

Give Structure Its Due: Political Agency and the Vietnam Commitment Decisions

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Abstract

The constructivist turn in the study of world politics provides new impetus to studies of the political deliberations of human agents. The co-constitution of agents and structures implies the non-acceptability of accounts that fail to consider the interpretations human agents provide to structural conditions. But neither can we accept the reverse. Studies of the interpretations of political agents should adequately account for the structural constraints on those interpretations. This paper illustrates how easily agency studies can underestimate structural constraints by reference to a most serious and scholarly account of agency in the Vietnam War commitment decisions, Yuen Foong Khong's *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich Dien Bien Phu and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*. The argumentative burden resides with those who offer accounts that hold or imply that agents acted from non-structural motives.

1 Introduction

In this essay I critique Yuen Foong Khong's (1992) *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*. Khong has greatly influenced our understanding of decisions leading to the 1965 US escalation of the Vietnam War. He contends that US President Lyndon Johnson and his closest advisers drew upon certain guiding analogies as they diagnosed the situation they faced in Vietnam. I do not believe the evidence supports this conclusion.

I disagree with Khong neither to expose his errors nor to defend Johnson's advisers against Khong's implicit characterization of them as specious reasoners. My main purpose is more methodological than substantive. I seek to show that scholarly

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accounts that take agency seriously can unwittingly produce faulty conclusions by failing to recognize structural effects on agents' decisions. More generally, by exposing the implications of some questionable presumptions underlying Khong's analysis, I hope to encourage students of agency to give structure its due.

Beforehand, however, I feel obliged to explain why we should care. Why should students of world politics not relegate questions of agency to the historians? After all, their antiquarian concerns and particularistic style seem more well-suited to archival studies of individual policy decisions in world history. Apart from their didactic use in illustrations of theories in action, what possible bearing could agency analyses have on the development of empirical theory in international studies?

2 Agency in international studies

We humans erect structures (e.g., institutions, regimes, rules). Often intentionally, but sometimes not, these structures constrain our actions. They affect our conceptions of the world around us, our preferences and interests relative to that world, and even the personal identities we present to one another as representations of who we are. Yet, however profoundly structural constraints may restrict the range of our action possibilities, they do not imprison us conceptually. Because we can and do subject our conceptual frameworks to criticism (Popper, 1970), we retain the capacity for self-surprise that renders human life essentially historical. We not only live the processes of historical change, we also in part author them (Fay, 1994). We possess the critical capacities (a) to reconceive the world, (b) to reformulate our preferences in light of our reconceptualizations, and (c) on the bases of our new preferences recast the very structures that so constrained us.

Informed by utilitarian simplifying assumptions, much international relations scholarship of the Cold War period minimized this structure-transforming capacity of human agents. These neo-utilitarians¹ treated agents as nearly helpless bystanders in a world they construed as described adequately by reference only to its structural forces. Their formulations stressed structural causes of human actions.

Although constructivism can be understood as part of 'reflexive modernity' (Guzzini, 2000) – increasing disillusion with Western diplomatic rules and analytic forms arising from the experience of decolonization and the rise of nationalism – the end of the Cold War provides a more proximal motive. It became evident to many that neo-utilitarian formulations were inconsistent with this signal event in contemporary world politics, in which political leaders became self-consciously cogni-

¹ I adopt Ruggie's (1998) 'neo-utilitarian' designation in favor of the usual 'rationalist' designation to avoid a category mistake widespread among self-described constructivists. Most are themselves rationalist. It is not their non-rationalism but their broader and more human conceptions of rationality that distinguishes them from neo-utilitarians. The neo-utilitarian construal of rationality extends only to instrumental or means–ends rationality. The constructivist conception, however, extends also to substantive rationality, or the choice of appropriate ends (or preference orderings).

zant that bipolar, nuclear-armed, superpower competition trapped them into dysfunctional political relationships that they themselves in their actions busily reproduced.

The trouble with utilitarianism is located in its treatment of agents' preferences as fixed and exogenous. This practice poses no problems in the microeconomic settings to which utilitarian techniques were initially applied. But it can generate great difficulties when transplanted to macropolitical contexts (see Ruggie, 1998). The Cold War ended because key agents reconceived the structure of world politics. They recast the meaning of political security and formulated new strategies to achieve it. Trapped inside a repetitive game of bipolar competition, the superpowers chose instead to play a different game. This outcome is literally inconceivable in models that treat preferences as fixed and exogenous. Because they deprive agents the capacity to reconstruct their worlds and reformulate their preferences, such models inherently support conservative formulations. They essentialize existing structures and thereby help to reproduce them. They can barely conceive of structural change, much less explain it.

Into this breach steps constructivism. Constructivists elaborate and explore frameworks for understanding world politics that do not essentialize its structural relationships. Several strains of constructivist IR have already appeared. Each approaches world politics with somewhat different first principles and methods.² Yet each shares the core contention that agents and structures are mutually constitutive. Constructivists agree with neo-utilitarians that structural forces shape agent preferences and thus profoundly affect their actions. Structures constitute agents in this sense. But constructivists also contend that agents constitute structures, primarily by means of routinizations of human interactions into practices and, ultimately, institutions (Onuf, 1998). We live in what Onuf (1989) calls a 'world of our making.' However profoundly structural relationships may affect their action preferences, their conceptions of world politics, and even their self-understandings, human agents retain the willful capacity to alter them.

² Ruggie (1998) describes three such strains: (1) a naturalistic constructivism that, despite the agent–structure co-constitution, would model inquiry on the style of natural science; (2) a postmodern constructivism that eschews generalization and finds domination embedded in uses of Reason; and (3) a neo-classical constructivism that rejects both the relativistic subjectivism of postmodernism and the positivistic scientism of naturalism. Two partly overlapping substrains are discernible within the neo-classical strain, one Weberian and Durkheimian and the other Aristotelian and Wittgensteinian. A critical-theoretic (but not postmodern) perspective also fits within the neo-classical strain and incorporates theoretical elements of both substrains. Others conflate either the postmodern and neo-classical strains (e.g., Adler, 1997; Hopf, 1998) or the naturalistic and neo-classical strains (e.g., Checkel, 1998). From a postmodern perspective, Pettman (2000: 3–30) classes as conservative constructivists some neo-classicists along with neo-liberals arguably seeking to coopt constructivist ideas (to retain students, according to Pettman). Other neo-classicists fall into his social theory constructivism category. His own perspective he labels 'commonsense' constructivism. Kubáľková (1998) offers a useful historical account of the intellectual heritage of constructivism.

If constructivists are right about the agent–structure co-constitution, then any worthy systemic theory of world politics must explicitly acknowledge and incorporate into its formulations the fact of human agency and its structure-transforming capacity. Although the denotative meaning of agency may vary across levels of analysis, theorists at all levels cannot avoid acknowledgement of human agency in their formulations. It may be the case that only corporate agents (e.g., such institutions as states, multinational corporations, IGOs, and NGOs) populate the systemic level (Wendt, 1999). And corporate agents may even play dominant roles within those institutions. At base, however, all corporate agents are peopled. Ultimately the actions of any corporate agent depend upon the outcomes of deliberative processes among the human agents located within them. Even systemic structural effects depend upon the interpretations that human agents assign them. One logically cannot account for the actions of corporate agents at whatever level without attending to the interpretations of human agents and the deliberative processes within which those interpretations acquire argumentative force.

Those who articulate the agency side of the agent–structure co-constitution typically investigate the social deliberations among agents within one or more corporate entities. These deliberations concern arguments about (a) the likely effectiveness of proposed policies for achieving valued ends and (b) the appropriate ends on which to judge proposed policies. Where available, careful examinations of deliberative records can provide insight into these processes. We can assess the internal coherence of arguments and compare across arguments to detect the faultlines of debate. We can ask why particular arguments succeeded and why others did not. We can ask why lines of argument, that today retrospectively compel, were not even taken up. In short, we can recover and explore the reasoning behind the various strands of argument and, ultimately, behind the final policy product.

The neo-utilitarian error arises primarily from a general failure to analyze agency. Neo-utilitarians adopted a strictly materialist stance that blinded them to ongoing reformulations of conceptual frames – the ‘new thinking’, if you will – responsible for this sea change in world politics. They dismissed as cheap any reconceptualization talk that appeared in the policy discourse and rededicated their blinkered focus to examinations of the ‘real’ payoffs. Because they underestimated the human capacity for self-surprise, reformulations of conceptual frames escaped their analytical notice.

Agency-oriented constructivists, however, are susceptible to the opposite difficulty. They often succumb to the temptations to adopt an idealist stance that can blind them to the action constraints that political structures often impose powerfully upon agents. Just as structural studies cannot afford to underestimate the effects of agency on action, studies of agency cannot afford to underestimate structural effects. Those who wish to contribute studies of agency in world politics should take special care to give structures their due.

3 Political agency in the Vietnam commitment decisions

To illustrate the ease with which a study of agency can underestimate structural influences, it will not do to select just any study. The work chosen should be influential. It should exemplify scholarly excellence. It should possess other characteristics that the very best studies of political agency would share. It should, for instance, reflect close familiarity not just with the secondary literature, but more importantly with the primary documents in the deliberative record. Where possible, it should endeavor to interview the agents who deliberated. It should also consider objections to its theses, and it should apply the principle of charity to consider the strongest forms of those objections.

3.1 Khong's thesis

One such study is Khong's (1992) *Analogies at War*. Although Khong himself might object to this characterization, I consider it close to a paradigmatic constructivist account of political agency. I know that others who consider themselves constructivist share this assessment. The book is theoretically relevant, exquisitely well documented, and clearly reasoned and explicated. I place it among the top handful of works in the already large and still growing literature on the Vietnam War escalation. My trouble with it mainly concerns certain mistaken premises, most of which Khong implicitly presumes.

Khong claims that policymakers in the Johnson administration relied upon cognitive analogies to historical events to develop their diagnoses of the situation the US faced in Vietnam as well as their policy recommendations. Khong conceives these analogies as 'schemas' or cognitive templates with which boundedly rational policymakers make sense of an otherwise too complicated political reality.

Khong describes the inferential work that, on his 'Analogical Explanation' (AE) framework, analogies perform.

[A]nalogies are cognitive devices that 'help' policymakers perform six diagnostic tasks central to political decisionmaking. Analogies (1) help define the nature of the situation confronting the policymaker, (2) help assess the stakes, and (3) provide prescriptions. They help evaluate alternative options by (4) predicting their chances of success, (5) evaluating their moral rightness, and (6) warning about dangers associated with the options (Khong, 1992: 10).

Khong identifies three analogical schemata that predominated White House reasoning in decisionmaking surrounding US military commitments in Vietnam.

- 1 On the *Korean analogy*, the Vietnam War was much like the Korean conflict. A concerted American effort, with the help of allies, can stem the communist tide in divided Asian countries. Because communist forces almost prevailed in Korea after the Chinese crossed the Yalu, the US should avoid provocations that could provoke Chinese entry into the Vietnam conflict.

- 2 On the *Munich analogy*, the US had an obligation to resist the communist insurgency. To do otherwise would be tantamount to the appeasement at Munich. Failure to act decisively in Vietnam would embolden communist insurgents elsewhere.
- 3 On the *Dien Bien Phu analogy*, the US position was similar to that of the French in the Indochinese War. Like the French, regular US troops cannot prevail in the Vietnamese terrain. The North Vietnamese and its National Liberation Front allies in the South would see Americans as a neo-colonial force, much like the French. Any US military actions in Vietnam would only harden resistance.

Anyone familiar with the primary documents would grant that these analogies pervaded the Vietnam policy discourse of the Johnson White House. The question concerns not their presence, but rather their function in that discourse. Khong claims that policymakers used these analogies to diagnose the situation in Vietnam. Opposed to this is what Khong terms ‘the skeptics’ argument’. Skeptics hold that policymakers used these analogies only rhetorically, to justify and advocate their positions. They contend that policymakers came to their positions on other diagnostic grounds.

Khong supports his thesis on two main grounds. First, he shows that policymakers used analogies in the internal White House deliberations as well as in their public discourse. Second, applying a slightly modified version of Alexander George’s process tracing and congruence procedures, Khong systematically compares (a) the fit between the policy outputs and his thesis to (b) the fit between the policy outputs and diagnostic grounds that others have proposed. These countertheses are:

- *Containment*: Policymakers opted to maintain continuity with US containment policy, which stood at the center of US foreign and defense policy during the Cold War.
- *Political–Military Ideology*: Policymakers’ positions represented their relative hawkishness or dovishness. Even their choice of analogies reflected their positions on this underlying ideological scale.
- *Bureaucratic Politics*: Policymakers adopted positions consistent with their roles in the federal bureaucracy. ‘Where you stand depends on where you sit.’
- *Domestic Political Considerations*: Lyndon Johnson opted for escalation in order to preserve his domestic ‘Great Society’ agenda, which a loss in Vietnam would wreck.

Save perhaps the second, these countertheses pertain to structural features of the political context at the time of the Vietnam escalation decisions. If one considers hawks to be those who most strongly felt a need to contain world communism, then one can sensibly interpret the political–military ideology counterthesis as an

alternative expression of the containment counterthesis and thus also structural. Khong, then, essentially opposes his analogical thesis to three structural countertheses.

Part of Khong's thesis is trivially acceptable. Policymakers faced with a difficult problem in an uncertain decision environment naturally turn to similar cases, perhaps for insight into the parameters of their decision or inspiration regarding possible courses of action. We expect policymakers to be cognizant of relevant history and to take it into account. Undeniably participants in the Vietnam commitment deliberations did just this. But, because it is cognitive, Khong's thesis is far stronger. He claims that decisionmakers in the Johnson White House *reasoned* analogically.

It is important to understand that analogical reasoning, whatever its heuristic usefulness, is a specious form of reasoning. Although drawn from singular cases, analogical propositions function inferentially very much like universally quantified propositions. Stated plainly, an analogy treats a particular case as though it constituted a general theory. The trouble, of course, is that the theory is induced from $N = 1$ observations. Thus, I am concerned to dispute Khong's thesis not simply because it underestimates the impact of structural factors on the Vietnam commitment decisions. I worry also that Khong, by implying that they reasoned speciously, gives insufficient intellectual credit to these policymakers and thereby, inadvertently I am sure, absolves them of responsibility for their decisions.

3.2 Khong's presumptions

Khong's analysis rests on a number of presumptions that do not stand critical scrutiny. Most are implicit, but one – perhaps the central presumption in the work – reiterates a core, nowadays non-controversial, contention of cognitive psychologists.

Presumption 1

All participants in the Vietnam deliberations were cognitive misers. Because the issues were complex, they took cognitive shortcuts instead of thinking through their Vietnam problem.

Khong contends that Johnson's Vietnam advisers were 'cognitive misers.' They resorted to analogical inference as a cognitive shortcut in order to manage the complexity of the Vietnam problem (pp. 24–25). We now have a generation of research, much of which Khong ably reviews, indicating that humans often resort to such shortcuts to compensate for the computational limits of their mental equipment relative to the world's complexities. However, Khong does not demonstrate, but only presumes, that this is one such case.

We expect to find rationality *least* bounded where Khong presumes it to exist. Johnson's Vietnam advisers were concerned with momentous decisions. This provided them a compelling incentive not to satisfice, but to think their problem

through as fully as possible. Advising the President was each man's primary obligation. Each was relatively freed of other duties that might have moved him to apply less cognitive energy to the formulation of policy positions. Each had ample time to consider the issues in detail, as Vietnam was a hot policy topic throughout 1965. Moreover, each was located at the pinnacle of a huge bureaucracy that greatly reduced personal information costs. Any deficiencies in the quality of advice Johnson received prior to the 1965 escalation decisions are more likely explained by inadequacies of the discursive environment than by any cognitive frailties of the advisors.

Khong begins the case for his thesis by showing that White House officials invoked analogies in their private deliberations as well as in their public discourse. This, he believes, undermines the contention of skeptics that analogies were used for justification and advocacy, not for diagnosis.

It would be rather unusual from the skeptics' perspective to find policy-makers constantly referring to historical analogies in private, for example in NSC meetings or in internal memoranda. In such private settings, there is no public to mollify, and there is less need to overstate the case; one may presumably speak one's mind. In other words, finding that policymakers resort to analogies in private recurrently and systematically would do much to undermine the skeptics' notion that analogies are used primarily for public justification (pp. 59-60).

However, Khong draws upon a faulty, implicit presumption.

Presumption 2

Contributions to the internal discourse uniformly served diagnostic purposes and never the ends of justification and advocacy.

Nothing justifies this. There is no reason to believe that the entire Vietnam policy discourse within the Johnson White House was diagnostic. Participants were quite concerned to justify and advocate their policy prescriptions to one another and especially to Lyndon Johnson.

Khong senses this objection as likely. He contends that any policymaker use of analogies for internal justification and advocacy only buttresses his thesis, as it would indicate that participants invoked analogies as devices for consensus-building and group decisionmaking (p. 103). But this in no way addresses the objection; it only restates it. That policymakers' analogies served these purposes in the internal policy discourse supports the skeptics' position that they invoked them for the ends of justification and advocacy to one another. Khong requires some method with which to distinguish diagnostic uses from other uses of analogy. Lacking one, he presumes without support that all internal discourse was necessarily diagnostic.

Of course, any participant in the internal discourse may at any time have invoked an analogy for an entirely different purpose. Because Khong does not

consider this possibility, he proceeds from another implicit and implausible presumption.

Presumption 3

The invocation of any analogy signals either diagnosis, justification, or advocacy. No other purpose is conceivable.

Diagnosis, justification, and advocacy do not exhaust the possible uses of an analogical argument. In the internal policy discourse one might adduce any number of reasons for an analogical invocation. For instance, a speaker (or memorandum author) might have used an analogy anaphorically. Much as a pronoun can succinctly represent a more complex noun phrase, an analogy may succinctly convey a lengthier and more systematic argument with which all participants were already thoroughly familiar. Alternatively, someone diagnosing the situation in Vietnam might invoke an analogy only to suggest a possible diagnosis worthy of more systematic investigation using more reliable diagnostic methods.

Also, use of an analogy in the internal discourse might simply have rehearsed an anticipated later invocation in the public discourse. Khong makes much of Henry Cabot Lodge's invocation of Munich at the 21 July 1965 meeting at which Johnson finalized the decision to introduce massive numbers of US ground troops. He finds support for his thesis in the fact that no one questioned Lodge's analogy and that even National Security Assistant McGeorge Bundy, whom Khong characterizes as 'the resident critic of specious analogies', fell silent (p. 134). But why take the silence of Bundy and others in the Cabinet Room as a sign of tacit acceptance of the diagnostic aptness of Lodge's analogy? The silence might just as reasonably be interpreted as general recognition that Lodge, Johnson's Republican opponent in 1960, was rehearsing the Republican criticism that Johnson would face had he not escalated the Vietnam War. Lodge's invocation of Munich thus can support the 'domestic political considerations' counterthesis (suitably generalized to include Johnson's re-electability) as readily as it supports Khong's thesis.

In short, Khong presumes the use of analogy to be restricted to the purposes of diagnosis, justification, and advocacy. But nowhere does he demonstrate that these exhaust the purposes of analogy. Because other plausible purposes come readily to mind, this part of Khong's argument rests upon a false alternative.

Presumption 4

Explicit denials of analogical diagnosis and explicit invocations of structural factors in the internal discourse neither undermine Khong's thesis nor signify support for the structural countertheses.

This inverts Presumption 2. If uses of analogy in internal White House deliberations signify support for Khong's thesis, then surely explicit denials of analogical diagnoses

and explicit references to structural factors in the internal discourse ought to undermine it.

One key participant very unlikely to have relied on analogies for diagnostic purposes was Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. McNamara understood that a mere analogy offered insecure inferential support. During the period of decision that Khong studies, McGeorge Bundy commissioned an historian to interview Johnson's top Vietnam policy advisers 'for posterity' (for us). On 9 June 1965, this historian asked McNamara whether he found the Munich analogy or the Korean analogy more instructive and compelling. McNamara expressed a preference for the Korean analogy, but noted that any analogy was 'false in logic, although significant in psychology' (Graff, 1970: 37). Although he never objected to analogical invocations that advanced his policy prescriptions and although he now credits the force of the Munich analogy with tipping the scales toward escalation (McNamara, 1995: 195), McNamara in 1965 explicitly expressed his understanding that analogies merit no diagnostic role.

Neither can Under Secretary of State George Ball be construed as having diagnosed the situation analogically. His arguments were closely reasoned and carefully considered several structural factors, including those mentioned in the structural countertheses. Alone among Johnson's advisers, Ball counseled against escalation and for US withdrawal. His predictions regarding the likely outcomes of US involvement, which at the time struck McNamara as too pessimistic, today seem quite prophetic. Khong contends that Ball drew analogically upon the French Indochinese experience that culminated at Dien Bien Phu. But it is quite a stretch to classify Ball's argument as analogical. Ball warned that, like the French, US troops were not trained for the Vietnamese terrain. This was not analogical terrain; it was the same terrain. Likewise, he warned that US forces, like the French, could not effectively counter the guerilla tactics that the French faced. But these were not analogical tactics; these were the exact same tactics. General Vo Nguyen Giap, who devised them, commanded both the Viet Minh and the Viet Cong. Ball's arguments rested upon relatively direct evidence, not mere analogy.

Also, Ball couched his arguments in terms that evoked the countertheses of containment and domestic political considerations. Ball alone recognized the conflict as a civil war and the insurgents as more nationalist than communist. Combined with the unfavorable terrain, he argued, the nationalist fervor of the Viet Cong assured that the US would fail to achieve its military and political goals. The US stood a better chance of prevailing by drawing the line against Southeast Asian communism in Thailand, which enjoyed greater political stability and a track-record of success against guerilla insurgents. Containing communism, for Ball, required a strategic withdrawal to Thailand. Ball accurately predicted that massive escalation of both the air war and ground war would produce a fiasco. As it became clear to the US people that a successful military operation would not be forthcoming, he argued,

political support for Johnson would quickly evaporate, endangering and perhaps scuttling his domestic agenda.

Khong grossly mischaracterizes Ball's prescient argument by describing it as merely an analogy to the French experience. Ball presented a cogent, logically coherent argument, not an analogy. It relied on direct evidence and found support in such structural concerns as containment and Johnson's domestic political support. It is true that the French experience profoundly affected Ball. He had, after all, served as a French legal representative in the US during the Indochinese war and consequently knew first hand of the difficulties French political leaders faced in 1954. But this does not make his argument analogical. Dismissing it as such now only reproduces the inadequate hearing it received in 1965.³

If Ball's arguments were not analogical, if McNamara understood analogies as logically specious, and if Khong correctly characterized McGeorge Bundy as 'the resident critic of specious analogies',⁴ then three members of Johnson's 1965 inner circle did not use analogies diagnostically. This leaves only three others: William Bundy, Dean Rusk, and Johnson himself. Although the evidence is mixed, Rusk and Johnson may indeed have used analogies diagnostically. However, in a memorandum declassified after the publication of Khong's book,⁵ William Bundy expressed support for Ball's argument regarding the likely political and military failures that would result from escalation. Although Bundy did not agree with Ball's plan for reassuring allies that a US withdrawal would signal a weakening commitment to containment, his concurrence with Ball's critical analysis of McNamara's plan for military intervention indicates that he too did not rely on analogical diagnosis. If two-thirds of Johnson's inner circle did not diagnose Vietnam analogically, Khong's thesis cannot be sustained.⁶

Presumption 5

All participants reasoned from a single set of premises. If they diagnosed Vietnam on the basis of an analogy, they could not partake of one or more of the countertheses. Multiple motivations for policy positions are inconceivable.

Khong presumes without justification that each participant diagnosed the situation

³ Some in the Johnson administration did consider it closely, particularly William Bundy and possibly also Johnson himself.

⁴ The putatively specious analogy that Bundy criticized was Ball's. Khong appears to have accepted uncritically Bundy's characterization of Ball's argument as analogical, and thus specious, without considering Bundy's motivation for so characterizing it to Johnson.

⁵ Bundy (William P.) to Rusk, McNamara, Ball, Thompson, Bundy (McGeorge), and Unger. 30 June 1965. LBJ Library. National Security Files. Declassified 9 January 1996.

⁶ One could, of course, expand Johnson's inner circle to include others (e.g., Llewellyn Thompson, Leonard Unger, Maxwell Taylor), which could possibly make Khong's thesis seem more credible, but none can be characterized as closer advisers on Vietnam policy than McNamara, Rusk, Ball, and the Bundy brothers.

in Vietnam either (a) according to one or a combination of guiding analogies or (b) according to grounds suggested by one of the structural countertheses. Nowhere does he consider that participants' policy positions might have flowed from multiple motivations.

Each participant might have come to his conclusion from multiple premises. Dean Rusk, for instance, even if enamored of the Munich and Korean analogies, might also have supported US intervention in order to contain communism, to align himself with other administration 'hawks', to satisfy pressures percolating through the State Department, and to help further Johnson's domestic agenda. Other motivations are conceivable and still not inconsistent with any of the others. Perhaps, knowing that the Arabian oil would revert to the shieks in 1973, Rusk believed the US needed to secure a base of operations in Vietnam in order to tap the Tonkin Gulf reserves. Khong does not suggest neo-colonialism as a possible explanation, but the Vietnamese in 1965 and even today surely would (see McNamara *et al.*, 1999: 52-55).

I do not suggest that any of these factors actually motivated Rusk, just that any combination of them might feasibly have motivated him or any of Johnson's advisers. Khong dismisses materialist explanations, such as the need for markets or raw materials. 'Evidence of such concerns', he writes (p. 65), 'are simply absent in the memos and minutes leading up to the decisions of 1965.' Although he acknowledges no one-to-one relationship between specific beliefs (statements of belief, really) and policy outcomes, Khong here betrays another faulty presumption.

Presumption 5

Actors' motivations may be inferred directly from their statements on the deliberative record.

Khong uses two methods to test his thesis. The process-tracing technique examines the deliberative record for invocations of analogies and mentions of structural factors. The congruence technique assesses the fit between analogies and various policy options. On the bases of these analyses Khong draws conclusions about the motivations for policy prescriptions. Although he treats the congruence technique as a validity check on the process-tracing, they in fact mutually validate one another. One can construe the congruence technique as a method for assessing the association between stated policy beliefs and policy outcomes and process-tracing as a method for teasing out the underlying processes that generated the association.

The trouble lies in the process-tracing. Suppose we accept as plausible associations between particular analogies and particular policy options. For instance, suppose we agree with Khong's observation of an association between the Korean analogy and the policy actually chosen. It does not follow from this observation, however, that (belief in) the Korean analogy explains the choice of policy. We would want some information about the underlying 'mechanism' (in a sense that would include intentional human actions) that generated the association. Otherwise, we

would not be sure that the observed association is not spurious, as Khong acknowledges (p. 66). For Khong, these mechanisms are cognitive. But his process-tracing procedures trace discursive processes, not cognitive ones. Consequently, Khong infers the presence or absence of motivations from their presence or absence in the deliberative record. But since when do we require humans to discuss their motivations in order to have them?

For strategic reasons, and thus especially in political settings, humans engaged in deliberative discourse often obscure their motivations and intentions from one another. Talk is cheap whenever strategic speech imposes little or no costs upon its speakers. In the Johnson White House, even substantial benefits may have fallen upon strategic speakers. Certainly, as the reception of George Ball's argument attests, a culture had arisen that vaunted sycophancy over sober considerations of the facts relevant to Vietnam policy.⁷ When examining discourse conducted in such contexts, analysts who attribute motivation and intention from the surface of their deliberative contributions stand on exceedingly shaky ground.

I say this not to suggest, however, that one should ignore the deliberative record. If talk were *always* strategic, people would lack any reason to converse. I mean instead that one should take care to understand participants' contributions to the deliberative record as they themselves intended them. As I have suggested elsewhere (Duffy, Frederking, and Tucker, 1998), distinguishing cheap talk from sincere communications imposes challenging, yet surmountable, evidentiary burdens on analysts of agency. At minimum, analysts should examine agents' belief statements diachronically, seeking explanations for any inconsistencies. Certainly analysts should also, whenever possible and for the same purposes, compare agents' public statements with their private ones. In the context of Khong's study, far more important than comparisons between policy advisors' public statements and their statements in the internal policy discourse would be comparisons of the latter with statements in their personal correspondence.

I expect that Khong would agree that, despite the extra evidentiary burden, explanations based on examinations of the records of agents' deliberations are bound to prove more valuable than those based only on extrapolations from the existing structural constraints. Khong otherwise could not have written *Analogies at War*. However, Khong errs procedurally in just the opposite directions. He infers belief uncritically from the deliberative record.

4 Conclusion: How to give structure its due

Constructivists reject the notion that one adequately investigates political action by treating agents as inessential onlookers in a world in which structural forces determine political outcomes. This recognition provides new impetus to the study of

⁷ See also Cooper's (1970: 223) description of National Security Council meetings during the Johnson administration.

political agency, as propositions regarding agency must ultimately enter into constructivist explanations, even at the systemic level.

But to deny that structures determine outcomes is not to deny that they influence outcomes. Not only the neo-utilitarians but also constructivists who focus on the structural side of the constructivist co-constitution will likely not take seriously agency studies that fail to consider fairly the impact of structural forces on agents' interpretations. Nor should they. Structural constraints take such routinized form that agents typically take them for granted, confusing artificial contingencies for natural necessities. Agents occasionally transcend these constraints to perform constraint-defying acts that culminate in a structural transformation. But these are rare and truly extraordinary events. For this reason, those who propose that agents have acted outside the bounds of structural constraints must bear the evidentiary burden of proof. I hope to have shown above that, with respect to the Vietnam commitment decisions, Khong has not discharged that burden.

How then can analysts of agency give structure its due? I suggest, first, that in analyzing deliberative records we understand their meaning or significance with respect to the structural context within which agents produced those records. To be sure, we can and should be sensitive to those relatively rare instances in which the agents we study show themselves to have transcended structural constraints. But we place ourselves on infirm ground, I think, if we argue that the verbal usage of a particular trope (e.g., an analogy) or a particular argument framing indicates such a transcendence. In the absence of direct evidence to the contrary, such as an agent's explicit critique of structural constraints on interpretation, we place ourselves on safer ground if, until we can show otherwise, we presume those constraints to be operative as we interpret agents' remarks.

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