry Graff, *The Tuesday Cabinet: Deliberations and Decisions on Peace and War under Lyndon B. Johnson*; Emmette S. Redford and Richard T. McCulley, *White House Operations: The Johnson Presidency*, especially chap. 3. See also Patrick Anderson, *The President's Men: White House Assistants of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson*, chap. 6.

from 1945, when American officers were in the reviewing stands as Ho Chi Minh and his forces celebrated Indochina's independence, through the successive French and American military involvements, to the American evacuation of Saigon in 1975. Whatever their policy positions, virtually every participant in the luxuriant public discourse on American policy toward Vietnam agrees that it ought to have been better advised and better informed.

The question of what, if anything, to do about Vietnam was addressed by each of seven presidents—Roosevelt to Ford. Each had distinctive leadership styles and advisory arrangements. Each received recommendations from inside and outside his administration, which were assessed with varying degrees of rigor. Underlying the advocacy and recommendations were factual claims about the present and likely future state of affairs in Vietnam and elsewhere in the world. Information, like advice, was gathered and evaluated with differing degrees of thoroughness.

The great bulk of the record of presidential deliberation on Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia is now available for analysis and evaluation. Presidential decision making on Vietnam in 1954 and 1965 is a particularly illuminating part of that record, whether the decisions in the two years are considered singly or compared. In each of the two years, the president and his associates had to make decisions under crisis conditions, when time was of the essence, and under less pressing conditions, when they could use their normal decision-making procedures. Moreover, they had to make decisions about the fundamentally common challenge of an incipient Communist victory abroad—in fact, in the same area and on the part of the same Communist leadership.

There were important further similarities between the two episodes, narrowing the range of factors that need to be considered in explaining differences in the decision making of the presidencies. In both periods, virtually all of the president's advisers (whether or not they favored intervention) accepted the premise that Communist victory in Southeast Asia was contrary to the national interest. The adverse physical setting, of course, was the same—the terrain, climate and distance from the United States.

The enemy was skilled, determined and well suited to fight an unconventional war without fixed battle lines, whereas the indigenous ally was deficient in these qualities and in the ability to rally non-Communist forces. As a predominantly white nation, the United States was open in both periods to charges of racist or colonial intervention in Asia. Moreover, in both periods the United States could not count on substantial support from its Western allies, and it faced the problem of maintaining domestic support for what could be a protracted conflict.

The many similarities between the two historical contexts do not, however, make the different outcomes in 1954 and 1965 a necessary consequence of the divergences between Eisenhower and Johnson and their advisory systems. As commentators on the method of controlled comparison since John Stuart Mill have made clear, it is always possible that uncontrolled variables will affect an outcome.[20] The problem of responding to Communist advances in Southeast Asia was, in fact, different in important ways in the two years.

Perhaps the most profound difference was in what the United States had already invested in its commitment. The question in 1954 was whether to enter a French colonial war that the United States had backed with funds but no military commitment. The issue in 1965 was whether to abandon an independent nation in which 23,000 American advisory troops were already based. The 1954 Indochina crisis broke out a half year after the United States had achieved an armistice in the costly, unpopular Korean War. By 1965, the "Never again!" admonition was no longer fresh in the minds of political leaders and the public, even though the prospect of an Asian war was unattractive. For these reasons the burden of proof would have been on Eisenhower to intervene and on Johnson to justify ending an American commitment.

Because the cases differ in ways other than the characteristics of the two presidencies, if our concern is with causality, we must look *within* the cases as well as compare them. The intellectual tool

[20]John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive: Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*, Books I-III, 378-463. Mill's *Logic* was originally published in 1843.

for doing so, as George and McKeown observe, is "disciplined analytic imagination"—and, more specifically, "plausible counterfactual reasoning."[21] The cases are less instructive, however, for the evidence they provide about causality than for the exceptional way they highlight the significance of differences in presidential leadership styles and advisory systems.

The cases are illuminated by the vast and intensely controversial literature on United States policy and policy making on Vietnam. For our purposes the controversy is of special interest because it generates hypotheses about presidential decision making. Indeed, assertions about each of the episodes can be found that bear on each of the three levels of influence on presidential performance —advisory system, president and political environment.[22]

Janis and George, for example, hypothesize that advisory practices were consequential for presidential Vietnam decisions. Janis sets forth an analysis of the Johnson administration's interjection of military forces in Vietnam in 1965 (and thereafter), devoting particular attention to the small group Tuesday luncheon meetings of Johnson and his advisers. Johnson and his associates, Janis argues, appear to have engaged in defective group consultations, succumbing to the flawed reality-testing characteristic of groupthink.[23]

George seeks to account for the 1954 action of the Eisenhower administration in terms of the advisory process. Writing before the archives on the 1954 episode were open, George drew on the then public sources and reached this conclusion:

[21]The cases themselves prompt and add realism to thought experiments, because in each of the years there were forks at which the actors were not in agreement and choices were made, whether deliberately or by default. Alexander L. George and Timothy J. McKeown, "Case Studies and Theories of Organizational Decision Making," *Advances in Information Processing in Organizations*, vol. 2, 21-58. On case analysis also see Alexander L. George, "Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured, Focused Comparison" and the sources cited there.

[22]Our selective references to the literature are not a historiographical survey. For an introduction to the very extensive literature on American policy toward Vietnam, see George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2d ed., 283-303.

[23]Janis, *Groupthink*, chap. 5.

> Vigorous multiple advocacy within the Eisenhower administration in the Indochina crisis of 1954 helped to control the psychological impediments to rational calculation . . . and to arrest the initial momentum for U.S. military intervention during the Dien Bien Phu crisis. The expected damage to the U.S. national interest was "bounded" in this case and, of particular importance, the price tag for a successful defense of Indochina was soberly calculated. A realistic cost-benefit judgment of the utility of American military intervention was then possible, and the president could make a reasoned decision against involving U.S. military forces. In the last analysis, the expected damage to U.S. interests that had earlier seemed a compelling reason for intervention was placed in calmer, more sober perspective.[24]

Other writers have sought to explain various aspects of Vietnam decision making in terms of the individual dispositions of presidents, sometimes in the context of "What if Kennedy had lived?" speculation. Bernard Brodie is explicit about the counterfactual. Of Kennedy and Johnson, Brodie argues, "There is quite enough known publicly about the two men to suggest we are dealing with a basic and vital character difference." Brodie continues, "John F. Kennedy had a basically different comprehension, as well as temperament, from the man who succeeded him." Brodie concludes that it is "unlikely" that Kennedy would have ordered the initial bombing of North Vietnam and "next to impossible" to imagine him "stubbornly escalating the commitment thereafter and persisting in a course that over time abundantly exposed its own bankruptcy." Kennedy "was free of the personal pigheadedness and truculence that Johnson so markedly betrayed."[25]

A number of writers on the 1954 Indochina crisis attribute the outcome to personal qualities of the president. Stephen Ambrose, for example, notes that many of Eisenhower's advisers wanted him to intervene. "What happened next depended solely upon his word . . . Eisenhower said no, decisively. He had looked at the military options, with his professional eye, and pronounced them unsatis-

[24]George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy*, 236.
[25]Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics*, 140-43.

factory." Similarly, Robert Divine concludes that "Eisenhower, determined not to become involved in another Korea, shrewdly vetoed American intervention."[26]

Finally, various writers conclude that the course of Vietnam policy was shaped by the historical context rather than by actions of the presidents and their advisers that might have gone in various directions. Gabriel Kolko, for example, argues that economic structures which determined both the foreign policy goals of the United States and the sociopolitical history of Vietnam were decisive. Ellsberg in his "stalemate machine" thesis and Gelb and Betts in their "the system worked" analysis see Vietnam policy as a predictable outcome of American politics and the dynamics of the American political system. Writing more about later periods than about 1954, these authors point to the widespread opposition to losing Vietnam among the public and the bulk of political leaders. For many years, there was never a good time to lose South Vietnam; presidents sought to hold on, at least until the next election. John Mueller advances still another environmental thesis: decision making on Vietnam was more than adequate, but no decision makers could have anticipated the unprecedented tenacity of the Vietnamese Communists.[27]

FRAMEWORK OF THE INQUIRY

Studies of the Vietnam decisions of American presidents and studies of presidential decision making in general often examine either the advisory system, the president or the political environment. Because our interest is in disentangling the diverse influences on presidential decision making, we frame our inquiry in multi-

[26]Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President*, 185; Robert A. Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War*, 45.

[27]Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience*, xxi; Daniel Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, especially, "The Quagmire Myth and the Stalemate Machine," 42-135; Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*; John Mueller, "Reassessment of American Policy: 1965-1968" and his "The Search for the 'Breaking Point' in Vietnam: Statistics of a Deadly Quarrel."

variate terms, asking about all three classes of variables and the relations among them as well as their relative effects. As we sift through the records of the two Vietnam crises, we ask questions about presidential advisory systems that we derive from the literature on presidential advising and questions about presidents and their capacity for leadership that we derive from the literature on the presidency and on political psychology. Our questions about the environment of presidential decision making stem less from specific writings than from the logic of decision making. If decision making is influenced by what the environment permits as well as by what the decision makers do and think, the limits and potentialities of the environment need to be assessed.

The Role of the Advisory System

The categories *competitive*, *formalistic* and *collegial* are too simple and too few to capture the varieties and complexities of advising in modern presidencies. But the basic insight that leads to such efforts at classification is persuasive: the channels and links between and among presidents and their advisers vary in ways that can be consequential for the conduct of the presidency. We derive three overarching questions about the advisory process from the literature, each of them the sum of a number of more differentiated concerns.

1. *What is the structure of the advisory system?*
   Our concern under this heading is with how advising is organized. Who in a presidential advisory system communicates with whom, under what circumstances and with what effect? What is the mixture of formal and informal components in the process? Is the president exposed to one, a few or many sources of information and advice? Are there managers of part or all of the advisory process, or does the president personally manage it?
2. *What are the dynamics of the advisory system?*
   By dynamics we refer to the character of interaction within the advisory structure. Are consultations by the president with the advisers and among the advisers regular and

predictable or are they ad hoc and unpredictable? Is there easy give-and-take among advisers and between the president and his advisers, or are there constraints on communication? How free are advisers to express their views? Are there occasions on which they are inhibited from doing so? Are there individuals who specialize as neutral custodians of the quality of the advisory process and as dispassionate synthesizers of information, or are the process managers and information synthesizers also policy advocates and political operators? In general, our concern is with whatever aspects of the performance of the advisory system enhance or diminish the quality of information and advice that come to the attention of decision makers.

3. *What content is produced by the advisory system?* Assessments of the content of presidential advising are more dependent than assessments of its structure or texture on the specific cases being analyzed. In general, it is important to identify both the political and the policy content of the advisory process. A course of action chosen as a consequence of careful policy analysis may go astray because of insufficient attention to its political feasibility, and conversely, an action may be politically feasible but based on faulty policy analysis. In particular cases of presidential action it is useful to ask: What options are advocated in the president's advisory group? Are there important possibilities that are not explored, or are explored superficially? Are some options presented in ways that preclude taking them seriously? To what degree is the decision-making process underpinned by rigorous information gathering and analysis? [28]

[28]For valuable accounts of one of the impediments to adequate information gathering and interpretation, see the discussions of the use and misuse of historical analogy in Ernest R. May, *"Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*; Ernest R. May and Richard E. Neustadt, Jr., *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers*; and Yen Foong Khong, "From Rotten Apples to Falling Dominos to Munich: The Problem of Reading by Analogy about Vietnam."

The Impact of the President

A president may have a personal impact on decision making through his core personal attributes, the dispositions he brings to working with his advisers and other principal associates and the way that he responds to the political environment. Here also we pose three broad questions, each of them the sum of more specific questions.

1. *What core personal attributes of the president influence decision making?*
   What cognitions and analytic skills does the president bring to bear on decision making? What emotional resources, capacities and limitations does he bring to his role as decision maker? What are his politically relevant identifications and reference groups?
2. *What dispositions of the president bear on how he works with advisers and other principal associates?*
   This raises such questions as: What organizational skills does the president possess? What kinds of individuals does he choose as aides? What is the mixture of reward and punishment, direction and delegation and other aspects of management style in his relationship to associates? What is his interpersonal style in dealing with associates and what does it elicit and fail to elicit in them?
3. *What dispositions of the president bear on how he responds to the political environment?*
   Questions that fall under this heading include: What are the president's perceptions of the elements in the political environment affecting particular policy choices? What political skills and resources does he possess that might affect the impact of that environment on his leadership and his impact on the environment? What is the president's capacity to assess policy options and test their feasibility in the political environment?[29]

[29]For a discussion of individual presidential qualities bearing on reality testing, see George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy*, chap. 8.

The Effect of the Political Environment

Still other questions apply to the historical context of presidential decision making. Are there pressures and opportunities for decision making in the political environment? For example, does it pose difficulties the policy makers are likely to perceive and want to resolve? Does it provide unproblematic but promising opportunities for change to which decision makers may want to respond? What resources or impediments does the environment have that bear on the capacity of the president and his associates to act on their aims? (Examples would be the presence or absence of a favorable climate of public or congressional opinion, or of cooperative international allies.)

Since our study is centered on the performance of presidents and their advisers, our concern in assessing the environment of decision making is with two matters: Is the environment one in which *any* president and advisory group would have been likely to act as the decision makers under consideration did? Does the environment permit the actions of the decision makers to make a difference? We address these issues by asking a single, overall question: *How malleable is the environment?*[30]

PLAN OF THE BOOK

In the chapters that follow we reconstruct and then analyze first the 1954 and then the 1965 decision-making sequence. The 1954 sequence falls readily into a period from early January to early April, during which Eisenhower kept open the option of unilateral American intervention in Indochina, at least with a single, covert air strike, and a period from early April through the Geneva Conference to the settlement in late July—a period during which the Eisenhower administration's aim appears to have been to muster a publicly recognized capacity for multilateral military intervention in order to strengthen the hand of the French in the Geneva negotiations. We narrate the events of the first period that

[30]See the discussion of actor and action dispensability in Greenstein, *Personality and Politics*, chap. 2.

bear on our analytic concern in chapter two and analyze them in chapter three. We narrate and analyze the second period in chapters four and five, respectively.

The role of American decision makers was more intricate and labyrinthine in 1965 than in 1954. As 1965 proceeded, the United States shifted from a holding pattern of deliberation and debate about how to respond to increasingly problematic circumstances of the anti-Communist South Vietnamese to, in rough sequence, retaliatory air strikes, continuing air strikes, the use of American combat troops to guard bases, the use of American troops in actual combat and, finally, on July 28, the announcement that the American military commander in Vietnam would receive whatever troops were necessary to preserve South Vietnam from defeat.

We narrate and analyze this sequence of escalation and the accompanying presidential decision making by looking at three periods: the actions in late 1964 and early 1965 that led up to the initial retaliatory bombing of North Vietnam in response to the Communist attack on the American air base at Pleiku, on February 7 (chapters six and seven); the incremental expansion of military involvement that occurred from February 7 to early June (chapters eight and nine); and the activities that led up to the July 28 announcement (chapters ten and eleven).

In the remainder of the book we pull the threads together. First, we compare the 1954 and 1965 decision-making processes on the basis of the questions in the framework of inquiry just set forth (chapter twelve). Then (in chapter thirteen) we discuss the implications of our findings for understanding the preconditions of more or less effective presidential reality testing.