Reviving the Cybernetic Approach to Foreign Policy Analysis: Explaining the Continuity of U.S. Policy Instruments

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Abstract

Important features of U.S. foreign policy, in particular its continuity over time and across space with respect to the repeated use of particular policy instruments, are usefully explained by cybernetic mechanisms. Two policy instruments – military assistance and covert paramilitary operations – are presented and certain noteworthy features of their use – multiple and shifting goals connected with the same instrument; the continuation of programs in the face of admitted failure – discussed. Those features are linked to cybernetic mechanisms, with two – organizational arrangements and "garbage cans" – offering explanatory possibilities. The paper concludes with a plea to revive the cybernetic approach to foreign policy as it was originally understood, i.e., in organizational and not bureaucratic political or cognitive psychological terms.

This paper – drawn from a forthcoming book on United States foreign policy (Sylvan and Majeski 2006) – is an argument for explaining certain major and recurrent features of U.S. policy by means of cybernetic processes. Chief among those features, for over a century now, is a structuring of policy around the acquisition and maintenance of client states, and hostility toward other states categorized as enemies. This orientation has been maintained in spite of enormous changes in U.S. capabilities and of major variations across time and space in states considered as clients and in those considered as enemies.

Our argument is that these continuities are best accounted for by the organizational structure of U.S. foreign policy making. Concretely, policy making involves using existing instruments – programs, bureaucracies, routine activities – to respond to particular situations. Although those instruments may be refined over time and new ones developed, the key to policy making is in connecting certain instruments to situations: for example, reporting on discontent among military officers in a certain country, or doling out funds for irrigation projects elsewhere, or sending troops to counter an insurgency in yet a third. Continuity of policy can thus be accounted for by the combination of a small number of instruments, standard bounded and sequential search and choice processes, and lesson-learning that tends to be focused on the tactical minutiae of instrument execution. Without denying the existence of phenomena such as goals, ideology, and national identity, or of leadership style, small group dynamics, and cognitive biases, we would argue that the various cybernetic processes associated with organizations and policy instruments do a good job of accounting for continuity.

As a way of focusing the argument for cybernetic explanations, we are limiting the scope of this paper in two important ways. First, we will discuss only a small number of empirical cases. In the book manuscript from which this paper is drawn, we range over a century of U.S. foreign policy and discuss well over a hundred cases of policy, both routine and extraordinary, toward various countries throughout this time period. In this paper, we will restrict ourselves to a small number of cases, chosen to give a sense of the range of American policy. Second, there are numerous aspects of policy making and various theories that we would qualify as cybernetic. In this paper, though, we focus on only two features of policy making, while blurring the important distinctions between cybernetic theories. Our hope is to open up some space for an important and useful way of understanding policy making, one that is currently scanted in the field of foreign policy analysis, even if in other social science fields it is far more central.

Some Cases

Let us begin by looking at one of the most important instruments in the U.S. foreign policy repertoire: military assistance, meaning both subsidized arms transfers and training of commissioned and noncommissioned officers.[1] The modern origins of military assistance date to the 19th century, when states such as Britain and Germany engaged in training missions for the militaries of the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere in what we would now call the periphery. Similarly, when the U.S. began to engage in long-term occupations in the Caribbean and Central America, it often was led to create a National Guard or constabulary as a way of maintaining U.S.-installed regimes after the Marines had been withdrawn. Typically, there would be an

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[1] The discussion in this section is drawn from our forthcoming book, which contains detailed citations to documents.

agreement setting up the force and specifying that the U.S. would "detail officers and enlisted men" from its own military to "assist" it. Weapons had to be paid for, but since insurgents had already been defeated and it was expected that they would be few and far between in the future, this was not a problem.

With the coming of World War II, the U.S. began to generalize the use of military training beyond the handful of countries for which it had created a constabulary. The goal was no longer to maintain client state regimes in power against domestic opponents but to push out Axis advisers in South America and lay the groundwork for U.S. naval and air patrols. Soon the program had expanded to Saudi Arabia, China, and Iran. In the meantime, the budgetary exigencies of most U.S. allies led to the creation of Lend-Lease and large-scale arms transfers. When the war was over, Lend-Lease was terminated for most recipients, but the weapons-transfer capability remained, as did the experience in sending training missions. This led to a series of ad hoc arrangements for shipping weapons and supplying advisers: in the Philippines (1946) and South Korea (1949), to buttress newly independent governments; in Greece (1947) and China (1948), to try to put down an insurgency; and in Turkey (1947), to stiffen the government should the Soviet Union try something.

Finally, in 1949, the Mutual Defense Assistance Act was passed, providing a legal framework for supplying "equipment, materials, and services" to North Atlantic Treaty signatories as well as the states listed above, plus Iran. Since by this time China was "lost" to the communists, Truman used the money appropriated for that "general area" to help out Thailand and the French in Indochina. Two years later, the Mutual Security Act was passed, which generalized yet further weapons transfers and trainers: it applied to every geographical region in the world, including Latin

America; it relabelled military training missions and tied them to arms transfers; and it incorporated economic aid into the security framework. Later legislation added new wrinkles – the possibility of making loans; more detailed language about sales: overseas weapons manufacture; and the possibility of budgetary support – but did not change the basic structure. More recently, training has come to be partly split off from arms transfers and now serves as a model for numerous more specialized programs, ranging from narcotics control and interdiction to peacekeeping, demining, disaster response, counterterrorism, and special operations force.

Along with these developments have come a host of new goals typically cited when military assistance is offered. In some cases, the assistance is used to establish friendly relations with recipient states or to provide the U.S. with military contacts. In other cases, the purpose of weapons and training is to strengthen state capacity and to take pressure off the regimes' budgets. In still other cases, aid and advisers are offered on an emergency basis, as a way of helping regimes combat insurgencies or prepare to fight external enemies. Examples of the use of military assistance to promote this last set of goals include some of the pivotal moments in U.S. foreign policy: aid to Greece in 1947 and the associated Truman Doctrine; Kennedy's greatly enhanced commitment to South Vietnam in 1961 and Nixon's policy of Vietnamization a decade later; aid to the government of El Salvador in the 1980s; and Plan Colombia in the past few years.

We have gone into this policy instrument at some length and for several reasons. The first is that military assistance is among the most frequently employed U.S. foreign policy tools. In fact, it is difficult to think of many states, especially poorer ones, with whom the U.S. does not have assistance agreements or in which there are no U.S.

advisers or transferred weapons. (Wealthier states tend simply to buy their weapons and do not receive military assistance.) Moreover, military assistance is one of the oldest U.S. policy tools, having been put together in its modern form more than half a century ago, and with one of its components reaching back several decades before that. Thus, the longevity and extent of U.S. military assistance programs are excellent examples of what we mean by the continuity of foreign policy: no matter whether we are talking about the cold war or the situation today, about Europe, Africa, Latin America, or Asia, U.S. foreign policy involves both the intensive and extensive use of military assistance.

Second, this policy instrument is to a great degree polyvalent: it can be and is used for any number of purposes, suggesting at the very least that the relation between ends and means is fairly complex. For starters, note just the goals mentioned in the above summary: protection of U.S. client state regimes against small-scale uprisings; diminishing the influence of U.S. enemies in other states; preparation for a major war; strengthening newly independent governments emerging from U.S. occupation; fighting insurgencies in other states and in other states' colonies; giving a sign of political support to states that are deemed to be potentially threatened by a U.S. enemy; fighting transnational threats; maintaining contact with the militaries of other states; helping out the economy of other states.

Note that these goals are different from each other in important ways. Some are aimed at the state in question and others at a third party (e.g., an external enemy); some are immediate (e.g., to put down an insurgency) and others long-term (e.g., contacts with the military); some are economic (e.g., budgetary support) and others technical (e.g., training in how to use certain kinds of weapons). Of course, they can, in classic

political science fashion, be subsumed under some kind of ultra-high-level goal (e.g., "helping other states"), but this is so abstract as to be useless. In addition, attributing such high-level goals to policy makers is often demonstrably incorrect: their interest may revolve around going after some kind of enemy and any "help to other states" is in this sense a pure and unavoidable side effect, one that the policy makers would happily forgo or even counteract with other, perhaps covert, instruments.

Third, the development of military assistance has to a great degree been a matter of what we might call internal replication. The program began as an ad hoc revival of a World War II measure; then, after it was given a more generic legislative framework, it was expanded to countries around the world. Additional changes – and the policy debates concerning those changes, both in the executive branch and in Congress – have involved taking the program into new task arenas: "civic action," democracy promotion, budgetary support, antiterrorist training, and so forth. In this sense, military assistance can be seen as a kind of meme, to use Dawkins's now famous term, with considerable powers of expansion and self-replication. Military assistance is thus an instrument that provides an entire way of looking at the world (see, for example, the website of one of the key agencies connected with military assistance, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency), and it is not surprising that debates over military assistance (e.g., should there be human rights conditions? should the U.S. suspend or restore military assistance to Indonesia?) have, for decades now, served as one of the principal, albeit extremely constrained means, by which U.S. foreign policy is assessed.

A second case of policy making concerns covert paramilitary raiding operations run against enemy states. Such operations are among the most important ways in which

the U.S. attempts to deal with states which it considers as systematically differing from it on key points of foreign and domestic policy: the Soviet Union, China for decades, Cuba, Libya for many years, and so forth. Beyond this aspect of bilateral relations, raids were one of the principal policy instruments employed by the U.S. during the cold war.

The United States developed a paramilitary raiding capacity during World War II, mostly through the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and then largely dismantled it for several years. It was revived (at the behest of George Kennan, among others) in 1948, with the creation of the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC), an agency which hired former OSS "knuckle draggers" and was at first partly under the control of the CIA, then eventually absorbed into it completely. However, for several years, the U.S. had no covert paramilitary capacity, which meant that when uprisings broke out in Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic republics around 1946, the U.S. was not in a position to do anything about them. Indeed, even basic U.S. intelligence was lacking about these places (in the words of the CIA's first Soviet Division chief, "In 1946 Washington knew virtually nothing about the U.S.S.R."). Once the uprisings were crushed, refugees flooded west and at that point, in 1947 or so, the British, who had prewar and wartime contacts with many of these groups, began to recruit from among their ranks and set up raiding programs to send small numbers of exiles back home to run sabotage campaigns and, if possible, serve as the nuclei for new uprisings.

These operations cost money, and the British, strapped for funds, were looking to offload expenses on the U.S., much as they had done with Greece in 1947. With the creation of the OPC, their problem was solved and the new agency was more than happy to start running operations of its own. (Its willingness was enhanced by its own

contacts among the refugees and the contracting arrangement it had worked out with the Gehlen organization.) Soon, the U.S. had adopted as a goal "the gradual retraction of undue Russian power and influence from the present perimeter areas around traditional Russian boundaries and the emergence of the satellite countries as entities independent of the USSR" and the OPC was participating actively in training exiles and organizing raids. These operations almost always failed, being not only several years too late to make any difference but also betrayed by double agents. Nonetheless, they continued for many months, ending only when the supply of cannon fodder ran out or when show trials made it clear that the operations were fatally compromised. In the words of Kim Philby, the MI6 officer (and Soviet double agent) who served as the liaison with the CIA, the "operation now takes on an independent existence ... Money that was allocated for it has already been partially spent, people have been recruited and continue to be recruited, equipment is being supplied. ... You can't turn back the clock – it would mean a colossal scandal."

A year after the raiding operations started in Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltics, MI6 induced the OPC to help it out with another raiding program, this time directed against Albania. Soon, the British had ceased their participation, but the Americans were increasing theirs, in spite of the dismal failures that accompanied each raid (typically the raiders were betrayed and rounded up, then tortured and put on display in show trials). This program, like the others, staggered on for several years until, short of cannon fodder, it finally folded. Even then, Dulles defended it: "At least we're getting the kind of experience we need for the next war."

The Eastern European pattern of raids was duplicated elsewhere, although henceforth without British urging. China, for example, had been a U.S. client state, and its loss

triggered a series of raiding operations: against the coast (during the Korean War); in the southwest (from the KMT forces in Burma); and, for many years, in Tibet. The Tibetan operation was eerily like that in Albania, as it was only launched on a large scale after the indigenous insurgency had been crushed and exiles streamed into India; these served as a pool for recruiting volunteers for air drops and land raids. As in Albania, the Tibetan raids were complete tactical failures. The next arena for raids was Cuba, where the Eisenhower Administration's hostility led eventually to the CIA's Operation Zapata and the Bay of Pigs. As is well known, this failure enraged Kennedy and his brother and led to plans for another operation, Mongoose, which was supposed to be a series of raids that, at the right moment, would trigger an uprising which could call on U.S. support. When Mongoose was shelved after the missile crisis, it was replaced by other raiding operations, led separately by the CIA and exiles. These were eventually turned off under Johnson's presidency, but only after considerable bureaucratic maneuvering. Some two decades later, yet another series of raiding operations were launched, this time against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, Qadaffi in Libya, and the leftist regime in South Yemen.

Exile raids, like military assistance, have been around for a long time. They also are common, though of course nowhere near as much as military assistance. (For one thing, the U.S. has far fewer enemies than it does clients.) Similarly, exile raids are linked to multiple goals, though again, there are fewer such goals than those associated with military assistance. However, what is striking about exile raids is that they are so rarely successful and yet are maintained for years against a given country, then resorted to elsewhere a short time later. This is partly a matter of shifting goals ("if we can't overthrow them, we can at least harass them"), partly of concern about "disposal" of the raiders, and partly a Micawberesque hope that something might turn

up. Most importantly, though, it is a matter of information flows and policy assessment procedures. Raiding operations tend to be carried out against enemy states with whom the U.S. does not have diplomatic relations and about whom there is as a result no regular reporting mechanism. This means that situation reports tend to be slanted heavily toward exile sources, with media accounts and intelligence from other states placed lower down the reliability list. Hence, pessimistic estimates and bad news are tagged as originating from outside the bureaucracy and hence as not verifiable. Given this emphasis, discussion of failures takes place within a tactical context (how did the particular landing go wrong? what can be done to improve fighting efficiency?) in which fundamental questions about the operation can only be raised by going outside standard reporting channels. Small wonder that bureaucrats who do this are accused of not being "on the team" and why the typical pattern is to keep the raids going until the last exile is arrested. Again, policy making revolves around the instrument rather than some higher-level goal with clear standards of success or failure.

This last point is worth developing further. The failures of the various raiding operations were clearly recognized: no one denied that operatives had been arrested, or fallen out of contact; or that an insurgency had not broken out. Rather, the point is that since there was not a single, unchanging goal, and since the organization was set up to transmit only certain types of information, there was no mechanism for focusing the discussion of failure on the very idea of the operation. Failures were understood as pertaining to persons or budgets or specific decisions (e.g., Kennedy's refusal to authorize a second air strike at the Bay of Pigs), not to the purpose of the operation. This is why, even when raiding operations are suspended for some years, it is always possible to revive them, as one might thaw a virus that had been frozen.

Before turning to more theoretical issues, it should be noted that the continuity of U.S. foreign policy is by no means restricted to military assistance and covert paramilitary operations. The United States has a number of tools at its disposal for maintaining client states and acting against enemies: economic aid (for both routine and emergency purposes), covert political operations (e.g., support for or attempts to undermine political parties), covert guerrilla operations, bombing operations, and the use of its own combat troops and those of proxy actors. All these instruments date back at least to the late 1940s, with several – economic aid, military training, U.S. and proxy combat troops – stretching back to the early years of the twentieth century. Each of these instruments has been used repeatedly and in or against countries from every region of the world. Moreover, these instruments are, as it were, scaleable: they can be instantiated in numerous specific programs run by different agencies (e.g., economic aid can be administered by AID, the Ex-Im Bank, the Economic Stabilization Fund, and various international multilateral lending agencies), with each of those programs in turn consisting of different operational modules. This scalability also runs in the other direction, so that the very logic of U.S. client state and enemy policy is programmatic, i.e., built around the use of preexisting policy instruments. *Each one of those instruments exhibits the same features of multiple goals and tactical failure assessment (also internal replication) as military assistance and covert paramilitary operations.*

Cybernetic arguments

The continuity of the two policy instruments we discussed is well explained by cybernetic processes. To see this, consider first the relation between means and ends. We saw above that the same policy instrument is routinely associated with multiple

and shifting goals, with new ones often being generated to justify the continuation of the instrument.[2] At the minimum, this suggests that goals are not determined first, with means then being chosen on the grounds of their ability to achieve those goals, whether in some optimal or satisficing sense. To claim otherwise would be to presume that states have some kind of priority ordering or hierarchy of goals and that the goal consequences of particular means can be satisfactorily predicted. Thus, whatever one's position on the cognitive and computational possibility of analytic solutions as opposed to boundedly rational ones, it makes no sense conceptually to "formulate the relevant values first and then choose among policies to achieve them," as Lindblom (1959: 82) put it almost half a century ago.[3]

In fact, it is much more reasonable to see policy making as being about specific, concrete policies, with the choice of the latter helping to determine which goals are most salient at a given moment. "Since means and ends are not distinct" (Lindblom 1959: 81), policy making revolves around what to do in a given situation now, with the immediate problem having only a loose and aleatory connection to the goals being adduced along with that policy. This is not hypocrisy – the policy makers may genuinely wish to pursue the goals – as much as it is the basic point of policy making. Policies must be particular and concrete in order to be useful: one cannot arrive in a meeting and say simply that a given regime must be supported and it should be left up to the technicians to decide between, say, helping a government get an IMF loan guarantee to facilitate its pursuit of a counterinsurgency campaign, and offering that

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[2] Our point simply that the same means or policy instrument can be used to obtain a variety of goals. It is important to distinguish this argument from an important one made by Most and Starr (1984) about foreign policy substitutability. They argued that a variety of means could be used to achieve a particular foreign policy goal and it is relevant to note that their analysis rests on the notion that goals both can be determined first and separated from means.

[3] Lindblom's paper still reads as if it were astonishingly new; note that "incrementalism" is only one, and a relatively minor, aspect of his claim (cf. Lindblom 1979).

same government U.S. attack helicopters for that campaign. Ignoring this concrete side, or seeing it as a trivial working out of general goals, is one of the principal failings of international relations research.

We can go further still, and see policy makers as deciding principally on means, with goals being stapled on, so to speak. A beautiful example of this is U.S. policy making regarding Afghanistan in 2001. Since the Taliban had taken over in the mid-1990s, the U.S. had maintained its ties with the leader of the Northern Alliance, Ahmed Shah Massoud, whom it had assisted in the 1980s when he was fighting the Soviet Union. Massoud wished for U.S. support against the Taliban, but this was refused for a number of reasons; instead, the CIA maintained contact with Massoud both as an insurance policy for the future and then, as concern grew about Osama Bin Laden, for the purpose of gathering intelligence. However, the prospect of aiding Massoud was brought up over and over, by both U.S. officials and Massoud himself. Finally, shortly before September 11, high level officials approved a plan to help Massoud's forces against Al Qaeda, with the understanding that this would involve Massoud launching an offensive against the Taliban. After the attacks of September 11, this plan then served as the nucleus of anti-Al Qaeda efforts, with the notable addition of U.S. bombing. Ostensibly, the Taliban were being given the choice of cooperating with the U.S. or being attacked, but since the U.S. had already begun helping the Northern Alliance, whose principal purpose was fighting against the Taliban, the goals associated with this offer (getting Bin Laden while avoiding war with the Taliban) were meaningless and appropriately short-lived.[4]

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[4] Discussion drawn from Sylvan and Majeski (forthcoming: ch. 6); see also Coll (2004).

There are various cybernetic mechanisms which can account for this prominence of means over ends. One has to do with the organizational arrangements for problem solving. Top-level policy makers in the U.S. are brought into play principally to solve the most pressing problems. They are presented with those problems in an already packaged form, as generated by lower-level officials; and it is expected that they will also be presented with possible solutions to those problems. These problem-solution packages are in turn put together from existing organizational capabilities, with search beginning from currently implemented programs and those attempted in putatively similar situations. However, such top-level policy making is more or less a mirror to what happens in more routine situations, except that the search space for the latter is more limited and the dominance of SOPs greater (cf. March and Simon 1958).

An alternative mechanism is that posited in the well-known garbage can model put forward by Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972; cf. Masuch and LaPotin 1989; Mucciaroni 1992; Olsen 2001; Peters 2002). Here, a "choice opportunity" can be viewed "as a garbage can into which various kinds of problems and solutions are dumped by participants as they are generated." In particular, solutions may be in search of problems, and so the idea, Oscar the Grouch-like, is to root around inside the garbage can for a problem to which a pet solution can be attached. Both military assistance programs and paramilitary raids are very much solutions along these lines, with policy makers lobbying for their use in a particular context and then hunting for problems which they can be said to solve and goals which they can be claimed to fulfill.

Let us now turn to the second issue raised by the policy instruments we discussed. This is the information transmission process and the way in which it focuses attention

on tactical failures rather than the operation itself. The claim here is not that failure is not recognized or downplayed, but rather that it is understood as stemming from flaws in execution, so that the operation can continue (perhaps on an escalated basis) in that country and the same policy instrument be employed in another country not long afterward. Typically, this phenomenon is glossed in terms of the reasons that motivate certain policy makers to advocate continuation: sunk costs, fear of appearing weak or irresolute to the outside or one's peers, cognitive and justificatory biases, and so forth (Ross and Staw 1986; Levitt and March 1988). However, such explanations do not address the fact that policy making involves specific argumentative norms and that organizational information-transmission channels make it next to impossible to construct robust or "proper" arguments that failed operations should result in ending a program or, going further, eliminating a policy instrument from future use elsewhere. As we saw above, policy recommendations are typically couched in terms of programmatic solutions to specific problems. The fact that an operation failed on a number of occasions must therefore be coupled with a proffered solution of a new program; simply proposing to shut down the operation is not enough.

The only way that advocates of ending a program can succeed is if they can adduce a different problem (i.e., not the operational failures) tied to the very functioning of the program. For example, it could be argued that the program is making things worse inside or outside the target state. Here, however, we bump up against the lack of organizational information channels mentioned above: the U.S. does not have diplomatic relations with many enemy states and thus its internal information gathering abilities (for example, via military advisers) are greatly restricted. Under these circumstances, reports that a given program is making things worse will either be difficult to generate or else be tagged as coming from third, and hence

"unverified," parties. This is why it usually takes some report that the policy instrument is having negative effects outside the target country before it is possible to turn off a program; barring that, the program will stagger on until there is no longer cannon fodder to keep it going.

A nice example of these processes at work is the meeting in which CIA raiding operations against Cuba were finally ended. The CIA director, John McCone, "pointed out that five relatively low-key sabotage operations since June 1963 do not in effect constitute a test of the program," an argument which more or less sidelined McNamara's objection that "the covert program has no present chance of success in terms of upsetting Fidel Castro" (McNamara's own deputy responded, shifting goals, that the program "would at least have the advantage of hindering Castro in the consolidation of his power"; Taylor made the same argument for the Joint Chiefs of Staff). Only when the Secretary of State observed that diplomatic information indicated that the raids were likely to interfere with other U.S. anti-Castro efforts at the diplomatic level, and that they also might prevent the Soviets from turning over SAM sites to the Cubans, did the tenor of the meeting shift – and even then, Rusk had to argue that the raiding assets should be kept in being while the raids were suspended and the question revisited in two months (it never was). Notice that Rusk did not eliminate his policy opponents' cognitive biases; instead, he redefined the situation as a new problem using organizationally vetted information. Notice also that Rusk's argument was of necessity Cuba-, and even more CIA-specific, meaning that the next time exiles became available to launch paramilitary operations against an another

enemy, there was no relevant institutional memory of the Cuban program's difficulties.[5]

Both of the cybernetic mechanisms we touched on above can account for this syndrome. The organizational arrangements mechanism would suggest that tactical failures never make it up the ladder to high-level policy makers as problems they need to consider, principally because the failures themselves cannot easily be packaged with programmatic solutions. The garbage can mechanism suggests that only when solutions (e.g., deals with the Soviets) are developed and staffed out can they be pulled from the garbage can and attached to a problem: in this case, an existing program.

A plea for cybernetics

As the above discussions make clear, we find that the basic continuity of United States foreign policy is usefully explained by reference to cybernetic mechanisms. Those mechanisms help account for the persistent resort to certain kinds of major policy instruments across time and space, even in the face of patent failures. An explanation which can account for details of disparate activities over the course of a century is, we think, worth pursuing. Moreover, the little we have seen about policy making in other states, notably the United Kingdom, France, and Russia, suggests that our arguments could be adapted to those cases as well.

In making this plea, we wish to resuscitate cybernetic theorizing as built around organizations, reporting mechanisms, routines, and institutional capabilities, though

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[5] Meeting at the White House, 7 April 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, vol. 32, doc. 259; for similar meetings on turning off the Cuban exiles' own operations under Manuel Artime, see docs. 296, 298.

updated to take into account norms of argumentation among high-level officials.[6]

These topics were how cybernetics was understood in the early 1970s, with the publication of *Essence of Decision*'s Model II and *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision*'s chapter on cybernetic models. Since that time, the specificity of this approach has largely disappeared from the study of foreign policy, being subsumed under discussions of bureaucratic politics, cognitive psychology, or adaptive logic (Hudson 2005; Levy 1994; Allison and Zelikow 1999; Steinbruner 2002: preface; though cf. Sagan 1994: 71-4). Although work in the cybernetic tradition is alive and well, its only trace in foreign policy analysis comes from a rather watered-down reading of Kingdon's reading of the garbage can model (Kingdon 1995; John 2003; Tomlin 1998; Lipson 2004).[7] In short, cybernetics has very much been absent from the study of foreign policy for quite a long time now.[8]

Our point is not to argue that cybernetic theory is "better" at explaining certain phenomena than other approaches, such as those focused on group dynamics or cognition. We have no way of knowing even how to make such a comparison (assuming commensurability of approaches), since to the best of our knowledge, the continuity of policy instruments is not a phenomenon that scholars operating in other theoretical traditions have paid much attention to. (The continuity of U.S. policy as a whole has been addressed by reference to constructs such as national identity, but these claims are notoriously abstract and say little about policy instruments or the

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[6] See Sylvan and Majeski (1998) and Majeski and Sylvan (1999) for examples of how argumentation among high-level officials is incorporated into a cybernetic approach to policy making.

[7] Hudson's (2005) excellent survey omits even the term "cybernetic" and any reference to Steinbruner's book with that word in its title. The Sagan (1994) piece can be seen as transitional: it mentions organizational theory and gives a range of appropriate citations, but is interested more in bounded rationality and organizational "biases" than in relations between goals and means, or other issues dealt with in this paper.

[8] In the late 1970s and 1980s the cybernetic approach was quite prominent (see for example Majeski (1983), Marra (1985,) and Ostrom and Job (1986), and was typically described as the main alternative to the rational analytic approach (see for instance Mintz, 1993).

problems of ranking goals. The same can be said about claims for the importance of

personality types, such as the well-known "hardball politics" argument.) Rather, our

interest is in opening up an explanatory field.

The one advantage we do see in constructing cybernetic explanations is the obligation

to look at the operational details of policy making. Quite apart from the fact that those

details, as we argued above, are at the heart of policy making, a focus on the details of

programs obliges us to grapple with primary sources and affords us the opportunity to

rethink the accounts of particular episodes typically found in newspapers and studies

by historians. We want to theorize about patterns of details, so that when we make

general statements, we can back them up with dozens of highly specific examples. A

cybernetic focus is in this respect a useful goad.

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