The Secretary of State as Lightning Rod: John Foster Dulles, Dean Acheson, and Henry Kissinger

Of all the members of a president’s cabinet, the secretary of state is invariably the most prominent. No other member of the administration outside of the president himself so readily commands the attention of the media. During the first year of the Reagan presidency, when the administration’s focus was overwhelmingly on the economy, Secretary of State Al Haig was still by far the most visible Reagan administration official. His 646 references in the *Vanderbilt Televisions News Abstract and Index* dwarf the next most prominent administration officials, who had less than half that number (Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, 272; OMB director David Stockman, 226; Vice President George Bush, 200). The most prominent officials in Congress, Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker and House Speaker Tip O’Neill received only about one-third of Haig’s coverage (220 and 182, respectively). And Haig received roughly ten times the coverage of even reasonably prominent figures such as CIA director William Casey (66), Press Secretary Larry Speakes (77), Interior Secretary James Watt (63), Senator Bob Dole (75), and House Ways and Means chair Dan Rostenkowski (57).

Lest it be thought that this greater visibility reflects Haig’s peculiarly colorful personality, one need only look at the coverage of the more understated Jim Baker in the first year of the Bush presidency. Secretary of State Baker’s 322 references were still well over twice those of his nearest administration rival, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney (148), and three times those of Vice President Dan Quayle (119). Even Speaker of the House Jim Wright, despite being engulfed in a prolonged and public scandal, was only half as visible as Baker. And Baker had six times the prominence of Chief of Staff John Sununu (53) and four times that of Drug Czar William Bennett (88), neither of whom could be described as shy of the public spotlight. Baker’s visibility was more than ten times as great as that of OMB director Dick Darman (32), Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady (24), Federal Reserve chair
Alan Greenspan (23), Chief Justice William Rehnquist (29), and Senate Finance chair and 1988 Democratic vice-presidential candidate Lloyd Bentsen (30).  

The abundant attention the press gives to the secretary of state would seem to make this cabinet post a prime candidate for the role of presidential lightning rod. Three postwar secretaries of state stand out as particularly visible and controversial occupants of this office: John Foster Dulles, Dean Acheson, and Henry Kissinger. Surveys show that about 90 percent of the American public claimed to recognize each of these men. More significantly, close to 80 percent of the public could correctly identify Kissinger's job after four years in the Nixon administration; upward of two-thirds of the public could correctly identify Dean Acheson's job as President Truman's secretary of state, and close to 60 percent could "recall offhand" the name of the secretary of state by the end of Dulles's tenure in the Eisenhower administration. That these individuals were well known even to the general public seems beyond question. That they were controversial and much criticized is well established. Less obvious and more interesting is the question of whether these individuals, prominent and controversial though they were, served as presidential lightning rods. In examining these three individual cases, we find a pattern that suggests some general lessons about the suitability of the secretary of state as a lightning rod.

DULLES AS LIGHTNING ROD

An oft-repeated corollary of Eisenhower revisionism is that President Eisenhower slyly used his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, as a lightning rod. "The truth," according to one of the earliest revisionists, Peter Lyon, is not only "that Dulles did Eisenhower's bidding in matters of high policy" but that Dulles "also served as the convenient butt for any criticism of that policy so that Eisenhower's avuncular image might be preserved." Historian Robert Divine echoes this view: "Dulles could serve as the lightning rod, absorbing domestic criticism and warding off attacks from the right wing with his moralistic fervor." And Fred Greenstein writes that the secretary of state was an "object of animosity that in another presidency would have been directed toward the chief executive." Eisenhower biographer Stephen Ambrose agrees that having "Dulles available to serve as a lightning rod served Eisenhower's purposes and helped maintain Eisenhower's popularity."

This view of Dulles as lightning rod is not without validity. An implicit division of labor does seem to have evolved, as Greenstein says, in which Dulles "issued the bulk of the 'get tough' foreign policy statements," while Eisenhower made the "gestures toward international humanitarianism and detente—for example, Atoms for Peace, Open Skies, goodwill trips, and
summitry." One can certainly point to individuals who blamed Dulles rather than Eisenhower for particular decisions or even for the overall course of the administration's foreign policy. The lightning rod hypothesis well describes the way certain liberal journalists conceived of the Dulles/Eisenhower relationship. New Yorker columnist Richard Rovere, to take one of the more extreme examples, believed that Eisenhower "more or less subcontracted the whole thing out [to Dulles]." According to Rovere, Eisenhower was a man of peaceful, moderate instincts who was always having to resist his bellicose secretary of state. In contrast to Eisenhower's "restraint and circumspection," Dulles was a "righteous, godly man, . . . repelled by the thought of striking bargains with men as steeped in sin as the Russian leaders are." As Rovere saw it:

The periods in which our foreign policy . . . appears to reach the maximum of flexibility and sobriety are those periods when Mr. Dulles is out of the country and making the rounds of the chancelleries. Then it is the President who speaks and who gives a powerful sense of being profoundly aware not only of the danger of Communist expansion but of the danger of war. After these interludes, Mr. Dulles flies in for a few days, delivers a couple of dour Calvinist forecasts of doom and retribution, then heads back out to Bangkok or Rio or wherever. It is believed in Washington that the President . . . winces each time he is notified that Mr. Dulles is about to touch down at National Airport.

Rovere even went so far as to speculate that Eisenhower had recruited Harold Stassen for the job of the president's special adviser on disarmament in hopes that "Mr. Stassen should embarrass Mr. Dulles."8 For certain events, too, a good case can be made that Eisenhower consciously used Dulles to shield himself from criticism. The controversy over the Bricker amendment, which would have limited the president's power to make international agreements as well as limiting the impact of international agreements on domestic laws, provides an early instance of Eisenhower's blame-avoidance technique and Dulles's willingness, in his own words, to be the "whipping boy."9 Asked at a press conference in March 1953 what he thought of the proposed Bricker amendment, which was heavily favored by congressional Republicans, Eisenhower at first artfully evaded the question. When asked again the following week, he spoke against the amendment but placed the responsibility for his decision on Dulles: "As analyzed for me by the Secretary of State," Eisenhower explained, the amendment "would, as I understand it, in certain ways, restrict the authority that the President must have, if he is to conduct the foreign affairs of this Nation effectively."10 In the ensuing months, Eisenhower met with Senator John Bricker on several occasions and gave the Ohio senator what Sherman Ad-
ams described as a "warm and sympathetic" hearing. Indeed, Eisenhower had seemed so sympathetic that Bricker emerged from one such conference telling reporters that he and the president had the same objectives and a few weeks later praised Eisenhower for "supporting the principle" of safeguarding constitutional rights.

Eisenhower's private expressions of sympathy for Bricker's position combined with his public deflection of responsibility onto Dulles fostered the view that it was the secretary of state who was "largely responsible" for the administration's opposition to the amendment. A number of supporters of the amendment doubted that the president fully understood the issue or that the president had firm views on the subject. Chief among those who held Dulles responsible for the president's opposition was Bricker himself. Dulles, Bricker told an interviewer many years later, represented the New York bankers and lawyers who "wanted to run government through treaties . . . to protect themselves and the international trade." Bricker believed that Dulles "dominated the administration's position and finally converted" the president and others in the administration to oppose the amendment.

The truth, as Duane Tananbaum's recent account shows, was that Eisenhower privately had little sympathy for Bricker or his amendment. Indeed "behind the scenes, Eisenhower played a much more active part in opposing the amendment than Bricker ever realized." The president tried to play down his personal opposition because he wanted to avoid a public confrontation during the first months of his presidency with people whom he would need to work with on other issues; he particularly wanted to avoid picking a fight on an issue that had broad support among congressional Republicans—virtually all the Republicans in the Senate had cosponsored Bricker's resolution. Republican leaders in Congress warned Eisenhower that a firm White House stand on the issue might cause "a serious split" in the Republican party. Even had Dulles not strongly opposed the measure, moreover, there were plenty of others in the administration—including Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson, and Mutual Security Director Harold Stassen, not to mention every high State Department official—who urged Eisenhower to oppose the amendment. In any event, Eisenhower needed little persuasion that the amendment compromised the ability of the United States to cooperate economically and militarily with its allies. On this basic question, there was no disagreement between the president and Dulles (or indeed any of the president's foreign and defense policy advisers).

If conservative Republicans faulted Dulles for the administration's opposition to the Bricker amendment, liberal Democrats blamed Dulles for the administration's Middle East policies. In particular, they held Dulles responsible for the administration's abrupt decision to withdraw promised funding for the Aswan Dam, a decision that Dulles's critics believed provoked Egyptian President Nasser to nationalize the Suez Canal and thus set off the entire
Suez crisis of 1956. That the decision was made while Eisenhower was still recovering from an operation helped bolster the view that it was Dulles who was alone responsible for the decision. But as Donald Neff’s account of the decision-making process makes clear, Eisenhower was intimately involved in the decision-making process throughout and the final call to withdraw the American offer of financial help was the president’s.

In the administration’s relations with foreign governments there seems a particularly compelling case for describing Dulles as a lightning rod. Foreign leaders frequently expressed admiration for Eisenhower, while simultaneously condemning the policies pursued by the secretary of state. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, for instance, professed “the deepest respect” for Eisenhower but characterized Dulles as an “imperialist” and “war-like.” British Prime Minister Anthony Eden, upon receiving a letter from Eisenhower warning Eden that the United States would not support the use of military force against Nasser, immediately attributed the letter to Dulles. “The only thing that’s true to Ike in that [letter] is his signature and that’s illegible.” The truth, however, was that Eisenhower himself had written the letter. European powers, particularly the British, found in Dulles a convenient scapegoat for their frustrations with their postwar role as followers of the United States. Dulles was crude, undiplomatic, moralistic—indeed, from their point of view, quintessentially American. Blaming Dulles allowed Europeans to avoid having to complicate their rosy view of Eisenhower as the supreme commander of the Allied forces and liberator of Europe.

What allowed Dulles to serve as a lightning rod was a widespread perception, even among some who should have known better, that the president “let Foster Dulles do about what Foster Dulles wanted to do.” This view was often repeated by contemporaries and even by scholars. Typical was Herman Finer’s judgment that Eisenhower picked Dulles to be secretary of state “so that he could leave in [Dulles’s] hands almost all of the direct and daily responsibilities for guiding this nation in her multitudinous and complex dealings with the other nations of the world. Dulles alone was in the driver’s seat.” Revisionist research has persuasively demonstrated that this conventional view of Eisenhower is widely off the mark. Dulles and Eisenhower in fact worked together extraordinarily closely, and Dulles invariably consulted the president before making public statements or sending diplomatic messages of any importance. Moreover, it was Eisenhower, not Dulles, who made the final decisions.

DULLES AND THE MASS PUBLIC

The finding that Eisenhower controlled foreign policy is necessary but not sufficient, however, to support the claim made by Ambrose and others that
having "Dulles available to serve as a lightning rod . . . helped to maintain Eisenhower's popularity." To validate this hypothesis we need evidence about how the general public felt about Dulles. Was Secretary Dulles as unpopular as this thesis implies, indeed requires? A number of secondary accounts assert that Dulles was unpopular. Political scientist Stephen Hess, for instance, reports that Dulles "was as unpopular as the President was popular." Diplomatic historian Gordon Craig agrees that "it would be difficult to think of an American Secretary of State who was less beloved during his term of office than Dulles." In *The Devil and John Foster Dulles*, Townsend Hoopes contrasts "the popular President" with "the unpopular Secretary of State." But in none of these cases is systematic evidence marshaled to support the claim.

This oversight is surprising because, unlike with most administration officials, there is no shortage of public opinion data relating to the public's attitude toward Dulles. In Eisenhower's first term, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) asked the public to evaluate Dulles's job performance on no less than twenty-one occasions. Contrary to conventional wisdom, these public opinion polls indicate that Secretary of State Dulles was well liked by the American public. In the first term, Dulles's popularity among those expressing an opinion averaged 87 percent, slightly above the 80 percent of those with an opinion who approved of Eisenhower. These results suggest an alternative to the lightning rod hypothesis: the mass public viewed Dulles and Eisenhower as a package, holding them jointly responsible for foreign policy setbacks, while crediting them both with foreign policy triumphs.

Consider, for example, the 1955 Geneva Summit, which is often cited as an instance in which the likable Eisenhower played "the warm champion of peace" to Dulles's "austere cold warrior." This view is offered by, among others, Herbert Parmet, who explains that "once again the impression created was of a President seeking peace with open sincerity while his Secretary of State, more consistent with the party's right wing, held out for the hard line." A contemporary version of this thesis is presented in a Herblock cartoon featuring a dour Dulles, laden with "Dulles doubts," and an eager Eisenhower, bubbling with "Eisenhower optimism," reassuring the listener at the other end of the phone that "we'll be there [at the summit], rain or shine."

Public opinion polls taken before and after the July summit validate part of this hypothesis: Eisenhower's popularity did increase slightly after the summit. During the months before the summit, the president's approval rating, among those expressing an opinion, hovered around 80 percent. A special Gallup survey conducted immediately after the summit showed the president's approval rating had been pushed up to 86 percent. What Parmet's thesis neglects, however, is that Dulles's popularity was also boosted by the
summit. Before the summit, 84 percent of those with an opinion approved of Dulles's performance; afterward, approval of the secretary rose to 92 percent. President Eisenhower's allegedly "personal triumph" was thus shared, at least in the mind of the general public, by the secretary of state.

Proponents of the "Dulles as lightning rod" thesis often point to the furor over the Suez crisis as evidence of their contention. They stress that it was Dulles, on July 19, 1956, who issued the public "slap in the face" to Egyptian President Nasser by withdrawing the American offer to help finance the building of the Aswan Dam. Although the Egyptians and congressional Democrats may have blamed Dulles, there is no indication that the American public faulted the secretary. Dulles's approval rating after the incident (61 percent approval, 16 percent disapproval, and 23 percent no opinion) remained unchanged from before (63-15-22). As the Suez drama unfolded—in response to Nasser's nationalization of the canal, Israel, France, and Britain invaded Egypt at the end of October—the American public, far from blaming Dulles, rallied around the foreign policy team of Dulles and Eisenhower. After Eisenhower's landslide victory in November 1956, approval of Eisenhower among those with an opinion increased to 83 percent (75-15-10), as did approval of Dulles, which rose to 84 percent (70-13-17).

The public evidently did not share the bitter antipathy felt toward Dulles in foreign capitals and, to a more uneven extent, in Congress. Dulles's "frequent references to God and the flag" may have been "tiresome" for intellectuals, but the general public, if they noticed at all, seemed to be little bothered by his moralizing. Perhaps, as Newsweek speculated at the time, "the very [moralism] that has irritated Europeans and Asians is the very thing that many Americans admire most about him." For at least some in the general public, foreign antagonism toward Dulles was probably a sign that the secretary was standing up for America. Whatever the reasons, the evidence cannot sustain the view that Dulles was unpopular with the American public, at least not during the first term.

Data concerning public attitudes toward Dulles's performance during Eisenhower's second term, unfortunately, are much more scanty than those that exist for the first term. The few polls taken, however, do not lend much support to the lightning rod hypothesis. During 1957, only one national survey asked respondents to evaluate the secretary of state's performance. Taken in the spring, as the "get Dulles" campaign in Washington intensified, the poll found that of those with an opinion (83 percent of the sample), 76 percent approved of Dulles's performance. A Gallup survey conducted at roughly the same time showed President Eisenhower with an identical approval rating of 76 percent among those with an opinion (88 percent of the sample). Up to this point, at least, there is still no evidence that Dulles helped to maintain Eisenhower's popularity in the general public by serving as a lightning rod.
Anti-Dulles sentiment in Congress and the media reached its peak at the outset of 1958. Gallup conducted two surveys during January that asked the public to evaluate the performance of both Secretary Dulles and President Eisenhower. The first poll, taken at the beginning of the month, found that among those with an opinion Dulles's approval rating had fallen to 61 percent. But support for Eisenhower had also declined; only two-thirds of those with an opinion now expressed approval of Eisenhower's performance. The drop in support for Dulles, however, is sharper than these statistics indicate. Thirty-six percent—more than double the number from the previous spring—were now undecided about how to evaluate the secretary's performance. Dulles met with the approval of only 39 percent of the sample—a dramatic decline from the 63 percent who had approved of his performance the preceding spring. In contrast, only one in ten respondents reserved judgment on Eisenhower's performance, and six in ten still approved of the president's performance.47

This poll suggests that the pervasive criticism of Dulles in Congress and in the press did have a significant impact on public attitudes toward Dulles. The primary impact of this criticism, however, was not to increase disapproval of Dulles—only 25 percent now disapproved compared with 20 percent the previous spring—but rather to move those people who had previously approved of Dulles into the undecided column. While this might be construed as evidence of a lightning rod effect, one must keep in mind that (1) more people (30 percent) still disapproved of Eisenhower than disapproved of Dulles (25 percent), and (2) Eisenhower's popularity had been declining steadily since his reelection and continued to erode until the spring of 1958 when it reached the low point of his administration. Mounting criticism of Dulles, in other words, corresponded closely with Eisenhower's own decline in popularity.

Bivariate analysis of the January 1958 survey provides further evidence of the high degree of linkage between public attitudes toward Eisenhower and Dulles. Only 14 percent of those who expressed an opinion about both men (62 percent of the sample) combined disapproval of Dulles with approval of Eisenhower. That figure is only marginally larger than the 11 percent who disapproved of Ike but approved of his secretary of state. More than half liked both Dulles and Eisenhower, and slightly less than one-fourth disapproved of both men. In short, three-fourths of those respondents with an opinion about both men answered the same way about the president and the secretary of state. In contrast, the same survey shows that only about half of the farmers gave Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson the same approval rating as they gave to the president.

Another Gallup poll taken in late January strengthens the linkage thesis while throwing further doubt upon the lightning rod hypothesis. Unfortunately, this survey uses an unnecessarily stringent filter question, asking
whether the respondent could "recall offhand the name of the U.S. Secretary of State." Among the 58 percent who passed this hurdle, Dulles had the support of 69 percent of those who expressed an opinion about Dulles's performance. This level of support was no different from the 68 percent of those with an opinion who approved of Eisenhower. Again one is struck by the trend toward consistency in public attitudes toward the president and secretary of state.

Two state polls taken near the end of 1958 point to the same conclusion that there was not a great discrepancy between the public's evaluation of Eisenhower and Dulles. A Des Moines Register poll of 753 Iowa residents taken in September 1958 found that among those with an opinion Dulles's performance was approved by 63 percent, while Eisenhower's performance met with the approval of 67 percent. (Benson, in contrast, met with the approval of only 47 percent.) In October 1958, the Minneapolis Herald Tribune polled 999 Minnesotans and found that among those with an opinion, 70 percent approved of Eisenhower and 69 percent approved of Dulles (and only 47 percent approved of Benson).

The dominant impression that emerges from the available survey research is of a public that has difficulty separating evaluations of the president from judgments about the secretary of state. This contrasts markedly with public attitudes in the sphere of agriculture, where many in the public, particularly among farmers, simultaneously held a positive view of the president and a negative view of Secretary Benson. Agricultural policy was deemed by the public to be largely the responsibility of Secretary Benson; foreign policy, in contrast, seems to have been judged the joint responsibility of the president and the secretary of state.

DULLES AND CONGRESS

In contrast to the mass public, which normally pays little or no attention to foreign affairs, elites closely scrutinize an administration's actions. Much of what exercises elites (the battle over the Bricker amendment is a conspicuous instance) leaves the great bulk of the mass public cold. While elites debate nuances in the doctrines of massive retaliation, containment, or liberation, the general public tends to evaluate an administration's performance in foreign affairs at the more "simple and global level of getting into war or staying out of it." If foreign policy "has to shout loudly to be heard even a little" by the mass public, even the faintest whisper is usually detected by political elites.

Because elites pay closer attention than the mass public to questions of foreign policy, they are more likely to perceive differences in the personas and positions of the president and secretary of state. We would therefore ex-
pect the lightning rod thesis to carry greater validity at the elite than at the mass level, and indeed we have already presented evidence that this is the case for Dulles. Even at the elite level, however, the evidence that Dulles was a presidential lightning rod is much less compelling than is commonly assumed. Although elites were more attentive to the differing emphases Eisenhower and Dulles assigned to policies, the dominant tendency among the political stratum no less than the mass public seems to have been to link their evaluations of the president and Secretary Dulles.

In a heroic effort, James Rosenau has coded every comment made on the Senate floor regarding Dulles between 1953 and 1956. Among those senators who engaged in “recurrent behavior,” ten were consistently hostile toward the secretary of state. Four were extreme right-wing isolationists: William Jenner (R-Ind.), George Malone (R-Nev.), Joseph McCarthy (R-Wis.), and Patrick McCarran (D-Nev.); the other six were liberal, “peace-minded” internationalists: Paul Douglas (D-Ill.), William Fulbright (D-Ark.), Hubert Humphrey (D-Minn.), Herbert Lehman (D-N.Y.), Joseph O’Mahoney (D-Wyo.), and Wayne Morse (I-Oreg.). Contrary to the lightning rod hypothesis, none of these senators were favorably disposed toward Eisenhower. Most were scornful of the president.

Like many other liberal senators, Hubert Humphrey often drew attention to apparent differences between Dulles and Eisenhower on such issues as disarmament or summit meetings with the Soviets. But this did not mean that he absolved Eisenhower from responsibility for what he regarded as the administration’s incoherent and contradictory foreign policy. Far from it. Indeed the president’s willingness to permit such differences was itself grounds for condemnation. Humphrey pledged that he could not “support an administration that constantly reveals such an abysmal lack of executive leadership.” In another unmistakable swipe at Eisenhower he lamented that “the great tragedy of this administration is that it seeks popularity at the expense of principle and leadership.” President Eisenhower no less than Secretary Dulles was responsible for what he considered to be “the deterioration of American foreign policy.”

From 1956 on, William Fulbright was Dulles’s severest congressional critic, but by 1958 the Arkansas senator had also become one of Eisenhower’s most persistent and uncompromising critics. Fulbright, like many other Democrats, did single out Dulles for deciding on his own to withdraw the offer of financial assistance to Nasser. And in an interview in 1970, Fulbright attributed what he regarded as the improper handling of treaties during the Eisenhower years to Dulles rather than to Eisenhower. But in criticizing Dulles for seeming “at times to be exercising those ‘delicate, plenary, and exclusive powers’ which are supposed to be vested in the President,” Fulbright also implicitly criticized Eisenhower for abdicating his constitutional responsibilities as president of the United States. Increasingly,
rather than isolating Dulles as the source of the administration's missteps, Fulbright directly criticized Eisenhower. The most extreme instance was a 1958 speech on the floor of the Senate in which he ridiculed the entire Eisenhower era as one of "luxurious torpor" in which people "were at liberty to stop thinking any more . . . [when] they could bask in the artificial sunlight of a government which did not bother them with serious things." He decried the "weakness for the easy way" and, in an unmistakable jab at Eisenhower, declared that "the age of the amateur is over." Fulbright was contemptuous of what he regarded as Eisenhower's "aimless and feeble" leadership that was distinguished by its "lack of taste for the hard work of the intellect that must precede meaningful action."

Another of Dulles's most vocal antagonists was Oregon Senator Wayne Morse. But Morse, who had bolted the Republican party shortly after the nomination of Eisenhower to become an Independent, had been a strident critic of Eisenhower from the outset. In 1952, he had supported Stevenson, whom he considered "a brilliant statesman," over Eisenhower, who he believed wasn't "big enough . . . for the job, [and] . . . hasn't the mind for it." During the campaign, Morse accused Eisenhower of "demagoguery, double-talk and dangerous desertion . . . of his once-professed political principles" and labeled Eisenhower's "I will go to Korea" pledge "a cheap, grandstand political ploy." The trouble with Eisenhower, Morse believed, was that Eisenhower was "a man of compromise rather than a man of determined principle." Nothing Ike did during the next eight years prompted Morse to change his opinion, and their personal relations remained frosty.

Neither Herbert Lehman nor Paul Douglas, both ardent liberals, had many kind words for Eisenhower. Ten days after Eisenhower had been nominated, Douglas criticized Eisenhower on the floor of the Democratic convention for his role, as army chief of staff, in recommending the withdrawal of American troops from South Korea. Eisenhower, Douglas told the Democratic delegates, must therefore carry a large part of the blame for the North Korean invasion of South Korea.

Like Morse, both Lehman and Douglas regarded themselves as men of principle rather than of compromise. In Lyndon Johnson's view, they were "crazies . . . bomb-thrower types." Both Lehman and Douglas sought leadership "which inspires and awakens . . . people to great ends and to great sacrifices" and found Eisenhower sorely lacking. Douglas condemned Eisenhower's "rush toward the middle of the road" and ridiculed a situation in which the "bland [were] leading the bland." Similarly, Lehman longed for "an administration seeking ideas instead of nostrums." Much as Ronald Reagan's detractors talked of a Teflon presidency, so Douglas referred disparagingly to "the Eisenhower spell."

Among the right-wing isolationists who were critical of Dulles, none could be counted as supportive of Eisenhower. Although initially reluctant
to tangle with the popular president, their private comments were suffused with disdain for the general-turned-president. In the case of McCarthy, the private contempt bubbled up to the surface at the end of 1954, when he publicly accused Eisenhower of “weakness and supineness” in ferreting out Communists and felt it necessary to “apologize to the American people” for supporting Eisenhower in 1952. The attitude toward Eisenhower among this stripe of Republican was, “He’s our meal ticket now. Once we’re in, the hell with him. . . . I won’t give a damn about Ike the day after the election.” From the perspective of the extreme right wing, it was not Secretary Dulles but Eisenhower, a “Fifth-Column Democrat,” who was largely responsible for the administration’s failure to depart from the disastrous foreign policy of his predecessors.

Early on, Eisenhower had given up trying to work with what he termed “the McCarthy-Malone axis,” which “hates and despises everything for which I stand.” Instead he opted for a strategy of isolating, and thereby rendering impotent, the “reactionary fringe” of the party by wooing those less rigid among the Old Guard, such as Robert Taft, Everett Dirksen, Homer Capehart, Styles Bridges, and William Knowland. With the exception of the “unappeasables,” the Old Guard consistently defended Dulles (as well as Eisenhower). By Rosenau’s count, five such senators (Capehart, Dirksen, Homer Ferguson, Bourke Hickenlooper, and Knowland) made a total of 233 references to Dulles between 1953 and 1956, and only four of those references were coded as unfavorable toward Dulles.

Suspicious the Taft wing of the party originally harbored about Dulles on account of his past associations with the Truman administration and Thomas Dewey were dispelled by Dulles’s strident anti-Communist rhetoric and by the enemies he was making, particularly in Britain. One notable convert was Senator William Langer (R-N.D.), a fervent isolationist who in a debate over foreign aid in 1953 had scored Dulles for having “brought over with him to the halls and meeting chambers of the State Department the entire Truman-Acheson foreign concept almost without variation.” Before long, however, Langer was praising Dulles as a tireless and courageous champion of American interests. “With John Foster Dulles as his Secretary of State,” Langer observed, “Dwight Eisenhower and Mr. Dulles have taken charge of the foreign relations of the United States Government, and, although cooperating with other countries, have not allowed England, France, or any other country to dictate to the United States of America.”

If even in Congress Dulles proved to be less of a lightning rod than is often presumed, this is in part due to his assiduous efforts to gain the support and confidence of members of Congress, particularly those (like Langer) who sat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. “His correspondence files and telephone memoranda,” according to one scholar, “tell the story of perpetual courtship.” He breakfasted with the Foreign Relations chair Walter
George at the influential Democrat's apartment at least every other week and frequently stopped by for conversations in the late afternoon or early evening. Dulles kept up a "continuous dialogue" with William Knowland, who was minority (and, briefly, majority) leader as well as a member of the Foreign Relations Committee. Anxious to avoid the acrimonious congressional relations that had plagued the tenure of his predecessor, Dean Acheson, Dulles made extraordinary efforts to consult congressional committees. During his six-year tenure, he testified forty-eight times before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and always consulted the committee before and after major international conferences. He established a reputation with Congress that Senator Alexander Wiley (R-Wis.) characterized as one of "complete frankness and honesty." Republicans in particular regarded Dulles's attitude as a welcome departure from the "deceit and contempt" that they believed Acheson had displayed during his appearances before congressional committees.

Those senators not persuaded by Dulles's appeals usually did not exempt the president from their criticisms of the administration's foreign policy. In part this was because, in contrast to a policy area like agriculture where Eisenhower had no pretense to expertise, the president knew a great deal about national security policy and foreign affairs. The former leader of the Allied armed forces could hardly claim to be following the advice of subordinates in formulating the nation's national defense posture. Indeed playing upon Eisenhower's military experience and wisdom was a common tactic used by proponents of the administration's foreign and defense policies. In defending the policy of massive retaliation, for instance, William Knowland told his fellow senators he doubted "that any member of this body has had the experience of President Eisenhower, who led our armies in World War II and won the great victory in Europe." Such arguments, which were repeated again and again, meant that Eisenhower's prestige was closely tied to his foreign and defense policies in a way that was never true in domestic policy.

Criticisms of Dulles's handling of foreign and defense policies, however, spilled over into indictments of the president for reasons that go beyond the circumstances peculiar to the Eisenhower presidency. To criticize the country's "foreign policy [as] inadequate, outmoded, and misdirected" necessarily implied a critique of the president, an implication that was absent or muted when critics attacked agricultural, labor, or land policies. The Acheson/Truman relationship, which exhibits an even more pronounced tendency on the part of elites and masses to merge their evaluations of the president and secretary of state, lends support to the hypothesis that this coupling phenomenon is embedded in the peculiar nature of a president's roles and responsibilities in conducting foreign policy.
ACHESON AND TRUMAN

If ever a president was in need of a lightning rod in foreign affairs it was Harry Truman during his second term. In contrast to the perceived foreign policy successes of his initial term—the Marshall Plan, Truman Doctrine, Berlin Air Lift—1949 was, as the historian Eric Goldman phrased it, “a year of shocks.” First came the fall of the Nationalist Chinese government, followed by the announcement that the Soviets had acquired the atomic bomb. Within another year, the United States was embroiled in a war in Korea. Public opinion surveys reflected the administration’s changing fortunes. Whereas during Truman’s first term more people had approved than disapproved of “the way the officials in Washington are handling our foreign affairs,” during the second term a majority consistently expressed disapproval (except for a brief “rally around the flag” immediately after North Korea invaded South Korea).

Dean Acheson was sworn in as secretary of state on January 21, 1949, arriving, as Acheson later noted, “just in time to have [Chiang Kai-shek] collapse on me.” In many ways, Acheson was an ideal foil for conservative Republicans looking for a culprit for the “loss of China.” With “his smart-aleck manner and his British clothes and that New Dealism,” Acheson, in the eyes of many Republicans, stood “for everything that has been wrong with the United States for years.” The Republican right piled abuse upon the head of “the great Red Dean.” By one scholar’s count, isolationist Republican senators made 7 cordial and 1,268 hostile remarks regarding Acheson on the floor of the Senate.

It is understandable that Acheson believed he had been singled out as “chief villain by the Republican right.”

If there is no doubting the level of abuse directed toward Acheson by Republican congressmen, there are grounds for questioning whether these assaults upon the secretary of state diverted criticism away from President Truman. An alternative hypothesis is that criticism of Acheson went hand-in-hand with criticism of Truman. The Congressional Record shows the latter hypothesis to be in closer accord with the evidence. The predominant tendency among Acheson’s severest congressional critics was to condemn both the secretary of state and the president.

A glimpse of the depths of Republican hostility toward Truman was revealed when Republican congressmen heckled the president during delivery of his 1950 State of the Union message. The following day, California Senator William Knowland launched an extended attack upon the administration’s “defeatist attitude” and “bankrupt policy” in China. Although Knowland singled out “a small group of willful men in the Far Eastern Division of the State Department” as particularly culpable for “the debacle which has taken place in China,” this did not, in his view, absolve those higher up in the chain of command, for the subordinates “had the backing
of their superiors." "No group," Knowland stressed, "could so operate in the Far Eastern Division without the approval of the Secretary of State and no Secretary of State could follow such a policy without the approval of the President of the United States. The ultimate responsibility is there." The Chinese, Knowland concluded, had been "sold down the river into slavery by the President of the United States and the State Department."

Perhaps the most persistent critic of the secretary of state was Styles Bridges, whom Acheson later characterized as "my faithful enemy." But while Bridges may have saved his most colorful barbs for Acheson and the State Department, his speeches on the floor of the Senate reveal that he considered Truman and Acheson jointly responsible for the disappointing course of events in the Far East. It was "the policy of Truman and Acheson," not that of Acheson alone, that Bridges blamed for "turning over China" to the Communists. In explaining why he believed no top military expert would contradict Acheson's contention that Formosa was of little strategic value to the United States, Bridges declared that under this administration "if a top-ranking policy maker is to retain his position, he must unhesitatingly follow the line laid down by the President."

Criticism of the secretary of state intensified after Acheson responded to news of Alger Hiss's perjury conviction by announcing at a press conference that "I do not intend to turn my back on Alger Hiss." But the same Republicans who now called for the secretary's removal believed Truman too was guilty of "coddling" Communists. As they were quick to remind the opposition, it was President Truman who had dismissed charges of subversion made by congressional investigating committees as "red herrings." Many Republican congressmen shared Indiana Senator Homer Capehart's belief that there would continue to be spies "as long as we have a president who refers to such matters as 'red herrings' and a secretary of state who refuses to turn his back on Alger Hisses."

The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 only strengthened the perceived ties between Truman and Acheson. Although the immediate effect of the North Korean invasion of South Korea was to mute criticism of Truman (but not of the secretary of state) as the country "rallied around the flag," once the war began to go badly—as it did after the entry of the Chinese in the winter of 1950-1951—there was even less scope for Truman to avoid responsibility than before. President Truman could not avoid blame because, as Senate Minority Leader Robert Taft expressed it, "the Korean War is a Truman War."

The dismissal of General MacArthur in the spring of 1951 provided a fresh occasion for Republicans to air their grievances with the Truman administration. As before, criticism was aimed at the team of Truman and Acheson. North Dakota Senator Milton Young, for instance, believed the firing of MacArthur to be "in line with President Truman's and Secretary
Dean Acheson's program of everlasting appeasement to Communists." Senator Richard Nixon agreed that "the policy of the State Department—and that means the policy of the administration" was one of "bare-faced appeasement." The disastrous war in Korea, Senator Capehart argued, "was due to the foreign policy team of Truman, Marshall, and Acheson." Bridges blamed the "Truman-Acheson clique."101

That abuse of Acheson in no way precluded blaming (or even abusing) Truman is evident from the behavior of Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose vitriolic criticisms of Acheson are well known. In his now famous Wheeling address, for instance, McCarthy had pummeled Acheson as a "pompous diplomat in striped pants, with a phony British accent."102 Although he obviously relished attacking the vulnerable State Department, he reserved plenty of invective for the president. Truman's dismissal of MacArthur prompted McCarthy to declare that "the son of a bitch should be impeached."103 He intimated, moreover, that Truman had been drunk when he issued the order to recall MacArthur.104 McCarthy was unequivocal that "we should put the blame [for tying MacArthur's hands] on our Chief Executive."105

Another of Acheson's most abusive critics was the newly elected senator from Idaho, Herman Welker—indeed Welker attributed his election in 1950 to his denunciations of Acheson during the campaign. While MacArthur's dismissal proved to Welker that Acheson "is riding in the saddle today," he also told his Senate colleagues that on account of "the continuous blundering on the part of the President of the United States, I have lost any confidence I ever had in Harry Truman"—although he allowed that "I never had very much in the beginning." Both Truman and Acheson, Welker intimated, were in league with the Communist paper the Daily Worker. In addition to repeating his call for Acheson to be "fired and replaced," he also asked for Truman's resignation—90 percent of his telegrams, he reported, asked for impeachment proceedings to begin immediately.106 Another longtime Acheson foe, Senator William Jenner, also believed that Acheson's resignation was no longer sufficient: "It is too late now for such minor remedies. We must cut this whole cancerous conspiracy out of our Government at once. Our only choice is to impeach President Truman."107

Public opinion polls, though scanty, strongly suggest that the general public also perceived Acheson and Truman as an inseparable package. In the public mind, Secretary Acheson was the president's accomplice, Truman's partner in crime. After the Chinese crushed the United Nations armies in late November, public support for the war shrank dramatically,108 as did support for President Truman and Secretary Acheson. A Gallup poll conducted early in December of 1950, immediately before the Republican caucus' vote of no-confidence in Acheson, found that six in ten of those venturing an opinion held an unfavorable impression of Acheson. Roughly the same per-
percentage believed Acheson should be replaced. A Gallup poll taken shortly thereafter showed that 58 percent of those expressing an opinion disapproved of Truman's performance as president. The percentage of people who wanted Acheson replaced was thus virtually identical with the proportion who disapproved of Truman.

In May of 1951, a month after Truman's recall of MacArthur, Gallup found that slightly more than two-thirds of those with an opinion believed that Acheson should be replaced. The same poll also showed that Truman's disapproval rating among those with an opinion had reached a new high of 72 percent. Bivariate analysis confirms that those who disapproved of Truman overwhelmingly wanted to get rid of Acheson and that those who approved of Truman were content to stick with Acheson.

Four months later, the storm over Acheson had subsided somewhat. Reflecting the relative absence of elite voices now calling for Acheson's dismissal, Gallup found that the percentage of those with an opinion who believed Acheson should be replaced had dropped to just under half. The same poll, however, showed that 63 percent of those expressing an opinion disapproved of President Truman's performance. One-sixth of those who wanted Acheson to stay on, moreover, did so out of a fear that Truman might appoint someone worse. No matter how unpopular a secretary of state becomes, this survey suggests, he cannot protect a president from bearing the responsibility for an unpopular war. It was Truman's war, not Acheson's.

If there had been a decline in the number of people clamoring for Acheson's dismissal, it did not mean that the public now approved of his performance as secretary of state. Far from it. A NORC survey taken in October 1951 found that although 60 percent of those with an opinion now wanted Acheson to stay on, only 42 percent of those with an opinion evaluated his handling of foreign affairs positively. Another NORC poll, taken a year later, found Acheson's approval rating roughly unchanged at about 39 percent. During this last year of Truman's presidency, the president's Gallup approval rating among those with an opinion hovered in the mid-30s, somewhat below Acheson's rating.

It is tempting to attribute the widespread perception of Truman and Acheson as a package to peculiar features of Truman's leadership. Because, as Robert Donovan observes, "Truman angrily regarded attacks on any of his subordinates as attacks upon himself," the president vigorously defended Acheson when he was under attack. As any number of commentators have noted, President Truman placed a high premium on loyalty. Richard Fenno, for instance, remarks that Truman "required a close loyalty, and he reciprocated in full measure when any of his subordinates (like Dean Acheson) were under fire from the outside."

The most obvious example of Truman coming to Acheson's defense occurred at the close of 1950. On December 15, the Republican caucuses in
both the House and Senate requested Acheson be removed on the grounds that he had “lost the confidence of the country.” At a subsequent press conference, Truman promptly “blasted back” at critics of the secretary of state. 115 To dismiss Acheson, Truman responded, would be to “weaken the firm and vigorous position this country has taken against communist aggression.” In addition to reiterating his great faith in the secretary of state, Truman made it clear that such attacks upon Acheson were attacks upon the president’s foreign policy. As Truman later explained in his memoirs, “They wanted Acheson’s scalp because he stood for my policy. . . . The men who struck out against Acheson were thus in reality striking out at me.” 116

Perhaps Truman’s style of never shrinking from a fight, much in evidence in his sharp, unflinching defense of Acheson, encouraged opponents to criticize the president directly. Certainly Truman’s insistence on reminding the public that responsibility for a decision was the president’s alone (“The Buck Stops Here”) made it more difficult for opponents to criticize Acheson without also criticizing Truman. But it was not only Truman who drew attention to the fact that attacks on Acheson were necessarily attacks on the president. Democrat William Fulbright, for instance, reminded his Senate colleagues that “this attack upon Mr. Acheson is, of course, not just a personal matter between him and the Republicans. It is, in fact, an attack upon the President and his foreign policy. . . . Everyone knows that Mr. Acheson is not an independent agent, but, on the contrary, that he is but the instrumentality of the President in carrying into effect the foreign policy which the President determines.” 117 Republican Senator Eugene Millikin admitted as much when he explained that at issue was something much broader than the issue of Mr. Acheson himself, and that was the “whole question of this Administration’s foreign policy.” 118

An examination of how President Eisenhower acted when faced with congressional criticism of Secretary Dulles’s handling of the Suez affair casts doubt upon an explanation that centers exclusively on Truman’s style of leadership. Rather than allow Dulles to stand alone and absorb the fire, Eisenhower went out of his way to identify himself with his secretary of state. At a January 30, 1957, news conference, Eisenhower was asked whether Dulles’s actions had “contributed to our present international difficulties.” Eisenhower replied that Dulles “has never taken any action which I have not in advance approved.” The policies pursued by the secretary of state, the president continued, “have my approval from top to bottom.” 119 Moreover, just as Truman praised Acheson as “among the greatest of our Secretaries of State,” 120 so Eisenhower credited his secretary of state with possessing “a wisdom and experience and knowledge that I think is possessed by no other man in the world.” 121

An additional difficulty with focusing on Truman’s leadership style as the critical variable in explaining the intense criticism directed at Truman is that
Presidents Truman and Eisenhower both delegated extensive authority to their secretaries of state. Unlike FDR, Truman had no desire to be his own secretary of state. Although Truman was hardly averse to placing himself on the firing line—indeed his motto "If you can’t stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen" implied that the ultimate test of presidential mettle was how well one stood up under fire—it was Acheson who, more often than not, was the administration's spokesman in foreign affairs.

In particular, Truman largely left to Acheson the role of “educating” the public about the fall of China. For instance, Acheson used a speech, delivered on January 12, 1950, before the National Press Club—with characteristic causticity, Acheson characterized the speech as “another effort to get the self-styled formulators of public opinion to think before they wrote” —to explain that Chiang’s government had fallen not because of American bungling but because of the Chinese government’s internal weakness. Throughout the first half of 1950, Acheson continued to make numerous speeches explaining and defending administration policy. These speeches amounted to what one scholar has called an “experiment in foreign-policy education.”

Even with Acheson “out front,” however, the president could not avoid blame. As one Republican critic of Truman reminded his fellow members of the House, “Under the Constitution, the President of the United States has full control in shaping our country’s foreign policy.” Even decisions announced by Acheson were blamed on Truman. Although it was Acheson, for instance, in the Press Club speech of January 12, 1950, who excluded South Korea from the American “defensive perimeter” (thus allegedly inviting a North Korean invasion of South Korea), Republican Senator Bourke Hickelenlooper recalled it as a presidential announcement: “A little more than a year ago . . . the State Department and the President, or the President through the State Department, made the famous announcement that Korea was not within our perimeter of defense.” Equally striking was Senator Knowland’s reference to the much-maligned White Paper issued by the State Department—a 1,000 plus page document recounting why the administration could not have done anything to stop China from going Communist—as “the white paper statement of the President of the United States.” For foreign policy, these comments suggest, was viewed as primarily Truman’s responsibility or at best as the joint responsibility of the president and secretary of state.

Both Truman and Eisenhower chose strong-willed secretaries of state, delegated to them substantial authority, and encouraged them to assume a prominent public profile, yet in neither case did the general public distinguish much between their evaluation of the president and their judgment of the secretary of state. In both cases the president and secretary were judged as a team, with the major difference between the two cases being that the
majority approved of the results—peace—achieved by the Eisenhower/Dulles foreign policy and disapproved of the outcomes—war—associated with the Truman/Acheson foreign policy. The story is more complex and nuanced at the elite level, particularly in the Eisenhower case, but here too the dominant tendency is to view the secretary of state as a presidential accomplice. Is there something distinctive about the domain of foreign policy that would explain why an adviser is less likely to act as a lightning rod than to be seen as an accomplice?

WHY PRESIDENTS CAN'T OR DON'T HIDE IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Why might presidents be less able to deflect blame in the realm of foreign policy? Part of the answer surely lies in the nature of public expectations regarding presidential control of foreign policy. The public expects the president to be responsible for, and intimately involved in, the conduct of foreign affairs, a presumption that is absent or significantly weaker in domestic affairs. A Gallup poll conducted in 1979, for instance, found that 49 percent of those surveyed thought the president “should have the major responsibility for setting foreign policy” while only 27 percent said the same about Congress. In contrast, when asked about energy policy or economic policy, 40 percent said Congress should have the major responsibility for setting policy, and only 34 percent named the president.129

Nor is this expectation of presidential control limited to the general public. It is shared by party activists and elected officials.130 Hubert Humphrey, speaking while Richard Nixon was ensconced in the presidency and opposition to the Vietnam War was near its peak, admitted that “ultimately though the President must be in charge [of foreign policy]. You cannot run foreign policy by committees. . . . It is [the] President [who] has the responsibility for really defining the . . . national security [interests] of this country.”131 The same view is expressed in the findings of the 1987 Tower Commission Report: “The President is responsible for the national security policy of the United States. In the development and execution of that policy, the President is the decision-maker. He is not obliged to consult with or seek approval from anyone in the Executive Branch. . . . As Chief Executive and Commander-in-Chief, and with broad authority in the area of foreign affairs, it is the President who is empowered to act for the nation and protect its interests.”132 More systematic evidence comes from a study of 1976 national party convention delegates that found delegates from both parties showed substantially greater trust in the president's judgment in foreign than in domestic policy, while trusting Congress more than the president in domestic policy.133
But there is more to the puzzle than the widespread predisposition to hold the president accountable for the conduct of foreign policy. The presumption that presidents are uniquely responsible for foreign policy makes it difficult for presidents to hide, but equally important is that presidents often don't even try to hide on the foreign policy stage. If secretaries of state often make poor lightning rods it is because presidents seem more inclined to thrust themselves into the public limelight in the foreign policy domain than they are in domestic policy.

In part, this is because presidents are inclined to regard foreign policy as uniquely their own responsibility. The Constitution may be, as Edward Corwin famously put it, "an invitation to struggle for the privilege of directing American foreign policy," but few presidents, especially in the twentieth century, have seen it this way. As Harry Truman bluntly informed a gathering of Jewish war veterans, "I make American foreign policy." Or, as Richard Nixon expressed the point: "I've always thought this country could run itself domestically without a President; all you need is a competent Cabinet to run the country at home. You need a President for foreign policy; no Secretary of State is really important; the President makes foreign policy." Presidents don't hide, in short, because they believe foreign and national security policy is their unique constitutional and statutory responsibility.

Even presidents less inclined to define the president's role in quite the way that Nixon did invariably find themselves spending large and increasing amounts of their time on foreign policy. Those presidents who come to office focused on a largely domestic agenda, as in the case of Ronald Reagan, soon find themselves "surprised at how much a part of the job, that is how much . . . percentage of your time and effort and thinking is devoted to the international situation." In the most systematic study of presidential attention, John Kessel showed that not only do presidents devote more space in their State of the Union addresses to international affairs than to any other topic, but that attention to this policy area increases substantially during the course of a president’s term in office. Why do presidents invariably catch what a Clinton aide recently characterized as the "foreign policy bug"?

A number of incentives lure the president onto the foreign policy stage. First is the prospect of being able to accomplish more. Studies have shown that presidents are more successful in getting their way with Congress in foreign policy than in domestic policy—although how much more is a matter of some dispute. What is beyond dispute is that presidents are substantially less dependent on legislative enactments in foreign affairs than in the domestic area. President Carter, as Thomas Cronin notes, freely "confessed he liked foreign policy because his capacity to act unilaterally seemed much greater in the foreign than in the domestic realm."

A second incentive is the promise of a more presidential image. "As for-
eign policy leaders,” George Edwards and Stephen Wayne explain, “[presi-
dents] can act as unifying figures, [and] overcome perceptions of partisanship.” ¹⁴³ To the extent that “going international” plays up the president’s nonpolitical, head-of-state image, there is less need for lightning rods in the foreign policy domain. ¹⁴⁴ For the aim of lightning rods is precisely to distance the president from the controversial political side of the presidential role. ¹⁴⁵

A number of studies have shown that popularity is significantly more likely to accompany presidential action in the realm of international affairs, where the president claims to speak for the entire nation, than in domestic affairs, where he appears to represent only a part. ¹⁴⁶ Gary Smith, for instance, finds that during Kennedy’s presidency, “presidential popularity jumps when foreign conflict occurs and it slumps at times of domestic conflict.” ¹⁴⁷ Examining presidential popularity from 1963 to 1980, Michael MacKuen finds that “the average net impact of all foreign actions . . . is positive (2.42 points), but . . . for domestic events (excluding Watergate) is slightly negative (−.84).” ¹⁴⁸ And Philip Stone and Richard Brody demonstrate that even in the case of Lyndon Johnson, “approval of Johnson goes up when announcements are made regarding foreign policy other than Vietnam . . . [and] it goes down when announcements are made regarding . . . domestic issues.” ¹⁴⁹ Even foreign policy blunders, as when an American U-2 spy plane was shot down over the Soviet Union in 1960, have often resulted in increases, at least in the short term, in presidential popularity. ¹⁵⁰

To the extent that presidential actions in foreign affairs accent a president’s unifying image as head of state and tend to be rewarded with increases in public support, presidents have an incentive to push themselves onto the foreign policy stage. This incentive structure teaches presidents to seek a lower profile on the domestic scene, where even skillful handling of a policy may cost a president political support, and to raise their profile in foreign affairs, where even mistakes may be rewarded.

If presidents are lured onto the foreign policy stage by the prospect of greater rewards, they are also pushed onto it by the fear that letting others take the blame will leave the impression of a president not in control. A presi-
dent can admit ignorance or detachment in the realm of agricultural or
land-use policy without drawing into question his fitness for the presidency, but a similar admission in foreign affairs is much more hazardous to a presi-
dent’s public prestige. In the aftermath of revelations about the Iran-contra
affair, for example, Gallup found that more people thought it was worse if the National Security Council (NSC) ran the operation without President
Reagan’s knowledge than if President Reagan had known and approved of
the Iran-contra connection. ¹⁵¹ The public expectation of presidential involve-
ment in national security matters helps explain why both Truman and Eisen-
hower were so reluctant to let their secretaries of state take the blame for
policies that were drawing criticism. And their vigorous defenses of Acheson and Dulles suggest that part of the reason the public so closely linked their assessments of the president and the secretary of state is that both presidents worked to forestall the perception that the secretary of state alone shaped the policies affecting the nation's security.

Eisenhower's willingness to accept responsibility for, and admit complete knowledge of, the U-2 flights over the Soviet Union—at the price of the collapse of the 1960 Paris Summit—reflected his recognition that a president cannot escape blame on a national security issue without seeming to abrogate his responsibility as conductor of foreign relations. Despite CIA Director Allen Dulles's offer to take full responsibility and resign, and Khrushchev's statement that he was "quite willing to grant that the President knew nothing" about the reconnaissance flights, Eisenhower evidently felt, as Stephen Hess writes, that to do so "would have been an unconscionable admission that he did not control the country's national security apparatus." 152

The reaction in the press to the government's denials helped to persuade Eisenhower that admitting involvement would be better than feigning detachment. In the *New York Herald Tribune*, Walter Lippmann pointed out that "in denying that it authorized the flight, the Administration has entered a plea of incompetence." James Reston, columnist for the *New York Times*, believed that "the heart of the problem here is that the Presidency has been parcelled out, first to Sherman Adams, then to John Foster Dulles, and in this case to somebody else—probably to Allen Dulles." Eisenhower's style had removed him from the key decisions and left "the nation, the world and sometimes even the President himself in a state of uncertainty about who is doing what." Harry Truman wrote to Dean Acheson with the opinion that "the President of the United States ought not to admit that he doesn't know what is going on." In the wake of such talk, Eisenhower convened the NSC and announced that "we're just going to have to take a lot of beating on this—and I'm the one, rightly, who's going to have to take it." 153

In subsequent interviews a number of former officials have suggested that Eisenhower shouldered the responsibility for the fiasco because it was not in the general's nature or training to avoid blame. Douglas Dillon, for one, has suggested that "he didn't like to blame other people. . . . He felt more strongly than a civilian leader might have. He had this thing about honesty and that was the military tradition." Similarly, Andrew Goodpaster has claimed that Eisenhower wasn't "in the business of using scapegoats. . . . That's the last thing the President would want." 154

Although there is some validity to this view, 155 the question remains as to why Eisenhower was unwilling to deflect blame in this episode but was perfectly happy to shift blame to subordinates on any number of other occasions. The answer seems to be that he recognized that an admission of detachment on such a question would do more harm than good. What
bothered Eisenhower was not only that this would be a "glaring and permanent injustice" to the subordinate, but that it would have been an intolerable admission that the president did not "control important matters in our government." To mute criticism that "the country has been humiliated by absentmindedness in the highest quarters of government," Eisenhower found it best to take the blame. The costs of being seen as a president not in command of foreign affairs can be further illustrated by examining the public perception of the relationship between Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger.

UPSTAGING THE PRESIDENT: KISSINGER AND FORD

From the moment Gerald Ford became president, the White House staff, and to a lesser extent Ford himself, worried that Kissinger, who had become a genuine celebrity in the last years of the Nixon administration, would upstage the new president. Believing that the public perception that Kissinger, not Ford, directed foreign policy hurt the president, some staff members attempted to downgrade Kissinger's importance, most visibly by stripping Kissinger of his second hat as national security assistant.

Polling data suggest that White House concerns that Kissinger was stealing Ford's thunder were justified. The Harris polling organization conducted eleven surveys between September 1974 and November 1976 asking respondents to evaluate the job performances of Kissinger and Ford. In the initial survey, Ford and Kissinger both received high marks, with only about 20 percent of the sample disapproving of either man's performance. Ford's pardon of Richard Nixon, however, sent the president's approval plummeting below 50 percent, while having no impact on the public's evaluation of the secretary of state. In the ten polls subsequent to the pardon, Kissinger's approval rating ranged from a low of 55 percent to a high of 75 percent; Ford's fluctuated from a low of 30 percent to a high of 50 percent. The president's average approval rating of 43 percent was a full 20 points below Kissinger's average approval rating of 62 percent, and at no point did Ford have a higher approval rating than his secretary of state.

Follow-up questions asking respondents to evaluate the performance of the president and secretary of state in specific foreign policy areas show that the difference between Ford and Kissinger was due to more than the fact that Kissinger was not being evaluated on the basis of a faltering economy. They show that the public was much more likely to approve of Kissinger's handling of foreign policy than of Ford's. More than 60 percent of those with an opinion approved of Kissinger's performance in handling U.S.-Chinese relations, for instance, while only 45 percent of those with an opinion approved of President Ford's performance in this area. Ford fared little better with
U.S.-Soviet relations: 62 percent of those with an opinion expressed approval of Kissinger's handling of relations with the Soviet Union, while only 46 percent approved of Ford's handling of the Soviets. While 71 percent of those expressing an opinion believed Kissinger had done a good job in "working for peace in the world," only 56 percent were willing to say the same for the president.160

There is some evidence that Kissinger did help President Ford by taking much of the public heat for the fall of Cambodia and the North Vietnamese takeover of Vietnam. In a May 1975 poll, taken in the aftermath of the fall of Cambodia and the North Vietnamese takeover, only 38 percent approved of Kissinger's "handling of the Vietnam and Cambodian crises." Despite Ford's significantly lower overall job rating at the time (40 percent approval compared to 56 percent for Kissinger), 46 percent expressed approval of the president's handling of the Indochina situation.161 Given that Kissinger had been linked in the public mind with Vietnam since early 1973, before Ford had become vice president let alone president, it is not surprising that Kissinger rather than Ford was held responsible. But these are rare circumstances indeed.

On balance, these polls suggest that Kissinger's accomplishments were of little help in boosting public approval of Ford. This pattern is well illustrated by the public reaction to the preliminary agreement Kissinger helped negotiate between Egypt and Israel. Kissinger's job approval rating, which in early August had been around 56 percent, jumped to 63 percent after signing the accord in September. Sixty-one percent (in contrast to 48 percent in May, and 50 percent in August) now expressed approval of Kissinger's efforts in "working to achieve a lasting peace in the Middle East." In contrast, Ford's job rating remained mired around 40 percent, unaffected by what was perceived as Kissinger's personal accomplishment. Only 44 percent approved of Ford's efforts in handling the Mideast crisis—only slightly higher than the 40 percent who had approved in May and July. A poll conducted the following spring, which found that Kissinger's efforts in the Middle East were approved by 56 percent of the sample while approval of Ford's efforts in this area had dropped to 31 percent, showed the persistence of this pattern in which the public withheld credit to Ford for Kissinger's peacemaking efforts.

The Kissinger case highlights both the costs to a president of not being perceived as in control of foreign policy and the credit that is foregone by abdicating the public perception of being responsible for foreign policy. Kissinger's "upstaging" relationship with Ford (and Nixon in his later years) was, however, exceptional. It is unlikely that a president will long endure a situation in which his secretary is credited for favorable developments while the president is blamed for the unpopular. This upstaging type of relationship inevitably creates friction between the departmental head and the presi-
dent and his aides and cannot help but generate pressures for the secretary's removal.

THE TWO PRESIDENCIES

Kissinger, Acheson, and Dulles all seemed ideally suited for the role of presidential lightning rod; they were prominent, powerful, and controversial secretaries of state. Their public personas—particularly Dulles the self-righteous, Presbyterian moralist and Acheson the haughty, pompous aristocrat—made them inviting targets for opponents. That none of them were particularly effective as lightning rods, at least at the level of the mass public, suggests that foreign affairs may be in important ways a distinctive policy domain. As Wildavsky formulated the point close to thirty years ago, “The United States has one president, but it has two presidencies; one presidency is for domestic affairs, and the other is concerned with defense and foreign policy.”

For Wildavsky, presidential power in foreign policy was substantially different than in domestic policy in large part because the president's potential opponents—the citizenry, special interest groups, Congress, the bureaucracy—were substantially weaker or less assertive in foreign policy than in domestic policy. Whatever the reasons, presidents do in fact do better in foreign policy. They do better in terms of public approval, and they do better in terms of congressional support. In foreign policy, moreover, presidents are more able to act unilaterally and thus are better able to convey to the public an image of strength as well as a unifying image of national leadership. In foreign policy, as a result, presidents have less to gain from lightning rods than they have to lose from being upstaged, a danger that is well illustrated by Kissinger's relationship with Ford.

The two-presidencies phenomenon is also structured by public expectations about presidential roles and responsibilities. Vietnam may have modified, at least at the elite level, the willingness to defer to the president in foreign affairs, but a widespread presumption remains that foreign policy is largely a presidential responsibility or, at least, that a president's responsibilities are relatively greater in foreign than in domestic policy. The public's predisposition to hold the president responsible for the conduct of national security (in a way the public does not hold the president responsible for education policy or agricultural policy, for example) makes it difficult for a president to avoid blame in foreign policy. The president who maintains his distance from a dispute over agricultural price supports can keep himself out of trouble, but the president who seems uninvolved with a decision vital to the country's national security risks drawing into question his fitness for governing.
Certainly there is no hiding for a president when it comes to war. The Constitution's designation of the president as commander-in-chief makes it virtually impossible for a president to hide from the wrath unleashed by an unpopular war. Although Truman delegated a great deal of authority to Acheson, and although Acheson was ideally cast as a villain for conservative Republicans, it did not prevent public anger over the Korean War from being directed at the president. Neither Truman nor Acheson could have done anything short of ending the war that would have helped Truman regain public favor.

Elites, because of their greater attentiveness to foreign policy matters, are better able to discriminate between their appraisal of the president and their evaluation of the secretary of state. There are myriad foreign policy battles that never penetrate the public consciousness—the Bricker amendment controversy is a paradigmatic example—in which secretaries of state can serve as viable lightning rods at the elite level. Yet even among sophisticated political elites, the presumption that the president is responsible for the conduct of foreign relations acts as a retardant upon a president's ability to use the secretary of state as a lightning rod, particularly in major international crises such as the U-2 affair or the Bay of Pigs. Modern presidents have often found it easier, as we see in the next chapter, to deflect elite attention and blame onto the chief of staff, a post where the norm of anonymity has repeatedly clashed with the realities of the job description.